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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 1: Memories and Choices (Year 6)

### Chapter 1: Memories and Choices

Aletha Black, one train ride away from taking up her new post as Professor of Potions at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, flattened herself against the corridor wall of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, as a shaggy black form streaked by at knee level, followed closely by a woman near Aletha's own age of thirty-mumble, the face which so resembled her twenty-years-younger sister contorted with fury, the bushy brown hair they shared in more disarray than usual, and one hand clutching a wooden spoon.

"Need any help with that, Danger?" Aletha called after the pair, stifling a smile.

"No, I think I can kill your husband all by myself." The words came back in a breathless snarl, underlain by piteous whimpering. "He'd better be grateful Animagi don't respond to chocolate the way real dogs do, or I wouldn't have to bother. *Twelve* triple chocolate fairy cakes this time, a full dozen—oh, don't give me that look, Sirius Valentine Black!" A loud whack and a yelp were almost simultaneous. "I was only sending eight of them on the train with Harry and the Pride! Well, nine, since Letha's going with them, but that still left the other three for us, including one for you! You had absolutely no call to eat every last one of them!"

Aletha leaned against the wall, grateful she'd seen Dobby and Winky out here cleaning earlier today, so she knew she wouldn't get marks on the new blue robes she'd chosen for the Opening Feast. "If you kill my husband, I get to kill yours. Pack rules, you know. You can give Remus fair warning if you like, but I'm going to insist on my rights. Unless... were those the chocolate fairy cakes I like? The ones with the dark mocha icing, where you can't tell if I steal a fingerful to eat?"

"You'd better not have your fingers in my icing bowl before I'm done with it. But yes, those are the ones. Or I should say, *were* the ones." The last three words emerged in a threatening growl. "I thought, *Mr. Padfoot*, that we had *discussed* the proper times, places, and quantities for filching food out of *my* kitchen..."

Chuckling under her breath, Aletha strolled away. *She'll put the fear of God into him, or better still, the fear of Gertrude Granger-Lupin. And it'll last, like it always does, just as long as it takes her to bake something else that smells good to his dog form. It's a good thing he has a cast-iron stomach, or his gluttony would have killed him before he left school.*

She turned in at the door of the guest bedroom she had occupied for the final two weeks of the summer, glancing automatically at her reflection in the mirror to make sure the whirlwind encounter in the corridor hadn't left visible marks.

*If there's one thing that would destroy my credibility at Hogwarts before the year begins, it would be turning up at platform nine and three-quarters looking like I'd already been through a war.*

But her skin, the color of that same dark mocha icing she had mentioned to Danger, was still unblemished, her hair unruffled in its close-cropped natural frizz about her head. Her eyes, a warmer and darker shade of chocolate brown, met their reflected counterparts sparkling with a rueful smile.

*How did I end up with this pack of rowdies again? Oh, that's right. It all began nearly thirty years ago, when one of my friends, who hated her given name, had a ridiculous roller skating accident, and I made up a silly little rhyme that ended in her getting tagged with the nickname "Danger." And then three years later I turned eleven, and discovered that magic was real, and that I was expected to go away from home and study it in an honest-to-goodness castle...*

Crossing the room, she sat down at the vanity and placed a hand on the elaborately carved wooden box which reposed there in solitary splendor. Rather than try to intervene between Sirius and Danger, or fret about whether or not she was fully packed for her upcoming year of teaching, she thought she might as well pass the time here until she helped shepherd the junior contingent of the Order of the Phoenix safely to King's Cross.

*Remembering my life. Or rather, the life I know ought to be mine.*

Her fingers, about to flick open the box's catch, halted in place. *I'm still not used to it. There are times I wonder if I ever will be. I do so well, I forget for hours at a time, even a full day once, but then it all comes rushing back, and I wonder if I made the right decision after all.*

"I made the only decision which wouldn't have broken Sirius's heart," she said under her breath. "Bad enough that *Lord Voldemort* forced him to use a Memory Charm on me and make me forget my life when we were both captured last month." She spat the name, pronouncing it with hatred. "Even worse, in some ways, that I could get back a copy of the memories, but only a copy, so that they don't feel like mine. It makes me neither fish nor fowl, neither truly his Aletha nor a complete stranger. But taking away even what little he has left of his wife, of Meghan's mother, in me?" She shook her head. "No. That would be unforgivable."

*Not to mention, I fell in love with him all by myself, long before I ever knew we'd been married for fourteen years and had the teenage daughter to prove it. And Meghan, our little Pearl, is delightful in her own right. As evidenced by the gift she had ready for me when I got home.*

Aletha smiled without constraint at the thought of the daughter she'd found no trouble loving and flipped back the catch of that gift.

*A memory box. Filled with tangible reminders of the life of Aletha Carina Freeman, later Aletha Freeman-Black.*

She had decided to drop the hyphenation from her name after much deliberation. It was a simple step, but a clear one, her personal way of proclaiming that although she was willing to accept the life which circumstances had thrust upon her, she was going to do so on her own terms.

*It will make life easier for the students, too. Shouting "Professor Black!" across the classroom is*

much quicker than "Professor Freeman-Black!" and will give me a chance to get there before the cauldron blows up. Some of the older students, from Ginny and Luna's year on up, might have trouble with it at first, since they were there the year Sirius and I team-taught Defense, but they'll get used to it.

She removed a carved wooden talisman from the box, smiling at it. *And here we have a piece of that same year, one of the little knickknacks we taught them how to make. I'm not sure if this one is Harry's or Hermione's, but I'd bet on Harry. Even at twelve, Hermione was a stickler for neatness, and there are some sloppy lines on these runes.*

A long, slender rod of wood followed the talisman. *From the next year, when Remus took the Defense post. A Combat Club wand, one of the ones the Weasley twins made for him, that squirt washable dye rather than casting spells. He enjoyed that year so much, I think he was born to be a teacher, and then the summer came and his secret came out so that he couldn't go back...*

She scowled, setting aside a thick sheaf of sheet music. "Damn cursed Defense post. I could wish he'd never taken it, but who knows which of those students might live through this war because of the practice he gave them in real fighting? Besides, it made him happy for that year. That's not nothing."

*Though it did cause us problems all through the first half of the school year after that, our older three's fourth and my Pearl's first, while we were hashing out through the courts whether or not it was safe and legal to have a man with Remus's "furry little problem" living in a house with four children. Thank God they finally came down on our side. I'd hate to go back to the bad old days of hiding from the law.*

"Though those days did have their attractions." Aletha traced the raised lettering on the cover of a paperback book thoughtfully, letting her fingers spell out *Long Journey Home* without input from her mind. "They certainly sparked an unexpected talent in Sirius."

*Even with Harry and Hermione, and later Meghan, to take care of, he would have gone mad being stuck in the house all day with nothing to do, and he was the only one of us at that point without an indoor hobby. I've always had my piano, Remus has his violin, Danger cooks, and all of us love to read. Sirius was used to being active, out and about. So he decided, if he couldn't go out himself, he could make up people who would go out for him.*

"Which sounds like he did go mad, and I'm sure most of his acquaintances at the Auror Office would have thought he had. Still would, if they found out about it today." Aletha grinned, lifting the book out of the box. "Who would ever imagine, in a million years, that Sirius Black, the original manly man, writes romance novels under a female pen name?"

*The only thing that might save him is that they're good romance novels. The characters are well-drawn, the plots hang together, and there are never any scenes we couldn't read to the cubs, even when they were little. There's plenty of innuendo, but it's always stated in such a way that anyone old enough to catch it is old enough to understand. And he channels the darkness he brought back from Azkaban to write chilling moments of despair, and everything he learned from his relatives to*

*get further inside evil minds than I ever wanted to be...*

Laying the book down on top of the sheet music, she extracted a hinged photo frame with three slots, all of them filled, swinging the hinges open to an angle where she could see all three pictures and setting the frame on the vanity's tabletop. The people in each portrait posed for her as she looked at them, six of them in the shot farthest to the left, eight in the other two.

*The first one was taken the day after our wedding, Sirius's and mine, not even six months after James and Lily died. It would have felt disrespectful, if I hadn't learned perfectly well after nearly ten years of being Lily's friend that the one thing she hated more than anything else was wasting time. I'm sure she would have felt even more strongly about it if she'd known how little time she had herself.*

Though Sirius's cheeks were sunken in this oldest photograph, his eyes deep-set from his several months' tenancy in Azkaban before his assisted escape, his tender smile as he looked at the photographic Aletha, then down at the messy-haired toddler he held on one hip, did much to counteract the frightening aspects of his countenance. Beside him, Remus Lupin listened gravely to the excited babbling of a little girl with a curly brown mane similar to that of the woman beside her, who was hiding a smile behind her hand.

*I wonder if Hermione's parents would have waited quite so long to have her if they hadn't had Danger so young? Maybe they would've started a lot earlier, or maybe just a little, a year or two. Aletha sighed, stroking one of the flowers carved into the frame. Or maybe, if they had known what was going to happen, they would never have had her at all.*

The older Grangers had died by the hands of Death Eaters a few months before the fateful Halloween which had, as Aletha thought at the time, shattered her life beyond recognition. She had never expected to have her hopes, her desires, and most especially her love for the man she had thought was a traitor and a murderer suddenly renewed by a friend from her past.

*But her parents' deaths released Danger's latent magic, started to give her true dreams, and from those dreams she put together the truth about Sirius and Wormtail. And then one night she dreamed of Remus, of meeting him and marrying him, and the next day, when she took her sister and the little boy from down the street she minded for his aunt and uncle out to the park, there he was...*

"And one whirlwind month later, there we were. Living in the two halves of my semidetached in London, by all appearances one single woman—me—and one young couple with a pair of not-quite-two-year-old twins and a big black dog." Aletha laughed aloud. "And in reality, two young couples holding the children they were raising in common, to make up for none of them being entirely emotionally stable."

*And there we stayed for five years, hiding a wanted criminal and a kidnapped child, and later two kidnapped children, in plain sight. She smiled at the boy who was present in the later two photographs, but not in the earliest one. We moved house later, changed our names around a bit, gave the cubs a chance to make some friends before Hogwarts, and finally got our hands on*

*Wormtail just in time to have our last Christmas at home together.*

"Which is when this middle shot was taken, a day or two after Sirius's trial. Our trial, I should say." Aletha repressed a shiver. Some memories, such as that of sitting at the center of attention, held in her chair by golden chains, she was just as happy to have at one remove. "We were all cleared when Sirius was, and we were able to go home and celebrate. For the first time ever, the Pack was really free."

*I think the name was inevitable. What else would you call a family with two mothers and two fathers, which never got out of the habit of taking care of their children communally, and in which both adult males have some connection with a canine animal form?*

The final photograph had been taken only two months before at a den-night, one of the Pack's holdovers from its earliest days, when both Harry and Sirius had still been badly traumatized enough that it had been decided the group should sleep all in the same room. Not only had this made dealing with nightmares quicker, but the combination of scents and sounds from the multiple sleepers made them less frequent, as Sirius's unconscious mind analyzed his surroundings and found them incompatible with a frigid cell in Azkaban, and Harry's did the same with a locked cupboard under the stairs.

*Once they were both sleeping better, we went back to normal sleeping arrangements—semi-normal, the cubs continued to share a bed until we left London when they were seven—except on full moon nights. Then we would gather for the night, and tell stories before we went to sleep, stories about the way we became who we were, and the people we met along the way.*

The central figure of the den-night photo was a blue-eyed wolf, his tail, tufted after the manner of a lion or a kneazle, wagging slowly back and forth. Curled next to him, one on either side, were two other wolves, though these bore the sleek straight tails of true wolves rather than the distinctive tuft which marked the werewolf. One's fur was long and shaggy, tan rather than her mate's gray, and her eyes were brown.

*Or rather, brown with bits of blue, the way Remus's are blue with bits of brown. Danger's magic was never normal, and it's the only reason any of this worked to begin with. Without her "taming" powers to link their souls together and spread his werewolf curse across them both so that it doesn't drive him mad, Remus wouldn't even have dared live in the same house with children, much less show himself to them on the full moon.*

The other wolf had darker fur, bright green eyes, and a distinctive set of black markings on his face, resembling round glasses and a lightning bolt scar between and above his eyes. In front of the three, the black dog Danger had been chasing down the corridor rolled on his back, waving his paws in the air.

*Dignity? My husband? Why no, I don't believe he does know the meaning of the word. How kind of you to notice.*

Between the werewolf's front paws sat a tricolored cat, patched attractively in black, orange, and

white. Next to her, shoving his head affectionately against the tan wolf, was a big-eared brown fox, one of the Arctic kind in his summer coat. Lying on the flank of the darkest wolf like a picture of the peaceable kingdom, a yearling deer, her spots just fading, bent her head to nibble at the fringe of one hoof.

*Apparently, Pearl inherited the basic shape of her form from me rather than her father, because there in the back, looking like some kind of redeemed guardian angel for animals...*

At the rear of the photograph lay a black winged horse, not skeletal as a thestral would have been but normally fleshed, feathers and fur both glossy with health. As Aletha watched, her photographic form raised its wings, arching them protectively over the rest of the Pack.

*She loved them. But then, I love them too. I just don't feel that I fit into her place, which is one of the reasons I accepted the Potions job. It's work I understand, work that's related to the things I was always good at and the studying I did to become a Healer, and it's still within their world, but I won't be bumping up against the adults, at least, every hour of the day. And when I come into contact with the cubs, I'll have a framework I can follow, teacher to student, and from there I can build outwards.*

"Here's to a good year," she said to the den-night photograph, raising an imaginary glass. "May this be the truth again by the end of it."

*Or if not this, something better.*

Quickly, she repacked the memory box, then opened her trunk with her wand and fit the box into the space she had left for it.

*Now let's get that year started. The sooner we leave, the sooner we're there.*

Relocking her trunk, she went in search of the Pack's four cubs and their four best friends, collectively known as the Pride.

*What better name for an octet of Gryffindors?*

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Ginny Weasley, alpha female of the Pride, perched on the end of her bed, twisting the silver ring she wore on her left hand.

*This time next year, I'll be married. I'll be Mrs. Harry Potter, and we'll be working on making that one prophecy of Mrs. Danger's come true. The one about Slytherin's line ending when Gryffindor's continues.*

"It's an awful job," she murmured aloud, "but somebody's got to do it."

*Thank goodness Mum insisted I wait until I'm sixteen. Being pregnant through O.W.L's would be the outside of enough.*

"—know she was around here somewhere," a voice broke into her musings. "Ginny?"

"In here, Ron!" Ginny sat up straight as her brother came around the doorway. "Time to go?"

"Not quite yet." Ron leaned against the doorframe, and Ginny hid a little thrill at the easy way his eyes moved around the room. Halfway through the summer, after an attack on Diagon Alley, the two of them had set off with their brother George and his Muggle girlfriend Crystal on an unauthorized rescue mission.

*Fred would have come too, but he was in St. Mungo's on account of that same attack...*

Although they had managed to infiltrate a hideout of Voldemort's Death Eaters and retrieve their brother Percy and a pair of Muggle women, Terry Boot's grandmother and his Housemate Amanda Smythe's mother, Ron had been caught and blinded by one of the Death Eaters before his siblings could locate him. It was only within the past two weeks that Mrs. Letha—*Professor Black, I should say*—had found a way to give him back a form of sight.

*Which is occasionally a little creepy, because she couldn't fix his eyes, so she had to change them. He doesn't see by the same sort of light that we do now. It means he can see in the dark, and he's working on figuring out how to tell when someone's lying by the way their face changes to his new sight.*

*I'd be jealous, if I didn't know that he can't see colors at all and has to work a spell on anything written before he can read it. Even with magic, nothing's perfect.*

"We're still waiting on Pearl and Snow Fox to say their goodbyes," Ron continued, unaware of Ginny's thoughts. "Luna's with her dad right now, and Neville said his to his mum before she left for work."

"Like we did Dad, and Mum is helping take us to the station." Ginny let the smile prompted by mention of her parents linger on her face, hoping it would mask the bloody, vicious thoughts she harbored towards a certain female Death Eater on the subject of the Longbottoms.

*Driving them both mad and making them miss most of their son's life wasn't enough for you, was it, Bellatrix? You couldn't stand that they'd been healed, that they'd had two and a half years with each other and with Neville, that one of them was training his fellow Aurors on the new techniques his son was teaching him and the other one was nearly the best Defense professor we've ever had. So you had to tear them apart again, to kill Mr. Longbottom and take our Captain's dad away from him just when he was getting used to having one...*

"What's got you so angry?" Ron asked.

Ginny started to deny it, then sighed. "Just thinking about Captain. He's lost both of them again, really, hasn't he? His mum is never going to be the same without his dad."

"He's not the same without his dad." Ron glanced up and down the hall to make sure no one else



was within earshot. "Honestly? He scares me. He was always good with that potion piece, but he's been practicing with it like crazy ever since Diagon Alley, hours every day up in that attic he and Pearl took over for a range. If it came to a fight, I think he'd go for his piece before he would his wand."

"Would that be so wrong?" Ginny reached through the slit in her robes to touch the handle of her own potion piece, holstered around her waist within easy reach. "You have to say a spell with the wand, and that takes time. With a piece, it's just..." She drew her own swiftly, keeping the muzzle pointed away from Ron and her finger outside the trigger guard. "Draw, arm, aim, and shoot. It's fast and it's easy. Isn't that why we sent these out to people's Muggle relations?"

"We sent them out to people's Muggle relations because they were Muggle things to start with," Ron pointed out. "Kids' toys, for shooting water at each other in the summertime. And that's still what they do, but now they're a little bit... improved." He grinned briefly. "Who'd have thought all those years listening to Dad talk about what you can and can't legally do to Muggle things with magic would pay off?"

Ginny returned the grin. "He did write most of the laws about it, so he knows exactly where the loopholes are. Which means we do too. And what we know, Harry knows."

"Someone call me?"

The person who stepped into Ginny's line of sight was many things to many people. He was the leader of the Pride, alpha male to Ginny's alpha female, and coincidentally the love of her life. He was Ron's best friend, a position he'd held since a snowy day in the Weasleys' orchard more than eight years ago. He was the head of the Hogwarts Defense Association, a recognized student organization since the previous Christmas and already one of the largest in the school.

To Lord Voldemort, he was five feet, ten inches of black-haired, green-eyed, bespectacled irritation.

*Assuming he hasn't been upgraded to threat level by this point.*

"No, but I suppose you can come in anyway," Ginny answered her fiancé's half-teasing question, pretending to cover a yawn with her hand. "If your company gets too boring, we can always chase you out."

"No need for that. Just drop a hint or two." Harry came into the room and sat down on the bottom of the bed beside Ginny's. "They might have to be bigger than usual, maybe about the size of an anvil, but I'll get them eventually."

"And ignore them, if you don't want to do what she's hinting about," Ron said with a hint of a laugh under his words. "That's what I always do, and she just thinks I'm too thick to understand."

"Thank you so much for telling me." Ginny favored her brother with her sweetest, most predatory smile, the closest she could come in her human form to the wildcat grin of her lynx Animagus.

"Now I don't have to bother with hinting. I'll just tell you straight out what I want, and if you say you don't understand, I won't believe you."

Ron groaned and thumped his head once against the doorframe. "When am I ever going to learn?"

"Good question," Harry said, leaning back on the bed. "Not one I think has any answer, but it's a good question. Now I have one. How would you like to help me roust a certain person out of the loo before we miss the train on that account?"

"In there again?" Ginny asked, then recalled the habit to which Harry's 'certain person' had become prone in the final week of the summer. "Oh, of course. Vanity, thy name is Fox."

"It is. And I have a plan." Harry chuckled. "We'll need the rest of the Pride, a camera, and every bit of practice in sneaking around we ever had..."

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The pale-blond boy grinned at himself in the mirror. His pointed features, fair skin, and sharp gray eyes contrasted well, he thought, with the bold color of the school robes he'd charmed to resemble his Quidditch uniform.

*And especially well with this.*

Folding a bit of sleeve over his hand, he buffed the metallic C which he now had the right—no, the *duty*—to affix to those robes, and by virtue of it, to lead his team to victory.

"My name is Draco," he said aloud, "and I'll be your captain today."

Experimentally, he held his hands out in front of him, at about the width he thought would be necessary to grasp the Quidditch Cup. He would let the rest of the team have a chance eventually, of course, but as captain, the first right would be his.

*This is going to be the best year ever.*

He hoisted his imaginary cup over his head, then hissed and brought his hands back down to rub at the sore spot on his left forearm. *I can't believe it's still hurting. Shouldn't it feel better by now?*

It had been a risk, he knew, but the prize was worth the pain.

*But you don't have your prize yet,* whispered a little voice at the back of his mind. *How does that make it worth anything?*

"I'm going to get it." Draco gripped both sides of the sink and stared at his reflection. "I won't let anything stand in my way. Pain is temporary. Glory lasts forever." Taking a step back, he stroked a finger along the gleaming C once more. "I'll start with this sort of glory, and move on to the greater kinds from there..."

Movement in the mirror caught his eye. The bathroom door behind him was inching open, and

through it he could see edges of robes, dark hair and light, a glint of glass—

He whirled in dismay. "Don't you dare—" he began.

The flash of the camera momentarily blinded him.

"Pain," a girl's voice mocked from somewhere in front of him, "is temporary. Glory lasts forever. And guess what? So do photographs!"

"Oh no they don't." Blinking furiously to clear his vision, Draco sidestepped to keep the movements of his right hand hidden from both direct and mirrored sight by his tormentors. "Not if I get hold of them first!"

Yanking his wand free of its pocket, he charged into the corridor in a swirl of red, dodging around his giggling baby sister and her smiling (*for once*) boyfriend, resisting the urge to aim a kick at his blood-twin's sniggering ginger male appendage only because said appendage was currently holding said blood-twin upright while she hooted with laughter, aiming himself squarely down the hall at his brother and the two girls flanking him.

None of whom were holding a camera.

"Give it," Draco said, halting at about three paces' distance and holding out his left hand. "Or I'll call Kreacher up here and have him take it off whichever one of you's got it."

"Call Kreacher, will you?" Ginny smirked at him. "Can't fight your own battles, O high and mighty Gryffindor Quidditch Captain?"

"More to the point, is he going to listen to you?" Harry wanted to know.

"Hello, last name Black." Draco tapped himself on the chest. "Not direct line, but still with a full share of the blood through Mother, and brought up by the full heir since age four. Check the tapestry sometime. And I could if I needed to," he said to Ginny. "It's more a matter of saving effort. So, are you going to hand it over or what?"

"Or what," said the girl on Harry's other side, her dark blonde hair rippling as she shook her head. "Unless you ask more politely than that."

"I do beg your pardon." Draco went down on one knee and extended his hand to the girl. "Most beautiful and exquisite Lady Luna Lovegood, *please* will you give me that camera? Or tell me who's got it, if you don't?"

"I might." Luna smiled down at him. "But only if you're willing to pay the price."

"Name it," Draco said promptly.

*Anything to keep my loving siblings and friends from blowing up those photos to ten times life-size and hanging them all over the Tower. Which they will, if they get half a chance.*

*Besides, I like paying prices to Luna. Unlike paying prices to Danger.* He rolled his left wrist once or twice, stretching the spot which had been bruised when his Pack-mother had caught him trying to sneak a fairy cake and scored a direct hit with a wooden spoon at five paces. *I know she said we could have them when we got on the train, but I didn't want one when I got on the train, I wanted one right then...*

"The first piece of the price is that you have to be a little more grown-up about Professor McGonagall naming you Quidditch Captain." Luna looked as stern as her features allowed, which wasn't much. "It's for your own good, really. If she sees you walking around and polishing your C all day long, she might think all you care about is showing off and decide someone else should be captain instead."

"Good point." Draco stood up, removing the Color-Changing Charm from his robes as he did. "What's the next piece?"

Luna angled her face upward rather than answering in words.

"That, I can do." Draco stepped forward, slid his arms around her, and gave her a gentle but thorough kiss.

*I had a feeling this would be involved somewhere along the line. Not that I mind. Kissing Luna has been on my list of fun ways to spend time for quite a few years now.*

*Now if I could only figure out what, exactly, she wants from me, and what Amanda does, and what I want from each of them...*

"The third piece of the price is the hardest," Luna said as they broke off. "Do you think you can handle it?"

"After getting that much luck from you?" Draco planted a light kiss on her forehead for good measure. "I'm ready for anything."

"Even finding out Mr. Padfoot ate all Mrs. Danger's fairy cakes so we won't have any for the train?"

"*What?*" Draco yelped, all worries about girls, desires, and emotional entanglements temporarily banished in favor of this greater crisis. "How could he do that to us? And he calls himself a father!"

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"Dad?" Amanda Smythe poked her head into her father's study. "You in here?"

"Yes, love, just a moment." A click, and the dimly-lit room was flooded with light. "Your mother sent you up to tell me it's almost time to take you and Matt to the train, didn't she?"

"How did you guess?" Amanda noticed the open book on her father's desk and glared at him. "*Dad*

. You promised you wouldn't read in low light anymore. Remember what the doctor said about your eyes!"

"Oh, I think my eyes will be just fine." Ezra Smythe looked up, directly into his daughter's face. "Don't you?"

Amanda took a step back, covering her mouth with her hand. "You didn't," she breathed. "Dad, you *didn't* ."

"Clearly, I did." The man across from her bestowed a green-eyed glare of annoyance on her. "Don't talk nonsense, 'Manda, we've got little enough time as it is."

"What if Grandpa G catches you?" Amanda pulled the door of the study shut behind her. "You know how he feels about unwarranted interference, he could ground you for the next hundred years for something like this—"

"Are you planning on telling him?" her father interrupted. "Because he certainly won't learn about it from me. Now, hush and let me talk. The sooner I can get my message across, the sooner I can get out of here and let you get on with business as usual."

"Usual," Amanda muttered, the word leaving a nasty taste at the back of her mouth. "There's nothing usual about me."

"Yes, well, you won't have to keep up your pretense too much longer." The man's voice was tight with strain. "This is it, Amanda. Your last year. Unless you get it done this time, you won't be able to do it at all."

"You're saying that like I've tried this a hundred times before," Amanda snapped. "I always knew this was my only shot, so don't worry, I'm not planning on muffing up. Is that the only thing you came to tell me?"

"No." Her father sat back in his chair, arms folded. "Why don't you explain to me this little game you've got going on with Draco Black and Luna Lovegood."

"I didn't think it was that hard to understand." Amanda crossed her own arms, hoping the pressure against her stomach would keep her voice from quivering. "Luna gets two months to see how well she can fascinate him, how deeply in love she can make him fall, and then she steps back and I get two months to do the same. Her two months are up today, since she gets to spend summers around him and I don't. What's the matter with that?"

*"Besides the fact that you're playing with this poor boy's emotions at a time when he least needs it?"* The hissed words gave Amanda an uneasy sense of just how important this was to her father. He almost never used this one of their family gifts, since it reminded him too painfully of his own father, the best-known bearer of that gift to the modern wizarding world. *"What right do you have to make anyone fall in love with you? Or are you going to claim that all your vows were broken when you—"*

"That's how they're worded, isn't it?" Amanda cut in, her shoulders rising and her breath coming faster. "I was faithful while they applied to me. I never so much as looked elsewhere. And I'm young now, I have feelings, I have needs, just like anybody else. He's kind, he's handsome, and he makes me happy."

"And how do you plan to help him when your story ends the way you've always known it will?" her father retorted. "Or will you leave that part to Luna, and hope enough of his heart is still hers that she can give him some measure of comfort?" He stood in one swift, fluid motion. "Nothing you have ever done has made me ashamed of you, daughter. Until this. Until today. Now I know how my father must have felt, when I turned away from his teachings to remain faithful to your mother."

Amanda swallowed a sob and lifted her chin defiantly. "Call me all the names you want to. This is my game, and I'm going to play it my own way. And I'm going to win, too. Now, it's time for you to go," she continued in English. "I can't miss the train."

"Of course not." Her father seated himself again, his movements oddly ceremonial. "Farewell, my daughter. May your chosen path lead to all the happiness you deserve."

"You too," Amanda whispered, in the last moment before the eyes facing hers changed from green to brown.

"Goodness sakes." Ezra blinked several times. "I must have been daydreaming. Time to go for your school train, love, isn't it? We wouldn't want you and Matt to be late." He got to his feet, smiling fondly. "Funny world we live in, isn't it, where plain, ordinary people like your mother and I can end up with a wizard and a witch for son and daughter?"

"Yeah." Amanda summoned a smile and hoped it looked passably natural. "Funny world."

*Funnier than I hope you'll ever know.*

Holding her head high, she opened the door and stepped out into the corridor.

The destiny she had chosen was waiting. It wouldn't do to be late.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 2: Doubts, Dreams, and Destruction (Year 6)

"So what can we expect this year, Professor?" asked Hermione as the Hogwarts Express rounded the first curve out of King's Cross.

"From me, or in general?" Letha—no, Harry reminded himself, he had to get used to calling her Professor Black—tapped her fingers together thoughtfully. "I'll be running my classes as fairly as I can, but there's a great deal to cover at the sixth year level. We'll be moving quickly, so I expect those of you who are better with Potions to help those of you who aren't." Her eyes moved meaningfully from Hermione and Draco to Harry and Ron. "You do have all your books, I assume?"

"Wouldn't have bothered, if we hadn't heard you were taking over Potions," said Ron. "It's good, because we couldn't have taken it otherwise and we would have been short a N.E.W.T. for Auror apprenticeship, but it does mean Snape for Defense..."

Professor Black cleared her throat, and Ron sighed. "*Professor* Snape, I mean," he corrected himself grudgingly.

"That's better, and I suggest you lose the sarcasm before the Opening Feast." Brown eyes, Letha's in all but their cool, detached expression, swept across the Pride, sparing no one. "What you do and say in private sets your habits for what comes out in public, and both his position and his accomplishments mean Severus Snape deserves your respect. His actions are not always above reproach, but it's not your place to rebuke him. If he does something truly egregious, bring it to me, or to Professor McGonagall, and we will handle it as we see fit. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said after a quick poll of the Pride by eyeball.

"Good." Professor Black settled into her seat more comfortably. "Of course, pranks which cannot be accurately traced to any one person or group cannot fairly be punished. But I would remind you," she added, cutting off the incipient manifestations of glee around the compartment, "that Severus has seldom felt it incumbent upon him to be fair. Bear in mind the time of year, any upcoming events, and possible repercussions before you embark on anything which cannot be quickly undone."

"Yes, ma'am," said Harry again, stowing the warning in the back of his mind. *It would be just like Snape to say only the DA has learned the spell that someone cast in his quarters, and ban every DA member from, say, an upcoming Quidditch match...*

"And I think that's enough on that particular unpleasant topic, don't you?" Professor Black chuckled. "O.W.L. year for you two, Ginny, Luna. Do you think maybe this lot might have some advice for you?"

"Do they have anything else but?" asked Ginny tartly. "At least I haven't got Percy on me about it."



We've barely seen him. Something to do with that group he's starting up, the Red Shepherds..."

---

Percy Weasley, at that very moment, was covered in dirt, grime, and substances better unnamed, but in the peculiar way of life, he had seldom been happier. Running one fingernail under another to remove the ingrained bits of a peculiar brick-orange stuff like modeling clay, he strolled down the main ground-floor corridor of the seemingly abandoned house, peering into rooms as he passed to check on the progress of his people.

*Time to announce the arrival of the new player on the scene. The Red Shepherds, devoted to saving innocent lives and ridding the world of Death Eaters, as spectacularly as possible. And in that spirit, why don't we start things off...* He grinned, looking, in that moment, startlingly like his brother Bill. *With a bang?*

"How's it coming?" he asked, looking around the corner into the dust-filled kitchen.

"Another few minutes," said George, looking up from the fine cord he was carefully inserting into a block of the same stuff Percy had just been digging out from under his nails. "Remind me why this place again?"

"Isolated." Percy held up one finger. "We won't harm anyone, especially not by accident." A second finger joined the first. "But then, it's close to several towns and villages the Order of the Phoenix suspects are hubs for Death Eater activity, so we'll rattle their windows and remind them that we could have come for them instead." A third finger rose to keep company with the first two. "And we *know* it's been used for Death Eater activity in the past, so this will make sure they don't come back." He glanced over his shoulder towards the front door, out of which he had once staggered, only to be abruptly Side-Along-Apparated into the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic by Sirius Black.

*In nothing but my underwear.*

*But given that the alternative at that time was to be attacked by Lord Voldemort's pet snake...*

He hadn't particularly cared for that humiliation, but he had survived it, as he had survived a great many other things he would once have thought would destroy him. Instead, to his intense surprise, his experiences had changed him, shaken him out of a calm and complacent view of the world, and awakened what he had overheard the twins referring to as his "inner Weasley".

*Or, as Mother calls it, the "rulebreaking streak".*

Rules, up to a certain point in Percy's life, had been there to be obeyed, no matter who had made them or why. Their mere existence was enough to compel obedience. But though he would never have admitted it aloud, Percy was beginning to understand the need to transgress, to push the boundaries, which drove so much of his brothers' (and sister's) personalities. He still wanted and needed structure in his life, but enough shocks had rolled over him in the last several years that even he could now admit that no one set of rules could cover everything.

*And that sometimes, rules are made for the wrong reasons. In which case, with proper precautions in place, of course, those rules can and should be broken.*

His, and the Red Shepherds', initial foray into wholesale rulebreaking would begin in the few minutes George had specified.

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"We may not see much overt activity from the Death Eaters for a while," Aletha told the Pride, silently hoping she was correct. "And what there is, we hope, will be devoted to trying to identify and locate the Red Shepherds. The Order is... not going underground, exactly, but stepping back for a while, staying out of sight. Which was always the idea, anyway."

"Because they can get a lot more done if the Death Eaters think they're not a threat any longer," said Hermione, nodding. "That makes sense."

"I'm sure they'll be glad you approve," Aletha teased gently. A flush rose on Hermione's cheeks, but she also giggled. "Yes, and it wouldn't hurt if you can run something of the same double game with the DA, Harry. Your skirmishers—they're the ones who are supposed to be so good they're bad, yes?—let them know that they always need to be ready to step up in practice, if... certain people should happen by."

"Certain people, like the sort who should think we're a bunch of kids who don't know one end of the wand from the other?" Harry flipped his once casually in his hand. "We'll be ready."

"How do we know who, though?" Neville rotated the chambers on his potion piece with a rhythmic, clicking sound. "Last year, when Mum taught Defense, she was our sponsor, but this year's professor..."

"Is not necessarily untrustworthy," Aletha finished firmly before anyone else could nip in, "but may need to be able to truthfully report what he has seen and heard. What he suspects or believes to be true is another matter entirely."

Two or three members of the Pride looked baffled by this, but the rest were nodding thoughtfully.

"Now, if you'll excuse us for just one moment..." Aletha pointed a finger at Harry, then beckoned him to her side. "Amuse yourselves as you see fit, the rest of you. Without explosions, if you please, I'd like to reach Hogwarts in one piece."

Ron snapped his fingers in mock disgust, and Ginny and Meghan pouted. Luna was already pulling out the latest issue of *The Quibbler*, folded back to a particular article which Draco leaned in to peer at with her. Hermione adjusted her seat to account for Crookshanks' weight on her lap, Summoned her current book, and reached over without looking to help herself to a handful of Bertie Bott's from the bag Neville had just opened.

Settling himself beside Aletha, Harry waited until she had set the Privacy Spell around them, then spoke before she could. "Occlumency lessons?"

"It is generally considered polite to let the adult bring up the topic of conversation," Aletha said coolly, letting just a hint of the patronization and disdain that her Pack-son was likely to experience from Snape into her own tone.

"Oh, I didn't know you wanted me to pretend I was stupid—" Harry began heatedly. He caught himself up with a flush, but they both knew that had he in fact been closeted with Snape, the damage would have been done.

*Time to walk the fine line. Make sure he understands, without rubbing it in if at all possible.* "I don't." Aletha kept her tone as neutral as possible. "He might, if only so he can castigate you for it. But then he'd also take it badly if you tried to prove you were smarter than he is."

"So I can't win, no matter what I do?" Harry glared daggers at the inoffensive gray mist of the Privacy Spell. "Sounds like the whole damn war."

"It does, in some ways." Aletha traced a circle on her palm with a finger, thinking over all she knew of Severus Snape.

"There are, when it comes down to it, only three types of encounters between human beings," she said finally. "Adult to adult, child to child, and adult to child. Two of those are evenly matched, one is not. Which one would you rather be in, and on which side?"

Harry looked over his shoulder at her. "Are you asking the Gryffindor, or the Marauder?"

"In this instance, the Marauder." Aletha raised an eyebrow at him. "The one who talked a snake into my bed on a particular date in April a number of years ago."

Something suspiciously like a snort escaped from Harry. "The Marauder would rather have the advantage," he said, getting himself back under control. "Even if Gryffindors are supposed to be 'brave, noble, and chivalrous'."

"Good answer." Aletha nodded. "And one, believe it or not, which Severus Snape will give you every chance to practice. You see, Harry, in some ways, he has never grown up. You, especially, seem to bring out his most petty, sulky, and vindictive side—that is, childish. So, logically speaking, if you want the advantage in your next encounter with him..."

"I... have to be the grown-up?" Harry hazarded.

"Precisely." Aletha smiled lopsidedly. "Mind you, I don't say it will be *easy*. But try to bear in mind, the same principle applies as arguing with idiots."

This time what got away from Harry was an actual laugh. "He'll try to drag me down to his level, then beat me with experience?"

"You said it, I didn't." Aletha raised a warning finger. "And I should tell you now that should he so much as glimpse this conversation in your mind, I will categorically deny that it ever took place."

"Noted." Harry hesitated a moment, then snaked an arm around Aletha's shoulders, squeezed once, and vanished through the Privacy Spell.

Aletha sat quietly for several seconds, bringing her expression back under control. When she dismissed the Privacy Spell, there was no sign she had ever been perturbed.

*Or so I hope.*

Taking out a notebook of her own and noticing in passing that Harry was now having a high-speed, deeply involved conversation with Hermione, Ginny, and Ron involving their Sanctuary-building project and their spell-breaking year, the new Hogwarts Potions Professor turned her attention to curricula, lesson plans, and classroom management techniques.

*Focus on what you can handle, and what you can't will come in its own good time.*

*Though at the risk of repeating myself... or so I hope.*

---

Remus Lupin was busily engaged in the consideration, compilation, and analysis of a number of fragmented, uncertain, or multiply-interpretable intelligence reports for the Order of the Phoenix. It said so, though in fewer words, in the sign he had posted on the door of the War Room at Headquarters, and therefore it must be true. Surely no one would dream of interpreting the rasping, rhythmic sounds escaping at regular intervals into the hallway as anything but evidence of a keen mind hard at work!

In fact, though, someone did so dream. Three someones, to be precise.

Bernadette Prichard, by virtue of her species the automatic bottom of the tower, steadied her friend Echo as the female house-elflet, the equivalent of a human seven-year-old and therefore the oldest of the three, balanced on her shoulders. Her brother Cissus, born her twin but now lagging behind her in development to "stay with Bernie" for longer, was perched atop her, a full cup of water wobbling in his hands. "A little closer," he whispered piercingly. "Just a little closer..."

A much larger hand plucked the cup out of Cissus's grasp. "You brought me a drink," Remus said, sitting up in his chair and smiling at the crestfallen three. "How nice of you."

"Dragon dung," Bernie said, scowling and reaching up to help Cissus jump down to the floor. "You weren't s'posed to wake up yet."

"So I guessed." Remus set the cup on his desk. "But you'd be surprised how loud whispers are. Next time, try talking quietly, or even in a normal tone. The person you're trying to surprise might wake up, but not bother to open his eyes, because he thinks people talking normally either haven't noticed him or aren't trying to sneak up on him."

Witch and elflets exchanged speculative looks. "Okay," said Echo after a moment. "We remem—*we'll* remember that," she corrected herself midstream, smiling at her carefully proper English.

"Good." Remus pointed to the partially opened door. "Now, off with you, before one of your mothers comes looking."

Identical expressions of panic crossed three faces at the thought of being caught in forbidden territory by either Voni Prichard or Winky, and three pairs of feet skittered rapidly into the hallway and back up the stairs from whence they had come.

A sense of nostalgic amusement touched the edge of Remus's mind a moment before the low chuckle which accompanied it filled his ears. "And just how long have you been standing there?" he inquired, turning in his chair to face the door.

"Long enough to know you were awake." Danger stepped into sight and leaned her shoulder against the doorframe. "Not to mention, long enough to realize if you weren't, you deserved what they were going to do to you."

Remus shook his head sadly. "And this is my wife," he told the mirror on the far wall. "My helpmeet, my other half, the light of my declining years..."

"Don't expect any sympathy from me," the mirror said testily. "You're the one who married her."

Danger laughed aloud this time, and Remus chuckled in response. **You know I would have considered you a de facto participant if you let them get away with it, he told her silently. And that means, whatever I had chosen as my revenge on them would have had to include you.**

**Revenge?** Danger pressed a hand to her chest, fanning herself with the other one and fluttering her eyelashes. **Why, Mr. Lupin! I cannot believe, no, I simply can not believe such a fine, gallant gentleman as you would take revenge on three such darling, adorable, innocent little children and your own beloved wife!**

**You keep right on not believing it, then,** Remus advised with a grin. **That will make my job all the easier. As for "innocent little children", are you really about to believe that? When they've been living in the same house as our cubs for months and one of them has an older cousin who works for the Weasley twins?**

**Of course I don't believe it.** Danger came across the room and plunked herself down on her husband's lap, squirming until she found a position where her weight was evenly distributed and she could rest her head against his shoulder. **But it sounds good, and that's what matters.**

**Whatever you say, dear.** Remus wove his hand into the mass of brown hair now cascading over his arm, got a grip, and exerted the gentlest of possible pressures, thereby lifting Danger's face to the proper angle at which he could, with a minimum of effort, take her lips with his own.

**Whatever you say.**

**I won't be able to say anything if you keep doing—oh, yes, just like that...**

One small, slender hand slid inside Remus's robes, extracted his wand, and aimed it at the door,

which obediently closed.

Corrupting children was all well and good, but only up to a point.

---

Harry watched as Ginny rolled a tiny ball of modeling clay between her fingers, then began to pinch flat, round pieces, which she curled around the ball at irregular intervals. "Any guesses yet?" she said, holding it out. "I'll give you a hint—it's something I like a lot."

"Um." Harry squinted at the miniature sculpture. "Is it... a rose?"

"Yes!" Ginny added another petal to the outside of what Harry could now see was meant as a half-open rosebud. "Pink ones are beautiful, but I can't wear them." She pointed to her hair, making a face. "They don't *go*."

"I could probably breed you one that would," said Neville, looking up from the discussion over the pages of *The Quibbler* that he and Meghan had joined. "A pale pink, maybe with some orange in it, almost peach-colored."

"Oh, Neville, could you really?" Ginny stopped, flushing. "And just listen to me. I sound like every gushing girly girl I've ever hated."

"No, you sound like someone who has a dream," said Professor Black from across the compartment, not lifting her eyes from the small book in which she was writing. "And a good friend who's offered to make that dream come true. Don't disdain yourself for wanting what you want, or for being happy when someone says they'll help you get it."

"Yes, Professor," said Ginny meekly, but she was smiling. "Neville, if you could do that, it would make me very happy. Thank you."

"I'll ask Professor Sprout if I can use one of the upper-level greenhouses. She might let me count it as extra credit, too." Neville sat up straighter, his hands rising to gesture, though his right one never strayed far from the pocket-like slit in his robe which gave access to his potion piece. "And if I get started soon, they might even be ready in time for May Day, and that would mean you could carry them in... you know."

"My bouquet." Ginny's smile widened. "You can say it. I don't think Harry will run away from the thought."

"From the thought of the wedding, I might," Harry said frankly, sparking a general round of laughter. "But from the thought of getting married to you?" He laid his hand gently over Ginny's clay-covered one. "Telling the world you belong to me, and I belong to you, now and always? That's about as scary as taking my next breath."

"Need the toilet," Draco muttered, and shoved himself to his feet, hurrying out of the compartment.

*What... Harry winced internally, though he kept the smile plastered on his face so Ginny wouldn't worry. Stupid. Bringing all that up, it slaps right up against the reason we're doing it so soon. We can't edge around it forever, but there was no reason I had to say it today...*

*Except that we can't edge around it forever, and it's coming faster than any of us want.*

*Why do our lives have to be so damned complicated, anyway?*

---

Draco slammed the door of the boys' toilet closed behind him and hastily examined his face in the mirror, exhaling a breath of relief when he could detect no visible signs of his momentary emotional turmoil. Leaning against the wall, he shut his eyes, swaying automatically as the train moved, trying to calm himself.

"It isn't now," he murmured. "It isn't today. And it can't have today unless I let it. Today belongs to me."

The mantra wasn't much against the fear and grief ripping him up from within, but he clung to it stubbornly, using it to beat them over their nonexistent heads. *Today belongs to me, I said. That means go away. You'll get your turn, I can't stop that, but not before it's time, and I am damn well going to live all the days I have left. Including the day my brother gets married, and I'm not going to be the ghost at the party, either. I'm going to be a proper best man: take pictures of Harry tied up so he can't escape before the ceremony, pretend I forgot the ring while it's going on and then find it in my pocket, and then embarrass him and Ginny within an inch of their lives at the reception. So you—* He opened his eyes and made a horrendous face at himself in the mirror. — *can go piss up a rope!*

Some combination of his carefully stated plans, the childish grimace, and the adult language made him laugh under his breath, and the worst of his panic receded. Vestiges of it remained, though, lurking around the edges of his mind and trying to sneak back into the center, and Draco decided on the spur of the moment to go for a walk. A change of view, a bit of exercise, possibly even some fresh air, would help him regain full control of himself before he returned to the Pride's compartment.

With this thought in his mind, he let himself back out into the corridor and started walking the length of the train, waving a quick hello to friends and acquaintances as he passed their compartments, taking a moment between each set of cars to enjoy the scenery as it flew rapidly past. As he neared the end of the last car, though, it became clear he hadn't been the only person to want some fresh air and solitude.

*Though if I'm not mistaken...* Draco leaned forward, surveying what he could see of a tumble of hair only slightly less red than a Weasley's and a shape distinctly feminine even in a shrouding Hogwarts robe. *Which I don't believe I am.*

"First of September already," he commented conversationally, sliding open the door to the tiny balcony. "Seems to come earlier every year, doesn't it?"

Amanda Smythe jumped as though someone had hit her with a *Rictusempra*. "Draco! I—yes, I suppose it does." She laughed, but something about the sound struck Draco's ear as forced. "Were you looking for me, or just..." One dainty hand made a small circle, indicating the platform on which she stood. "I can always leave, if you wanted to be alone."

"No, I wouldn't mind company." Draco stepped outside and shut the door behind him. "Seeing that it's you. How was your summer?"

"Not terribly interesting." Amanda leaned on the railing again, looking out over the long stretch of train tracks behind them. "Yours?"

"More interesting than I'd expected." *Or intended, or wanted.* Draco considered trying to explain two weeks spent in his alternate form, locked in a bedroom in an aggressively Muggle Surrey suburb, but gave it up as a bad job. "But interesting or not, it's over."

"Over." Amanda's voice hummed through the two simple syllables, but Draco looked at her sharply. There was an undertone in her tone he didn't like at all. "Such a lovely word, isn't it? Over. Over and done with, finished, no more." Her hands gripped tightly on the railing as she leaned forward, staring into the distance. "Haven't you ever thought how wonderful it would be to have everything over with? No more decisions, no more responsibilities, no more troubles, not ever. Just... just peace. Peace, and quiet, and no more games to play, not ever again—"

"Hey, now." Alarmed, Draco reached out and caught Amanda around the waist, pulling her back onto the platform. "Be careful! You almost fell there."

"And if I had?" Amanda looked up at him, her grass-green eyes filled with a misery he had seldom seen.

*On anyone else's face.* A sudden suspicion possessed Draco. *Does she know something...*

"If I fell from the train right now, this very moment, would you care?" Amanda's lower lip was trembling, her voice husky with the suppressed tears he could see glazing her eyes. "Would you wish I hadn't? Or would you be glad, because it was one more choice you didn't have to make? One more person you didn't have to hurt? One more—"

The door slammed open. Draco snatched his hands away from Amanda's waist as though she were red-hot, which was the approximate color her face was turning. *Wonderful. Caught in a compromising position with a girl who is not my official girlfriend, and the year hasn't even started yet. Could this get any worse?*

He turned to face the person framed in the doorway and flinched.

*I should know by now.*

*It can always get worse.*

Luna regarded them both for a long moment, one hand gripping the doorframe tightly, her only



sign of tension. "This isn't something you want to do, Amanda," she said finally. "This isn't a place you really want to go. It's not necessary, and it's not worthy of you."

"Worthy?" Amanda spat. "What do *you* know about my worth?"

"I know that you have it." Luna could have been discussing a book she wanted to borrow or a missing box of sweets, except that neither of those would have filled her tone with the boundless compassion Draco could hear in her words. "I know that you have always had it, no matter what choices you've made. And I know that the past is not the future. New patterns don't have to be the same as old ones."

Amanda was bone white, her hands fisted tightly in her robes. "How *dare* you," she choked out. "How *dare* you stand there and say that to me—to *me!* Look at me! Look where I'm standing, and what I've tried to do! And you dare, you dare talk to me about worth, about choices—"

"I dare to tell the truth." Luna smiled, softly, sadly. "I speak as I must, for I cannot be silent."

Draco moved without thinking, catching Amanda's wrist as she hauled off for what he realized, belatedly, would have been a ringing slap across Luna's face. "None of that, now," he told her, releasing her as she whirled, furious, to face him. "I've no idea what she's talking about, or you either, but I heard nothing that would warrant you hitting her."

"You heard nothing—well, that much you have right." Amanda brushed her robes off, her fury transmuting in an instant from fire to ice. "Or rather, you heard everything, but you understood nothing. As I expected." She turned to face Luna and squared her shoulders. "The field is yours, madam, as are the spoils." One more fulminating glance raked Draco from head to foot. "I wish you joy of him."

Luna shook her head. "It was never a battle," she said, stepping out onto the platform. "Not to me. I wish it hadn't had to be one for you."

"You do, do you?" Amanda tried to sneer, but somehow the expression lost most of its force, confronted by Luna's matter-of-fact nod. "Well, isn't that just so special. Have you got anything else to tell me today, or may I go?"

"Only one more thing." Luna smiled again, this time more brightly, as though she were about to bestow a blessing upon the other girl. "Don't be afraid. When the time comes, you'll know what to do, and you'll do it."

Amanda stared at her for the space of three heartbeats, then bolted back into the train car, wild sobbing trailing behind her. Luna watched her go, a look of compassion creeping onto her face to match her earlier tone. Draco exhaled what felt like his first breath in over a minute and sucked another one in gratefully.

"What," he said without any real hope of getting an answer, "was that all about?"

"I'm not really sure yet." Luna shut the door and came to stand beside him, gazing back the way they'd come. "I hope we didn't harm the spells on the year by it, but what she was trying to do could have been much worse for them. She'll be important to the way it ends, you know. Or maybe you didn't."

"Generally I don't, until you tell me." Draco slid an arm around Luna's shoulders, and mentally sighed in relief when she leaned into him as naturally as she ever had. "Do you know how, or is that still hidden?"

"Most of Amanda is hidden from me." Luna sketched with her finger on the top of the railing. "She's very good at hiding. She's had a long time to practice it."

"Not that long," Draco objected. "She's only in my year, so she can't be more than sixteen, can she?"

"Her body is only sixteen." Luna brushed her hand across her invisible sketch, as though erasing it. "Her mind and her soul are much older than that. And her soul is... wounded. Wounded like someone else I've seen, only that wound was healed." She canted her head to look up at him. "I'll think of it one of these days. In the meantime, it doesn't much matter. Though I wish she wasn't so angry about my understanding."

"Sometimes, understanding is the most painful gift anyone can give you." Draco squeezed Luna's shoulders gently. "And some people don't accept gifts well, even ones they want."

Luna made a small noise of agreement, and they stood in companionable silence for what might have been a short or a very long while.

In the presence of love, such small things as time were hard to notice.

---

Harry checked his wristwatch again. "Five more minutes," he said for the third time. "If they're not back in five more minutes, I'm going out to find them."

"Oh, let them be." Ron tapped one of his chessmen on the head and indicated the square where he wanted it to move with a finger. Meghan squealed indignantly as her castle was demolished by the bishop's long staff. "We were in each other's laps most of the summer, when you and Fox weren't away. Why shouldn't they have a little alone time?"

"Besides," Ginny put in from the floor, where she was now dangling a string for Crookshanks to attack, "we can use the room in here. Expanded compartment or not, it gets crowded when half the DA seems to want to drop by at once."

"No argument." Harry allowed himself a grin at the number of people who had stopped in to say hello, to report on how often they'd practiced their wandwork over the summer, to pass along tips for potion piece maintenance or accuracy, to share ideas on the active pursuit of the harmony which would make the spell-breaking year a going concern. "All right, we'll let them take their

own time. But if they're not back by the time we're usually getting into robes..."

"You know they will be." Ginny punched his leg. "Worrywart. What time is it again?"

Harry angled his wrist downwards. Ginny craned her neck to see the watch's face. "Percy and his friends should be starting their celebration any minute now," she said, looping the string loosely around Crookshanks's neck and watching him roll over in confusion. "I hope everything goes well for them."

"It's Percy." Ron moved a pawn up to strengthen his king's defense. "If anything goes wrong, it won't be because of a lack of attention to detail."

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The Red Shepherds, at that very moment, were crouching in a dry ditch a safe distance away from the house they had so lovingly seeded with blocks of red-orange material. Percy held the end of a long string in his hand and his wand in the other. "Final check, please?" he requested.

Fred and George both poked their heads out of the improvised bunker, each holding a pair of Ron's improved Omnioculars. After a moment, they both pulled back in.

"No heat signatures anywhere that I could see." Fred patted the golden glasses affectionately.

"Nor on my side," said George. "I think we're good to go."

"Very well, then." Percy looked around the small group, his eyes passing over Lee, Danielle, and Crystal before lighting on Roger Davies. "Would you care to do the honors?" he asked, extending the string.

"Well, if you insist." Roger grinned and accepted the string, drawing his own wand and touching its tip to the string's frayed end. "What is it they yell again? Burning down the burrow?"

Crystal rolled her eyes. "Fire in the hole," she said in a tone of infinite patience.

"Right." Roger raised his wand ceremoniously. "Fire in the hole," he pronounced, and touched a spark to the string, dropping it before it could burn his hand.

The hissing flame raced along the fibers, disappearing over the side of the ditch. Roger cast a quick charm on his ears, tucked his wand away, and hunkered down, the rest of the Red Shepherds doing the same, George taking an extra moment to charm Crystal's ears.

Percy pressed his back against the packed dirt, his watch in his hand, his mind following the fire Roger had started to its inevitable conclusion. *In five, four, three, two...*

**BOOM.**

It was the only word possible for the sound they had created (which came through clearly in spite of the charms), and did not even begin to address the shockwave which rolled over them, or the

debris which began to rain down on them until those with wands hastily raised overlapping Shield Charms to stop it. It shook him to the core, it stole his breath, it dried his mouth and turned his knees to water, and he wanted to do it again immediately.

As Fred and George worked a mass Disillusionment to ensure they wouldn't be seen by the Muggles now rushing to the spot of the "mysterious explosion", Percy scooted over to sit beside Crystal. "That was quite impressive," he said casually.

"Yep." Crystal grinned and rolled a piece of the original red-orange material between her fingers. "Like they say, when in doubt, Semtex."

"And being a basic material, it falls under Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, so now that we know its properties, we can make as much of it as we want." Percy pulled his mind away forcefully from the marvelous possibilities this opened up. "Remind me again where you got that sample you gave us?"

"Well, I can't say anything for sure." Crystal lowered her eyes and looked demure. "But if someone's father had been in the Navy for twenty-five years, and if he'd been in charge of the squad which handled disposal of hazardous materials, and if he had saved a sample of everything he ever came across, just for research purposes, mind you..."

Percy looked up at his brothers. "Her father and our father," he said, pointing to Crystal, "are *never* allowed to meet."

"Decided that one already," said George, coming to sit beside his lady. "Far too many possibilities inherent in that."

"Bad possibilities." Fred shuddered. "Very, very bad possibilities."

"Especially when your mum learned about it," Danielle put in. "So, are we just going to keep sitting here, or are we going to go see what we pulled off?"

As one, the Red Shepherds rose to their feet. As one, they turned to face their first target. As one, they stared.

"We're not telling Winky about this one," Fred muttered, pointing at the flattened wreckage of what had once been a spacious house belonging to an old wizarding family named Crouch. "As in, never."

"On the other hand, success." George sounded slightly shocked, as though he hadn't been prepared for the extent of the devastation possible by using only Muggle methods. "It looks like we got every major loadbearing wall, and the rest of the house just fell in under its own weight."

"Proof of concept." Lee climbed up to sit on top of the dirt mound, scooping up a handful and letting it fall from his fingers. "That looks pretty well proved to me. And you know what this means."

"If we can find it," said Roger, tapping his finger against the back end of his wand, "we can destroy it. So long as it doesn't have wards up that keep *everything* out."

"Which it won't, because those are incredibly power draining. You'd have to be recasting them every few hours." Danielle ran her tongue along her teeth. "They'll have the basics, hostile people, hostile spells, anything with ill intent that the ward can sense..."

"It's going to have an awfully hard time finding any ill intent in a couple dozen blocks of modeling clay with strings attached." Crystal tossed and caught her tiny piece of "clay", grinning broadly. "And by the time the people find them—if they ever do—it will be far, far too late."

"Let's not get carried away," Percy warned, facing his team. "This is only the beginning."

"Hell of a good beginning." Fred pointed. "Look, there goes the magic component. The one we put on time delay, remember?"

George handed Crystal his Omniculars so that she could see the shape now soaring into the sky, visible to everyone else present.

High above them, outlined in red smoke, a man leaned on a crook-handled staff, using it to crush the head of a serpent. In his hand, held out for all to see, was a clock, its two hands pointing straight up.

*"Mortal peril" for Death Eaters, and for their leader.* Percy bared his teeth in the direction of the fallen house. *This was your warning. There won't be another.*

The Red Shepherds were well started indeed.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 3: Portraits, Parties, and Pumpkin Juice (Year 6)

"It's called a wall. It holds the house up and divides it into rooms."

"Very funny." Sirius scowled at Remus, then returned to his perusal of the large scorch mark behind the velvet curtains in the front entryway of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. "Not that I object to what you did to my dear old mum, but we ought to have something else here. Something a little more... homelike. Or maybe Headquarters-y."

"We're hoping it won't need to be Headquarters for too much longer," Remus pointed out. "And it wouldn't do us any harm to have a reminder that we're fighting this war specifically so people can have their homes and lives in peace. What did you have in mind?"

"That's the trouble. I can't decide." Sirius cocked his head one way, then the other. "I'd thought about moving the tapestry down here, now that Letha fixed it up, but that seems a little, I don't know, pretentious. I don't want the first thing people see when they walk into my house to be a declaration of my marvelous pureblood lineage."

"So what do you want it to be?" Remus asked, joining his friend in front of the scorch mark. "If someone was touring this house and you weren't here, what would you want their first impression of you to be? What would you want them to take away from here, to think is most important to you, based on what they see?"

"Moony, you're a genius." Sirius made a rectangle with his fingers and held it up in front of his eyes, holding it first horizontally, then vertically. "Hmm, a full-length, I think. Not quite life-size, but close. Formal, or mostly formal. As close as we ever get."

"Mr. Moony is pleased that Mr. Padfoot considers him a genius, but sadly his genius intellect is not up to the task of translating Padfoot-speak into English."

"Really?" Sirius snickered. "Mr. Padfoot is highly amused by this lack in Mr. Moony."

"Mr. Moony would like to suggest that Mr. Padfoot shelve the amusement and get on with the explaining."

"Mr. Padfoot wonders if Mr. Moony is perhaps still affected by the downswing of his cycle—" Sirius held up his hands in surrender as Remus reached meaningfully for his wand. "Don't shoot, I'll talk! I'll talk!"

Remus folded his arms. "You do that."

"We'll have to wait until Christmas to get it done properly, but..." Sirius drew his own wand and sketched the outline of a frame on the wall, and within it a group of figures, some sitting, others standing, rough but recognizable. "A portrait. Or more likely a photograph, but you know what I

mean. The Pack, all of us, together."

"I like that." Remus considered Sirius's sketch, letting his mind fill in the details. "Each of us holding something, maybe. A Snitch for Harry, a flute for Draco..."

"A book for Hermione." Sirius chuckled. "Letha could have a potion stirrer, or—no, how stupid am I? Don't answer that," he added hastily as Remus raised his eyebrows. "All she needs is her Healer's robes. She worked hard for those, she deserves to show them off."

"And you didn't work hard for Auror red?" Remus added a sparkle of fire across the sketch, painting the warm color he'd mentioned onto one of the seated figures, a Healer's cool green onto another. "I like this idea."

**So do I**, Danger chimed in from the back of his mind. **Can I have my favorite whacking spoon?**

**Of course you can.** Remus shaped this article out of flames and hung it in place, earning a snicker from Sirius. **Any ideas for me?**

No answer came in words, but a familiar shape formed itself in fire on the wall, and Sirius made a noise of approval. "I was just going to suggest that," he said, nodding towards the fiery violin. "So that leaves Pearl."

"Maybe this is where that 'mostly formal' should come in," said Remus as Danger caught the thought in his mind and began to giggle. "May I?"

"Please." Sirius gestured grandly at the wall. "Be my guest."

Remus drew his wand and outlined the fiery additions in lines of light similar to Sirius's, allowing the flames to fade. Then he began to draw what he had in mind, posed on the pictured floor between the two seated figures.

Sirius barked a laugh as he caught the gist of the idea. "I stick by what I said earlier, Moony. Genius."

"Once again, thank you." Remus slid his wand away. "I'll let you explain to Meghan that we're not making fun of her for being small."

"Don't be ridiculous, she'll love it." Sirius grinned at the drawing, which showed a tiny girl figure complete with braided and beaded hair, dressed in Healer-apprentice green, though only her head and shoulders were visible above the lip of the large cauldron in which she was seated. "It adds just the right touch. Silly, but not stupid. Very... very *us*. Very Pack."

"That is the general idea." Remus took a step or two back to get the full impression. "Maybe we should get a second one done for the Den. Less posed, more slice-of-life."

"Sure, if we're going to do one, why not two?" Sirius laid a Preserving Spell over the sketch, then closed the curtains on it. "In the music room, maybe. Letha at the piano, you actually playing,



Danger coming in with a tea tray—not that that's all you're good for," he added with a sidelong look at Remus, "but you do tend to be the one who makes sure we don't go hungry."

"With you," Danger said aloud through Remus's mouth, "it's a full-time job."

Sirius shrugged. "What can I say? I need the energy."

"Just as long as you only use it for good," said Remus, reclaiming his own vocal cords. "We could bring your typewriter down, or set you up with a scroll and quill if you like. Either would do. And the cubs sprawled out on the floor, with Exploding Snap or Wizard's Monopoly."

"I like this better the more I think about it." Sirius nodded. "Hang that one at the bottom of the stairs in the Den, what say? Facing the front door. You know the spot."

"Yes, I do." Remus shut his eyes for a moment to imagine it. "And I'm looking forward to being able to see it there, every day."

*Assuming we get the chance to hang it, or even have it done.*

*This war has been ugly already, and it's only going to get worse.*

---

*Why have you come to Hogwarts School?*

*What do you wish from me?*

*A Sorting, is it? Here's my rule:*

*Let's see what we shall see.*

*If compassed in you I detect*

*A daring, noble heart,*

*To Gryffindor you'll be elect,*

*And there each day you'll start.*

*But if perchance instead I find*

*Your thoughts sharp as a hatchet,*

*To Ravenclaw I'll send your mind,*

*And all the rest to match it.*

*If "loyal" best describes your traits,*

*"Hard-working", "dedicated",*

*The Hufflepuffs shall be your mates,*

*And all shall be elated.*

*But if your soul cries out for power,*

*You thirst for fast advancing,*

*'Tis Slytherin within this hour*

*You'll find the most entrancing.*

*Is one House bad, are others good,*

*You ask before we're done?*

*I would not tell you if I could,*

*For answer there is none.*

*Both what you are and what you choose  
Determine who you'll be;  
Let all who'd win instead of lose  
Take warning now by me.  
You'll need your allies' powers to lend  
Your own their fine uniqueness;  
So try me on, and learn to mend  
With others' strength your weakness!*

"It may be a new record," Harry said, watching the first nervous eleven-year-old advancing towards Professor McGonagall and the Sorting Hat. "We made it through the train ride, up to the school, and to the Opening Feast without anyone getting hexed, insulted, or detention."

"Shut up," muttered Ginny out the side of her mouth. "Do you want to jinx it now?"

"I could always insult someone," Draco suggested. "Or see how many candles I can put out before the teachers start noticing."

"Bet I can do more," said Ron.

"You think so, longshanks?" Draco started to reach for his wand.

Hermione's hand closed firmly around his wrist. "That. Is. Enough," she said, glaring first at her twin, then at her boyfriend. "Contrary to popular opinion, we do *not* come to school to see how much trouble we can get into!"

Professor McGonagall directed a meaningful look at them over the peak of the Sorting Hat, currently on the head of the fifth new student. Harry winced and nodded. "Save it for later, everyone," he advised. "Remember what kind of food the house-elves are allowed to bring you if you're in detention."

Ron, who had been looking mutinous, quickly straightened his shoulders and turned his attention to the Sorting. Harry watched as his friend blinked several times, squinted, and finally shaded his eyes with a hand. "What is it?" he asked. "Something wrong?"

"No. No, I think it's supposed to look like that." Ron frowned. "I hope it is, anyway."

"It doesn't look any different now than it ever has," said Luna. "You're just seeing more of it."

"What does it look like to you, Ron?" asked Meghan curiously. "All I see is..." She covered her giggle with one hand. "Well. An old hat. Sorry, Mr. Godric," she added in a self-conscious whisper, glancing upwards as though she thought the Founders might be watching.

*For all I know, they are.* Harry cast his own glance up, but saw only the hundreds of floating candles and the starry sky, masked here and there by clouds. *It was their school first, after all.*

Ron pulled out his wand and pushed his plate aside, drawing a diagram on the tabletop. The rest of

the Pride, and several other Gryffindors within earshot, leaned in to see. "Like this," he said, indicating the lines radiating into and around the rough conical shape which Harry assumed was meant to represent the Hat itself. "Is it... magic? I'm seeing the Hat's magic?"

"I don't see why you wouldn't," said Neville, holding his hand a little ways above a portion of the diagram. "Think about what it feels like when a spell just misses you. The air is warmer where it passed, and it smells a little different, almost like burning."

"That does make sense." Hermione was nodding. "Magic uses energy, energy from the person who cast the spell, or from a place or thing that they can draw from." She looked around the Great Hall, smiling. "I don't think we have to ask where the Hat gets its magic!"

"But it never feels hot," Harry objected. "It isn't hot to touch, or to wear. Otherwise all the first years would have burns on their heads."

"You may not be the best judge of what's hot and what isn't, Harry," Draco pointed out. "Think about the way Moony likes his tea."

"You have a point there." Harry ran a finger along the frame of his glasses, enabling the spell Ron had added for him, allowing Harry's vision to parallel the new way Ron's own eyes worked. "I never thought there'd be a drawback to being... what I am."

"There are drawbacks to everything," said Luna softly. "And some of them hurt more than others."

Rather than answer this, Harry returned his attention to the Sorting. With his heat-sight spell active, he could indeed see the lines of force which surrounded the Hat like a corona, graceful ovoid curves at four distinct angles from one another. As McGonagall lowered the Hat onto another student's head, the lines began to pulse, some brightening and widening, others dimming and shrinking. Within a few moments, only one was left, glowing like a candle flame—

"RAVENCLAW!" the Hat announced, and the table two down from Harry erupted in cheers.

*I wonder... Harry waited for the next student to be Sorted, and was not surprised in the least when a different line brightened as the others dimmed and the Hat announced "HUFFLEPUFF!" So it isn't just that the Hat is magic Ron can see now—he can actually watch it working, and know what it's decided before it speaks. I wonder if the same goes for any magical object?*

He made a mental note to have Hermione come up with experiments. Not only was she their best researcher, but she and Ron had plenty of practice at working together.

*Maybe see if some of the Ravenclaws want to help too. Isn't that what the year is supposed to be all about, cooperation and using each other's strengths?*

Without taking his eyes off the dwindling line of first years, he fished in his pocket, searching around by feel for a quill. Just as he ascertained that the fluffy thing he had located was, in fact, a large ball of pocket lint, a long gray plume protruded over his shoulder into his peripheral vision.

He accepted it with a nod of thanks, pulled out a hand-size scrap of parchment he had found, and began to scribble down his ideas before they escaped him, pausing only to swipe two fingers across his cheek and press them against the back of the dainty hand whose owner had read his mind.

*It's a good beginning. Now we just need to build on it.*

"You're welcome," Ginny murmured.

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The word spread in whispers from one Housemate to another, scrawled on bits of parchment slipped or tossed from one table to the next, even shouted over the heads of all in tones so jovial that anyone who did not know the truth already would have put it down to Opening Feast high spirits.

"Secret meeting under the school at midnight! Anyone who should be there already knows where to go!"

*And so they hide in plain sight, inviting their enemies to waste their time seeking out hidden motives. Aletha took a sip of pumpkin juice to keep her smile from showing. No doubt sons and daughters of Death Eaters are taking that message down meticulously, ready to analyze it for any scrap of meaning it might hold, then pass it along to their parents for further examination, certain all the while that it cannot possibly mean precisely what it says...*

The man sitting next to her made a small sound in the back of his throat which could have been either a stifled snort of disgust or—Aletha sipped from her goblet again—a carefully repressed laugh, audible only to her. "Something troubling you, Severus?" she asked, setting her cup down.

"Simply reflecting on the small step between brazen courage and blatant stupidity," said Snape, bisecting a potato with his fork. "And on the even smaller step between being caught out of bounds after hours and detention."

"So noted." *Good heavens. Is Severus Snape actually hinting at...*

Aletha sat back in her chair, toying with a peppermint humbug, and reviewed all the memories she had of her own and others' reported encounters with Snape. *I stand by what I said to Harry earlier*, she decided when she was finished. *He can be incredibly childish, particularly when he comes up against something that represents a situation in which he knows, but does not wish to admit, that he was wrong. But for all his petty point-scoring, he knows the stakes we fight for.*

*Now if I could just be certain he understood how badly his grudges might affect that very matter...*

"I will be inspecting the Slytherin dormitories at 1:15 tomorrow morning precisely," Snape said as though in answer to her thoughts. "Any student found not to be in his or her bed will receive the full punishment due for such an offense."

"I see." Aletha nodded, as though Snape were instructing her on some obscure point of Hogwarts etiquette. "That will be your inspection time only this once, I take it. It wouldn't do to have your schedule become too widely known."

"It would not. Future examinations shall take place at such time as seems good to me." Snape pushed his plate away. "I trust we understand one another."

"I believe we do." *Better than you would prefer, I'm sure.* Aletha watched her husband's old rival and her own current colleague as he chose a small turnover from a platter and lifted the top crust with his fork, ensuring nothing had been added to it. *You loathe Harry for being who and what he is—the living symbol of a man you despised, of his success in the face of your failure—but you loathe Voldemort still more, for murdering the one person you ever loved. If I didn't see what Lily was to you in my Hogwarts days, I certainly see it now, looking back.* She frowned, piecing together bits of memory as she might a jigsaw puzzle. *Though even if you had given up the Death Eaters, I don't know that it would have worked, not the way you wanted it to...*

She shook off the unhelpful might-have-beens. *That agile mind of yours can come up with all sorts of rationalizations for tormenting Harry in small and creative ways, and some of them may even be true. Certainly he does need to learn to deal with adversity. But when it comes to important matters, and I can't think of much that's more important than robbing Voldemort of the tools he needs to bolster his followers' delusions, you seem able to... not set aside your hatred, perhaps, but work around it.*

Smiling, she picked out a turnover for herself and bit into it, relishing the sweet-tart taste of spiced apple and flaky pastry. *And honestly? That's all we need from you.*

*Unless, of course, you could learn to bottle your attitude towards Harry and sneak it into the soup at Death Eater Headquarters one evening, directed towards Voldemort...*

Her attempt to keep from snorting crumbs onto her plate was only partially successful.

---

"Gah!" Ron clapped his hands over his eyes as he stepped from the entrance tunnel into Sanctuary. "Who turned on the lights?"

"Magic traces," said Hermione, taking Ron's elbow and steering him out of the flow of traffic. "Give yourself a moment, your sight should adjust."

"I hope so." Ron peeked cautiously between his fingers, then lowered them with a sigh of relief. "It did. And it wasn't actually that bright, it's just that..."

"That you weren't expecting it?" Neville finished, joining them with Meghan bouncing along behind him. "You've only seen this place by normal light, and it was made by magic in the first place. Then we came along and started changing it with more magic, and hiding it with even more magic. It would be like going away from a normal rosebush and coming back to find it had grown to be like one of the ones in that Muggle story about the sleeping princess."

"Except it was always like that," Meghan put in, sitting down on a handy rock and toeing her shoes off. "Only you never had the right kind of eyes to see it before." She nestled her feet into the grass which carpeted most of Sanctuary and hummed in pleasure. "It's so pretty down here now. I can't believe it used to be just a bare cave."

"It is hard to remember, even when we were the ones who found it." Hermione looked around at the walls, now adorned with paintings which suggested to the eye that the stretches of plain rock between them were in fact freestanding pillars under the night sky above, rather than a continuation of the solid surface onto which the long sweep of grassy plain had been painted. "Luna did a beautiful job drawing the sketches for these—"

"Thank you," said Luna, climbing partway up one of the "pillars" to join Ginny, who was already perched in a niche which looked suspiciously as though it had been melted and cooled into the shape of a pair of seats.

"You're welcome." Hermione smiled up at her friends. "And then everyone worked together on filling in the lines and adding the little details. It's like standing at the center of Stonehenge."

"Going to be more than that soon," Ron began, but broke off as a broomstick took to the air from across the cave.

"Evening, everyone," said Harry in a tone only one notch louder than conversational, setting his Firebolt to hover a few feet above the heads of the Sanctuary-builders. "Glad to see you all back."

*He isn't yelling over them, because that would mean he was admitting they're more powerful than he is. Instead he's talking the way he wants to, and making them quiet down to accommodate him.* Hermione smiled to herself at the hush which had fallen over Sanctuary. *Oh, Harry—you've learned more from Moony about how to manage people without their knowing it than I think you'll ever realize...*

"We put in a lot of work last year, and as you can see, it paid off." Harry's hand encompassed the grassy floor, the star-studded ceiling, the painted walls of what had once been a vast but otherwise uninspiring cavern. "But we all knew that was just getting started. Now we have to get this place ready for what it's being built for—for people to live in it. Maybe for a long time. This..." Another circular gesture. "...it's a good start, it will help keep people from feeling hemmed in or claustrophobic, but it's only one part of what they're going to need."

"People have to eat," Hannah Abbott piped up from one side of the crowd below. "And sleep. We'll need places for them to do that."

"And it'll probably work better if we give them some privacy," Susan Bones added. "For sleeping, at least. They're not soldiers or students, they're families, and they'll want to be able to stay families when they're here."

"Dormitories would be easiest for us, though," said Selena Moon, stepping up onto a nearby boulder so that everyone could see her. "How would we know how many family-style sleeping

rooms we'll need?"

"We can always make more if we start running low," pointed out one of the Patil twins, Padma, Hermione realized as she saw Parvati at the other end of the crowd, whispering with Lavender Brown. "It isn't like we're going to run out of rock to excavate!"

At this, the gathering devolved into half a dozen individual arguments—

*But no, it isn't either. They aren't really fighting. Discussing with vigor, as Danger might say, but not fighting. No one's angry, there's no shouting, no squaring off, no fists or wands.* Hermione glanced up at Harry. He was leaning back on the Firebolt, both hands planted on its handle, a smug little smile on his face. *You planned this, brother of mine. You always meant them to talk it out themselves...*

**Because it's better if they come up with the answer independently,** Draco murmured mentally, brushing his fingers against the back of her hand. **No matter how much they respect and look up to him, they'll still work harder for a plan they feel like they thought of themselves, a plan that belongs to them.** He sighed theatrically. **And here I thought I was the Slytherin one in the family.**

**You are.** Hermione glanced sideways at her twin, not bothering to disguise her amusement. **You scheme for your own advancement. Harry schemes for everybody.**

**Ouch.** Draco snatched his hand back as though Hermione's skin had burned him. "I am chastised," he said aloud, shaking out his fingers. "But since when did I care about advancement?"

"You always have," said Luna, smiling down at him. "It just has to be in an area where *you* want to excel. Like Quidditch, or theatre."

"Point," Draco acknowledged. "And speaking of theatre, wouldn't it be a good idea to have an area for things like that, if people want to perform in the evenings sometimes? A stage with some seating, either here in the 'open air' or in one of the larger 'enclosures'?"

"We'll add it to the list." Hermione pulled a scroll from her pocket. "And I think we're starting to come to a consensus..."

"Starting" was the operative word, but gradually the hubbub sorted itself out into the compromise Hermione knew Harry had planned from the beginning. Sanctuary would hold two or three large communal eating and gathering areas, along with a good-sized kitchen of its own in case something happened to the school, but the sleeping apartments would be designed for family use, with one, two, or three bedrooms as needed. Some dormitories would also be built, for anyone passing through who simply needed a bed for the night, but by and large what Sanctuary would most resemble when it was done was an underground village.

*Which is what we're hoping it can be, after all. There may be a war on, but that's no reason everything should be dull and gloomy and gray.*

With that important question settled, the discussion moved onto timetables for construction. The give-and-take on this was even livelier than the first round had been, with several fifth and seventh years reminding the rest of the room at the top of their lungs that they had exams to study for on top of all their regular schoolwork. Harry eventually had to let off two or three of Fred and George's magical fireworks to get everyone's attention back on him.

"The most important thing is to have a place for people to go as quickly as possible, if the war starts getting bad," he said when the shouting had died down. "Isn't that right?" His eyes went unerringly to the students in the crowd who had Muggle relations, all of whom were nodding firmly. "They won't care so much if it's private or even if it's very comfortable, so long as it's safe."

"So what we ought to be focusing on first are the basics," said Justin Finch-Fletchley. "The eating areas and the dormitories."

"Don't forget the entrances." Colleen Lamb's flinch when everyone turned to look at her was much smaller than it once would have been. Blaise Zabini smiled at her proudly and squeezed her hand in encouragement. "We won't do anyone much good if they can't get to us in the first place."

"We'll have help with the entrances." Maya Pritchard tossed a wink to her cousin Graham, who grinned back. "The Red Shepherds will be working from the outside, while we work from the inside."

"And we could even put off the 'inside' rooms if we had to." Su Li extended her arms to indicate the area in which they were all standing. "It won't exactly rain on people here, and we can always conjure tents if they need privacy. I say the entrances have to be the very first thing we do."

"Dorms and eating areas second," Ernie Macmillan called out over the chorus of approval.

"Dorms before eating areas, I think," said Lindsey Jordan, glancing over at Su. "No offense to the tents idea, it would work for a while, but people will get tired of sleeping on camp beds sooner than they will of eating picnic-style. And with dorms come toilets and showers, which are something we definitely need right off!"

A wave of laughter rippled through the group, and Harry glanced out at Hermione and held out his hand. She quickly drew her wand and Banished the scroll on which she'd been keeping notes towards him. He caught it deftly, nodded in thanks, and skimmed down her list.

"So I see here entrances being built first," he said. "And why don't we put toilets and showers on that part of the timetable as well, since everyone seems to agree those matter." To light chuckles, he made the emendation on the list. "Dormitories second, eating areas and other common rooms third, and individual sleeping areas fourth. All in favor say aye?"

"Aye," rumbled back in semi-unison.

"Perfect." Harry levitated the list into the air and stuck it to the top of one of the "pillars", then



turned back to face the group. "That should leave us plenty of time to get our schoolwork done—oh yes, and one other little thing."

The Pride exchanged looks as puzzled as the rest of their year-mates. Whatever Harry had in mind, he hadn't discussed it with any of them—

*Except her.* Hermione raised an eyebrow at Ginny, who was leaning back against her rocky perch, her eyes dancing in mirth. *What has he got up his sleeve now?*

"It isn't right that we should have to do all the work towards fellowship this year," Harry said sanctimoniously, landing his broomstick in the center of the group. "What if we could get the rest of the school to help us out with that?"

"That'd be nice," said Dean Thomas. "But how are we going to do it without telling them all about the year?"

"We could do it lots of different ways." Harry pulled a small bag from his pocket. "But I think the easiest one is to have each House do something kind for the others. And it helps that we have holidays dividing up the rest of the year almost exactly. Halloween, Christmas, St. Valentine's, and then May Day to finish up." He held up the bag and shook it. "Would one person from each House come up here?"

"Oh, he's good," Ron muttered. "He is very good. Who's going to think anything of the Houses holding holiday parties?" He glanced up. "Gin, you knew?"

"We talked about it some," said Ginny, clambering down to ground level, Luna sliding down behind her. "Not only that, he's already got Professor Dumbledore and all the Heads of House on board. So whatever we come up with here, they'll present it as their idea, and no one has to know about us."

Susan Bones, drawing for the Hufflepuffs, pulled her hand out of the bag with the slip marked "Halloween". Terry Boot, for the Ravenclaws, got Christmas. Blaise glanced at Colleen with a smile when he came out with St. Valentine's Day for the Slytherins, which left—

"What else could I draw?" asked Maya with a laugh, exhibiting her "May Day" slip. "We'll need your help with the flowers, of course," she called to the Hufflepuff contingent. "What do you think, pink and pale yellow, like red and gold but lighter, for springtime?"

"So, what do you think?" said Harry, arriving unnoticed beside the Pride as discussions broke out again, louder and more boisterous than before. "Will it work?"

"As long as we can keep people from hexing each other over color schemes or refreshment lists, it should," said Neville. "Or trying to sabotage other Houses' turns."

"Regular little ray of sunshine, aren't you?" Draco commented. "Not that you aren't right. That would wreck everything, even set us further back than we began."

"But if it works the way it should, it'll make Voldemort so angry." Meghan squeezed her hands together, beaming. "He'll think we should be afraid of him, setting everything aside to fight him, and instead we're having extra celebrations, planning a whole year of fun. It's like he doesn't matter at all."

"He shouldn't," said Ginny. "And if we can pull this off, we'll be one step closer to making sure he never does again." She held out her hand, palm down. "Pride together."

"Pride forever," chorused seven voices quietly, as seven other hands piled on top of hers.

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As Professor McGonagall moved down the table to Draco, Harry ran his finger along his list of classes for his first day. The free period with which he was starting out brought a smile to his face, which was quickly banished when he spotted Defense Against the Dark Arts later in the morning.

*I can handle Snape, he reminded himself. Let him do whatever he likes, be as childish as he wants, I don't have to respond to it.*

*No matter how much I want to.*

Keeping his resentful look in Professor Black's direction strictly mental, he continued through the day. He and Hermione would share Advanced Arithmancy after lunch (though not exactly necessary for an Auror apprenticeship, the interplay of numbers and magic still interested him, and he thought he could handle one extra class along with his core subjects), and then, late that afternoon...

"I'm going to need that back, Pearl," he said, looking across the table at his little sister, who had her nose buried in his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* .

"In a minute." Meghan turned a page. "Oh, now that's interesting..."

"No, not in a minute. Now." Harry checked his watch. "Breakfast is almost over, and you've got Charms to go to, don't you?"

Meghan muttered something about Charms to which Professor Flitwick would surely have objected and turned another page.

"Meghan." Harry put all the authority he could muster at such an early hour into his voice. "Give me my book."

"Why?" Meghan glared at him over the top of the pages. "You don't need it until after lunch, do you?"

"And what are you going to do with it? Read it under the desk all morning?" Harry reached across the table and grabbed hold of the textbook's spine. "Give it here. I'm not letting you get in trouble for something that silly our first day back."

"But I just want to finish this one bit!" Meghan tightened her grasp. "You don't understand, I think he's made a mistake, or not really a mistake, but there's a better way to do it, and if I can just read this recipe over once more, I think I know what it is—"

"So now you're smarter than—" Harry increased his pull on the book until he could read the name on the front cover. "—Libatius Borage was? Smarter than everyone who's used this book in all the years since it was written? I don't think so—"

"And why couldn't I be?" Meghan snapped, pulling back even harder. "You just don't want anyone else to be more special than you are yourself—"

Harry growled under his breath and gave the book a mighty yank. Meghan lost her grip on it and toppled backwards with a squeak, Neville grabbing her arm just in time to save her from a painful impact with the Great Hall's stone floor. Harry saw this only in passing, his attention mainly given to his textbook as it slipped from his fingers and went sailing gracefully through the air.

*This can't be good.*

Time seemed to slow as *Advanced Potion-Making* soared across the Great Hall. Knocking candles aside right and left, showering Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws with sparks and making them yelp, it described a beautiful parabolic arc which ended in proper dramatic fashion with a splashdown in a pitcher of pumpkin juice on the Slytherin table. Pansy Parkinson and two of her friends broke off their intense session of gossip to squeal indignantly as a wave of orange liquid drenched them.

*I was right.*

Snatching a full pitcher of pumpkin juice from under Ron's nose, Harry spun around on the bench and hurried across the Hall as whispers broke out everywhere. "Sorry, I'm terribly sorry," he said as soon as he was near enough for the Slytherin witches to hear him. "That was an accident, let me just replace that for you—" He thunked down the fresh pitcher and scooped up the one in which his book now floated. "And I'll get out of your way, let you dry yourselves off—"

"Accident, my foot," Pansy snapped, wringing out the hem of her robes. "You did that on purpose, Harry Potter!"

Reminding himself of the secret under the school, of the need for him to be the adult in his dealings with others this year, Harry kept a firm grip on his temper and merely shrugged his shoulders instead of snapping back as he longed to do. "I've said I didn't, and I don't like lying," he said calmly. "If you want to think I did, I can't stop you. I am sorry, and I won't let anything like this happen again."

Before Pansy could come up with a retort, he turned on his heel and started back to the Gryffindor table, looking ruefully down at the pitcher in his hands. The juice within was darkening by the second as the ink from his textbook leached from the pages.

"Oh, no," said Meghan repentantly as Harry set the pitcher down in the center of the table. "Harry,

I'm so sorry, I never meant—"

"We neither of us meant, Pearl, but it happened anyway." Harry fished the book out with a fork and laid it on a plate Draco shoved over, peeling back the first few pages and sighing at the damage. The words within were all but unreadable, the illustrations a muddy mess of colors. "Looks like I'm going to need a new Potions book..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 4: Asking Questions, Seeking Answers (Year 6)

"I love what he's done with the place," said Draco acerbically, studying the gruesome pictures which now adorned the walls of the Defense classroom. "Making sure we won't take it lightly, d'you think?"

"Or trying to scare us off," said Harry, dumping his books on a desk. "As if we didn't already know —"

"We know it." Hermione's whisked fingers indicated the five members of the Pride currently present. "And the DA knows, at least with their heads. Their hearts might not understand yet, if they haven't lost someone they cared deeply for. But think about some of the other people we bump up against every day, Harry. The ones who've been more sheltered, who think it's all a big game. Isn't it better for them to be a little scared now if that means they'll be prepared for what's coming?"

"If they're still that oblivious, I don't think anything's getting through to them." Neville hung his bag on the back of his chair and sat down, one hand automatically adjusting the fall of his robe so that his potion piece was within easy reach. "Not until they do lose someone, at any rate. Or, not to be callous, but until they get hurt themselves. Or even killed."

"Good riddance to some of them," muttered Ron, claiming the desk between Harry and Neville, directly in front of Hermione. "The ones who'll be—"

"Enough talking." Snape's low, cool tone cut effortlessly through the Pride's conversation and the two others taking place in various portions of the classroom. "Class has now begun, which means your attention should be not on the antics of your fellow students or on the words of your book, which you can read at any time..." His black eyes rested on Hermione, who hastily closed *Confronting the Faceless* and folded her hands in her lap. "But on your teacher. Who happens, this year, to be myself."

Ron leaned back in his chair, his hands crossed on his left arm, fingers apparently twitching at random. Harry had to swallow a snicker as he interpreted the abbreviated Pride-sign.

*Anyone else hearing a "well, finally" in there?*

"The number of different teachers you have had in this subject naturally indicates a high level of discontinuity in what you will have learned, in the level of proficiency you will have been expected to display. I am quite frankly astounded at the number of you who managed to obtain the necessary O.W.L. to enter this class, though no doubt *some* of the marks were justified." His flickering glance towards the Pride left no doubt as to whom he meant to receive the backhanded portion of this compliment. "Bear in mind, however, I have no special reason to favor any of my students over any others, and no desire to coddle or coax the incompetent. If you cannot keep up with the coursework solely on your own merits, you will be asked to leave."

Neville's eyes went hard, and his hand slid down his side, towards the slit in his robes. Ron's fingers curled into fists. Harry could hear Hermione's unvoiced hiss and Draco's back-of-the-throat growl. He waited for his own answering surge of anger, but to his surprise, what rose in his chest instead felt like... amusement?

*It's because I know he knows better than that.* The answer rose from the depths of his mind as he watched Snape stride over to the first of pictures, a witch with her head thrown back and her mouth open in a scream. *He knows none of our parents ever favored us when they taught Defense—if anything, they graded us harder than the rest of the class, because they knew what we could do. But he hates us so much that he can't acknowledge we did it on our own, so he's convinced himself that we haven't!*

"Those who practice the Dark Arts are continually seeking new paths, new directions in which to unleash their energies and indulge their passions," Snape went on, waving his hand at the writhing witch. "Never underestimate your enemy, for that may well be the last mistake you ever have a chance to make."

*Take your own advice, Professor Grumpy.* Harry spread his fingers and moved his hand horizontally, palm down, warning the Pride without words to cool off. *Give us a fair shakes, we'll do the same for you. And even if you can't, we'll still try. Because we know how to be adults...*

"Do you find something funny in the contemplation of the Dark Arts, Potter?" Snape asked sharply from beside the picture of a body so battered by the attack of an Inferius that it was impossible to tell if it had been witch, wizard, or Muggle.

"No, Professor," Harry said promptly. "Not at all."

"Yet you are smiling. One might almost say, smirking." Snape stalked towards Harry's desk, his robes billowing out behind him. "Perhaps you would like to share the joke with the rest of the class?"

Harry considered doing just this for a fraction of a second, but decided the look on Snape's face, though likely to be marvelous, would not adequately repay him for a week's worth of detentions or some unconscionable number of points from Gryffindor. Instead he glanced back at the pictures Snape had been using as his visual aids, narrowing in after a moment on the central one.

"I was thinking over good memories, Professor," he said, tilting his head back to look up innocently at Snape, who had planted both his hands on the front edge of Harry's desk. "Memories powerful enough to create a Patronus, to protect against dementors and keep from being Kissed." A flick of his hand indicated the central picture, where a wizard lay crumpled against a wall, eyes empty and mouth hanging open. "Isn't that the proper method, sir?"

Behind him, he heard the slight hitch in breath which meant Hermione was trying very hard not to laugh, and the soft cough which indicated the same for Draco. Ron was grinning openly, and Neville's lower lip had disappeared. The other DA members in the room were variously beaming, snickering behind their hands, or tossing him encouraging gestures ranging from the innocuous to

the obscene.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for cheek, Potter," Snape said after a long moment. "And I will see you after class."

"Yes, Professor." Harry waited until Snape's back was turned, then shot an apologetic look at his Housemates. *Sorry, he signed to the Pride. I guess cheek is whatever he says it is.*

*Don't worry, Hermione signed back one-handed, her other hand rummaging in her bag for a quill. You didn't deserve it, so Letha will make sure we get them back.*

*Which is the only way any of the Pack-parents ever "favored" us, Draco added, sarcasm as clearly visible in the crisp motions of his fingers as it would have been audible in the drawling tone of his voice. What fun is winning if you cheat?*

*Depends on the game, Neville put in. And the stakes—*

Ron rapped his desk twice, an urgent waggle of two fingers with his other hand needing no translation as *Heads up!* Harry and Neville quickly faced forward as Snape turned to survey his class.

"Today," he said, as coolly as if he and Harry had never exchanged words, "we shall see how many, or perhaps I should say how few, of you can muster the necessary focus and mental acumen for the casting of nonverbal spells..."

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"Potter," Professor Black called as Harry followed Ron into the Potions classroom. "Come here a moment."

Harry handed his bag to Draco, who was behind him, and hurried up to the Professor's desk. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I believe you'll be needing this," Professor Black said blandly, extending a rather battered copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. "Until you can get an owl to Flourish and Blotts, of course."

"Thank you, Professor." Harry felt his face start to burn and swore mentally. He had managed perfectly well throughout the first Defense class despite Snape's deliberate antagonism, avoiding any loss of points other than the ten at the beginning, even managing one nonverbal Shield Charm, though it hadn't been nearly as strong as Hermione's—how was it that the simple offer of a book, from a professor he knew to be on his side, could embarrass him so much more than all Snape's nasty little jabs?

*Because she expects more from me, not less, and I disappointed her this morning at breakfast. Snape expects me to be just that careless all the time, no matter what I really do...*

"Accidents can happen to anyone, Potter," Professor Black added in a casual tone. "They only



become mistakes if you ignore them."

"Understood, Professor." Harry gave his Pack-mother a thankful smile and started back to the table Draco, Hermione, and Ron had claimed for their own, his borrowed book under his arm.

*Time to put it behind me, and enjoy finally having a Potions professor who isn't out to get me. I wonder if Snape was secretly Confunding me all these years, and I'll suddenly turn into a genius with a cauldron now that he's gone?*

Taking the chair on which Draco had hung his bag, he had to hold in a snicker. *Somehow I doubt it, but hey, you never know.*

"Good afternoon, everyone," said Professor Black, drawing all eyes to herself as she rose.

"Welcome to Advanced Potions, and congratulations on your excellent O.W.L. results. This year, we're going to take the building blocks of ingredients and techniques you've been learning over your time here at Hogwarts and start to put them together in new and exciting ways..."

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*What a very interesting set of results for a first day.*

Aletha regarded the twelve labeled bottles of the Draught of Living Death which her students had obediently delivered to her desk when she had called time. In the back of the room, in between cleaning out their cauldrons and packing away their ingredients, her own three children—cubs, she corrected herself with a mental chuckle—and Ron had their heads together, peering intently at a small object in Harry's hand.

*Several of these are quite good. Some... She swallowed a chuckle as she looked at Ron's brewing, which resembled nothing so much as melted tar, and the navy blue concoction Ernie Macmillan had handed over. ...are not. But one, one is exceptional, and that comes not from either of the people I would have expected but from someone who, as far as I can remember, has never showed any particular talent in this area of magic...*

Settling herself in her chair, she fixed her eyes on that person. *Stay, she willed silently. Make it look like an accident if you want to, but stay.*

Turning around too fast, Harry sent a jar of wormwood extract flying across the table with his sleeve. He swore under his breath as it smashed on the stone flags and waved his siblings and Ron out of the room with a rueful smile, drawing his wand and glancing at Aletha for permission to use it to clean up. She nodded, smiling faintly in her turn.

*It's good to know I haven't lost my touch.*

By the time Harry had finished levitating the broken glass into the bin by the door, then using a firm *Scourgify* to remove the greenish liquid from the stones, the rest of the class had filed out. He slid his wand away, scooped up his bag, and started to follow them, moving briskly.

Aletha cleared her throat, and Harry's shoulders slumped. "Yes, Professor?" he asked guiltily, turning to face her.

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" Aletha inquired. "Before I have to take official notice of it, that is?"

Harry straightened in shock. "I didn't cheat!"

"I never said you did. But I do want an explanation." Aletha tapped Harry's stoppered potion flask, which could have been photographed and placed in a Potions dictionary as an ideal sample of the Draught of Living Death. "This potion is several levels more difficult than anything you've attempted before, and you made it perfectly on the first try. I'm not about to credit myself with *that* much more teaching acumen than Severus Snape, especially when both your siblings' potions are significantly less excellent."

With a sigh, Harry dipped his hand into his bag and pulled out his borrowed textbook. "It's this," he said, coming to Aletha's desk and flipping the book open to page ten to show her copious margin notes in a tiny, cramped, oddly familiar handwriting. "Whoever used to have it must've been fantastic at Potions, or done loads of research on his own to find all this out."

"I see." Aletha slid the book out of Harry's hands and paged through it, her sense of familiarity growing. She had seen this handwriting before, and recently. "Why do you say he?"

"Don't know." Harry shrugged. "Just... a feeling, I guess."

Aletha checked inside first one cover, then the other, and began to smile. "I think your feeling may be right," she said, turning the book so that Harry could see the small inscription along the bottom of the back cover.

"This book is the property of the Half-Blood Prince," Harry read aloud, frowning. "Prince? There hasn't been wizarding royalty for hundreds of years, not since the Statute of Secrecy was passed..."

"I see I'll have to write a thank you note to Hestia Jones," Aletha said dryly. "Since I'm quite sure you never would have known that when Professor Binns was teaching."

Harry grimaced. "He's still here, you know," he said. "Haunts the library now. Drives Madam Pince up the wall demanding she get him down books when she's in the middle of something else."

"Professor Dumbledore may be able to set up a spell to help with that. I'll mention it to him if I get a chance." Aletha shut the textbook and laid it on her desk. "Harry, I'd like to double-check this book. Make absolutely sure that it's only what it seems. If and when it passes my tests, and possibly those of a few other people, I assume you'd like it back?"

"If that's all right, Professor." Harry looked wistfully at the book. "It was nice getting the best results in Potions for once..."

"I'm sure it was, but consider it from my perspective." Aletha tapped the book. "I need a standard gauge by which to measure all my students. If one of them has different, and judging by today's results, better instructions than the rest, how can I be sure if he's learning anything on his own?"

"I know." Harry looked down. "Maybe if everyone had the extra bits, not just me?" he suggested to his shoes. "If I let you copy down the notes for the potions you were going to teach us every week, and put them up on the blackboard as optional steps or something?"

"That may not be a bad notion. But that's always assuming there's nothing unpleasant about this book, and that's yet to be proved." Aletha got to her feet, smiling as Harry looked up. "I'll have an answer for you by Friday at the latest, Harry. In the meantime, you can borrow one of the other copies from the cupboard here if you need it, or work from Ron's book or Draco's. And before I forget." She slid her hand into her pocket and found the folded slip of parchment she'd inscribed earlier. "This is only to be shared with your Pride, mind you, and for use only in true emergencies. If I find anyone using it for pranks or to try to avoid petty trouble, there will be repercussions."

Harry opened the slip, and his eyes widened. "Yes, Professor. I mean, we won't. Use it wrong, that is..." Rolling his eyes, he tucked the slip carefully into his own pocket. "Apparently doing well at Potions means I forgot how to talk."

"Go have some dinner." Aletha pointed to the door. "I understand that helps with tied tongues."

His most eager Wolf-grin appearing on his face, Harry nodded exaggeratedly and bolted for the door, pausing with his hand on the handle to look back. "Thanks, Professor," he said. "For everything."

"You're welcome," Aletha said softly, listening to his footsteps hurrying along the corridor. "For what it's worth."

After noting down the marks to be given to each student, she Vanished eleven of the twelve potion samples, tucking Harry's instead into one of her desk drawers. Adding the Half-Blood Prince's book, she closed the drawer and laid a quick but complex sealing charm around it, then made for the door herself. Food would help stimulate her thought processes as to who should be consulted about a thickly inscribed, possibly dangerous book.

*Sirius or Remus would normally be my first choices, I suppose, but I have no way of knowing what else they're doing tonight, and if this thing really is dangerous, it might be best to keep it here at Hogwarts. So one of the other professors would probably be the best place to start. Flitwick could tell me if it's under any active charms, McGonagall if it was ever anything else, Snape if it's been influenced by Dark magic...*

She stopped dead in the center of the corridor, her half-recognition of the handwriting codifying at last.

*No. It can't be—or can it?*

Turning on her heel, she hurried back to the classroom. If her wild, insane idea was correct, and it felt more and more likely as she let it percolate through her mind, there was a very simple way to verify the identity of the Half-Blood Prince, assuming his handwriting had undergone no massive changes between his own time at Hogwarts and the present day...

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To Harry's surprise, Hedwig swooped down from the rafters as he was serving himself some rice to go with his baked chicken and laid a neatly wrapped parcel beside his plate. He tore into it to discover the book he and the Pride had just been discussing.

*My research bore fruit sooner than I had expected, Professor Black had written on the inside of the wrappings. We will place your idea for the added information in this text into action on Wednesday, so please come a few minutes early. Also, test any spells you may find recorded in this book on non-living targets and in a controlled environment before you place them into everyday use. The Half-Blood Prince was not always mindful of others' dignity, though he was rather touchy about his own.*

"Not always mindful of others' dignity?" Ron repeated. "That's quite a mouthful to say he was a git, isn't it?"

"It doesn't necessarily mean he was a git," said Hermione with a slight huff. "Padfoot didn't always think about how the things he did would make people feel when he was in school, but he wasn't a git. Exactly."

"Yes, he was," Draco said, reaching past Harry to get the platter of chicken. "He says so himself."

Hermione humphed and returned her attention to her slice of steak and kidney pie.

"We had an interesting Care of Magical Creatures lesson today," Luna said into the silence. "Professor Kettleburn is quite nice, though he didn't know about bowtruckles being able to bless or curse the wood that humans take from their trees."

"The eye-gouging would be enough of a curse for me," said Ginny with a wince. "But he is nice, Professor Kettleburn, I mean. Quiet, a little shy, but nice. Though he'll never be Hagrid."

"Nobody will ever be Hagrid." Harry set his fork down, his appetite momentarily gone. "Nobody could."

Meghan sniffled once, but resolutely took another bite of well-sugared mashed turnip. "Will we still be using Hagrid's Place for the DA, Harry?" she asked through it. "To run simulations and training exercises, and maybe for... something else?" On the tabletop, her finger traced out a large S, then pointed downwards.

Harry frowned. "How do you mean?"

"For an entrance." Meghan swallowed. "If we had people coming through the Forest, say, and it

was too dangerous for them to get into the castle, or even down to the cave..."

"They could just go in Hagrid's back door," Neville said, nodding. "I like that. But where would we put it that it won't get tripped over by everyone who's in and out of there all the time?"

Meghan looked at Harry. Harry looked at Hermione. Hermione looked at Draco. Draco raised an eyebrow, and all four of them started to snicker.

"We missed something," said Ron.

"Nothing new there." Ginny poked Harry in the side. "Oi. Share the joke?"

"We will," Harry managed through his laughter, batting her hand away. "We will. Just... give us a sec, here..."

"No secs," Ginny began, then froze.

"What, ever?" Draco asked, as Ron gaped at Ginny with his fork halfway to his mouth. "That's harsh."

Luna began to giggle.

Ginny glared at her Pridemates, but the reddening of her ears cut the effectiveness of the look in half. "Shut up and tell us where you're putting this entrance."

"It's from an old, old joke of ours," Hermione said, recovering her breath. "Before we'd met any of you, even. We'd been in America, visiting our Aunt Amy—Letha's aunt, really, so our great-aunt, but that's too long to say for everyday—but in any case, we came back around New Year's and wanted to surprise Professor Dumbledore and Hagrid. So we slipped into Hagrid's house and hid all around, and all four of us—" Her hand circled to indicate the Pack's cubs. "—fit under Hagrid's bed. Which is funny because there used to be a rumor, when he was at school, that he kept werewolf cubs under his bed."

"And now he really had some." Neville smiled, tweaking one of Meghan's braids gently. "That's a good idea, too. No one who's in there to run a simulation will likely look under the bed, and even if they do, we can camouflage the entrance somehow."

"Floorboards," said Harry, refilling Ginny's goblet and passing it to her. "A section of them can come up like a trapdoor, either with a hidden catch or a password. Or both, like Professor Black has on her office." He patted the pocket where the slip of parchment detailing those security precautions now rested.

"Both is better." Ginny glanced around. "And maybe we shouldn't talk too much about this in public, either."

"Should I not have said it?" asked Meghan. "I was afraid I'd forget, though."

"No harm this once." Ginny reached over and tapped Ron on the shoulder. "All right in there?"

"Er." Ron shook his head as though he were trying to throw off the effects of the Imperius Curse. "You said... what?"

"Long day," Hermione said, covering Ron's hand with hers and giving it a comforting squeeze. "Let's go up to the common room, Ron, you'll feel better after you've had a rest."

"Rest," Ron mumbled, following her obediently. "Right."

Ginny watched him go, then looked back at Harry. "He's not going to react well at all when we're actually married, is he?"

"I think it was more the shock of hearing it unexpectedly," said Harry. "And certain people didn't help."

"Those nasty certain people." Draco scowled ferociously. "You should teach them a lesson, Harry. Show them what happens when they don't help."

"Thanks for the advice." Harry drained his goblet and stood. "I'll go upstairs and start working on that. In between homework. Coming, Gin? Luna?"

"Now that you mention homework, yes." Ginny swung her legs over the bench. "I thought you lot were just whiny last year, but now that I'm on the approach to O.W.L.s myself, I can tell you were trying to warn me what I was in for."

"It won't be that bad as long as we keep up with it," said Luna pragmatically, taking a handful of peppermints from one of the bowls as she passed it. "And I'll make everyone a sachet to keep the Wrackspurts away, because it would be a disaster if we went all fuzzy-brained now..."

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Draco looked down the table at Neville and Meghan as the girls and Harry passed through the door into the entrance hall. "I'm doomed, aren't I?" he inquired.

"You're the one who gave him ideas," said Neville, as Meghan giggled behind her hand. "Don't look at us to get you out of it."

"I thought you were my friends." Draco pouted. "Friends are supposed to help each other."

"Help is one thing." Meghan scooped the piece of chicken Harry hadn't eaten off his plate and attacked it herself. "Standing between you and Harry, when he's in a Marauding mood, is different."

"I'd do it for you!"

"Not if I deserved it, you wouldn't."

"Point," Draco conceded. "And I know it can't be anything too bad, because of the year."

"But Harry's definition of 'not too bad' and yours might be entirely different." Neville sat back on the bench, his fingers moving in familiar patterns in front of him, as though he held his guitar and were working out a tricky chord change. "And you can't exactly ask him."

Draco shrugged. "I'll live with it, whatever it is," he said, helping himself to another spoonful of peas. "For all I know, he's planning to do nothing, just watch me sweat..."

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Ron followed Hermione docilely up the stairs until they reached the fifth floor, at which point he carefully turned his wrist in her grasp until he was holding her instead and tugged her towards a tapestry behind which he could see the slight difference in temperature which meant a secret alcove. "Come fix me," he said, giving her the cocky grin he knew she enjoyed and loathed in equal measure.

"Oh, you fibber." Hermione allowed herself to be tugged, though she punched him lightly in the shoulder as the tapestry fell into place behind them. "You weren't broken at all, were you?"

"Maybe for a minute there. Bit of a shock, hearing that word out of my little sister's mouth, even by accident." Ron slid an arm around Hermione's shoulders, thrilling to the ease with which she leaned against it. "Don't tell me it doesn't shake you when you see Pearl with Neville. She was a baby just yesterday, hanging onto your robes and getting into your things and messing up your games. What's she doing with a boyfriend?"

"It does, sometimes," Hermione admitted, resting her head against Ron's chest. "But of course, sometimes it shakes me that *I* have a boyfriend." She glanced up at him through her eyelashes. "And then I remember it's you, and my shakes go away."

"What am I supposed to say to that?" Ron asked aggrievedly.

"Why do you have to say anything?" Hermione wrapped an arm around his neck. "Actions speak louder than words, you know."

"Right."

Quiet fell over the corridor once more.

---

"See anything unusual?" Harry asked Luna, watching her riffle through the Half-Blood Prince's book. "Any shapes or shadows, active spells?"

"Nothing dangerous, if that's what you mean." Luna ran her finger along the declaration of identity on the back cover. "There is a shadow, but not a Dark one, not all Dark." Her accent on the word was enlivened by the twiddle of her fingers beside the book, indicating the sort of magic she meant. "He had a strong personality, and he liked getting his own way, but he wasn't evil." She

frowned. "I feel like I should know him, but I don't. Not well enough to say a name. But he's someone we've met, someone we've seen. Not a stranger."

"Not to be paranoid," said Ginny, looking up from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, "but wouldn't Voldemort qualify? If this was something he made around the same time he made the diary, when he was in school?"

"You tell me." Luna shut the book and handed it back to Harry. "You met him, or his memory, down in the Chamber. Was he all the way Dark, truly evil, even then?"

Ginny shuddered. "Yes, he was," she said, her eyes momentarily distant as she looked into the past. "Even at that age, and probably younger than that, he liked to see people get hurt. If he had the choice between getting what he wanted without doing any harm, and getting it while hurting people, he'd choose to hurt people, because it made him feel powerful."

"So this can't have been his," said Harry, tapping the book. "Which, after dealing with that diary, is a relief. Do you realize how lucky we got that night, Gin?"

"Don't remind me." Ginny chuckled shakily. "I was positive we were both going to die, because Percy was so much older than we were, one of the best wizards I knew, and Riddle had been able to take him over and use him, just like that." She snapped her fingers. "We shouldn't have had a chance."

"Except it wasn't 'just like that', not really." Harry flipped idly through the book, noting the pages on which several iterations of what looked like spells had been written, all but the last crossed out. "We saw the end of what had taken all year for Riddle to do. He only had that little while to work on us, so he couldn't coax us into trusting him the way he did with Percy. He had to use force, and that, we could fight."

"It's always harder to fight things that happen a little at a time." Luna began to doodle on a sheet of parchment, shading a section darker and darker with every pass of her quill. "Because often you don't notice them until they've progressed a long way, and by then, they're very difficult to dislodge."

"Like bad habits." Harry reached over and flicked the piece of Ginny's hair she had begun to chew on out of her mouth. She bared her teeth at him, but made no other comment, returning to her book. "Well, I'll be happiest if we don't make a habit out of chasing after things Voldemort's been involved with. Once was enough."

Luna smiled and returned to her drawing, which now resembled an underground passage shrouded in darkness, doors studded along the walls and a hint of something scaly at one end.

---

"What did Snape want with you after class, mate?" asked Ron later, when the Pride was fully assembled around one of the common room tables. "More points off Gryffindor? The hourglass didn't look any lower."



"No, he was setting up a time for my first..." Harry motioned in front of his eyes. "You know. Special lesson."

"Good luck with that." Ron made a gagging noise deep in his throat. "I'd rather sort through a barrel of rotten flobberworms, myself. Without gloves."

"I may get to that eventually, if I keep saying things he takes as cheek." Harry snickered once. "Wonder if I could keep him out of my head with that image?"

"He's a Potions Master," said Meghan, dipping her quill into Neville's open inkwell. "He's used to that. You'd need something he isn't used to, something he doesn't expect."

"Something he doesn't expect." Harry twisted around in his chair until he was lying sideways across the seat, legs dangling over one arm. "Maybe something he doesn't do well, or enjoy, and I do."

"Something he hasn't done," Hermione suggested. "Animagus, perhaps. Moony said once he'd looked into it, but never gone any farther than that."

"I've never seen him on a broom, but I bet he's no more than passable," was Draco's contribution. "And you're a natural, always have been. Though that might not be the best idea, now that I think about it, because it might throw him back to thinking about your dad."

"But that might also be a reason it's good." Harry arched his shoulders, stretching. "If he's thinking about Dad, he's not thinking about me. We may look a lot alike, but we're not the same person. Not nearly."

"Even just this might do." Neville indicated their small circle of chairs and sofas with his quill-holding hand. "This, or a DA meeting, a Quidditch team practice... anything that's people working together, liking each other, pulling towards a common goal. Snape's a loner, probably always has been. He doesn't understand how to get people to listen to him, to agree with him, to follow him not because they have to but because they want to."

Harry snorted. "You can say that again. But what does that have to do with me?"

"People trust you, Harry." Neville set his quill down, the better to gesture. "You know how to earn their trust, and how to treat them to keep it. And you don't try to cover up when you make mistakes—you just fix them, and work on not making the same ones again. I don't think Snape trusts anyone, and not that many people trust him. So that's a difference you can use, a piece of you he can't get a hold on." He smiled faintly. "Sorry if it embarrasses you, but it's true."

"I'll take your word for it." Harry pressed his hands against his cheeks, hoping his blush would subside quickly. "Something else that came to mind was that dreamworld we used against Voldemort," he said to Hermione and Draco. "If I could come up with something like that, only twisted a little, so that it just goes around and around and never gets him anywhere..."

"What about a maze?" said Luna, turning around her second piece of scrap parchment. High hedges in bewildering formations stretched away from the tiny, baffled-looking figure in their midst, which had a distinctly hooked nose and two curtains of stringy black hair. "Like the third Triwizard task, only going on and on and on. A nightmare maze, the kind you can never get out of."

"I dreamed of one of those once." Hermione leaned forward to see Luna's drawing better. "Only it was made of glass, so I could see other passages that looked more promising but couldn't get to them..."

Harry sat back and listened to his friends discussing possibilities, letting the words slide into his ears and be recorded by his mind for consideration later. At the moment, he was too busy storing up yet another memory which could be used to spark a Patronus.

*This is the reason we're going to win. The reason Voldemort's doomed and doesn't even know it yet. The Death Eaters only work together because he makes them—take him away and they'd fall apart, grabbing for whatever scraps they thought they could lay claim to. Like Neville said, they don't trust anyone, and that's their downfall. A lot of them are strong on their own, and we shouldn't underestimate them, but if you took the seven most individually talented Quidditch players in the world and threw them up against a team which wasn't quite as good but which was a team, which had trained together and practiced together and knew each other and trusted each other...*

"It'd be like the Quidditch World Cup all over again," he murmured aloud. "Krum may have caught the Snitch, but Ireland still won."

"Except in this case, the equivalent of the Snitch would be you," said Ginny, startling him into a jump. "And I'm not about to let anyone catch you but me."

"I'll hold you to that, now." Harry hooked his thumbs together and fluttered his fingers like a Snitch's wings. "So what did you think of Professor Sprout's announcement this morning?"

"About what the Hufflepuffs are doing for Halloween?" Ginny closed her hand around Harry's make-believe Snitch, squeezed it once, and let it go. "It sounds like fun. An all-school fancy dress party and banquet. Why?"

"I was just thinking about what we ought to dress as." Harry let his head dangle back, so that he was looking at Ginny upside down. "If you're going to be my date, that is."

"You shouldn't ask questions when you already know the answer. It's redundant." Ginny chuckled. "It sounds like you already have something in mind. Do you?"

"Well, that depends." Harry grinned. "How well can you say, 'Oh, Grandmother, what big eyes you have'?"

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Alone in his quarters, Severus Snape reviewed his lesson plans for the next day, the back of his mind idly chewing at an oddity which had taken place before dinner.

*Why would Aletha Black want a sample of my handwriting? Is she hoping to help that young hellion she has raised to cause even more trouble than he could manage on his own?*

---

Looking over the notes she had taken on her class of third years, Aletha found her mind wandering to her actions earlier in the day.

*Was I right to give Harry back that book, or should I have returned it to its original owner? And why did he ever let it out of his possession in the first place?*

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"Time moves on apace, old friend," Albus Dumbledore said with a sigh to Fawkes, who was preening his shining tail. "Do you think I can let the children have one holiday in peace before I lay yet another burden on them?"

*And how much weight can even their young strength bear, before it all becomes too much?*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 5: Reading Lines (Year 6)

Danger trotted down the third floor corridor, mentally checking off the occupants of the rooms she passed. *Voni and Par—he's at work, she's downstairs. Arthur and Molly, when they're here—he's at work, she's at the Burrow. Sirius and Aletha—she's at Hogwarts, he's...*

She stopped, backed up three steps, and took another look.

*What is he doing?*

Only the bottom half of Sirius was visible, sticking out from under the bed. He was emitting a series of muffled noises which sounded suspiciously like a mix of French and English curse words, and every so often the entire bed shook.

**That's a very good question,** said Remus, taking a look through Danger's eyes. **Either the doxies are back, Kreacher's decided this would make a good den, or Sirius can't remember where he put something.**

**I'm betting on number three.** Danger stepped cautiously into the room. **Do you think he needs help?**

**You could ask. Just make sure he—**

"All right under there?" Danger said aloud.

Sirius jerked and swore more distinctly.

**—hears you coming,** Remus finished with a mental chuckle. **Ah, well, it's just his head. Now if it were something *important*...**

Danger stifled her snickers in her sleeve and sat down on the floor as Sirius emerged from under the bed, rubbing the back of his head and scowling. "Don't *do* that."

"Sorry." Danger kissed her fingertips and leaned over to brush them against the slight lump under Sirius's hair. "Looking for something?"

"I could have *sworn* I put a box of my old manuscripts under there when we got back from the Den after Christmas." Sirius slapped at the sleeves of his robes, raising clouds of dust. Danger coughed and scooted back. "But now I can't find it. I've looked everywhere."

**And this,** said Remus with a weary mental sigh, **is a pureblood wizard, ladies and gentlemen.**

"Er." Danger drew her wand. "I don't know if you've considered..."

"If I've considered what?" Sirius looked up. Then he sagged in place. "I," he said in tones of great

dejection, "am an idiot."

"Yes, but you're our idiot, and we love you just the way you are." Danger directed a quick mental *Scourgify* over her Pack-brother, wiping away the dust he'd been ineffectively smacking at, then turned towards the bed. "So how would I do this? Summoning Charm?"

"No, that's too risky, especially when we're not sure where it is." Sirius drew his own wand, little bursts of sparks starting to emanate from its tip as he gestured in explanation. "Summoners work in straight lines, so if it turns out I'm wrong—I know, shock, astonishment, but it has been known to happen—and it's in another room, or even back at the Den itself..."

"We have an enormous mess." Danger nodded. "What should we use, then?"

"Variation on an Auror charm. We use it to check if there's somebody hiding in a building we're about to search. Should work just as well for boxes." Sirius frowned for a moment, then nodded and lifted his wand. "*Revelio cistam fabulae!*" he intoned.

An arc of light swept from the end of his wand and out through the room, widening as it went. On a shelf in the closet, something sparked.

"Well, that would certainly explain why I couldn't find it under the bed." Sirius clambered to his feet. "Do you ever wonder if I'm losing my mind?"

Danger lifted an eyebrow. "You have a mind?"

Sirius leaned his head against the open closet door. "Fourteen years," he told it. "You'd think I'd learn not to give her straight lines."

"But then how would we have our fun?" Deciding to have pity, Danger rose and crossed to Sirius's side, looking up at the box with interest. "So what's in there? I know you were working on a few things right after the Department of Mysteries, after Marcus..."

"Died." Sirius slid an arm around Danger and held her for a moment, giving comfort as much as taking it. "He's in good hands, though. Yeah, I had a couple different stories going, but then we had that damn full moon in January and that blew open a case or two we'd been working at the Office, so I tossed everything in here and set it aside until I had more time, and forgot all about it until now. So..." He swished and flicked, and the box rose from the shelf and floated out of the closet. "Why don't we have a look?"

"Sounds like fun. May my personal shapeshifting monster of evilness join in?"

"Only if he promises not to drool on my denouement again."

**Typical,** Remus said in tones of disgust. **Fall asleep on one book and you're marked for life.**

Giggling, Danger relayed this. Sirius paused in the act of pulling manila folders out of the box to give her a raised-eyebrow look of his own. "And were *you* the one cleaning up the puddle under

his chair?"

"Well, actually..."

"Forget I asked," said Sirius hastily, turning back to his work.

The giggles intensified.

When Remus arrived, he casually flicked an Ear-Hair Hex onto Sirius in passing. Sirius growled when he reached up to scratch his ear only to discover a thick thatch of black obscuring it, and fired back with a Catfoot Jinx, which would have made Remus unable to put his heels on the ground for about a day. Remus dodged it and was about to return fire when Danger ordered a general truce and slashed a *Finite* over Sirius's ears.

"*Honestly*," she said, glaring at husband and Pack-brother. "I thought I could relax when we put the cubs on the train earlier this week, and here you two are, worse than any of them!"

"What's that?" Sirius asked, cocking his now hair-free ear towards her. "I didn't catch it."

"I said—" Danger stopped as both men started to laugh. "Oh, Merlin's tea and crumpets. You deserve each other, you realize that, don't you?"

"I think about it every day." Remus sat down on the bed and patted the spot beside him. "And I also think about things I don't deserve. Such as you."

Danger opened her mouth and closed it again. "Well played," she said after a moment, coming to sit down. "For that, you get mostly forgiven."

"Mostly?" Remus glanced at her uneasily. "Why only mostly?"

"Because I say so. Now hush. I want stories."

Grinning, Sirius obliged, pulling out the desk chair with a foot and seating himself as he selected a folder from the pile. "Part One," he read aloud. "Sing a Song of Sixpence. In June of a year known to later chronicles as the Annus Mirabilis, the Polite World of England was presented with a fine tidbit of scandal..."

Leaning back against Remus and letting her eyes drift half-shut, Danger listened dreamily to the tale of a young woman trapped by the expectations of her world, torn between hiding her fine mind in order to get a husband and escape her overbearing relatives or shocking society by revealing that she could and did think, study, and learn as well as any man. The heroine's final decision, to make her own way in the world and let society say what it would, brought a smile to her face, and she glanced up at Remus. **So is it true that reading scares men away?**

**Only the sort of men who can't bear the thought that anyone in the world could be smarter than they are.** Remus dropped a kiss on Danger's forehead, just touching her hairline. **And that sort, you're likely better off without.**

**Amen.** "That was charming," Danger said aloud, sitting up. "I love how you invoke the time period you're writing about with all those little details."

"I'd like to know more about those characters," was Remus's contribution. "We get to hear her decision, but we don't find out what came of it, how it worked out. Though it is 'Part One', which implies a 'Part Two'."

"Yeah, I've got plans that way, but I wanted to see how it went over first. You're curious, then?"

"Very much so." Danger nodded emphatically. "About what it is she'll end up doing with her life, how that little house comes into it, and if she ever does meet the fortune-teller again, or the girl with the kitten."

"In my head she does, but I'll have to wait and see if it works out that way on paper." Sirius returned the folder to the box and picked up another. "Oh, here, this is a good one. Creepy, but good." He cleared his throat and began to read. "Clouds scudded raggedly across a sky the hue of fresh blood as a silent figure slipped out of cover to drink at the hillside spring..."

Danger shivered uncontrollably at several points through this story, grateful for Remus's warm, supporting arm around her waist. "She did it to him herself?" she said when Sirius had finished. "I mean, I know she had to, but..." She stopped and made a face. "Pardon me while I try and get this foot out of my mouth."

"Strange that you would be writing a story with that as a motif, six months before everything happened in the summer," said Remus neutrally. "Or are you trying to take over the true dreamer post in the family?"

"Merlin's toenails, I hope not. One's enough." Sirius set the story aside, got up, and crossed to Danger. "Hey," he said gently, tapping her chin with one finger until she looked up at him. "Don't do that. It'll turn out right in the end."

"I know." Danger reached up and pulled Sirius down to the bed on her other side. "But the end never comes soon enough."

Sirius sighed. "You can say that again."

"Missing Letha?" Remus asked, releasing Danger so that she could scoot back on the bed, tucking her legs up under her. "You were just getting used to having her around, and now she's gone."

"Do I have a window right here that I don't know about?" Sirius demanded, jabbing a finger at his forehead. "Stick a Knut in my ear, it opens up and let you see what I'm thinking?"

"Actually, it's a little bigger than that." Danger framed her face with her hands. "As you said yourself, fourteen years, and for the first one or two at least, you were still getting used to being with people again."

"You did lose some of that pureblood unreadability after Azkaban," Remus confirmed. "And it



never worked all that well on me, anyway. I'd had too much practice watching people to see who might know things."

"I should probably hate you right now," said Sirius conversationally. "Isn't that the proper manly response when people catch you having emotions?"

"Either that or hit them." Danger extended her hand, palm down. "Need a target?"

"You're just going to pull it out of the way on me, aren't you?"

"And there we are!" Danger pointed at him dramatically. "Proof that the mindreading goes both ways!"

"No, that's just the voice of painful experience. In some cases more painful than others." Sirius snickered, then grew quiet. "I... don't know," he said after several seconds of silence. "If I'm missing Letha, or if I'm glad she's not around right now. In some ways, I'm not even sure if I want her to come back. Which sounds awful, and isn't at all what I meant, but..."

"A case of half a loaf not being better than no bread?" Remus inquired. "Because what you truly want is to have back the woman you love, the woman who loves you. A woman who's still working out what she feels, even who she is, makes a highly uncomfortable substitute."

"I'm glad you know what I mean, because I had no idea." Sirius sighed again. "And it doesn't help that I keep wondering—please don't jump on me, I know this is ridiculous, I'm working on it—but if she wouldn't have been a little quicker to come back if our lives weren't as crazy. If we hadn't lost Marcus, or we weren't part of the war, or I wasn't..." He shrugged. "What I am."

Danger lifted both eyebrows this time. "You mean a wisecracking pureblood white sheep with an endless appetite and the biggest, softest heart of any man I know?"

**Any man?** Remus asked silently, his mental tone carrying a strong hint of amusement. **Should I be getting jealous again?**

**It's only the truth. You have a nasty ruthless streak, love, though you don't show it much. Sirius has to be reminded to be pragmatic.**

**I'll decide whether or not I'm insulted by that later.** "It's a fair thought to have," Remus said aloud, drawing Sirius's eyes. "But not one to dwell on, though I'm sure you know that."

"Know it, yes. Do it... well, like I said, I'm working on it." Sirius smiled, and though the expression wobbled slightly, it reached and warmed his eyes. "That's part of the reason I went looking for the stories. I wanted to see if there was anything I'd started that I could expand on, deepen and broaden a bit, maybe write some of this out and get it off my chest. Or out of my head. Whatever."

"Did you find it yet?" Danger asked, scooting closer.

"Maybe." Sirius rose and returned to the desk. "But let's keep looking. I was thinking more along the lines of a bard's tale, sort of, oh, what's that word—the one that isn't a crocodile."

Remus coughed once. "I believe the word you're looking for is 'allegory'?" he suggested delicately, as Danger buried her face in her sleeve.

"Is it? That's good to know." Sirius looked up from the box and grinned at his friends, then went back to rummaging.

**And he's back**, Danger said, her shoulders still shaking with suppressed merriment. **Only Sirius**—"the one that isn't a crocodile", **honestly**.

**Don't encourage him. He'll only get worse. I've heard him**— Remus broke off. **Something's wrong**, he said without preamble.

Danger looked up. Sirius was sinking slowly into the desk chair, a folder open in his hands, his eyes fixed on the words within it. "What is it?" she asked, scrambling off the bed. "Sirius, what's the matter?"

"I never wrote this." Sirius looked up at her, his expression of bafflement imperfectly concealing fear. "I don't remember ever writing this. But it's my writing—my DictaQuill, anyway—and my style, or one of them—" He ran a hand impatiently through his hair. "I just don't remember ever coming up with these characters. This setting, these actions. They don't sound familiar at all."

"May we hear?" Remus sat up straighter, but did not rise, and sent Danger a tiny beckoning feeling, calling her back to the bed. **This could be something or it could be nothing, but whatever it is, it won't get any better for his panicking**, he reminded her. **And he feeds off us like we do off him, so if we're calm...**

**Calm. Right. Calm.** Danger sank back down beside her husband. **Something or someone else may have taken over my Pack-brother and used his writing to send us a message, but I can be calm about that. It's nothing new. It's nothing strange...** She stopped. **And you know what the sad part is? Compared to the rest of our lives, it's really not.**

**Precisely.** Remus tugged gently at a tendril of her hair. **Now hush yourself.**

"It hasn't got a title." Sirius was skimming down the lines, as though preparing to deliver an unfamiliar oration. "But sometimes that's the last thing that comes, sometimes you have to finish the entire story before you know what it should be called... oh, right, you wanted to hear it. Sorry." He coughed twice, swallowed hard, and began.

"Once upon a time, in a kingdom called England, there lived a young boy named Dafydd Beauvoi, the younger son of a Norman noble and his wife, a Welshwoman though she carried also the blood of Denmark. Dafydd was a beautiful boy, with his father's fine bones and his mother's fair coloring, but he was lonely, for his father's great concern was Owain his heir, and his mother's great love was Angharad her daughter, and neither had much time to spare for little Dafydd.

"And so one day he went exploring, and in a stream he found a girl of his own age, seven years, whose red hair spilled over the shoulders of a kirtle as green as her eyes. And as they bragged as children will—Dafydd was the son of a lord, the girl the granddaughter of a baron—Dafydd let it slip that he could make the arrows of his bow fly anywhere that he wished, merely by willing it so. The girl coaxed him into coming to her home, where her black-haired father laid a carven stick in Dafydd's hand and bade him wave it in the air, and as the boy did so, sparks flew from it, for the stick was a wand, and young Dafydd a wizard.

"Thus began the great magical House of Beauvoi, famed in song and story..." Sirius's voice trailed off. "I may remember writing this after all," he said, lowering the papers to his lap. "The problem is, I still don't remember *thinking* of it. It just..." He snapped his fingers ringingly. "...showed up. Like someone else was telling it to me, and I was just writing it down."

"Where were you?" Danger asked, a suspicion tickling at the back of her mind. "When you wrote it down, however it happened. Where were you that day?"

"That night. It was the night after everything happened at the Department of Mysteries. I know, because I remember putting aside something I was writing about Marcus to start on this." Sirius frowned. "But that would mean..."

"That would mean you wrote it at Hogwarts," said Remus. "Which may give us some insight into who could have been telling it to you."

Sirius glanced upwards. "Thanks," he said, only half sarcastically. "But who's it about, then? The father can't be Gryffindor, his hair's not black, and Slytherin never had a daughter..."

"Move down a generation." Danger shut her eyes, recalling a face glimpsed across the street, a whispered word from Luna, a friend's voice issuing from a stranger's lips. "What about Alex?"

"He'd fit, though I don't know if he had kids. He probably did, though, I think he told us once that he didn't have heirs of his own anymore, which means he has to've had them at some point." Sirius was nodding, tracing along the lines of writing with a finger. "Yeah, and right here. The girl was a baron's granddaughter. Moony, didn't that book of yours say Slytherin was some kind of noble?"

"I'd have to look to be sure, but I believe it did." Remus chuckled. "Wouldn't that have irritated Salazar Slytherin no end. His granddaughter, taking up with a Muggleborn."

"He probably would just have said it was bad blood calling to bad blood." Danger drummed her fingers against the duvet, thinking furiously. "If he could say anything at all. This would likely have been after the Battle of Hogwarts took place, wouldn't you think? After he'd broken with the other Founders, been cast out, and come back to try to take over by force, but been killed by one of Gryffindor's students instead?"

"After he'd broken with the other Founders," said Remus slowly. "And with his own son. Why did Alex stay? What made his father disown him?"

"Difference of opinion wasn't enough?" Sirius snorted. "It was for my parents."

"It might have been, but Remus has a point." Danger rolled her eyes at Sirius's snicker. "Be disgusting on your own time, please. What I'm saying is, this is a thousand years ago we're talking about. Family was everything to these people, the only ones they knew they could count on. A son could fall under his father's displeasure in an awful lot of ways—being disowned was the absolute last resort, a way to say this person had dishonored you so badly that they didn't even exist to you anymore. And Alex still managed it. What does that say?"

"He pissed his daddy off good and proper." Sirius grinned. "Even more, you think, than siding with the other Founders could've done?"

"Taking sides is something you can take back," Danger pointed out. "Especially when you're young, easily misled, you can change your mind about things. Slytherin would have felt betrayed, angry, he wouldn't have understood his son's decision, but I think he'd have stopped short of a formal disowning. Unless..."

"Unless Alex had already done something his father considered beyond the pale." Remus smiled, squeezing Danger's hand. "What would you say to his falling in love with a Muggleborn? Even marrying one, perhaps?"

"I'd say he had good taste in women." Sirius winked at Danger. "Everybody knows that's where all the best ones come from."

"Are you complimenting me, him, yourself, or all three?" Danger asked.

"Yes." Sirius looked back at the story in his hand. "So if this is Alex and his daughter, and she's a redhead, her mum probably would be as well. Not that it matters, just keeping things straight. But what about this Dafydd kid?"

"That surname sounded familiar," said Remus. "Say it again?"

"Beauvoi." Sirius spelled it out. "And it's striking sparks with me too, but I can't think of why. My mind keeps flipping back and forth between thinking I've heard something just like it and thinking I've heard something completely different..."

"Back and forth, like and different," Danger repeated aloud. "Opposites. 'Beau' is good, isn't it, or beautiful?"

"Yeah, so the opposite would be 'mal'—" Sirius smacked himself in the forehead with his handful of papers. "How dumb can one guy be? Don't answer that either," he added hastily. "But of course that's why I think I've heard something different. I have. Flip 'beau' for 'mal' and you get—"

"Malfoy." Remus nodded. "Or something close enough to make no difference, not in those days."

"You said a mouthful." Sirius laughed. "You'd think no one could mess up my surname, right? B-L-A-C-K, not much room for error, but no, I had one ancestor who perennially signed himself,

from the age of seven onwards, as Perseus Block. Known, apparently, as 'The Blockhead', and not entirely because he couldn't spell..."

"You've thought of something," said Remus when Sirius trailed off. "Can you get it into words?"

"Variant spellings." Sirius set aside the story and drew his wand. "Variant pronunciations. And something Albus showed me a while back. *Revelio fabulam gladii argenti!*"

This time the pulse of light left the room entirely, returning a moment later to dance invitingly in front of Sirius, who nodded. "Must be down in the War Room. 'Scuse me, right back..."

**Do you have any idea what he's talking about?** Danger asked as Sirius hurried into the corridor.

**Not offhand—but wait, no, the spell. "Fabulam gladii argenti".** Remus traced the curling path of a strand of brown hair which had made its way over his shoulder. **The Tale of the Silver Sword. It's an old wizarding legend, about a magical sword which can choose a leader in time of need—**

**Like Excalibur?**

**Yes, though there's no stone involved. I'm not entirely sure how it does its choosing, it's been years since I read it—**

"Found it!" Sirius bounded back into the room, waving a scroll over his head in triumph. "I was able to Summon it from the stairs. Look, here it is—spelled Beaufoi, not Beauvoi, but like you said, Moony, close enough."

"The hilt of the Silver Sword shimmered with the gleam of Mars, the light of the ancient god of war," Remus read aloud, accepting the scroll. "It arose from its place on the table and turned as though regarding those who had called to it. Great was the fear of the wizards there gathered that they had awakened something too powerful for them to control, that the Sword might turn upon them and slay them all for their presumption, and almost to a man they cowered back. Almost—but for four men. Those four, the Sword inspected gravely, for each was valiant in his own right. One was the Sword's own keeper, the young head of the House of Beaufoi, who had proved his manhood by avenging his father's death..."

**Another legend involving Mars,** Danger commented silently. **Isn't he also supposed to be the one who turned Romulus into a werewolf?**

**Wizards were seldom peaceful sorts. Though in this case...** "The gleam of Mars'," Remus repeated. "Mars, the Red Planet. A silver sword with a red hilt."

"And with a 'great name' engraved on its blade," Danger added, pointing at the phrase. "The name of a famous wizard, perhaps? Say, one of the ones we were discussing earlier?"

"Wait, hold up." Sirius made a time-out T with his hands. "Are you saying this is Gryffindor's sword? The Sword of Decision? But that would mean it was being guarded by *Slytherin's* Heirs."

"That can't be right!"

"It can if they were Alex's." Danger poked Sirius in the chest, directly atop his pendants. "A bit hypocritical, are we, oh honorary one?"

Sirius growled half-heartedly and batted her finger away. "All right, all right. It just seems weird, that's all."

"They were friends to start out with, remember," said Remus, still perusing the scroll. "Gryffindor and Slytherin. Imagine if, say, Wormtail had a child—"

"Moony!" Sirius yelped, clapping his hands over his eyes. "Images, man, images!"

Remus blinked. "Wormtail's hypothetical child causes you to have images?"

"It *doesn't* cause them for you?" Sirius shuddered theatrically. "Fourth year," he told Danger.

"Wormtail was working on spells for his Animagus and got two of them mixed together. One of them was for his size, the other was for his tail. And to top it all off, he reversed two words in the tail portion. So instead of either shrinking safely to rat size or growing this long pink thing behind him, he shrank *half* of the way to rat size and grew this long pink thing out in *front* ..."

Danger fell over on the bed in helpless giggles.

"Ah, yes." Remus got up and walked unerringly to the desk, his eyes still trained on the words of the scroll. "That."

"Ah, yes, that." Sirius glared at his friend. "How can you *not* be scarred by 'ah, yes, that'?"

"Because I, unlike some Marauders, do not have a mind which permanently inhabits the gutter." Remus sat down in the desk chair and picked up the page which contained Sirius's story about Dafydd Beauvoi, holding it side by side with the story of the Silver Sword. "Possibly also because I wasn't there."

"You weren't—that's right, you were still in the hospital wing. Bad transformation a couple days before." Sirius groaned. "Do you have any idea how lucky you were?"

"Judging by the gagging noises you and James made when you came to see me later that day, and the more or less permanent blush Peter wore for the next week, I can guess." Remus looked up. "None of which vitiates my point, by the way. Would you blame Wormtail's hypothetical child for his, or her, father's sins? Or would you try to remember he was our friend once, and this was something good that had come from him, something we could still do for him, even though he's made himself no longer our friend by his actions?"

"I know, I know. Plus Alex had made his own decision by that point, and Godric isn't the sort to turn down help, no matter where it comes from. So let me see if I've got this straight." Sirius started ticking off points on his fingers. "We're pretty sure the little red-haired girl is Alex's daughter, which makes her an Heir of Slytherin, and so would hers and Beauvoi's kids have been.

Somewhere down the line, they come into possession of Gryffindor's sword, and even further along, it gets made into the Sword of Decision. Then what?"

"But the House of Beaufoi is no more," Danger quoted, sitting up again. "They must have died out at some point. Either that or they 'are no more' because they became the Malfoys."

"I think we'd have noticed by now if Draco spoke snake," Sirius said dryly.

"There were three Beauvoi children in the beginning," Remus pointed out, setting aside the two pieces of parchment. "Two sons and a daughter. What if the present-day Malfoys descend from the other son?"

"But the other son was a Muggle," Sirius objected. "How can they—"

"A thousand years, Sirius," said Remus patiently. "A lot can happen in a thousand years."

"Like magic blossoming in a second line of a family." Danger frowned. "I wonder what happened to the daughter?"

Remus ran his finger down the parchment. "It doesn't say. Maybe we'll ask Alex the next time we visit. Though he may not be allowed to tell us."

"No harm in asking." Sirius nodded. "We'll have that as our working theory, why don't we. Two magical Beauvoi lines of descent, the older one from Dafydd and the little red-haired girl, and then the younger one from Dafydd's brother, which turned magic somewhere further along. But how do you go from that to one of them going extinct and the other getting stuck with a name like Malfoy? I mean, I know how I'd do it if I were writing it, but you know what they say about truth and fiction..."

"Do you have any books in the library on wizarding genealogy?" Danger suggested. "That might have something, even if it's been 'cleaned up' to say more what the purebloods want it to say. We can probably sort through the gibberish and get at the truth, given what we already know."

"Do we have any books on wizarding genealogy, she asks." Sirius swept Danger a flourishing bow. "My lady, your wish is my command. Pardon me a moment." He shot back out the door.

"Watching you manage him is an education," said Remus, returning to his side-by-side comparison.

"I learned from the best." Danger sat down again. "I notice you framed Wormtail having a child entirely in hypothetical terms."

"Should I have done something else?" Remus looked at her over the top edge of the scroll. "Or is there something I don't know?"

Danger leaned back on her hands. "No dreams, not on this one. None at all so far this year, actually. Which could mean we've worn out our allotment of warnings, or just that it isn't time for

us to get one yet."

"Or that nothing's going to happen in the immediate future about which we need to be warned. I think I like that better." Remus paused. "Very nicely done. You almost had me. Now let's get back to the original topic. Peter Pettigrew and his offspring, hypothetical or not, and what you do or do not know about said offspring."

"Damn." Danger pouted. "What gave me away?"

**You were purring**, Remus said, switching into silent speech. **In the back of your mind. Now let's have it.**

**I don't know anything**, Danger protested. **But, well, children do tend to happen when people get married, if there's nothing barring the way. And I did give Evanie those rings...**

**And you called me ruthless.** Remus shook his head. **Still, I suppose the punishment fits the crime. But I do feel sorry for Evanie. And, assuming you're correct, their child. Or children. She may have chosen to stay with him, but the children won't have that choice.**

**They might not have to make it, though.** Danger slid off the bed and came to sit on Remus's lap. **Aren't we hoping to have the war over within the next year or two? To see if we can't slide that first dream of mine into reality? We could always "miss" a few of the lower-ranked Death Eaters when we're cleaning things up, and there's lots of places in this world for a little family to disappear.**

**As long as they make it that far, I'll pledge to keep my wand off him.** Remus slid an arm around Danger's waist. **We might have to speak firmly to Sirius, but we'll get Aletha's help with that one.**

**Sounds like a plan.**

"Here it is, I found—" Sirius cut himself off as he loped back into the room. "Don't you two ever get tired of doing that?"

"Don't you ever get tired of asking silly questions?" Remus returned. "Let's see it."

"Here you are." Sirius handed over the thick hardcover. "*Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*. Good luck finding anything useful."

Remus flipped to the back of the book. "Let's see here. Lestrangle, Longbottom, Lupin, a-ha. Malfoy." Opening the book to somewhere near the middle, he turned a few pages, then began to read aloud. "The name of the Noble and Ancient House of Malfoy first occurs in wizarding history in the time of King James I. The founding member of the House at this time was one Lucius Malfoy—"

"No way." Sirius sat down on the corner of his desk. "You're making that up."



"See for yourself." Remus turned the book so that Sirius could see it. "Down in print."

"History repeats itself with a vengeance." Sirius laughed. "So what did this Lucius do?"

"Maybe it says. Let's see." Remus returned to the page. "—one Lucius Malfoy, though he was born with the name of Beauvoi or Beaufoi, under which style there is evidence that the line is considerably older. This said Lucius, however, was followed throughout his lifetime by unjust rumors that he had murdered his cousin, William Beauvoi, in order to inherit his money and property, including the present-day Malfoy Manor (Wiltshire, England). This led to his being given the darkly punning nickname of 'mal foi', or 'bad faith'. In an attempt to lay this calumny to rest, Lucius adopted the altered form Malfoy as his legal surname, which succeeded in silencing all but the most pernicious of the slanderers. His current descendant, another Lucius, resides at Malfoy Manor with his wife Narcissa (nee Black)."

"Published before 1984, I see." Danger grinned briefly. "But that answers that question, doesn't it?"

"Clear as mud," said Sirius. "Olden-days Lucius took his cousin out of the picture, that much I get, but what's it got to do with our two-lines theory?"

"Everything." Remus set the book aside. "Think about it, Sirius. Why would William Beauvoi have had money and property, and Lucius Beauvoi none? And why would the author be so coy about 'the line' being older under the Beauvoi name, but never say outright that *Lucius* had older magical ancestors? Unless—"

"Unless he didn't," Sirius completed the sentence for him. "Unless it was his cousin who came from the magical line, and he was actually Muggleborn." A broad grin split his face. "D'you think our Lucius—"

"Do *not* call him that." Danger winced. "Not *ever* again."

"Fine, fine. Present-day Lucius. Better?"

"Yes. Much."

"Picky, picky, picky," Sirius groused under his breath. "Do you think *present-day* Lucius knows he's named after a 'Mudblood'?" He primmed up his mouth and sketched dainty air quotes around the word. "Or has he convinced himself he comes from that 'considerably older' line and his ancestor was the innocent victim of malicious defamation?"

"Having experienced Lucius Malfoy's ability to deceive himself, I'd say by this point he could very well believe anything he wanted to." Remus sighed. "So, there it is. Confirmation, or at least fairly strong circumstantial evidence. The House of Beauvoi, however you spell it, is indeed no more."

"I heard a name I recognized on the way past," Danger said with a grin. "Care to turn back a

couple pages and read us that entry?"

Remus gave her a weary look. "Must I?"

"I will, if you don't." Sirius whisked the book out of Remus's grasp and retreated across the room. "Let's see here. Though not a recognized wizarding House, the line of Lupin is nonetheless of respectable antiquity. Some historians claim to trace it to a wizard of legendary valor on the battlefield, known as John the Wolf for his ferocity towards his enemies in war and his dedication to his family in peace. However, as John the Wolf flourished less than a century after the Founding of Hogwarts, this claim is difficult to validate, and this author finds it more creditable that the line was founded in more recent times, perhaps by a notable hunter of wolves or breeder of wolfhounds. No current—" He broke off, scowling. "Well, the hell with that."

"No current what?" Danger blinked, bewildered. "What's the matter?"

Sirius growled under his breath, but finished the sentence. "No current descendants of this pureblood line exist."

"You mean I married a ghost?" Danger poked Remus in the shoulder. "That's quite a thing to keep from your wife all these years."

"My crimes against existence are twofold, you see." Remus kissed the finger which had poked him. "I was born of a Muggle mother—how dare I—and then I compounded that error by going outside late one night as a child. With what results, you already know."

"So you're a half-blood and a werewolf. What part of that means you don't exist?"

"The part where they only acknowledge the world they want to?" Sirius closed the book with a thump. "Danger, these are my people. I grew up with them. So trust me when I tell you—they're *insane*. Completely and totally off the trolley. They know they have magic, and they know magic makes your wishes come true. What they've never quite figured out is, magic's not unlimited. It can't do everything. And one of these days, all those things it can't do are going to turn around and bite them all on the collective arse."

"May that day come sooner, rather than later," said Remus, shifting Danger's weight to the other leg. "And speaking of things magic can't do, how are the Red Shepherds coming along with their new place in Diagon Alley, the Pepper Pot? You were there the other day, weren't you?"

"Stuck my nose in, yeah." Sirius chuckled. "They've got it cleaned up all nice—actually looks like a restaurant now—and Percy's put a rush on the paperwork with the Ministry, so he thinks they should be cleared to open by next week. And unless I'm much mistaken, it smelled like they were trying one of Molly's recipes in the back."

"Well, that should guarantee plenty of customers if nothing else will." Danger got to her feet and stretched. "I wonder if they need any kitchen help? I've been thinking it might be good for me to get out of the house more..."



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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 6: Seeking and Hiding (Year 6)

A small bell rang over the door as Danger stepped inside the Pepper Pot. In keeping with the name, the walls had been painted a deep shade of gray, but pretty landscape paintings mounted here and there on the walls and a comfortable level of light kept the small restaurant from feeling dark or claustrophobic. She could hear voices in the back, and even as she located the double door which surely led to the kitchens, its left half swung wide open and Lee Jordan came hurrying towards her.

"*Bonjour, madame!*" he proclaimed in an outrageous French accent, making her grin. "*Bienvenue*, welcome, welcome to ze Pepp-air Pot! Do you 'ave a reserva-shawn?"

"I would pay money to see you welcome actual guests like that." Danger chuckled, looking around. "You've really done wonders with this place, all of you. How are things going?"

"Not too bad," said Lee, dropping the mannerisms. "We've had to modify the kitchen a good bit, the last people in here must've had house-elves doing all their cooking, but I think we've finally found everything that's likely to—"

A muffled boom from the kitchen cut off his words. "On second thoughts, never mind."

"All right in there?" Danger called, hurrying towards the swinging doors. "Anyone hurt?"

"Not really," said one of the Weasley twins—Fred, Danger identified as she pushed the door open, as George seemed likely to be the one enduring a virulent scolding at the hands of Crystal Huley. All of them were liberally festooned with chunks of vegetable, bits of beef, and drips of brown gravy, as was the kitchen.

"—and that," Crystal wound up, "is why you never put *any* kind of water, conjured or not, on a grease fire—oh, thank God." This was spoken in heartfelt tones as she looked over George's shoulder and spotted Danger. "Someone who knows what she's doing. Please tell me you've come to help in the kitchen, these three are only good for blowing things to pieces..."

"Go mind your shop, boys." Danger made a shooping motion towards the door. "We'll handle things here."

Both twins saluted, Fred with his left hand and George with his right. Lee, in the doorway, clicked his heels together and bowed across his arm. Then, in perfect unison, they turned in place and Disappeared.

"Men," said Crystal under her breath. "Not even having magic changes them."

"Would you really want it to?" Danger shook her head in amusement. "I'll get this cleaned up if you want to get out the fixings for another pot of stew, since I assume that's what you were trying

to make. Yes?"

"French pot roast, actually, but that's much the same thing." Crystal opened the refrigerator and began to pull out a bag of carrots, a head of celery, half an onion, and a small paper sack which proved to contain mushrooms. "At least one of them had the good sense to cast a Chilling Charm on it as it blew, or else you'd be in here doing first aid for burns, not just cleaning. Would you mind?"

Danger obligingly swished her wand's tip across the cutting board Crystal was indicating with her chin, clearing it of food chunks and gravy stains, then returned to her search pattern through the room, seeking out and removing the rest of the mess. "You might be able to get a house-elf to help out around here, at least part-time," she commented. "They can go through a sink full of dishes like you wouldn't believe, which leaves you free to mind the cooking."

"That's not a bad idea. I'll ask the boys about it later, after they get done sulking because I scolded them for being idiots." Crystal grinned briefly. "It'll give them a way to feel like they're being useful again."

"So what else are you planning to have on the menu?" Danger unstuck the last bit of potato from the ceiling, flicked it into the bin, and went to wash her hands before joining Crystal at the cutting board. "Will it change every night, or will some dishes always be available?"

"We're thinking somewhere between the two. Have a few simple things which are always available, but change the details as things come in and out of season, and then a specialty menu which changes completely from week to week, using what's available, what's fresh. We don't want to be competing with the Leaky Cauldron, exactly—they were here first, and it's never wise to antagonize the route by which all your customers come—so we're trying for something a little fancier, the sort of place you go for a romantic night out, say."

"That makes a lot of sense. And there isn't any place like that on Diagon Alley at the moment, so you're filling a niche." Danger smiled. "Even if it is mostly just a front for the rest of what your merry band is up to."

"The best way to run a bluff is to really do what it looks like you're doing," Crystal returned. "And we really are trying to make a go of this place." She pretended to wipe her forehead. "Though it may run us into the ground eventually. Restaurant work is hard enough to keep up with, let alone everything else."

"Which is why you've got me on board now." Danger pushed her pile of chopped carrots to one side and started breaking ribs off the head of celery. "Assuming you want me."

"Are you kidding? Someone I don't have to watch every second to be sure he won't think it's funny to start charming ferrets into my flour container?" Crystal held out her hand. "Percy gets final say, of course, but for all of me, you're hired."

"Thank you." Danger shook the proffered hand. "Ferrets in the flour, you say? Now, with me, it

was an exploding blender, though of course, Harry had given them the notion by relabeling the buttons..."

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Harry would have welcomed an exploding blender at that precise moment, or anything else which might have delayed his reluctant journey into the depths of the castle.

*If I were going to Quidditch practice, now, Peeves would be in my way the entire time, every shortcut would turn into a longcut, and I'd probably end up stumbling across a leftover Portkey from Flitwick's seventh year Charms class and getting dragged off to Zimbabwe. But no, I'm on my way to Saturday afternoon Occlumency lessons with Snape— Professor Snape—which means everything's conspiring to get me there ahead of time...*

He supposed he should be grateful for that, as Snape was quite capable of deciding any lateness had been purposeful and taking action ranging from points off Gryffindor to detentions to refusing to teach Harry the skills of the mental arts at all.

*And I do need to learn this. One of the places I used to be able to go to keep my mind safe from Voldemort, I can't anymore, and if I use the other one too much, he might find a way around the shields. I have to be able to defend against him, me, myself, or I can't know the things I'll need to know to win the war.*

Trying to ignore the faint voice in the back of his head which wondered if he really wanted to know those things, Harry knocked on the door Snape's directions had indicated.

"Come," his professor's deep voice said curtly from within. Harry turned the knob, pushed open the door, and entered.

The walls of this room were alternately lined with shelves holding potion samples, potion ingredients, or pickled specimens of creatures both magical and Muggle, and with pictures such as Snape had hung on the walls in the Defense classroom, illustrating people being attacked by various forms of Dark magic. Snape himself was bent over a shallow stone basin set on a table on the other side of the room, his wand at his temple. As Harry watched, fine strands of silver, like glowing cobweb, followed the tip of Snape's wand as he drew it away from his skin. With a flick of his wrist, he deposited them in the basin, then straightened and turned to face Harry.

"Well, Potter," he said, curling his lip. "A day long postponed, though hardly one awaited with eagerness."

*I'd rather be somewhere else too, sir, but you'll give me detention if I say that.* Harry shut the door behind himself without comment, using the moment he faced away from Snape to vent a few of his feelings by baring his teeth as Wolf might have done, then turning back with his expression neutral once more. *Steady on, Harry, you don't have to like it, you just have to do it...*

"Occlumency, as no doubt your so-clever *Pack-sister* has told you, is the defending of one's mind against outside invasion by magical means." Snape had his eyes fixed firmly on Harry, as though

they were boring through Harry's skull at this very moment. "Do you know what that invasion is called, and how it is most commonly accomplished?"

Harry took a slow breath through his nose, both to calm himself and to see what he could pick up about Snape's frame of mind. Distaste and disgust he was prepared for, weary acceptance as well, but not the undernote of... *is that guilt? But why would he...*

"I believe that would be Legilimency, Professor," he said, pulling himself back to the moment and Snape's question, filing the thought for later. "And it's most often done through... eye contact?"

"Eye contact?" Snape mocked Harry's querying tone. "Are you asking me, Potter, or am I asking you? I had expected some rudimentary level of knowledge from you, some semblance of effort towards learning about this topic, as it may someday be all which stands between your beloved *Pack* and a singularly unpleasant fate. But I suppose that was too much to hope for. Work does seem somehow alien to your nature."

"I beg your pardon, Professor," Harry said contritely. It wasn't easy. He was sure Snape would mistake the tightness in his voice for suppressed anger, but it was, in fact, suppressed laughter.

*And here he goes again. Does he really believe that about me, even when he knows about Sanctuary, about the year, about the extra work I'm going to be putting in on top of all my new classes and Quidditch, and still running the DA? Or does he make himself believe it, because then it's easier for him to hate me?*

"Is that what you plan to do, Potter, when you face the Dark Lord next? Beg his pardon? Ask for his mercy?" Snape looked down his nose at Harry, something he was, by nature, well-equipped to do. "I would recommend against it, for the very simple reason that he has none. Though if you fail to put in the required amount of practice on this skill I will be attempting to teach you over the next few weeks and months, that will indeed be your only recourse. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir." Harry snapped his wrist, bringing his wand into his hand, and lifted it in a modified dueler's salute. It went against the grain with him to salute Snape for any reason, but it seemed to fit the moment, as well as preparing him for whatever was about to happen.

*It would be just like him to hit me out of nowhere and claim he's trying to toughen me up, get me ready for what I might face... and the worst part is, he'd be right.*

"Let us begin, then." Snape brought his own wand up to the ready. "You may fight back by whatever means seem best to you, though I warn you that as we progress, I will be dissuading you from using your wand or disrupting my Legilimency in any other physical way. You must, if you are ever to be a truly successful Occlumens, be able to repel an attack with nothing but the power of your mind."

Harry simply nodded, readying the image he'd discussed with the *Pride*. *A maze, a maze like the one at the Triwizard, only made of glass, like Neenie's dream...*



Hermione had let him use her pendants to go inside a fragment of that particular nightmare, so that it would be a real memory of his as well, not something he was trying to imagine. It had been more frightening than he had expected from her quick description, and he wondered idly what had happened within the dream to keep her from waking up shaken and terrified.

*Probably she sculpted it into something she liked better—she can do that, as long as she knows it's a dream...*

"*Legilimens!*" hissed Snape, and Harry felt a force like a battering ram strike into his mind, aimed at his memories. He thrust the memory of the glass maze into its way, widening and deepening it as he went, then imagined himself, the shimmering silver self he saw when he went walking, pulling back, rising above the invader, looking down on him, trapped in the shining tunnels below—

With a shattering crash, Snape broke free of the maze, but Harry was already pulling himself back into his body, raising his wand, forcing his lips to move—a memory tried to rise up and envelop him, a closed door and a shouting voice and helpless terror, but that was just a piece of a den-night story, it couldn't hurt him now—

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Snape staggered back two paces, his wand torn from his hand. Harry snagged it on its way past, waited until his professor recovered his balance, and extended it to him, grip first.

"Not bad," said Snape, reclaiming his wand, a grudging note of approval in his voice. "A clever tactic, to use one of your own memories against me. But the Dark Lord is clever as well, and he will use your memories and their associations against *you*, finding your weaknesses and playing on them. You would do better to clear your mind and set aside your emotions, which will deny him entrance to your thoughts completely. Now, again." He raised his wand. "*Legilimens!*"

They battled back and forth for the remainder of the hour, surprisingly (to Harry's mind) evenly matched. He could usually manage to throw Snape out of his mind within a few moments of entry, though this grew harder as the hour went on and he began to get tired, but his score at keeping Snape out completely was considerably less than half the attempts.

*Which means he now knows a few things about me I didn't want him to. It's mostly baby stuff, though. I think I blocked him out of anything really important...like me and Ginny...*

He suppressed another snicker. *Though that might get him hauling his greasy tail out of my head pretty damn fast!*

"For a rank beginner, you acquitted yourself creditably today, Potter," said Snape, sitting down behind his desk. "Do not, however, believe that this removes the necessity for you to practice. Every night, before you go to sleep, focus on clearing your mind. Set aside all emotions, all worries, everything that troubles or disturbs you, for those are pathways into your innermost thoughts which can and will be exploited by the Dark Lord."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand that, sir." Harry injected a tiny amount of Hermione's eagerness to learn into his tone. "Isn't it like that old story where you can have all the gold you want if you can just keep from thinking of a red erumpent for one minute? As soon as you try not to think of it, you're thinking of it anyway."

"As with nonverbal spells, Potter, the answer lies in self-control." Snape used his wand to scoop up the silver contents of the stone basin, which Harry could now see was either Dumbledore's Pensieve or one exactly like it, and swirled them three times in the air, making them vanish. "When you are in sufficient control of your thought processes to cast a spell without speaking the incantation aloud, you will also find yourself more able to think, at need, of nothing at all."

*Which doesn't help me now, but clearly he thinks that ought to be enough for me, and arguing isn't going to change his mind.* "Yes, Professor." Harry returned his wand to its arm holster.

"Wednesday evening for the next session, I think you said, sir?"

"I did." Snape flipped his hand at the door. "You may go."

Harry went, but paused in the doorway to look back. Snape was leaning back in his chair, eyes closed, an expression of weariness on his face. Automatically, Harry sniffed, and took a quick step out into the hall so as not to cough aloud in surprise.

*He's angry. Angry and sad and guilty again, all at the same time. And not at me, either—at himself.*

*What's in those memories he was putting in the Pensieve, the memories he doesn't want me to see?*

---

Harry had many opportunities to ponder that question over the next few weeks, but though he continued to improve his Occlumency by painful bits and snatches, even once catching Snape at a vulnerable moment and getting a tantalizing peek at a fragmentary memory which seemed to involve Dumbledore and a stormy night, it was clear that Snape had requested the use of the Pensieve for precisely this reason. If the memories were not in his head (or rather, were there only as the knowledge that they had happened, rather like Harry's own memories of his parents' visit with him the summer before or Padfoot's good memories while he'd been in Azkaban), Harry couldn't see them, no matter how lucky he got.

"Which is all it's been, really," he told the Pride some weeks later as a storm lashed the windows of Gryffindor Tower. "Luck, and a little bit of skill. Rather like—"

"Snap," Draco said, slapping down his hand and dodging the resultant explosion with the ease of long practice. "You were saying, Harry?"

"I think you finished his sentence for him," said Luna, blowing on the ashes of the cards to start the reassembly spell. "But it will get to be more skill and less luck as you keep working on it, Harry. That's how these things are."

"I'm still never going to be really good at it." Harry punched the back of his chair moodily. "How can you think of nothing? It doesn't make sense."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ginny, pretending to yawn and using her covering hand to block the fact that she was pointing at Ron. "We might have an expert on thinking of nothing somewhere around here."

Ron tapped Hermione on the shoulder. "Lean forward?" he requested. She did so, and he removed the cushion from behind her back, thwapped Ginny soundly upside the head with it, and returned it to its former place. "Thanks."

"It makes sense if you come at it sideways." Neville spoke absently as he sketched a diagram of a Venomous Tentacula seedling, labeling each part as he drew it. "Your memories are like a map of your mind. Voldemort could use any one of them to get to others, and eventually into the ones that are most important to you, the ones that can hurt you or help him. But if you never let him onto the map at all, if you keep him on its border, outside of everything..."

"Let him see, but never let him touch," Meghan added. "Shut him out with things he can't use. Like your fire, Harry. Isn't that what Moony was having you do?"

"Yeah, he was. Thanks, Pearl, I did forget about that." Harry blew into the cupped palms of his hands, summoning a globe of flame, which he swirled three times around a finger and regarded complacently. "I'm used to doing this by now. It doesn't bother me anymore. But someone who doesn't have my power, who's used to thinking of fire as dangerous, he'd jump back, he'd shy away, and there's my chance to slam the doors shut and hold him off."

"Ice might be better." Draco scooped up the reconstituted Exploding Snap cards and began to shuffle them. "A wall of ice, like a glacier. It's thick and strong and impenetrable, and even if you can see through it a little, everything's impossibly distorted. He might be able to tell you're in there, but he couldn't see anything clearly enough to use it. With a firewall, he might be able to move some of it aside or blow it out long enough to get a good look at something, and then you're back where you started."

Harry frowned. "I don't know. Having a wall of ice around my mind just feels too... *cold*, I guess. I'd never feel comfortable in my own head. I like fire, and I think it likes me back." He scraped the flames off his finger and molded them into a tiny phoenix shape, which flew across the table and around Luna's head once before dissipating. "But if ice works for you, Fox, go for it. Anybody else?"

"Rosebushes," Meghan said promptly, pointing at Neville. "Like Captain said downstairs, on our first night back. Briar roses, a great tall hedge of them, to guard the princess." She batted her eyelashes. "Me."

"I'll take her arms if you'll get her legs, Draco," said Hermione without looking up from her book. "Harry can do the tickling."

Meghan gasped theatrically and clung to Neville's arm. "Save me!"

"Nobody tickles my princess," Neville declared. Then his face turned wicked. "Except me."

The resulting shriek had everyone in the common room turning to look.

"I'd probably use clay," said Ginny when order had been restored and the original subject had been brought back up. "While it's still wet, before it's been fired, because then it absorbs anything that's thrown at it." She closed her hands around each other and made a sucking noise. "Pulls it in, and uses it to get stronger."

"Dreams," said Luna, just as Hermione said, "Words." They paused and looked at each other, starting to smile.

"Because they can be anything," Hermione began.

"Anything at all." Luna beamed.

"And any path that someone tries to take..."

"Can become a completely different one..."

"Just because we say so!" they finished together.

Ron and Draco exchanged identical baffled looks and shrugs.

"You're up, Redwing," Harry said, rolling another sphere of fire across the backs of his fingers. "What would you use?"

"All right, this is going to sound odd, but just hear me out." Ron waved his hands in a wide circle. "I'd use air. But not just regular old air—moving air. Wind. It all looks the same from down here on the ground, but think about being up on a broom during a storm like this one." He pointed to the window, where rain lashed against the glass. "Now take away the broom. Imagine you can fly on your own."

"Because you can." Hermione bumped her shoulder against his. "But you have to use all your senses to do it, and all your concentration and thought. Anyone who tried to do it without your experience and your know-how would just be blown away, tossed around by the winds, and dumped on the ground again. And that's if they were lucky."

"The only problem is, if someone was a good flyer with a broom, they might still have a chance." Harry wove his hand up and down in the air, mimicking his twists and turns during a typical Quidditch match. "But then, all ours have some weakness. That's just the way of things. And speaking of flying..."

"How did I know," said Hermione with a weary sigh. "I'll be here when you're finished." Picking up her book again, she applied herself to it.

Ginny sniffed. "Some people can't appreciate the finer things in life. Slytherin for the first match again, right, Draco?"

"Right." Draco reached into his bag and pulled out a scroll, which he unrolled to reveal a careful scale drawing of the Quidditch pitch. A quick tap of his wand warmed the lines so Ron could see them, and four heads, two red, one black, one white-blond, bent over the plan.

Gryffindor Quidditch tryouts had left Harry blessing the forethought of Professor McGonagall in naming Draco, rather than himself, as team captain. Apparently the simple fact of his showing up was enough to attract a highly mixed crowd, including a batch of second years who could barely fly, a small group which had come without broomsticks, and a gaggle of exceptionally giggly Hufflepuffs. It would, he was sure, have been far worse had he been captain and therefore in charge of decisions.

Draco had disposed of things briskly, and they now had a new pair of Beaters to replace Fred and George—Ritchie Coote, whose weedy appearance would likely fool opposing teams into discounting him only to discover he aimed like a pro, and Jimmy Peakes, who might be just a third year but had nearly knocked Harry off his broom with a strongly-hit Bludger to the shoulder. Draco himself, Ginny, and Katie Bell would be the first-string Chasers, with Demelza Robbins, a particularly deft flyer from the year below Ginny's, as their first reserve, and much to Harry's surprise, Meghan's friend Natalie Macdonald as their second.

*She may not look like much, but she's little and she's quick and she sticks on her broom like somebody glued her there. She might even be able to come in as Seeker if I get knocked out and Fox decides they can't spare Ginny from Chasing...*

Ron was also back as Keeper, for which Harry gave devout thanks to whichever of the Founders had been watching over that particular set of trials. He strongly suspected Paul, as the Keeper who had gone before Ron, one Cormac McLaggen, had been a target worthy of the pranking talents of Gryffindor's only son.

*Though come to think, it's probably Paul's doing we haven't run into him sooner. Even a Gryffindor of the "brute force" type isn't usually stupid enough to accept a bet that includes eating a pound of doxy eggs.*

Whoever had been responsible, McLaggen had saved four of his five goals, then apparently lost all sense of direction and shot straight up in the air as Natalie approached the goal hoops, allowing her to fly directly to the center hoop, balance the Quaffle inside it, and then tap it delicately with one finger, toppling it through. The stands, now filled with students who had finished their Sunday breakfast, had roared with laughter, and McLaggen had grounded his broom looking ready to wring Natalie's neck, until Graham and Maya Pritchard, Selena Moon, Dean Thomas, and Lindsey Jordan had rushed the pitch to surround her, cheering, as she landed with the Quaffle under one arm.

*Pride together, Pride forever.* Harry grinned to himself. *Even when the Pride isn't ours.*

Ron had been laughing so hard he had trouble taking off on his Cleansweep Eleven, but that had apparently worked in his favor. Once he did get into the air, no trace of his usual pre-game nerves had remained, and he'd saved his five shots, one from each Chaser, cleanly, making Draco's decision an easy one.

*I worried a bit about open trials, but with everyone being there and watching how we did, there'll be no way for accusations of nepotism, or Pride-ism, to come creeping up afterwards. We won our slots fairly. Harry watched his own sketched figure fly a loop around the Gryffindor goal hoops and dive to follow up what could have been a sighting of the Snitch. Sorry, Seeker wanna-bes, but I'm still the best...*

"...and then we'll release the flying monkeys, which will make the Quaffle hard to hold onto because of all the poo, so be sure to use extra chalk beforehand," Draco finished. "Any questions?"

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Ah, he's finally back!" Draco gave Harry his most open, cheerful, and disarming smile. "Have a nice trip inside your head, brother of mine? Awful lot of empty space in there... hope you didn't get lost..."

"Very funny. How long were you talking nonsense?"

Draco pointed at Ron and Ginny. The former was holding a pillow over his mouth and had turned approximately the same color as his hair, while the latter had her face buried in the couch cushions and was drumming her feet helplessly against the arm. "Long enough for them to get like that."

Fuming, Harry turned to glare at Neville, Meghan, and Luna. Luna met his eyes with her usual smile of sweet unconcern. "Did you need something, Harry?" she inquired.

"Do you have anything I can use to make my brother grow up?"

"Some things, even magic can't do," Neville murmured, dipping his quill again.

A muffled, gleeful squeal erupted from the small, blanket-covered lump lying in the approximate location where Harry had last seen Meghan.

*I love my Pack, Harry reminded himself firmly. I love my Pride. I do not want to kill them or even hurt them. Badly.*

*But I can't say I'd mind it if a certain few of them suffered a minor mischief one of these days...*

---

Draco jogged down the first floor corridor, one hand on his bag to keep it from bouncing. He'd stayed after Ancient Runes to check on something with Professor Bab—*because honestly, who's going to want to be called by their whole name when it's something as silly as that?*—and in

consequence was running late for dinner.

*And I may not be able to put it away like Ron can, but I still get a bit peckish at this hour of the day, eh what?*

Chuckling at his own posh mental accent, he rounded a corner and collided painfully with a suit of armor he was positive hadn't been there yesterday. The armor collapsed with a crash and a groan, and Peeves exploded from within it, knocking Draco backwards onto his rump. "Ah-ha!" the poltergeist bellowed. "The miniature Malfoy! Come to pester old Peevesie, have you?"

"Didn't even know you were there," said Draco wearily, getting up. "Honestly, didn't care. Would you mind—" He dodged as a vambrace clattered against the wall beside him. "Hey, stop that!"

"Shan't." Peeves stuck out his tongue, and a greave rose from the pile of armor to shoot towards Draco's chest. He dodged again, but it caught him on the arm, making him hiss in pain. "Mini-Malfoy must learn better manners than not to care about his precious Peeves, he must!"

"Why?" Draco retorted, turning so that Peeves was presented with his left shoulder and couldn't see him snapping his right wrist to bring his wand into his hand. Something in the back of his mind was trying to tell him that baiting Peeves wasn't a good idea, but the poltergeist's repeated use of his birth name was drowning it out. "You don't care about us except to harass us, why should we care about—" A pauldron came rocketing at him. He deflected it across the corridor with a quick Stunner. "—about you?"

"Well now!" Peeves leapt into the air, cackling. "Bitty Black has some spunk in him! And some sneakiness, too, to get his wand into his hand without my spotting him! Well done, Black boy, well done indeed!"

"Learned my proper name, have you?" Draco relaxed his grip on his wand slightly, but kept it in ready position. Peeves was known for pretending to break off his attacks to get students to lower their guard. "Why don't you just move along and we'll both pretend this never happened?"

"But bitty boy Black must listen first. Peeves has a song for him." Peeves rotated in the air, humming to himself until he found the pitch he wanted. "Ooooooh," he sang horribly off his own key.

Draco considered grabbing his bag and ducking back around the corner, but the first line of Peeves's song got his full attention.

*"What is the moon's secret, the sweet little moon?*

*"Why didn't she love you in May or in June?*

*"What is she afraid of? What fills her with fear?*

*"Go ask her! Just ask her! She's close by, she's here! "*

On the last two words, Peeves gestured to a nearby classroom door. It slammed open, and a tiny sniffing sob told Draco it was occupied.

*No prizes for guessing who, either.* A wave of cold anger rose over him, and he snapped his wand up to point directly at Peeves.

"*Ictumusque* ," he said clearly and distinctly.

Peeves yelped and flinched as though he'd been struck. Then he yelped again, flinching in a different direction this time. And again... and again... and again...

*Ha.* Draco lowered his wand, feeling a rush of satisfaction. *It works.*

"Get lost," he said, pointing down the passage. "And from now on, leave my girl alone."

"Ooooh, you'll be sorry for this one, micro-Malfoy!" Peeves shouted, clutching his behind as he bounced away. "You just wait and see... you'll be sorryyyy..."

"Sorry I didn't do that before, maybe." Grinning, Draco put his wand away and turned to face the classroom. Luna stood in the doorway, blotting her face on her sleeve.

"Don't," he said, catching her hand in mid-motion. "The robes are too rough, you'll hurt your skin—here, use this." With his other hand, he fumbled in his pocket until he found a tissue. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Luna said in a small voice, accepting the tissue. "Nothing important, I mean."

"If it's making you cry, it's important to me." Draco made as if to release her hand, but Luna tightened her grip. "What is it?"

"Just—I was thinking about Mrs. Danger's letter, the one you showed us, the one with the story in it." Luna swallowed. "I heard a story once that I think is about some of the people in the one Mr. Padfoot wrote down, later on in their lives. The little girl with red hair and her father, and the boy she met in the forest."

"We think her father's Alex," Draco reminded her. "All the more so because of that ginger lady I've seen in his portrait down in the Den a couple times. She could be the girl's mother—" He stopped as Luna made a soft sound. "What is it?"

"She is," Luna said under her breath. "She is, and someone else's as well. And that someone else is what ruined everything."

"How do you mean?" Draco frowned. "She and Alex had another kid, and that somehow wrecked their lives?"

"It wasn't their fault, though." Luna stepped closer to him, looking up at him earnestly. "You have to remember that, Draco. None of what happened was their fault. It was Salazar Slytherin, with all his hatred and his anger at his son, for betraying everything he stood for, siding with 'the freaks' against his own family." The quotes could not have been clearer had she added them with her wand. "I don't know that it was him, not for certain, I haven't seen it, but it sounds like him. A



horrible sort of tit for tat, a way for him to make sure that Alex would know the same pain that Alex had caused *him* ."

"What are you saying?" Draco bent to scoop up his bag, never letting his eyes leave Luna's face. "Slytherin did something to Alex, a punishment for marrying the wrong girl? You're right, it does fit what we know about him, but what is it you think he did?"

Luna drew a deep breath. "I think—" she began.

"Around here they are, Mr. Filch, sir!" Peeves's screeching voice broke in. "Just around this corner, canoodling in the classrooms!"

Draco swore. "Run," he said shortly, suiting the action to the word and dragging Luna after him. "We have to hide, if Filch catches us we'll be in detention for a week, never mind that we were just *talking*, and technically it's not wrong for students to be in classrooms even when they're not in class—ah-ha!" He pulled up short as they rounded another corner. "This looks promising!"

"I don't know." Luna eyed the tall cabinet, with its elaborate decorations in black and gold paint, doubtfully. "There's a lot of magic around it."

"Luna, this is Hogwarts. There's a lot of magic around *everything* ." Draco tried not to roll his eyes, but some of the temptation must have escaped into his voice, because Luna started and looked at him reproachfully. "Now, do you want that week's worth of detentions for nothing worse than talking, or are we going to hide?"

"Well." Luna hurried past him and opened the cabinet's doors. "When you put it *that* way."

Draco waited for her to step up into the cabinet's interior, then followed her in, pressing himself against the opposite wall and pulling the doors most of the way closed but holding them there instead of latching them.

*Because I know that it is very foolish to shut oneself into any wardrobe.* He grinned in the darkness. *Or anything that looks like one, either.*

"Well, Peeves?" Filch's raspy voice demanded from a few feet away. "Where are they?"

"They were just here, Mr. Filch, *sir* ." Peeves's tones practically dripped respect. "They must've run away when they heard us coming, Mr. Filch, *sir* . Poor Mr. Filch, *sir* , cheated of his rightful prey..."

"Hmph," Filch snorted. "See if I ever listen to you again."

"But what about this?" Peeves asked, and Draco felt their hiding place shake back and forth. "They couldn't be a-hiding in here, could they, Mr. Filch, *sir* ?"

"What, in a Vanishing Cabinet?" Filch laughed wheezily. "Even students wouldn't be that stupid!"

*Vanishing Cabinet?* Draco looked down at himself, then across at Luna, flattened against the other wall. Both of them were still entirely visible. *How does it—*

"Of course not, Mr. Filch, *sir* ." Peeves rattled the cabinet again. "Not when everybody knows, when you put things into a Vanishing Cabinet and then you close the doors—like so —"

Draco had just time to yank his hands back and snatch Luna into an embrace before Peeves threw his whole weight against the doors.

There was a brief instant in which the world turned inside out, upside down, and spun three ways at once. Then he stood once more in the dim light afforded by a cabinet door which hung a slit ajar, still clutching Luna against himself like his only hope of sanity.

*Which doesn't speak well for my chances overall.*

"All right?" he whispered into her ear.

"Mm-hmm," she answered into his chest. Her eyes, wide and interested as ever, tracked around the interior of the cabinet as he eased her back against his arms. "That wasn't very pleasant. Do you suppose that's what it's like for things we Vanish too?"

"I hope not." Draco sniffed cautiously at the air coming into their small space. *Dust, gold, more dust, potion residue, still more dust. No chalk, no cat fur, and definitely no food.* "But there's one thing I'm pretty sure about."

"What's that?"

*Danger would smack me for this, but then again, Danger's not here. More's the pity.*

"Luna..." Draco pointed a thumb at the sliver of light. "I have a feeling we're not at Hogwarts anymore."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 7: Cookery and Curses (Year 6)

Danger hoisted the strainer filled with pasta out of the pot of boiling water and shook it briskly, then switched to a one-handed grip in order to snag herself a noodle. Biting it in half, she grinned. "Perfect," she said, and hurled the remainder of it across the room.

Percy, pushing open one half of the swinging door, blinked as half a strand of pasta went hurtling past him and hit the wall, where it stuck. "And what had that noodle ever done to you?" he inquired, stepping out of Crystal's way as she bustled out the other half of the door with a tray of food balanced on her arm.

"Nothing, that's just another way to make sure it's done. Which it is." Danger emptied the strainer into a serving bowl, picked up another pot from the stove, and tasted the sauce simmering inside it before pouring it over the pasta.

"That smells like peanuts."

"It should. It's made from peanut butter."

Percy's eyebrows rose. "Really, now."

"Come try a bit if you don't believe me. It's quite good." Danger pushed the serving bowl back on the counter into one of the red-painted circles which designated the spots with built-in warming spells. "It sounds unusual, I know, but it's tasty, it's vegetarian, and it's something of a storied food in our household..."

---

Luna turned to face the door, and her eyes drifted and refocused as Draco had seen them do so many times before. "You're right," she said. "We're not. We're in a shop of some kind." She blinked rapidly and rubbed her hands up and down her arms. "There are Dark things in here. Very Dark, some of them."

"In that case..." Draco pulled his pendants from his robes, lengthened the chain with one swift pull, and dropped it over Luna's head. **We don't want to be overheard**, he said silently. **Anyone who runs a shop with Dark magic hanging around probably wouldn't stop to ask too many questions if they found us in here.**

**No, they wouldn't.** Luna possessed herself of one of Draco's hands and squeezed it briefly. **Would you mind if I...**

**Go ahead**, said Draco, catching the drift of what Luna wanted to do from the fragmentary images which had come with the words. **You'll be the next thing to invisible, something so common no one even thinks about it.**

*Unlike me. But then, as long as no one looks too closely at my robes...*

A moment's work with his wand, and the Gryffindor patch over his heart was the same midnight black as the rest of the fabric. Fleetinglly he wished for his outdoor cloak, with its hood to shield his face—

*As long as I'm wishing, why not wish for Harry's Invisibility Cloak? Or maybe not to have hidden in here at all?*

The same spell which had camouflaged his House colors served for his hair. Though he was certain the combination of matte black and pale porcelain made him look like either a life-size doll or a particularly well-preserved Inferius, the point was not to win appearance awards but to get out of a possibly dangerous situation.

**Do you think just opening and shutting the door would work?** he asked of Starwing the owl, who was waiting patiently on the cabinet's floor beside him. **Vanish us back to where we started? It's how we got here...**

Starwing shook her head. **There isn't nearly as much magic around us here as there was before Peeves shut the door back at Hogwarts,** she said, stepping daintily onto Draco's wrist as he went to one knee and held it out to her. **I think the Cabinet is out of practice at Vanishing things. We were lucky to get here all in one piece.**

**Well, there goes that idea.** Draco got to his feet again, Starwing mantling her wings for balance. **Back to Plan A. Wait until there's no one in the shop, then run like mad.**

**Does that mean you want me to tell you when there's no one in the shop?**

**If you would be so kind, my lady.**

**There's no one in the shop now.** Starwing made the chuckling gurgle which served owls for laughter under her breath. **If we go quickly, we should be able to get out before he comes back.**

**He? No, never mind,** Draco corrected himself before Starwing could begin to answer. **Tell me later. Here we go.**

Drawing a deep breath, he lifted the cabinet door slightly and swung it wide, taking the weight which might otherwise have caused the hinges to creak.

His first impression was of the sort of magical junk shop in which he and the Pride had so often spied on Fred and George, and used their knowledge for small-scale blackmail. If they had ever discovered the twins in here, though, their demands would have increased exponentially.

*That's assuming we didn't just tell the Pack-parents about it, and to hell with blackmail. Any place that sells bloodstained cards and cursed necklaces is dangerous, no two ways about it. Draco threaded his way carefully between overflowing bins and tables, holding Starwing against his chest. Not that the street out there looks any better, but at least out there I'll have room to run...*

He reached the door and closed his fingers around the handle.

**Don't yell,** Starwing hissed inside his mind, in the same moment as an oily voice said, "May I help you?" from behind him.

The instant of warning allowed Draco to turn what would have been a guilty jerk of surprise into a slow, deliberate turn. By the time he was facing the stooped man who had emerged from a curtained door at the back of the shop, he had his features well under control, and even managed what he thought was a creditable look of disdain. "No," he said in a cool, slow voice, then added "Thank you" after a moment's pause, meant to convey his uncertainty as to whether the person before him deserved such politeness.

"You're sure?" The man started forward, rubbing his hands together. "I didn't realize anyone had come in—"

"I was just leaving," Draco cut in. "If you'll excuse me."

He turned and pushed the door open, making a bell jangle above it.

"Here now," the man began behind him, footsteps speeding up on the creaky floor, "haven't I seen you somewhere—"

**Go,** Draco snapped, reclaiming his chain and thrusting Starwing skyward as he broke into a run. She pushed off his wrist and flapped quickly above the grimy, overhanging buildings around them.

*At least she's well out of it.* Draco risked a glance over his shoulder. The man was still pursuing him, pointing after him and shouting hoarsely, and several of the other unkempt denizens of this twisting alleyway seemed minded to join in the chase—

A body slammed into him from his blind side, and he went down hard, managing to get his shoulder under him and roll to take a bit of the edge off the impact but still losing his breath as his attacker's full weight landed on top of him. He twisted frantically, trying to get a grip on the other, then cursed silently as he felt the chill of a spell pass over him—

"Stay down," hissed the pale, dark-haired boy who had tackled him, silver-gray eyes shining weirdly in the dim light of the alley. "Follow when it's safe." Shoving himself back to his feet, he sprinted off, plain black robes trailing behind him, the man from the shop only a few steps behind, a pair of untidy witches with trays and an unshaven wizard in tattered robes on his heels.

*Was that—me?*

Draco lay very still, letting his lungs remember how to work, and tried to form the last several seconds into some semblance of intelligent sense. It wasn't easy.

*So I tackled myself to the ground, then told me to stay down and follow me when it's safe. He glanced down at his body, unsurprised to see only a vague outline through which the cobblestones beneath him were clearly visible. I obviously Disillusioned me while I was down, to be sure they*

wouldn't see me. This me, not the other me. I wonder if Luna will spot me? That me, not this me.

*More to the point, what will Luna see if she looks at that me? Is it really me? Did I sneak into the Ministry and get a Time-Turner and come back and save myself? Or is it someone disguised as me, an Order member or a Red Shepherd or just a friend who spotted me running and decided to help?*

On the whole, the latter seemed more likely, but there was one problem.

*How did whoever-it-was disguise themselves as me in plain sight, without anybody noticing what they were doing? Even if they'd been using my face to sneak around with, for whatever reason, they'd still have had blond hair, not black, so they must've done the changes on the fly. But how could they work that kind of magic on themselves while running, and without being spotted? The only person we know who could do that is—*

He let out his regained breath in a long, silent laugh as the name finally surfaced in his mind.

*Well, at least now I know who I'm looking for. Or maybe I should say... Rolling onto his side, he changed forms and got his paws underneath himself. ...who I'm sniffing for. Smells don't change even when looks do.*

Slinking from one patch of shadow to the next, Snow Fox cast about until he found the trail he wanted, then followed the scent of forest groves and spellfire, with just a hint of dragon musk, at his best quick trot.

Ladies, after all, shouldn't be kept waiting.

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"It's really very easy, you see." Danger added a splash of peanut oil to the hot skillet, then tossed in a generous pinch of hot pepper flakes and the large clove of garlic she'd chopped beforehand. "You can use more of the pepper or less, depending on how hot you like things, or even leave it out altogether. I'm going to make this batch a little spicier, since people seem to like that."

"That seems... imprecise," Percy said doubtfully. "How can you be sure you don't overdo?"

"In my case, I've been making this recipe so long I like to think my fingers can just tell what's the right amount. If you were to do it at home, you might want to measure things the first few times." Danger glanced up at him. "Or do you cook?"

"Sometimes. When I must." Percy stepped back as Danger lifted the skillet from the flame and expertly jabbed it forward in a looping motion, tossing its contents into the air and catching them within the pan without losing so much as a drop of oil. "Though I've never done that."

"What, sauteing? It's easy once you get the knack." Danger chuckled, setting the skillet back on the heat. "Though you certainly don't want to learn it with a hot pan! Use a cold one and some dried beans or rice until you've got the motion down." Catching his dubious look, she shook her head. "Don't be so hard on yourself. It's no different than learning the proper movement for a new

spell, and I'm sure you know how to do that."

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of it that way." Percy looked down at the pan, where the garlic had turned translucent and the hot pepper flakes were a dark brown. "Is that ready to move on?"

"Yes, it is. Good catch." Danger picked up one of the two measuring cups beside the stove. "One-half cup of milk..." She dumped it into the pan, causing a loud hiss from the hot oil. "And three-quarters of a cup of peanut butter." This required some urging from her wand to leave its container, but eventually fell into the bubbling liquid with a small splash. "Now, this is where it's nice to have magic, because I don't have to get it smooth by hand, and that means I won't have cramps and an aching wrist later tonight." Picking up a metal whisk, she set it in the pan, then twirled her wand three times around it, starting it on its brisk journey around the pan's contents. "And there you have it. Peanut butter sauce."

Percy frowned. "That's all? It seems so simple."

"Oh, there are flourishes. It's good to grind a bit of black pepper into it, and you can add a drop or two of hot pepper oil if you want it spiced up more. And you can use peanuts or sesame seeds or green scallions as a garnish on the finished dish. But in essence, that's all it is." Danger shrugged, catching the whisk as it came by and checking the consistency of the sauce. "The best dishes are made from good ingredients, simply prepared. Even if some of them are unexpected."

"I see." Percy smiled. "Rather like life, isn't it?"

"Yes," Danger said slowly. "Yes, I suppose it is."

Crystal shoved back through the door, her tray now loaded with empty, sauce-stained dishes. "Two beef, two pasta, one chicken," she said briskly, setting the tray down next to the sink. Percy stepped to one side and flicked his wand at it, sending the dishes soaring into the dishpan, where another two waves started them washing themselves. "And once we have that up, someone who says she has to see you in person, Danger. Something about lost property."

"Lost property?" Danger paused for a moment in the midst of piling two bowls with her completed pasta. "I haven't lost anything that I know of. Did she give her name?"

"No, but I don't suppose she feels she has to." Crystal grinned. "There can't be too many people walking around with hair the same color scheme as that ridiculous advert Fred and George have in their front window."

"Hair the same—oh good Lord." Danger shoved the serving forks into Percy's hands and shot out the door. "Tonks, what on earth—" Percy heard her begin before the closing door cut her voice off.

Percy looked over at Crystal. "Lost property?" he asked, gingerly scooping out a portion of pasta which looked reasonable to fill the second bowl.

"Don't ask me, I just work here." Crystal scooped up a folded towel and pulled one of the ovens



open, extracting a deep blue pot which emitted a marvelously savory odor when she set it on the stovetop and lifted the lid. "All I know is, she had a white owl on her shoulder, and either she's got a messed-up arm or she had something under her cloak too..."

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"Tonks, what on earth have you found of mine?" Danger asked, beckoning the younger witch back towards the kitchen. "Not that I need to ask about one part of it—shouldn't you be at school?" This last clause was addressed to Starwing, who fluffed out her neck feathers in the closest thing owls had to a blush. "It would serve you right if I took you straight home and let your father deal with you—"

"Don't shout at them," Tonks said, stepping past Danger into the back room. "Judging by the way I found them, either this wasn't their idea or it went pretty badly wrong. I'd hate to think they *planned* something that stuffed up like this."

"They?" Danger folded her arms.

Tonks drew back her cloak. The small brown fox huddled in the crook of her left arm turned imploring eyes on Danger.

"Oh, don't give me that look." Danger plucked him out of Tonks's hold by the scruff of his neck, eliciting a muffled yelp, and deposited him on the nearest chair as Starwing fluttered to the table's edge. Tonks shut the door, then claimed another chair for herself. "Let's have it."

The fox shook himself once, then burst upwards and outwards into a rumpled, sheepish-looking Draco. "It was an accident," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I swear."

"Yes, it always is." Danger drew her wand and tapped him on the top of the head, removing what looked like an inexpertly applied coat of black varnish from his hair. "It's just that no one else ever seems to have accidents quite like you."

"It really was, though," said Luna, perched on the corner of the table almost as comfortably as Starwing had been. "We were just hiding from Peeves and Mr. Filch, and we picked the wrong thing to do it in."

"I'd say you did," Tonks put in, leaning back in her chair. "How exactly do you go from hiding at Hogwarts to bolting up Knockturn Alley with Brucellus Borgin hot on your trail?"

"Bolting up—" Danger stopped and counted backwards from ten in Latin. "All right," she said when she was finished. "Clearly you're not hurt, and it doesn't sound like you've destroyed anything that can't be repaired, so as long as no one's hunting for you there should be no damage done, and I have a feeling this is a story I'm going to need to hear all the way through. We'll declare a moratorium on punishments for the time being." **Love, would you mind firecalling Minerva?** she added mentally, feeling Remus stir in the back of her mind as her emotional state caught his attention. **Let her know she's, shall we say, misplaced a pair of students?**

**What, again?** Remus chuckled. **I'll get the message through. Start without me if you have to.**

"Could we maybe have some dinner before we tell you what happened?" Draco asked wistfully, turning his head to track the mixed aromas floating in from the kitchen. "I was on my way to the Great Hall when I ran into Peeves, and I don't think Luna ever got there."

Luna shook her head, sliding off the table. "I didn't much want to eat, with what I was thinking about," she said. "But flying always makes me hungry, so I could eat now." She sniffed the air. "Is that your chicken with the mushroom and sweet wine sauce, Mrs. Danger?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it is. And I don't have to ask what you want." Danger smiled at Draco, who licked his lips exaggeratedly. "Anything for you, Tonks?"

"If you can wrap it up to take away. I should get back to my stakeout."

Draco winced. "We blew that open for you, didn't we? I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Tonks scrubbed her knuckles briefly across his scalp, dodging his lunge and snap of teeth. "It would've looked a lot more suspicious if I hadn't joined in the chase. Might even be better this way, because I can just meander back looking different and no one has to know I'm the same person who was there before. Besides, my partner's still on the spot, so we're covered, but I don't want to leave him alone there for too long."

"So something portable and quick. Got it." Danger hurried back to the kitchen, where she had to hide a smile at the sight of Percy, enveloped in a large apron with a chef's toque askew on his head, furrowing his brow in concentration as he sent spoons and knives sailing back and forth across the kitchen with his wand.

"One chicken, one pasta, and slice some of the beef thin for me?" she requested at the first moment when he had nothing airborne to be distracted from. "I'm making Tonks a wrap, she has to get back."

"Of course." Percy directed a shallow bowl towards the dish of pasta and a plate towards the pot of chicken. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Or it should be." Danger removed a piece of flatbread from the refrigerator and held it between her hands until it was nicely warmed and pliable, then plopped it down in a free space on one of the cutting boards and pointed. Percy flicked his wand at it, and a pile of sliced beef materialized, followed by a small shower of carrots, peas, and pearl onions. "Excellent. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Percy said loftily, turning just in time to see the pasta overflow the bowl and tip onto the stove with a violent hiss and a smell of charred peanuts.

Danger busied herself with folding flatbread around meat and vegetables in order to hide her grin.

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"Thanks for the save," Draco said, bumping Tonks's shoulder with his. "Good thinking to bowl me over and disillusion me, then jump up looking like me and run off. Nobody's going to be stopping to try and help you up, not down Knockturn Alley, and once you get a corner or two ahead of them, you can just stop and change into anything you like and they'll run right past you looking for me."

"Which is exactly what I did, so I'm glad you approve." Tonks tweaked his ear. "Try not to fall through any more cabinets, okay, little cousin? Next time I might not be there to bail you out."

"Don't worry, I'll listen to Luna next time she tells me something has magic around it." Draco grimaced. "You'd think I'd have learned that by now, wouldn't you?"

"You? Learn things? I didn't know that was possible." Tonks leaned out of the way of Draco's halfhearted punch, waved to Luna, and scooped her wrap off the top of Danger's tray as Danger carried it in. "Have a good night, all. I'll be in touch."

"Say hi to Charlie for us," Luna called after her. Tonks tossed them a thumbs-up without breaking stride.

"Minerva apparently expressed herself with vigor on the subject of students who fail to stay where they're put," said Danger, setting the tray down on the table and drawing her wand to close the door. "However, she accepted Remus's assurances that this was in fact an accident and that it will be an isolated incident." Handing Luna her plate of chicken, she fixed Draco with a stare equal parts blue and brown. "I trust you don't intend to make him into a liar."

Draco shook his head. Danger regarded him for a moment, as though trying to decide if he were sincere, then smiled. "Good," she said, setting down his bowl of pasta. "Take the edge off, then get started at your own pace. We don't quite have all night, but close to it."

"Right." Draco helped himself to a fork from the tray, loaded and twirled it, and took his first bite, trying to get his thoughts in order. *Don't think I need to mention what Peeves was on about, not really. It doesn't matter. Just that I ran across him, chased him off, he went and found Filch and led him straight to us, and I wasn't about to take a bunch of detentions for not doing anything wrong...*

Danger listened without comment to his narrative of his and Luna's encounter with Hogwarts's resident poltergeist and their avoidance of one with the caretaker, though Draco thought he saw an increase in the swirls of blue which indicated Moony's presence when he described Peeves's obsequious politeness towards Filch. The trip through the Vanishing Cabinet and their arrival in what he now knew had been the infamous Borgin and Burkes netted the same lack of response, but his unceremonious exit therefrom drew a brief grin. "I see we've been studying our Marauder Commandments."

"Eleventh Commandment," Draco said promptly. "Thou shalt not get caught. Twelfth Commandment. When at risk of violating Eleventh Commandment, thou shalt run like hell."

"That's my boy." Danger patted his shoulder proudly, then sobered. "I can't say I like the idea of that easy an access to Hogwarts in that Dark of a location. Not to mention, if that one exists, could there be others? But you've found this one, and we can deal with it now." She blew out a breath. "Well done on that count. Also on thinking to disguise yourself, even just a bit."

"I figured if we were in a shop filled with Dark magic, it was a fair bet Lucius had been around it somewhere along the line, buying or selling or both." Draco shrugged. "That's probably why Borgin thought I looked familiar, but without this—" He tugged a hank of his hair between two fingers. "He couldn't put it together."

"I helped some too," said Luna, looking up from the design she was tracing with one tine of her fork in the leftover sauce on her plate. "Not by doing anything, though I would have if I could, but just by being there."

"How do you mean?" Draco asked.

"Well." Luna smiled sweetly. "Snowy owls aren't very common, you know. And if Mr. Borgin didn't get a good look at you, if all he saw was that you looked like the right age to be at Hogwarts and had dark hair and a white owl, and if he starts telling the story of the boy who got away to his usual customers, and some of them have children who go to Hogwarts..."

"Luna," said Danger after a moment's pause, "are you saying the Death Eaters might think Draco was Harry?"

"It might be interesting to see what they do if they did." Luna giggled a little. "Maybe we should ask Tonks to watch that store too. See if anything disappears or gets locked up or put under heavy alarm spells."

"I've been mistaken for many people," Draco commented, "but somehow Harry was never one of them. How d'you think they'll account for my not wearing glasses? Or will that tell them they've got to be wrong?"

Danger shrugged. "In my experience, once people think they're right, they can come up with reasons for anything. Maybe they'll say Borgin didn't notice them because the light was bad, or you'd taken them off to try to disguise yourself, or they broke when you fell out of the Floo at the wrong fireplace."

"The wrong fireplace? Really?" Draco grimaced. "What am I, six? Or rather, what is Harry?"

"The Boy Who Lived," said Luna in a singsong tone. "The Chosen One. The alpha of the Pride. Should I go on?"

"No. Please don't." Draco twirled the last of his pasta onto his fork. "Go back instead. Back to what you were about to tell me before Peeves contracted his unnatural alliance with Filch. Luna's got a new twist on that story of Padfoot's," he explained to Danger. "Something to do with Alex and his kids, and his father..."

"Yes." Luna pushed her plate away. "His father. *Lord* Salazar Slytherin, to be precise. A baron, a landed nobleman." Her tone now was vicious, with a cold, biting venom Draco had never heard from her before. "He owned the land where Hogwarts is, did you know that? It was his through his mother's family, and he was so proud to think that their fine school would be erected on it. But then the other Founders started to do things he thought of as unnatural. Perverted. And then even his own son was seduced by their twisted lies." She flattened her palms against the table. "So he took what seemed, to him, a very proper step. He took his anger and his wounded pride and he turned them into a curse. And he laid that curse on his son, and on his son's children, and on all their children after them."

Draco resisted the urge to wrap his arms around himself, settling for a brief, heartfelt shudder. Danger laid her hand comfortingly over his, and he gave her a thankful smile. **It's so creepy when she gets this way, he sent through their blood link. Like living with one of those ancient priestesses—what were they called again?**

**I think you mean the Pythia, at the Oracle at Delphi.** Danger's silent chuckle echoed through Draco's mind. **Be glad she's not one. Their "cryptic utterances" are generally considered to have been the result of drugs. Now hush, this may be important.**

Luna, unaware of the mental conversation, was still speaking, her words so sharp-edged Draco was surprised not to see her lips bleeding. "He came to his son's home on a night which should have been the happiest of his life. A night when his son now also had a son, for his gracious wife had borne a strong and handsome baby boy, and their beloved red-haired daughter had held her new brother in her arms like a precious gift. And he looked his son in the eye, and he told him what he had done, and he destroyed that family's joy forever. For this was the curse which Salazar Slytherin laid on the child who displeased him, and no magic could defend against it:

*"By your actions you have taken from me one of my two sons, and left me only one child to carry on my name. On this day and in this hour, I curse you, and all your descendants after you, that you may know the same anguish I suffer because of you. For no matter how many children you may sire, no matter how many your wife may bear, before ever they attain the fullness of their years, all but one of them shall die."*

Danger pressed her free hand to her lips, stifling a cry. Indistinctly, in the back of his mind, Draco heard a curse in a voice which sounded like Moony's, and provided a vehement, if silent, second to it.

"And he turned and left that house, and never came there again," Luna finished quietly. "And his son and his wife looked at their two beautiful children and wondered upon which of them the doom should fall, and how, and when." She looked across the table at them, some trick of the light making her eyes glow momentarily a green as brilliant as Harry's or as Alex's own. "But even their worst imaginings could not encompass the full cruelty of Salazar Slytherin's curse. For when at last it took effect and their young son did die, it happened under such circumstances as made his sister blame herself, though she had been faced with an impossible choice and an eyeblink of time in which to make it. And ever after, all her life long, the soul of their beloved daughter bled from a wound which could not heal..."

*Beloved daughter, Draco's mind supplied in the silence which followed this last pronouncement. That's the second time she's said it like that. Does that just mean Alex and his wife really loved her a lot, or is there something more to it?*

Luna blinked once, restoring her eyes to their usual soft blue-gray, though tears glistened in their corners, threatening to spill over at any second. "That was even more sad than I thought it was going to be," she said, picking up her napkin. "Slytherin really wasn't a nice wizard at all, was he?"

Draco sat back, letting his thoughts race, as Danger rounded the table in three strides and closed her arms around Luna, maneuvering them in some way known only to mothers so that they ended up sitting together in the chair with Luna's face against Danger's shoulder. *Usually in prophecies and such, at least the sort we seem to get, a descriptor being connected with somebody more than once is a pun on the meaning of their name. Calling me the dragon or Harry the warrior or Pearl... well, the pearl. A smile touched his lips momentarily. So we're looking for a girl's name that means "beloved". Not that it really matters what her name was, since she lived a thousand years ago...*

*And aren't we dealing with the fallout of a thousand years ago every day in this war?* whispered the annoyingly rational part of his mind, the part which so often sounded like his twin. *Shouldn't we know as much about the people who lived then as we can, to see if we can keep from repeating their mistakes?*

Shutting his eyes so that he could roll them without being seen, Draco considered the question. *"Beloved". Well, since it is the wizarding world, let's start with the obvious. Latin. Amo, amas, amat—*

His eyes flew open. Danger was looking at him steadily. When she saw that she had his attention, she mouthed a single word. Slowly, Draco nodded.

*Amanda.*

*The name is Amanda.*

*But that doesn't mean Amanda Smythe has anything to do with anything. Just because she has red hair and green eyes—*

*Don't forget her little brother, murmured the annoying voice again. Her little Slytherin brother, whose name is Matt. What's that short for, I wonder? Could it possibly be... Matthias?*

Suddenly fed up with his thoughts, Draco stood up, sending his chair skidding backwards across the floor. "Back in a moment," he mumbled, and hurried out the door into the passage, and from there out into the narrow alleyway behind the Pepper Pot. Full dark had fallen, and he leaned back to stare up at the bleak sky overhead, breathing heavily through his teeth.

"It's a load of coincidences, that's all," he said aloud when he had some semblance of control back. "If the name and the looks didn't match, I'd be finding something else that did. Amanda's alive,

she's real, she belongs in the here and now. She's not any crazy Inferius or soul-fragment from a thousand years ago. She's my..." He stalled slightly on the word, and finally settled for a slightly lame-sounding, "...friend. Not to mention one of our yearmates. That's all. That's *it*."

*And if you believe that, I have a self-spelling wand to sell you.*

"Speaking of spells." Draco planted his hands in the small of his back and stretched. "And I thought *I* had daddy problems. That... that was twisted. Fitting, if you look at it from his point of view, but utterly twisted and so incredibly wrong from anywhere else in the world."

*Also possibly an explanation for the long string of only children in the Malfoy line. His curiosity had got the better of him after Letha had repaired the Black family tapestry, and he had sneaked a look into Nature's Nobility to see if he could find an equivalent for the Malfoys. Hardly any of my ancestors had so much as two kids, and that was mostly when a daughter came first. He made a face. Must continue the sacred name at all costs, mustn't we?*

"But if we really do descend from the Beauvois," he murmured, twisting his shoulders, "even diagonally with a side helping of murder, the tradition of only having one child might have come down from them too, and we'd have kept it up without asking why, because we're purebloods and that's what purebloods do. They keep up traditions and they don't ask questions and they always, always do as they're told."

*Unless they're renegades. Troublemakers. Freaks, misfits, outcasts even. Like the Weasleys, like Padfoot and Aunt Andy, like Corona and Maya and Blaise and Selena. He grinned. And like me. Troublemaker extraordinaire.*

**It's a good thing to be,** said a different voice in the back of his mind. **As long as you're willing to pay the price.**

"I thought you might be turning up right about now." Draco went to one knee to retie a loose shoelace. "So, is it true?"

**Is what true? The story Luna told you? Oh, that's true enough.** Alex's tone was bleak and bitter, as chill as a snow-laden wind in January. **You descending from the Beauvois? Also true. Your ancestor, incidentally, was an ungrateful little git. But that's neither here nor there.**

"No, it's not, and you're avoiding the question." Draco pulled his bow taut and got back to his feet. "Is Amanda..." He stopped to consider his wording. "Should we be worried about her?"

**Not... exactly,** Alex said after a pause so long Draco had begun to wonder if he was getting an answer at all. **She does have her own agenda, but she isn't evil, and she won't betray you, or the year, by being what she is or doing what she must. And I'd tell you not to get involved with her, but it's much too late for that, isn't it?**

"Fraid so." Draco poked a finger through a hole in one of his pockets. "Do I at least get to know what she is, or is that one of those classified secrets I have to be admitted to your special club to

learn?"

**You're not in love with a ghost, if that's what you're asking. Though crazy she may well be.** Alex sighed heavily. **How about this. I'll tell you everything you want to know about Amanda, answer every question you've got, on the day your spell-breaking year is over. Sound fair?**

"You're proposing it, of course it doesn't sound fair. But it's probably the best deal I'm going to get, so I'll take it." Draco shook hands with himself. "There. Done. Any recommendations about the Cabinet, or is that our problem?"

**Other than "Buy it before a Death Eater does"? I think you'll work it out.** Alex chuckled wearily. **Go enjoy your life, troublemaker. Or should I say Fantastic Mr. Fox?**

"Oh, you like that? I thought it was pretty fitting, myself." Draco struck a pose. "Luna's not sure yet if she wants to go as Matilda or as Violet Beauregard. And I know Neville and Meghan have settled on something, because they keep sneaking off together to work on it."

**Don't they do that all the time anyway?**

Draco snorted a laugh. "Too true. Ron and Neenie haven't picked yet, as far as I know, but there's still a month to go so there's no great rush..."



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 8: The Mysterious Ripping Noise (Year 6)

"I'm Hen-e-ry the Eighth, I am,  
"Hen-e-ry the Eighth, I am, I am,  
"I got married to the widow next door,  
"She'd been married seven times before,  
"And every one was an Hen-e-ry, Hen-e-ry,  
"She wouldn't have a Willie or a Sam, no Sam,  
"I'm her eighth old man, I'm Hen-e-ry,  
"Hen-e-ry the Eighth I am!"

"Remind me again why you handed Peeves new material, Drake?" Ron asked as the poltergeist circled the ceiling of the Great Hall, cackling. "I missed the part where it made sense."

Draco shrugged. "We wouldn't have known about the Vanishing Cabinet except for him. It could've been a serious breach of Hogwarts defenses, and instead it's an extra entrance to you-know-what." He glanced at the floor significantly. "Why not make him happy for a little while?"

"Because making him happy is going to drive all the rest of us mad?" said Ginny testily over Peeves' bellowed, "Next verse, same as the first, a little bit louder and a little bit worse! I'M HEN-E-RY THE EIGHTH, I AM, HEN-E-RY THE EIGHTH, I AM, I AM!"

"I've lost my appetite," said Hermione, pushing her plate away, just as the usual deluge of morning post soared into the Great Hall on owl wings. Peeves, intent on his song, didn't see them coming, and his declaration of his new wife's status as seven times a widow was cut off abruptly when a barn owl collided with his face.

"I might have a way to get it back for you." Harry lowered his hand into his lap and made the small twisting motion which produced his wand. "It's a spell of the Prince's I've been wanting to try, and Peeves ought to qualify as a test subject if anyone does."

"Didn't Professor Black say 'non-living'?" Neville objected.

"She did, but poltergeists aren't really alive. They're..." Harry stopped. "What are they?" he asked Hermione.

Hermione sighed. *Someday I won't be here to tell you all the answers you never pay attention to in class, Harry...* "Anthropomorphic manifestations of extreme emotional disturbances within a confined location," she recited.

"Oh, I see." Neville peered up at Peeves, who was spitting feathers and cursewords at an equally rapid rate. "They're born out of lots of really strong feelings bouncing around a small space and they look human because that's who had the feelings."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Neville's translating for those of us who don't read textbooks for fun." Ginny refilled her goblet of pumpkin juice and waggled the pitcher in Hermione's direction. "Want some? And Harry, if you're going to work that spell, you'd better hurry. Peeves is getting ready to start singing again."

"Yes, please," Hermione said, pushing her goblet towards Ginny but watching Harry. His eyes narrowed, his lips moved silently, and an almost-invisible bead of light streaked from the tip of his wand, Ron turning his head to track it but no one else seeming to be aware that it even existed—it impacted Peeves just as the poltergeist sent a last feather spinning into a candle flame and sucked in a breath to continue singing—

The sound which emerged from Peeves's mouth was wordless, garbled, and rather less melodious than usual, which Hermione hadn't thought was possible. Bumbling furiously, like a train underwater, he spun three times in midair and vanished to general applause from the tables below.

"Nicely done, Harry," said Luna, handing her own goblet to Ginny for a refill. "Was it supposed to do that?"

"I don't know. What did it do?"

"His tongue was stuck." Luna pointed to the roof of her mouth. "Up here."

"Then yes, it was supposed to do that." Harry grinned. "Three for three. Go Prince."

"What were the other two?" Hermione asked, pulling her plate back towards herself. "Or no, one of them was *Muffliato*, that you showed us the other day, wasn't it?"

Harry nodded. "And the last one's just a Toenail-Growing Hex," he said, helping himself to another sausage. "Nothing earth-shattering, but funny. Speaking of earth-shattering, we're nearly through to Hagrid's Place, aren't we? One more day, maybe two, and we'll have that one finished."

Meghan paused in the middle of piling her scrambled eggs and bacon onto a piece of toast. "I miss Hagrid," she said quietly. "There are days I think if I just slip out there to his house and wait, he'll come walking out of the Forest and scoop me up and put me in the rafters like he always used to do. I know he wouldn't want me to cry over him, but..." She swallowed. "Some days I can't help it."

"But that's why we're working so hard on our project, isn't it?" Hermione reached across the table to squeeze Meghan's hand. "So there won't be as many people to cry over."

"It doesn't make the ones who already went away come back, though." Meghan sniffled once, then squared her shoulders. "Which is why we have to be strong and carry on. So we don't disappoint them and make their... their *deaths* a waste." The word seemed to cost her a pang even to say. "It doesn't stop the hurting, but someday it might help with it."

"It does help." Neville slid an arm around Meghan. "And so does knowing that we will avenge

them." Somehow his voice wrapped around the words, so melodramatic on their own, and made them a statement of fact roughly equivalent to his declaring that wands were made of wood. "Did I give you that status update last night, Harry? I can't remember now."

"You may have, but give it to me again. I was head over ears in McGonagall's essay and I don't think I heard a word you said."

Stifling her familiar irritation at her brothers and their haphazard approach to schoolwork, Hermione turned her attention back to Neville's statement. It was bothering her on two separate levels, and she knew she would have to deal with both before her mind would give her any peace.

*There's the obvious one, which is that we shouldn't be thinking in terms of vengeance or payback. Even when the other side deserves it so richly. The more we mimic them, the more we become like them, until finally we're doing as awful of things as they are and trying to justify it by our cause...*

*But then again, this is our Captain speaking. She smiled a bit as she took a drink of her juice. He's the most level-headed of any of the boys, the least likely to go out and wreak havoc for any reason, even after his dad died. Or maybe especially after his dad died. He may talk about "avenging", but I'd bet my cauldron what he means is winning the war, not any kind of personal revenge.*

*Because he knows that's the way his dad would have wanted it.*

With that question settled, at least until the next time it cropped up, Hermione could turn her attention to the other level of uncertainty Neville's words had awakened. Halloween was less than three weeks away, and she and Ron still hadn't decided who they were going as.

*I suppose we could always go separately, but everyone else is doing pairs, and so will most of the school if I'm hearing the gossip correctly. The witch and the knight from The Fountain of Fair Fortune, Babbity Rabbity and her Cackling Stump—we'll have to watch out for branches and roots on the dance floor—and I'm positive I saw some Hufflepuff third years playing wand, quill, parchment to decide who was going to be the gnome and who was going to be the jarvey. But all the rest of the Pride are going as Muggle things, because of how close we've always lived to the Muggle world. So what am I trying to remember that's a Muggle thing with two people, a man and a woman, that Neville would have reminded me of by saying that we're going to—*

She sucked in a breath as the answer popped into her mind.

"All right, Neenie?" Ron said, looking at her in concern.

"Yes. I'm perfect." Hermione couldn't stop herself from grinning. "Better than perfect. I can't explain right now," she added hastily as the bell rang to signal the end of breakfast, "but remind me on our study period? I should have it all sorted in my head by then."

*I wonder if Professor Burbage would have any pictures I could borrow?*

---

Much to Hermione's satisfaction, Professor Burbage did indeed have pictures, and was quite happy to give her a copy of one of them to take back to the Gryffindor common room with her after lunch. With the younger three girls still in classes, Harry and Neville with their heads together over a floor plan of Sanctuary, and Draco going over a passage in his Transfiguration text line by line, she and Ron had the moment to themselves. She worked the small spell which would render the black and white picture something Ron could see by causing the darker areas to glow with warmth, then handed him the parchment. "What do you think?" she asked.

Ron sat very still, peering closely at the picture. "You mean it?" he asked after a long moment. "You want to wear—"

"I don't see any harm in it. It is Halloween, after all." Hermione smiled. "A time to wear things which have absolutely no connection to the person one normally is."

"Hermione, I..." Ron shook his head. "I think I love you."

"Only discovering this now?" Draco inquired, looking up from his textbook.

"More than ever," finished Ron smoothly.

"Nice save," said Draco in admiration.

"He is a Keeper, after all." Hermione squeezed Ron's hand. "And I'm going to be keeping him. Would you like to see what we're wearing for Halloween, Fox?"

"Sure, why not? It might give my brain a break from trying to understand this rubbish." Setting his Transfiguration book aside and accepting the picture from Ron, Draco took a casual look at it.

His second look was far less casual.

"You," he said finally. "Are wearing this."

"That's the plan." Hermione sat back, allowing the little smirk she could feel trembling on her lips to escape onto her face.

"In public." Draco shook the parchment in her general direction. "In front of the entire school."

"Is there some reason I shouldn't?"

Draco opened his mouth, then shut it again. "I hope I'm too smart to answer that question," he said, passing the picture back. "Just consider that I've already said all the proper threatening brotherly things. You know, Ron, the ones you'll be saying to Harry when you see how short Ginny's little red skirt is going to be."

"You really think Neenie couldn't take me all by herself?" Ron scooted down on the sofa and propped his feet on the low table in front of it. "Peel my skin right off me, she could..." He stopped, looking in confusion from one to the other of the twins as they both burst into laughter.

"All right, what've I said this time?"

---

Sanctuary rang with the sound of cheerful voices, the chip-chip-chip of spells drilling away at stone providing a percussive counterpoint. Harry sat sideways on his Firebolt, high above the action, and let his eyes pick out the underlying order in the seeming chaos.

Three separate tunnels were being constructed to supplement the original one which led to the harbor cavern. One exited on the grounds of Hogwarts, inside Hagrid's Place; the second, for which they had received special permission from Professor Dumbledore, led to a small cave high in the hills above Hogsmeade; and the third should, if their calculations were correct, be breaking through shortly into a secret passage which had once opened behind a large mirror on the fourth floor.

*And even if we can't clear the cave-in and make it a way into the castle again, we'll still have a way into Sanctuary without having to do all the digging ourselves. Harry sketched the three-dimensional map of tunnels and cave in the air in front of him with fire. Not to mention, it's one that the Death Eaters won't think to look at, because they "know", courtesy of Wormtail's checking on it back in our third year, that the cave-in blocked it off and it's no good anymore.*

Dismissing his fiery drawing, he sent the Firebolt into a swift dive. *And then there's the fourth entrance. Talk about sheer dumb luck—who could have guessed Fox and Starwing would find something so useful doing something as ordinary as hiding from Filch? And even sheerer, dumber luck that they found it before the Death Eaters did.* The closeness of that call made him shiver. *All it would've needed is a pair of Slytherins, the nasty sort, in that spot instead of our two, or some spoiled little pureblood brat hiding from his daddy in Borgin and Burkes and latching the door of the Cabinet on accident...*

*But it didn't happen, and now it won't.* Touching down, he dismounted and shouldered the broom. *The Pepper Pot has a new piece of furniture—Percy even said it gives the place ambiance, whatever that might mean—and we have a quick way for Muggles in London to get here. Or for us to get there, if things should ever go really wrong.*

"Though if things go that wrong," he murmured, "Diagon Alley probably wouldn't be safe either. Nowhere would be."

"Thinking gloomy thoughts, are we?" Draco asked, emerging from the tunnel and brushing stone dust out of his hair.

"Just letting my mind wander."

"You shouldn't do that. It might not come back."

"Oh, is that what happened to you?" Harry snickered and dodged Draco's fist. "How's it look in there?"

"Really good. I think we may break through tonight, though we'll want to save human-sizing the hole for tomorrow. Everyone's tired, even the loo crew."

"The..." Harry shook his head. "Tell me you didn't call them that to their faces."

"Why are you always telling me to lie to you?" Draco wagged a finger at Harry. "I remember Padfoot telling us lying is wrong even if you don't."

"He was telling us lying is wrong because we were all denying taking his stash of Honeydukes Special Reserve. And we weren't lying—Letha ate it. That time, anyway." Harry stopped, frowning. "How did we get here?"

"I never keep track of our conversations anymore. It's too confusing even for my genius mind." Draco stooped and ran his hand across the verdant surface of the grass. "But if you're going to push me, I'd say it started when I mentioned what I call that lot over there." His thumb indicated a large group, comprised of mostly witches, whose House badges covered the majority of the rainbow among them, darting in and out of several rooms cut into one side of Sanctuary and calling overlapping commands and suggestions to one another. "They, by the way, think it's funny. Some of them have even picked it up for themselves."

"You have all the luck with girls," Harry said without rancor. "If I tried saying that, they'd hex me so hard I'd have to miss the Halloween party and the first Quidditch match. You say it and they giggle and clap their hands and start using it on their own. What's your secret?"

"Don't I wish I knew." The laughter drained out of Draco's expression as they came level with a blocked passageway near the original entrance tunnel. "Maybe then I could figure out what's going on with..."

"Amanda?" Harry swore mentally at Draco's jerky nod. "Thought you were going to try and forget about that."

"Yeah." Draco snorted. "Operative word 'try'." He sat down on a bit of loose rock, staring at the piled boulders which filled the archway. "I don't know, Harry. I just don't know. Alex says she's not evil, I trust him, and she doesn't come off as evil, does she? Just... sad. And confused. There's something in her future that scares her, something she wishes she could get away from, but she doesn't think she can." He smiled wanly. "I know how that feels."

Harry nodded, not knowing what he could say. *The one person with a destiny worse than mine—mine is at least "kill or be killed", which may not be the best choice in the world but it is a choice. Fox hasn't even got that. No arguments, no appeals, nothing. Just... the end.*

He glanced upward. *I know I was looking for things to make me feel better about my having to fight Voldemort, but that wasn't what I had in mind.*

No answer rang in his head, but he hadn't really expected one. For all this was a place the Founders had made, he and his yearmates were reshaping it to their own ends, and any ancient

ghosts or memories which might remain had surely gone into hiding by now.

A glint of red hair, a different shade than Ginny's sleek mane or Ron's disordered mop, caught his eye.

*Always assuming they're not wearing flesh and walking among us.*

"We need testers," Amanda Smythe declared, stopping in front of them and pointing at them with her two forefingers. "You're elected."

"Oh, we are, are we?" Draco got to his feet. "And just what have we been elected to do?"

"Help us stress-test the plumbing." Amanda rocked back and forth on her toes, smiling. "You have to flush the toilets continuously for five minutes."

"I don't know." Harry looked worriedly at Draco. "Do you think we'll be up to the excitement? You know Madam Pomfrey said we weren't supposed to do anything too stimulating."

"We'll probably survive it," Draco decided after a moment's thought. "Lead on, O Lady of the Loo."

Amanda curtsied deeply, grinning, and turned to lead the way.

---

"Not bad, Potter," said Snape, picking himself up off the floor. "Utterly lacking in subtlety or technique, but effective."

Harry nodded curtly, his astonishment that Snape was complimenting him blunted by the feeling that his brain was bruised all over. His Occlumency lessons grew more difficult each week, as Snape put more and more power behind his Legilimency, slipping around the back of Harry's defenses or through holes he'd barely known were there. Objectively, Harry agreed this was a good thing, that making his mind more invulnerable to Voldemort could only be to his advantage. Subjectively, he would have traded several pages out of the Half-Blood Prince's book for so much as a single day's rest from his grueling schedule.

"Again." Snape raised his wand. "*Legilimens!*"

Instead of the glass maze or the shield of fire, Harry found his mental self holding a familiar, closely-written-over textbook. With a shrug, he flung it at the onrushing invader. *Letha did say it might have dangerous spells in it—maybe I'll get lucky and one of them will take effect—*

The invader froze as the book dropped neatly into his hands, and Harry, his Quidditch reflexes now awake and aware, seized the moment. With a wrench, their positions were reversed, Harry flying forward through a tunnel of memories, Snape reaching after him with a snarl to pull him out—Harry glimpsed, in the moment before Snape's intangible hand closed around the hem of his robes and yanked, a dark boy in an odd selection of clothing peering from the shelter of a bush at



two girls about his own age riding on swings, the older with yellow hair and the younger, finer-boned one with red—

Harry stumbled back and crashed painfully into a desk. Across from him, Snape was leaning on another one, breathing hard. The scent on the air was unmistakable to anyone with a predatory Animagus. As incomprehensible as Harry found it, Snape was afraid.

*But what of? All I saw was him as a kid, looking at a couple of girls. That's not wrong, not unless he was going to hurt them, and I don't think he was. Especially not the little red-haired one. I wish I could have got their scent, but it was Snape's memory so there'd only be the smells he remembered, and human noses aren't much good...*

"Enough," Snape said, turning away. "We will resume on Saturday."

"Yes, Professor." Harry hoisted his bag onto his shoulder and hurried towards the door, hoping to get into the corridor before Snape could change his mind.

"Potter," Snape's voice stopped him with his hand on the doorknob.

*Damn.* "Yes, sir?" Harry said resignedly, turning back.

"The... item." Snape had his usual control back now, though hints of shock and surprise still eddied through his scent. "Your defense, this last time. What was it?"

"Just one of my textbooks, Professor." Harry crossed his fingers behind his back, the childishness of the gesture making him smile. "I was thinking about how much homework I still have to do before the weekend."

"Homework." Snape snorted. "I suppose you might succeed in *boring* the Dark Lord out of your mind, if all else fails."

Harry attempted not to snicker and was mostly successful. "I'll keep it in reserve, sir," he said. "Same time on Saturday?"

Snape nodded and made a flicking motion with two fingers, sending Harry on his way.

---

"Snape was afraid?" Ginny turned a page in her Charms text. "What did you do, think about a bottle of shampoo?"

"Not quite." Harry held up the Half-Blood Prince's book. "It started with this. I'm not sure he was afraid of it, but it did surprise him."

"I would be a little surprised if someone threw a book at me," said Luna, writing down an answer for her Herbology homework and returning to her rendering of what the Sanctuary "theater" area should look like. "But then, I'm not a Librago."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, then each laid a fist on a flat palm and pounded one, two, three. Ginny's thumb against her first two fingers, holding her quill, beat Harry's flattened hand, for parchment, so Harry asked the question. "What's a Librago?"

"It's a nasty little insect with a sting, which lives in libraries and stings people when they try to read books." Luna dipped her quill again. "The only way to chase it off is to throw a book at it, because it hates books and will run away from one." She paused, holding her quill above the inkwell. "I'm not quite sure why it lives in libraries if it hates books so much, but then, people don't always make sense either."

"You said a mouthful," said Ginny. "So Snape was surprised, or startled, either that you threw a book at him or that you threw this particular book at him. We can't be sure. But then you got into his head, you saw a memory of his, and that, that made him afraid. Why would he be afraid of your seeing a memory?"

"I don't know, but he's really afraid I'll see some of them." Harry described Snape's actions with Dumbledore's Pensieve, which Snape had repeated before every Occlumency lesson to date. "This can't be anything quite that bad, but he still didn't want me seeing it. I wonder why not?"

"Did you know the girls?" asked Luna, finishing the shading on a section of seats and switching her attention back to Herbology.

"I don't know." Harry opened the Prince's book and flipped back and forth through the pages. "Maybe. They'd be grown-up by now, wouldn't they, if they were the same age as Snape?"

"Define 'grown-up'," Ginny muttered. "But yes, they would be. So two women, about the same age as your parents, Harry, one blonde and one ginger... anything else about them?"

Harry paused in the middle of turning a page. "The blonde one was older," he said. "Not by a lot, a couple years, maybe, but older. The ginger was prettier, though. She reminded me of someone." He made a face as Ginny fluttered her eyelashes. "Not you. I don't think it's someone I've ever met at all, but I've seen their picture..."

Belatedly, he finished turning the page, and looked down to see what gems of wisdom the Prince had recorded here.

"Harry?" said Ginny worriedly when he did not speak for several moments.

Harry looked up. "I have to go," he said, and slid off the sofa, headed for the portrait hole.

He needed to ask Professor Black a very important question.

---

Aletha was grading papers in her office when someone knocked on the door. "Come in," she called without looking up. "Is it an emergency or can it wait five minutes?"

"It can wait, Professor," said a voice she knew well. "I'm sorry to bother you, but—"

"Sit." Aletha pointed at one of her desk chairs, into which Harry obediently sank. "Let me finish this section, and then you can tell me what's so important you've come all the way down here to find me."

*Coming up on curfew, too. But if there were anything truly wrong, he would've told me that...*

While still writing, she lifted her eyes enough to get a good look at Harry's face. He seemed... disturbed, she decided finally. Whatever was on his mind, it was troubling, but not horrifying.

*Of course, knowing Harry, that could mean anything from Severus taking undeserved points off Gryffindor to his having managed to get himself into enough trouble to be banned from either the Halloween party, the first Quidditch match, or both.*

Her final three essays marked, Aletha set the scrolls aside and folded her hands on her desk.

"Did Snape know my mum?" Harry asked bluntly. "When they were young, I mean, before Hogwarts. Were they already friends when they got to school?"

"Yes." Aletha nodded. "As I understand it, they grew up in the same general area, and Severus was actually how Lily first found out about magic, before her Hogwarts letter. They remained friends for several years at school, until Severus got too deeply entangled with the Death Eaters and they, shall we say, discouraged his friendship with a Muggleborn."

"Why didn't anybody ever tell me?" Harry sounded honestly bewildered.

"I suppose it never occurred to us you would want to be told. We weren't concealing it from you, if that's what you mean." Aletha looked him over again. "How have you found it out now?"

"Saw a memory of his in Occlumency lessons. He was spying on her and another girl, my Aunt Petunia, I guess. Though she wouldn't have been very interesting to him, since she's just a Muggle." Harry's tone dripped scorn. "I'm surprised he bothered making friends with Mum. Don't most purebloods think Muggles and Muggleborns are just about equally bad?"

"Most of them in fact consider Muggleborns worse, for 'aping their betters' rather than 'knowing their place'." Aletha smiled, acknowledging the irony in her quoting of such words. "But you seem to be laboring under a delusion, Harry. Unless I'm completely misremembering what I heard in my school days, Severus Snape is no pureblood."

"News to me." Harry began to crack his knuckles. "What is he, then? Half?"

"I believe so, yes." Aletha twined her own fingers together, sorting through memories. "Obviously, you are not to repeat this, but the story which went around was that his father, a Muggle, felt his wife had somehow tricked him by not revealing that she was a witch before they were married."

"That doesn't have to go wrong." Harry finished with his right hand and started on his left.

"Seamus Finnegan's parents were just like that, and all that came out of it was a load of funny stories."

"It depends on the people involved, as I'm sure you know. And judging by the results, I would say it went quite badly wrong."

"Anything that results in Snape counts as going badly wrong," said Harry darkly. "Except Neville's boggart." He straightened in his seat, struck by a thought. "I wonder if he'd still see Snape now? Or would it be—" He winced. "Never mind, I know what it would be. His dad."

"Most likely, yes." Aletha got up and came around her desk to pull her other guest chair closer to Harry's and sit down by his side. "You've all come such a long way since the most frightening thing in the world was a sarcastic teacher, haven't you?"

"Further than we could have dreamed. And we've got even further still to go." Harry sighed. "I just wish I could see the end of the road. Or at least a couple of landmarks along the way."

"Isn't that what your spell-breaking year is for? Giving you landmarks, letting you celebrate, striking a blow at Voldemort without him ever knowing it?" Absently, Aletha brushed two fingers along her cheek, then squeezed Harry's hand with hers. "I know it's hard, Greeneyes, but remember you're not alone. Pack together."

"Pack forever," Harry murmured, returning the squeeze. "I should get back to the Tower before I miss curfew."

"I'll walk you back." Aletha got to her feet. "Less chance of random detentions. We can't have our star Seeker missing the first match with Slytherin, now can we?"

"It wouldn't be a total disaster." Harry opened the door for her, his usual animation returning in full with the introduction of one of his favorite topics. "Ginny's my reserve and she's already proved she can handle it, but that isn't to say I wouldn't rather be playing than watching, or stuck at the castle dusting all Snape's books with a quill or something..."

---

After giving Harry a quick good night hug down the hall from the Fat Lady, Aletha opted to take the scenic route back to her office. She had only one more section of essays to mark, and the students weren't expecting them back until Friday.

*Not to mention, it will do me good to stretch my legs. I feel... She pondered terms and discarded "itchy" and "restless" before settling on "unsettled". And a good walk is just the thing to settle me back down.*

She made it past three flights of stairs before she began to hear the mysterious ripping noise.

---

"So what did she say?" Luna asked as Harry flopped back onto the sofa beside Ginny.

"Yes." Harry turned over the Half-Blood Prince's book to the page he'd left it open to. "Snape knew my mum. And whoever the Half-Blood Prince is, he must have known her too." He held out the book so the girls could see it. "Look familiar?"

Ginny leaned forward to get a better look. "'Compliments of LC'," she read from the first line on the page. "It's—oh, Harry, it's the slug potion!"

"It isn't quite the same as the slug potion we know," Luna commented, reading over Ginny's shoulder. "She must have made changes after she told the Prince about it."

"He made some of his own." Harry pointed to a column of notes beside the directions. "This version looks like it would be smoother, but thicker. More like the stuff you get with Fred and George's *Mucinno* spell. And unless I'm reading this part wrong, he managed to get the smell part to the point where the person it's on doesn't smell anything, but everyone around them..."

"That's awful," Ginny declared. Then her face turned wicked. "So when are we brewing it?"

"After the first Quidditch match?"

"Works for me."

---

Aletha followed her ears to a classroom which should, at this hour, have been dark and empty. Instead, lines of light showed above and below the closed door, and the mysterious ripping noise emerged from within every few seconds, punctuating the murmur of two voices, one high and the other low.

*Let's see here. What, and whom, have I found?*

She outlined a square on the door with her wand and murmured a Peephole Spell, turning the wood within the square transparent.

*Ron and Hermione, in the classroom, with...* Aletha frowned, staring at the shining silver material in which Hermione was apparently encased. *What is that?*

As she watched, Ron picked up a thick roll of the stuff and ripped off another length, sticking it to the layers already covering Hermione's arm. "How's that?" he asked.

"Just right." Hermione flexed and twisted her arm, checking her range of motion. "How does it look?"

"I don't think I should answer that question." Ron moved up behind Hermione. "Not in words, anyway."

Aletha debated her next move for a moment, then removed the Peephole Spell and knocked firmly.

*Better I catch them than someone else.*

Hermione's strangled gasp mingled with Ron's low-voiced curse as Aletha opened the door. "Good evening," she said, stepping inside. "Shouldn't you two be in your common room at this hour?"

"You're right, we should," Hermione said instantly. "But we just needed some privacy to work on this, and we didn't think we'd be disturbing anyone here, Professor—"

"Disturbing's not the issue, and you know that. Though since you've brought the subject up..." Aletha motioned to her Pack-daughter's unconventional clothing. "What in the world, Hermione?"

"It's... well, it's..." Hermione stammered.

"It's this stuff," Ron finished, tossing the roll to Aletha. She caught it and squeezed, feeling a slight give in the layers and a sticky, gummy sensation along the edge. "Fred and George are going to start selling it soon. Stuck Tape, they're calling it. Half of their Universal Magical Toolkit."

Aletha looked down at what she was holding, then looked back up. "Stuck Tape," she said, with what she considered under the circumstances to be remarkable calm. "I see. And what might the other half be?"

"Well, the other half is why they're not selling it yet," said Hermione, sitting down on the edge of a desk. "Since this stuff sticks to everything, they thought they should pair it with a potion that makes everything slip and slide around. The problem is, they brewed it too well." She giggled. "If they spill even a drop of it on the outside of the bottles they're trying to sell it in, the bottles slip out of their hands as soon as they pick them up."

"I told them they should call it WizarDrop," Ron put in. "Just to let everyone know how much of it they need."

"That must be quite a potion." Aletha shook her head, impressed in spite of herself. "How many brewings did it take them to get it right, do you know?"

"Thirty-five or forty, I think." Ron shrugged. "They've been at it since before we came back to school, and they only just got it the other day. The Toolkits should be ready to go for Christmas, they said."

"Good for Fred and George. Now, to return to the question I actually asked you." Aletha gestured at Hermione's silver catsuit. "*Why?*"

"Er." Ron grinned sheepishly. "Because they're giving away free rolls of the stuff in their store and offering a hundred Galleons prize to the person, or people," he added at Hermione's hiss, "who do the most creative thing with it. So when Hermione showed me what she wants to go to the Halloween party as—"

"Yes, what are you going to the Halloween party as?" Aletha slid the roll of Stuck Tape onto her wrist like a thick silver bracelet. "It looks familiar, but I can't place it offhand."

Hermione laced her fingers together, pointing her two index fingers out like the barrel of a gun. Ron picked up an item which had been hidden by the desk he was standing behind, displayed it to Aletha, and clapped the shining silver bowler hat on his head. "Mrs. Peel," he intoned solemnly, "we're needed."

Aletha applauded slowly. "Well done. For that, you get a free pass back to Gryffindor Tower. But only this once," she cautioned. "Do the rest of your costume construction within bounds, please?"

"We will." Hermione reached around behind herself and undid a series of straps, peeling her silver shell away to reveal a T-shirt and leggings underneath it. "Thank you, Professor."

"You can thank me if you win that prize." Aletha smiled. "Five Galleons from each of you should do nicely."

---

Unseen by Harry and Ginny, who were earnestly discussing the best use for the Prince's modified slug potion, Luna Looked piercingly at the Prince's book, then smiled to herself and returned to her homework.

*I knew the Half-Blood Prince wasn't a stranger. I just didn't know he was so very nearby.*

---

On her way back down to her office, Aletha paused as a familiar sound met her ear.

*Is that—*

Turning the corner, she all but ran over Severus Snape. "I beg your pardon," she said, stepping hastily back.

Snape hushed her with one hand. "Have you heard..." He trailed off, scowling as though unable to come up with words to describe the sensation, then brightened as it occurred again. "That. What is that... that..."

"Mysterious ripping noise?" Aletha suggested, keeping her face straight with an effort.

"Yes." Snape looked around as though hoping for some visual clue to accompany the sound. "I have been hearing it in this vicinity for nearly twenty minutes, but I cannot find where it is coming from."

Aletha turned her head to look into the classroom beside her. "I'm sure I don't know," she said with deliberation. "But if it should happen to be students, and if those students are somewhere they shouldn't be, even for a very innocent reason, I'm sure they will not press their luck any further than they already have." She turned back to Snape and smiled. "Good night, Severus."

"Good night." Snape watched her go suspiciously, then stuck his head into the classroom she had examined, no doubt giving every corner a searching look.

*But, of course, he won't see anything. Aletha rolled a tiny bit of Stuck Tape between her fingers as she descended the stairs. Because he does not happen to be an Heir of the Hogwarts Founders, which both students in that room are.*

*I wonder what they're sticking together for the Halloween party? It looked like some kind of rolling chair for Neville, and another bodysuit for Meghan...*



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 9: The Hufflepuff Halloween Extravaganza (Year 6)

"Give me a U! Give me a Go! Give me a P-O-O! What's that spell? U-Go-Poo! What's that mean? Go! Go! Go! Go!"

Harry groaned aloud as Meghan jumped up and down, waving her sign with the large purple "U" painted on it. Beside her, a grinning Graham held up the "Go" and Natalie, giggling helplessly, raised and lowered the "Poo" to control the volume of the chanting from the rest of the yearmates. "Remind me why we never threw her to the wolves?" he asked Draco and Hermione.

"We tried." Draco shook his head. "They threw her back."

"I'm going to guess that's the antidote to the other stuff Fred and George sell?" said Hermione as Hannah and Susan ceremoniously swung open the doors to the now-completed toilets of Sanctuary.

"Out of the way!" bellowed Ryan Premeles of Hufflepuff, hopping towards the open doors as fast as possible with his legs crossed. Katie Chi, of Ravenclaw, stood off to one side with her friends, smirking.

"I'm going to guess you're right." Harry watched Ryan disappear through the doors. "I hope I don't need to do something about that."

"We'll keep an eye on it, but unless it escalates, we should be all right." Draco leaned back against the stone wall beside him. "Those two have been playing little pranks on each other ever since the Silly Duel last year, and it hasn't got out of hand yet."

"Key word, yet," Hermione reminded him. "That doesn't mean it couldn't tomorrow, or the day after that. Or the day after that."

"Thank you for those optimistic words of wisdom."

"Just trying to keep your feet on the ground, brother dear."

"Enough," said Harry, swiping his hands in opposite directions. "The last thing I need is you two going after each other."

"Does that mean we get to go after you?" inquired Draco.

"Only if you're prepared for my swift and terrible revenge."

"Oh, I'm terrified." Draco held out a hand and regarded its rock-steady stillness in the air. "See how badly I'm shaking."

"Ginny said she'd help."

"Well, shite."

"Don't you dare do that here!" Hermione smacked Draco sharply in the ear, making him yelp. "That's what the toilets are for!"

Selena Moon, emerging from the small crowd just in time to catch this exchange, blinked. "I was coming over here to commiserate with you on the fact that we're stuck with them through various tricks of friendship, family, and Pride-bonds," she said to Harry, indicating Meghan, Graham, and Natalie with a tilt of her head. "Now I think I should be offering you my deepest sympathies. You're in it much deeper than I am."

"Oi!" Draco protested. "He started it!"

"And I'm finishing it," said Hermione, giving her brothers a look. "Enough is enough. What are you going to the party as, Selena? Will Roger be there? I'd heard the Hufflepuffs arranged for some outside entertainment and extra security, but I didn't know through whom..."

"They did, and yes, he will." Selena grinned. "He said he wasn't going to miss something that sounded like that much fun just through the technicality of not being a student anymore. We couldn't decide on a pair of costumes, though, so we aren't going as an obvious couple like some people are..."

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Aletha closed the cupboard on the more dangerous of her Potions supplies, shaking the latch to be sure it had reengaged. It opened to the same password as her office door, since anyone who had access to her private space was also a person she would trust with the makings for the more worrisome brews she was teaching this year.

*Which means, technically, that I've allowed a thirteen-year-old girl, and her fifteen- and sixteen-year-old siblings and friends, free access to some of the most poisonous items known to wizardkind. But that's the thing about the Pride. It would very seldom occur to any of them to do anything alone by now, especially anything both dangerous and against the rules, and if all eight of them agree that it ought to be done...*

*She chuckled under her breath. Occasionally, it just means that eight teenagers are as wrong as one would have been. More often, though, they balance one another out, keep one another from going too far outside the lines. They complement each other's strengths and weaknesses very well.*

*They're rather like the Pack that way...*

Someone knocked on her door at this very opportune moment, shunting that train of thought onto an unused side track before it could go any further. Exhaling a breath of relief, Aletha conjured a mirror quickly onto the wall, checked her long braided wig and sleeveless blue-violet dress to be sure they were sitting straight, then vanished the mirror and unlocked the door in the same motion as she called, "Come in!"

Sirius opened the door, stepped inside, and stopped short as he caught sight of her. Aletha thought his widened eyes and the breath he sucked through his teeth were the best compliment she could have received. "Why, thank you, my lord," she said teasingly, dropping him a little curtsy. "You are too, too kind to this humble palace slave."

"I don't see any slave here." Crossing to her side, Sirius offered her his scarlet-clad arm. "Only the most beautiful princess in all the lands."

"Flatterer." Aletha shoved him playfully on the exact spot where the gold Eye of Horus was embroidered on his wrap-around jacket, then took the offered arm. "Don't think this gets you any better class of refreshments."

"Better than Hogwarts food? Is that possible?"

"Point. Don't think it gets you stationed by the punch bowl, then."

"Damn." Sirius snapped the fingers of his free hand. "I was hoping to collect a little extra money in bribes."

"Since when does anyone need to bribe you to let them spike a punch bowl?"

"Since I grew up and got responsible."

Aletha looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

"All right, all right," Sirius grumbled. "Since Moony reminded me before I left that I don't need to give Snape any new reasons to consider me an overgrown teenager with more hair than sense."

"That's better." Aletha squeezed his arm comfortingly. "There will be other times, love. Other parties, other punch bowls."

"Point taken." Sirius grinned. "Let's get upstairs and see what these kids have been up to for the last two months."

"Yes, let's."

Fleetingly Aletha wondered why Sirius seemed so very cheered up by her reminder, but dismissed it from her mind in favor of assuming the proper dignity of a Princess of Nubia, being escorted to a royal ballroom by a rising young general of Egypt. For this one night, Aida and Radames would have the happiness their story forbade them.

*And may our choice of characters for the night not be prophetic. However romantic it may be to die in the arms of the man you love, suffocation by being walled into a tomb is still not the way I would choose to go...*

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Ron straightened his glossy bowler hat by feel, watching as Seamus fussed with the khaki trench

coat and fedora which went over the main portion of his costume. "Explain this to me again," he said. "You're a frog... who also happens to be a reporter?"

"I wanted to add the reporter bit because otherwise he doesn't wear any clothes, and you just know how much fun they'd all have with that." Seamus tugged the knot of his tie a bit looser. "Thank Merlin for magical ventilation. I'd be boiling under here otherwise."

"I'm not wearing any clothes," Harry pointed out, experimenting with different elevations on the small spell which held his long, gray tail clear of the floor.

"You've got fur. It's different."

"What he's got is no fashion sense." Draco tugged down the sleeves of his burnt-orange suit over his foxskin gloves. "Besides, I've seen Ginny's costume. No one's going to be looking at him anyway."

Harry bared his teeth, which he had lengthened and sharpened with a fractional Animagus charm, and growled deep in his chest.

"Or maybe they will." Draco stepped back and almost ran over Dean, who dodged aside in a flurry of sky blue, maroon, and white. "Sorry."

"No problem." Recovering his balance, Dean Summoned a large hammer from his bed and shouldered it. "Just for fun," he said as the other boys gave it wary looks. "Bit of a play on the name. Lindz is going as a West Ham fangirl, so we should have some fun with that."

"Shame I couldn't find a Miss Piggy." Seamus peered around the dorm. "Say, where's Neville?"

"Meghan's helping him finish up in the common room." Harry pointed to the door. "They're going to have to levitate that chair down seven flights as it is, there's no point in dragging it all the way up here too."

"We're mad, aren't we?" Ron asked, picking up his umbrella.

"You have to ask?" Draco snorted. "We're *wizards*, Ron. What else would we be?"

Laughing and making increasingly obscene suggestions about the answer to Draco's question, the sixth year Gryffindor boys descended the staircase on their way to the first-ever Hufflepuff Halloween Extravaganza.

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"There's a story in that somewhere," Sirius muttered to himself, watching a dark-haired Slytherin girl dressed as Little Bo Peep, complete with a tiny sheep drowsing in the baby sling she had rigged around her neck, towing Roger Davies, in cowboy hat and chaps, across the Great Hall with her crook. "But I could say that just about anywhere I look, tonight."

Fur, feathers, and frills competed for space on the dance floor and around the refreshment tables with scales, sequins, and satin, while stark black and white jostled against every color combination imaginable, including some Sirius had never thought would work. Clearly the students, and not a few of the professors, of Hogwarts had only been awaiting an excuse to let their wildest dreams manifest in fancy dress.

*I do believe I'm flattered by what Minerva decided to wear. To his secret and incredulous delight, McGonagall had arrived halfway through the first hour of the party in the tailored suit and hip-length coat of her crime-solving Valentina Jett alter ego, Athena McElheny. Just as long as she doesn't decide to hit me with that makeup spell again...*

*And then there's Albus. Sirius turned his head slightly to spot the Headmaster, chatting amiably with Snape, who wore his usual funereal black and looked decidedly bored by the spectacle before him. Only man in the school whose fancy dress is less showy than what he usually wears. I didn't even know he owned a set of grey robes. Suppose he could have conjured them for the evening, though. In any case, that and a long staff—probably had someone transfigure his wand for him—and presto, one wandering wizard of Middle-Earth.*

"Excuse me, please," said a girl's voice.

Sirius jumped and looked around. "Oh, sorry," he said, stepping aside to allow the blonde girl in pigtails and Hufflepuff robes access to the bowl of dip he'd been blocking. "Wait, why aren't you..." He frowned, irritatingly sure he knew this girl but unable to come up with her name.

"What are you dressed as?"

"I'm a homicidal maniac." The girl smiled sweetly. "They look just like everybody else." Popping a crisp loaded with dip into her mouth, she skipped away licking her fingers.

"...right." Sirius edged around the end of the table and between the curtains which had been hung around the Great Hall for the occasion, locating the Weasley twins at the other end of the service area. A quick sniff once he was close enough told him Fred from George, and he waved the latter over when the pair broke from their quiet consultation with Lee. "Did I just see your girlfriend out there?" he asked.

"Probably." George pushed his mask back on his head and held his hand level with his shoulder. "About so tall, yellow hair, bumblebee badge?"

"Sounds like what I saw. But I thought she was—"

"She is."

"Then how did you—"

"Special permission," Fred put in from over his brother's shoulder. "Dumbledore made us up a couple of enchanted hairbands after we reminded Professor Sprout one of our team's a Muggle."

"The spells wear off by tomorrow afternoon, so there's no chance any other Muggles could get hold of them and see things they shouldn't." George smiled fondly. "Isn't it funny how such little things can make people so happy?"

"Little things," Sirius agreed, though personally he thought being allowed inside a school of magic might not be quite so little for a Muggle girl.

*On the other hand, she's dating a wizard from a family of wizards, helping to run his brother's magical restaurant, and introducing their trouble-making team to various Muggle forms of wreaking havoc to go along with the magical ones they already knew. Who knows? Maybe a visit to Hogwarts really does count as little beside all of that.*

With a shrug, he turned to get back out to his station. The party was just getting warmed up.

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Luna, in the long dark wig and short-skirted blue dress which transformed her into the frighteningly intelligent schoolgirl Matilda, was just showing off how she could levitate a piece of chalk when a squeal from the other end of the Great Hall sent her, Draco, and Terry Boot and Su Li (dressed respectively in the rusted armor of Sir Luckless and the flowing robes of the witch Amata) whipping around.

"You have angered Circe of the lovely tresses!" shouted Daphne Greengrass, her Grecian-style robes rippling as she gestured with a wand rather more elaborately carved than any normally carried by a Hogwarts student. "Pray my wrath is of short duration!"

"Squee!" was the only response from her conversation partner, which was understandable. He, or she, had just turned into a pig.

"Miss Greengrass," said Snape quellingly, stepping forward. "We have rules."

"It wears off in a minute or two, Professor." Daphne squared her shoulders and darted a malicious glance back at the pig. "And Smith was *very* rude to me."

"Nevertheless." Snape extended his hand, and after several tense seconds, Daphne sighed and handed him a small bag of powder she extracted from one of her pockets. "Thank you."

"I'm never sleeping in my dormitory again," said Selena in awed tones as she came up to the group in her frilly shepherdess dress, baby Zach sleeping in his sling, cushioned by his sheep costume. "Where did she get that stuff?"

"From the Weasley twins?" Su suggested. "They do seem to sell just about anything you could want."

"Including Headless Hats." Terry jerked a thumb at an elaborate gown of Tudor styling, which appeared to be running through the Hall without an occupant, though bloodcurdling shrieks were emerging from the place where its wearer's head normally would have been. This was likely due to

Peeves' hot pursuit with a large rubber axe, alternately cackling like a maniac and singing snatches of "Henry the Eighth". "He'd better hurry up if he's going to get all six in before the party's over, that's only number two he's after now..."

Across the Hall, the small pink pig Daphne had left in her wake exploded back into Zacharias Smith, very flushed in the face and looking more disgruntled than usual as he straightened his black-and-yellow Wimbourne Wasps robes.

"He's not a very polite person for being a Hufflepuff," Luna remarked. "But I suppose you can be hard-working and loyal without being nice."

"Should just have made the transformation permanent," said Draco under his breath, making everyone within earshot snort with laughter.

"Oh. My. GAWD!" shrieked a girl in Hufflepuff robes, bursting into the center of their small circle. "Look at the little SHEEP!" She darted up to Selena, peered down at Zach, then lifted her blonde and pigtailed head with an awestruck expression. "It's... it's so CUTE! And FLUFFY!"

She dashed away, leaving behind her a moment of stunned silence. Zach blinked awake and began to fuss. Several yards away, Theodore Nott, dressed as a Hungarian Horntail, flinched and edged further from the source of the sound, dragging Chinese Fireball Astoria Greengrass with him.

"Luna," said Selena weakly after a few seconds had passed, bouncing Zach to calm him down. "I didn't realize you had a cousin in Hufflepuff."

"I don't." Luna stepped closer and dangled a tendril of her wig over Zach's face, brushing his nose with it until he stopped crying to grab at this intriguing new object. "Haven't you met George's girlfriend?"

"You mean that was... wow." Selena peered the way Crystal had gone. "She looks different with her hair up. And I wasn't expecting her to be here."

"Why not?" Roger asked, coming to Selena's side and handing her a bottle of butterbeer. "The rest of us came."

"Yes, but she's a M—" Selena stopped mid-word. "I'm being pureblood again, aren't I?" she asked with a one-sided smile.

Draco shrugged. "You can't change what you are any more than she can," he said. "What you can change, and you are changing, is the way you think about it and the things you do."

"That's what the year is for, besides breaking the spell," Luna added, rescuing her wig from Zach's grasp. "When you do anything over and over for long enough, whether it's brushing your teeth or casting a spell or being kind to other people around you, it becomes a habit and you keep doing it without really thinking about it. We're trying to get everyone out of their old habits."

"As the actor said to the nun," Terry murmured, prompting Su to smack him on the top of his



helmeted head. "Ow. So what else is on the slate for tonight, Roger? Got to be something good with you and three Weasleys here."

"Well, I can't give it all away, that wouldn't be fair." Roger grinned, nodding towards Percy Weasley, surprisingly elegant in the fitted coat and breeches of a late eighteenth-century exquisite, who was now taking music requests from a pair of Gryffindors dressed as Dangerous Dai Llewellyn and the Chimaera which had eaten him. "But keep your eyes open that way and you might see some of it coming..."

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"Is that Parvati?" Ron asked as a screaming blur sped past. "She's meant to be that witch who invented Beauty Potions, right? So why has she got a big whacking piece of cardboard around her?"

"You're thinking of Sacharissa Tugwood, and no, she's not, not exactly." Hermione smiled. "She's Sacharissa Tugwood's Chocolate Frog card."

"She dressed as a Chocolate Frog card? Really?" Ron laughed, then stopped. "That's not such a bad idea. Not that I don't like ours," he added hastily. "Especially yours. You look... you look really good."

"Really good? Is that the best you can come up with?"

"With your dad standing across the room watching us?" Ron nodded towards Padfoot, who nodded back before returning to his conversation with Professors McGonagall and Black. From the movements of their hands, Hermione suspected they were discussing the Gryffindor Quidditch team's chances in the first match against Slytherin. "I'm not stupid enough to say anything he could overhear. What's Parvati running from, anyway?"

Hermione turned to follow her friend's line of flight. "There," she said when she spotted the problem. "I can't tell who they are from here, but there's a pair of them."

"A pair of..." Ron looked where Hermione was pointing and snickered once. "Mummies? Really? That's creative. And it looks like they've just used toilet roll for it, too. Hold on a second, I bet I can see..." His eyes unfocused, then refocused differently, rather like Luna's when she was Seeing. "Yeah, I can. That's awesome. They sort of shine through the stuff, the shapes of their faces do—"

"So who are they?" Hermione asked patiently.

"Oh, sorry." Ron blinked several times, pressing two fingers against the inside corners of his eyes. "Thought I'd said. It's Crabbe and Goyle. Big surprise. Do you think we ought to go and do something? I mean, if she's that frightened?"

"She's with Lavender and Colleen," Hermione pointed out, inclining her head to the spot across the room where the goddess Cliodna (or rather, her Chocolate Frog card) and Perenelle Flamel were offering tissues and a cup of punch to the sobbing Sacharissa. "I think she'll be all right."

As she started to turn back, a spot of silver caught her eye. "Ron, can you see ghosts?" she asked, watching Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, dressed in translucent armor, furiously fencing with a similarly-clad Fat Friar to the delight of a large crowd of first and second years.

"Course I can. But they're the opposite color—or it's not really color, but that's the closest thing it's like—whatever it is, they're the opposite of people." Ron slid his arm around Hermione's shoulders and laid his fingers against her cheek. "Only makes sense, right? People are warm, ghosts are cold."

"Only makes sense," Hermione repeated, leaning into the embrace, her heart thrilling and marveling in equal measure that both the movement and the words felt completely natural.

*Last Halloween, would I ever have believed this was possible, any part of it? Either Ron thinking so quickly, so clearly, or my being so willing to, well, cuddle with him in public? I don't know that I would have.*

*What a difference a year can make.*

*I wonder how much will change between now and next Halloween?*

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"Remember the last time we saw Parvati with a mummy?" Harry asked Neville, leaning against the back of Professor Xavier's wheelchair.

"Third year Defense, with Mr. Moony." Neville grinned, dapper in his suit and full bald cap. "Where he let me and Colleen lead off against the boggart. Shame we couldn't get Snape into my gran's clothes again for the occasion..."

Meghan nearly spilled her punch down the front of her black Stuck-Tape jumpsuit, which she and Neville had carefully textured to look like leather.

"He is the only person here who's not in fancy dress," Harry said thoughtfully. "And that's not very polite to the Hufflepuffs. They went to a lot of trouble to make this a fun night for everyone."

"Harry," Ginny began in a warning tone, then sighed. "Just don't get caught, all right?"

"Since when do I get caught?"

"Since one of the people who taught you everything you know about pranking is here and Snape's been digging around inside your mind for the last eight weeks so he might be able to know you're coming somehow?"

"He hasn't been able to get as far lately, and just knowing how I think shouldn't give him that much of an advantage. But I take your point." Harry flicked his wrist, catching his wand carefully in one fur-covered hand. "Especially about Padfoot. I'll be careful."

Crouching down, he took a moment to admire the view of Ginny's legs afforded by this vantage point, then slid underneath the table beside which Neville had parked his chair, transformed fully into Wolf, picked up his wand in his teeth, and began to slink along the table's length. His nose told him when he had reached the proper point, and he stopped, listening to the voices above him.

"...must say, Nicolas, I'm quite surprised to see you here," said Dumbledore jovially. "I had thought you were dead."

"No one is truly dead whose memory is honored, Headmaster," Blaise Zabini replied coolly.

"Well played, young man." Dumbledore applauded softly. "Are we in your way, or do you have everything you need?"

"I should be all right, thank you, sir. Professor."

Wolf slipped out from beneath the table and retransformed, snagging his wand as it fell from his merely human teeth and peering cautiously over the table's edge. If Snape or Dumbledore should happen to be looking his way—

But he was in luck, as both of them were watching Zabini walk away, a tray of snacks and drinks in his hands, headed in the direction of a small knot of girls on the other side of the Hall. Quickly, Harry got to his feet, called up the memory of his first Defense class in third year, and pointed his wand at Snape. An incantation of the Half-Blood Prince's, one of those which had the notation *nvbl* written beside it, seemed called for here.

*Exstaetheris!* he shouted mentally, as though he were using the word to throw Snape out of his mind.

A rush of colors flowed from his wand's tip and swirled around Snape, settling after a moment into the image of a long, green dress with lace trim, a moth-eaten fox-fur scarf, and a pointed hat with a vulture perched on its brim. Harry wanted to cheer aloud—it was his first truly successful nonverbal casting—but settled for a glance down the table, where Neville was pumping his fist over his head in victory and both Ginny and Meghan had their hands pressed firmly over their mouths.

Someone choked on Harry's other side. He looked over his shoulder to see Padfoot doing his best to stifle his snickers in his sleeve. Behind him, Professor Black gave Harry a small, cool smile and a nod, then swiped her finger across her throat. Harry blinked twice, signifying assent, and released his wand, ending the spell and sending the wand back to its place up his sleeve, just as Snape began to turn towards him—

With a clatter, Harry snatched up the closest tray of food and extended it in Snape's direction as the black eyes focused fully on him. "Kabob, sir?" he said as innocently as he could manage, focusing his mind on the other truly memorable image from that long-ago lesson. *Slytherin House in their underwear, Slytherin House in their underwear, which was bad enough back then but now—oh, perfect, Harry, you just had to go and think of what they'd look like in their underwear now,*

*didn't you?*

"No, thank you." Snape curled his lip. "The meat looks... overdone."

Harry nearly dropped the tray as the full extent of what he was seeing struck him. "I... well... yes. I'll just have one for me, then. Sir," he said to Dumbledore as the Headmaster gave him a small smile, and set the tray hastily back on the table before snatching a kabob and starting back towards Ginny and the others as quickly as he dared.

*I was wrong. Snape is in fancy dress. It's just that you have to get right up close to him to see it...*

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Percy glanced around the Great Hall, surveying what was, for this evening, his domain and finding it good. *All is going well. The attendees seem to be enjoying themselves, the food is excellent as always, and Fred and George were even able to slip away for the time they needed to go down to Sanctuary and lay their protective charms over the entrances.* He smirked faintly. *If the length of the correspondence I've seen them carrying on with our eldest brother is any indication, some of those charms should be quite nasty indeed.*

Professor Sprout, dressed as Babbitty Rabbitty, caught his eye from one end of the Hall and whipped her fingers in three small circles.

*And that would be our cue to start the evening's entertainment.* Percy waited until Crystal, in her borrowed Hogwarts robes, was looking his way, then nodded to her. She nodded back and reached up to pull her two pigtails tighter, the agreed-upon signal to the twins that they should get to their places for the opening of the little show the Red Shepherds had put together.

*Doubtless there are children of Death Eaters in our audience, and they will report to their parents precisely what we wish them to report. That the Red Shepherds are a silly group of just-barely-adult wizards and witches—and one Muggle—who are fit only to perform childish tricks at parties.*

Stepping down from the small dais where he had been standing, Percy started for the drinks table, noticing in passing his sister laughing near-hysterically at something Harry Potter was whispering in her ear. Although Percy couldn't say he was comfortable with the mid-thigh drape of her crimson skirt, nor with the plunging neckline of her off-white blouse, she was still more covered than half the girls in the Hall, and he found her and Harry's paired costumes quite appropriate to his current line of thought.

*"Why, Red Shepherd, what shiny spells you have!" "All the better to destroy you with, my dear Death Eaters..."*

Percy finished his short journey with a broad smile on his face, which he made haste to wipe off and replace with an expression of suitable worry as he spotted Crystal, rooting around in the tub of magical ice which occupied fully half of the table. "Gone," the Muggle girl said in disgust, pulling a single bottle out of the tub. "Every last one gone, except this. I *told* you we should have brought

more!"

"What's gone?" Percy deliberately pitched his voice to carry, and heard conversations stopping or dying away even as he spoke. "I'm sure we can find more of it somewhere."

"Not easily." Crystal thumped the bottle down on the table. "It's the butterbeer. This is the very last cold butterbeer! How are we supposed to figure out who gets it?"

At the back of the Great Hall, behind the teachers' table, a chainsaw revved.

Several girls screamed as Fred stepped into view, dressed in a loose blue jumpsuit, his face entirely covered with a hockey mask, the chainsaw growling in his hands. The noise redoubled as the Hall's main door slammed open, revealing George garbed and armed in precisely the same manner. Step by perfectly mirrored step, the students clearing a path for them with little gasps and squeals of gratified fright, they closed in on Percy, Crystal, and the butterbeer, chainsaws snarling, clearly ready to tear one another limb from limb for that final drink—

Drawing his wand, Percy transfigured both chainsaws into bouquets of flowers, drawing applause from the assembled students. "You know what Mother always says about edged weapons," he reproved his brothers.

"Only to use them outside the house." Fred pushed his mask back, and another wave of applause went up as their audience recognized him. "But we're not in the house. We're at Hogwarts!"

"Can't we even use them a little?" pleaded George, lifting his mask in turn. "If we promise to clean up afterwards?"

"Oh, why not let them?" Crystal asked Percy, as Danielle and Lee made their way through the crowd to the edge of the cleared space around the drinks table. "It might be fun for everyone to watch."

"You may have a point." Reversing his earlier motion, Percy restored the chainsaws to their original state. "We're going to have a clean bout, now," he told the twins, pointing his wand at each of them in turn. "No fouls, no foolishness, and remember there are first and second years present. Let's keep the mental scarring to a minimum."

Both twins saluted him with their saws, then faced one another, lowered their masks, and pulled their cords in time with one another. Both chainsaws growled back to life.

"Ready," Percy said, raising his hand. On either side of him, Danielle and Lee drew their wands. "Steady."

Fred and George held the chainsaws upright in front of their faces, waiting for the word.

"Go!" Percy slashed his hand down through the air. Simultaneously, Danielle and Lee snapped their wands through a three-stroke movement. Turning on their heels, Fred and George charged towards the freshly conjured blocks of ice and began to carve frantically.

Laughter and cheering swept through the Great Hall as students and professors alike realized the true nature of this competition. Some of those in the back were conjuring boxes or finding places on the tables so that they could see better. Fred, Percy noted, appeared to be creating an image of the same bottle which was even now in contention, while George had chosen the slightly more ambitious figure of the person who was holding it...

"Would you mind?" Crystal murmured, extending the bottle towards him. Percy tapped it with his wand, and the cork popped up, landing in Crystal's outstretched hand. "Thanks." Leaning back on her heel, she took a long, appreciative swig.

His brother George, Percy decided, was either a very lucky or a very unlucky wizard.

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"And by the time they're done, it's going to be gone," Meghan announced in a loud whisper, squirming in her excitement. "Crystal's going to drink it all and there won't be any left!"

"Easy, Pearl." Neville patted her leg. "Remember this chair's only taped together. We don't want it to fall apart before the twins can see it for their contest."

"Right. Sorry." Meghan stilled, craning only her neck to see over the heads of the crowd from her perch on the arm and back of the wheelchair. The long fall of her white wig streamed across Neville's shoulder, and he brushed a few strands out of his face but let the majority of the hair stay where it was.

He'd been a bit surprised, over the course of the night, not by the students they'd had to explain their costumes to, but by the ones they hadn't. A startling number even of the Slytherins had recognized Professor X and Storm, and not for the first time, Neville wondered how many wizards who claimed to be pureblood were anything but.

*Well, if the year goes the way we hope it will, they can claim it all they like. No one will be able to prove them wrong, not with magic anyway. There's always looking up family trees, but everyone knows about... He sniffed slightly, channeling his gran. "Unofficial" children. As long as they're willing to surrender a bit of dignity, they can claim they're descended from one of those, or even that they are one themselves, and there you are.*

He was under no illusions about what the year wouldn't do. It wouldn't grant them an instant victory over Voldemort and the Death Eaters, or even an assured one. What it would do, what it was doing even now, was solidify the core of the DA as a fighting force, reinforce their bonds to one another, and chip away at the foundations of Voldemort's power.

*The more weapons we can take away from him without ever facing him or his followers in a duel, the greater chance we all have of coming home alive after the battles are fought. His throat tightened momentarily at the thought of his dad. And there you have the final purpose of the year. To remind us what we're fighting for, in the end. To help us see past the war and the battles and the fighting to the living and the joys and the sorrows that we have to keep doing and having through it all.*

*Because the minute we stop doing that, Voldemort wins.*

---

"So we're certain that's fancy dress on Snape's part?" Ginny asked Harry in an undertone as they watched the twins putting the final touches on their sculptures and Crystal daintily polishing off the last few sips of butterbeer. "He does live in the dungeons, after all. And I don't know that I've ever seen him outside in the sunlight."

"Do you really think Dumbledore would've hired him if he were one?" Harry countered.

"Why not? He hired a werewolf."

"That's different and you know it." Harry slipped his hand into Ginny's hair and tweaked a bit of it. "Werewolves are only dangerous one night a month. Whereas vampires—"

"Are always thirsty for blood, can't stand the sunlight, must be invited into a house to pass its doorway, are repelled by garlic and silver and a half-dozen other things," Ginny recited in a singsong tone. "Honestly, with the number of things that chase them away or keep them out, I'm surprised even Muggles would think they're dangerous."

"It might be worse if they didn't..." Harry straightened up as Fred shut down his chainsaw and removed his mask. George put a few finishing touches on his carving, then did the same. "Hold that thought. Here we go."

Percy began to walk around the two ice sculptures, tapping a finger against his lips thoughtfully. "Very nice," he said, brushing a shaving of ice from the shoulder of Fred's butterbeer bottle. "Good shape, interesting texture, very symbolic. Somewhat simplistic, though. I give it eight out of ten." Turning on the mixed wave of cheers and boos, he strode over to George's depiction of Crystal. "Now this, this is quite good. Recognizable, vital, engaging. Not perfectly executed, but the flaws are part of its charm. Nine out of ten."

"Yes!" George dropped his chainsaw and shot his arms straight up in the air, acknowledging the crowd's cheers, as Fred slumped dejectedly in place. "Victory is mine! Now where's my prize?"

"Here it comes," said Crystal sweetly, skipping over to him and handing him the bottle. "All yours." Stepping back, she clasped her hands behind her.

George put the bottle to his lips and tipped his head theatrically back. When nothing happened, an expression of dismay shot across his face, and he straightened quickly and turned the bottle upside down over his other hand. "But..." he stammered, staring at the nonexistent flow of butterbeer. "But..."

"Ha!" Fred pointed at his twin, his face lighting up with maniacal glee. "No ill-gotten gains for you!"

"I thought you loved me," George said mournfully to Crystal. "How could you do this to me?"

"I can do lots of things." Crystal giggled. "Like this."

She brought her hands out from behind her back. Each of them held a fresh, unopened butterbeer.

"You both get to win," explained Danielle, coming to stand beside Crystal and accepting the butterbeer from her friend's left hand. "This time, anyway."

Fred and George looked at each other, then shrugged and stepped forward, each claiming a butterbeer with one hand and a girl with the other. Percy took his place between them, and in perfect unison, all five bowed.

The applause lasted, Harry later estimated, for the better part of three minutes.



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 10: Compacts, Crawls, and Comfort (Year 6)

"Watch carefully," Harry said as Ginny wound a length of string around her wrists and hands in a complicated pattern. "The hand is quicker than the eye."

He drew his dagger and swiped it through the bit of string Ginny was holding out to him. The string's two ends fell against Ginny's hands, cleanly cut through. "Which is stronger, steel or flame? Steel can cut string, but what can flame do?"

"Burn it up?" Ron suggested.

"Ordinary flame would, yes." Harry blew into his palms, kindling a blue-violet fire, as Ginny unwound the string and gathered it into her own hand. "But when the flame is magic..."

Ginny extended her closed hand, and Harry directed the flame around it in a swirling pattern, which spiraled around three times and vanished with a small pop. Then he reached into the curl of her fingers and pulled out an end of the string.

The entire length slid smoothly out of Ginny's hand, with no cuts or knots visible anywhere. Ginny opened her fingers and wiggled them to display that no bits of string were left. "What steel can cut," she said, accepting the string back from Harry, "flame can restore. So we see that flame must be the stronger of the two. And there you have it."

"But..." Hermione stared wide-eyed at the string. "I saw you cut it! And your fire magic doesn't work like that, Harry, it couldn't just—"

"Repair the string?" Harry grinned. "It didn't. It's a Muggle trick, Hermione, sleight-of-hand. What you saw isn't what you think you saw."

"But we're not going to tell you any more than that," Ginny added. "Good magicians never reveal their secrets."

"Does that mean evil ones do?" Ron caught Ginny's hand as it was headed for his shoulder and pulled her off-balance, doubling her over on his outstretched arm and hoisting her feet off the rug. "Harry, you want this back?"

"Well, which one is it?" Harry lounged in his chair, winding the reclaimed string around his fingers. "Is it Ginevra, or her evil sock-stealing boy-snogging trick-doing house-elf twin Virginia?"

"Hmm." Ron peered closely at the squirming bundle on his arm. "Can't tell from here. Hermione?"

"There are so many other things we should be doing today," Hermione murmured, then shook her head and joined in the careful examination. "Let's see here. Her ears are round, not pointed, so that sounds human to me, but we have to bear in mind that house-elves are masters of disguise..."

Draco sat by himself in the library, the Half-Blood Prince's book, which he had borrowed from Harry, mostly buried under a slew of other books. Two or three of those, he had needed a note from Professor Black to so much as approach, and even then Madam Pince had looked at him oddly. He didn't care.

His offhanded comment about Zacharias Smith at the Halloween party had come back to him a few days ago from a wholly unexpected direction.

"I got your note, here I am," said the other person his thought had involved, setting her bag on the small section of table he wasn't using and seating herself across from him. "Is this all for that piece of Professor Black's homework I heard Harry and Ron moaning about, or is this something else?"

"Something else. Very else. As in, we may be using Moaning Myrtle's bathroom again." Draco looked in both directions, then drew his wand and cast a careful *Muffliato* towards Madam Pince. "Luna, this is important, and it has to be secret." He drew one long breath, nerving himself up to say the words. "I think I know why you were sent that vision."

Luna held up her hand, halting him, and exchanged her seat for one on the same side of the table where Draco was, then leaned her head affectionately against his shoulder. Two fingers slid along his neck and collarbone, caressing and playful. The tiny tug they gave to the gold chain they encountered along the way might have been nothing more than a lover's ploy for attention.

*Except it's not.* Draco leaned into the embrace, willing his pendants intangible to Luna and enjoying her slight shiver as they passed through her skin and bone, reappearing on the opposite side of her neck. *No point in showing off to the world what we can do with these, and no point in talking aloud about things no one else needs to know either.*

**Now we can be private,** Luna said over the chain link. **And if anyone sees us, they'll think we're just cuddling. Madam Pince may scold us, but we're being quiet so she won't chase us out.** As Draco had, she took a deep breath before approaching the subject. **Tell me what you've thought of.**

**Well, I approached it from the other side. So to speak.** Draco flipped a few pages in one of the books he'd borrowed from the Restricted Section, finding again one of the potions he'd been most intrigued by. **Stopped thinking about it as what's going to happen to me, and started thinking about what it means for you, and for... him .** No name was necessary to accompany the pronoun, nor had one been for quite some time. **Whatever else is or isn't going on there, we know—know for certain, had it confirmed by Higher Authority and everything—that he'll show up there, that you'll both say those words, and that he'll take you away with him, thinking you're on his side.** He laid his finger on the title of the potion. **What if you brought a flask of this with you?**

Luna leaned forward to read the line Draco was indicating, and a momentary shock of hot, brilliant delight shot through the sense of her magic. **I like that. I like that very much.** She

looked at the piles of books, sizing them up with a new, analytical twist to her thoughts. **But you haven't decided finally on this one, have you? After all...** She fluttered her eyelashes briefly. **There are so many possibilities.**

**Aren't there just.** Draco lifted the chain off Luna's neck. "But that means you'll do it," he said, looking into her eyes. "You'll...finish what I couldn't. Make sure he can't hurt anyone else I love, ever again."

"Of course I will." Luna clasped his hand fiercely. "I love them too."

Their intertwined fingers rested across the title "A Potion for the Permanent Transformation of a Selected Human, Wizard or Muggle, into an Animal Form Selected by its Brewer".

---

Neville leaned against a tree at the edge of the Not-So-Forbidden Forest (his own coinage, as nothing at the Founders' Castle was likely to do worse than startle him), pretending to ignore the soft footsteps creeping up on him. She was ten feet away—five—two—

Without looking, he darted a hand behind him, fingers wiggling. A shriek and a shower of bark and twigs later, Meghan was glowering down at him from a branch above his head. "Don't *do* that."

"Don't sneak up, then," Neville returned, asking the branch for a favor. Obediently, it lowered its end towards the ground, widening and flattening its upper surface as it went.

"I'm allowed to sneak if I—" Meghan's self-righteous declaration broke off in a yelp as she slid swiftly down the branch, landing in a small and indignant heap at Neville's feet.

"Yes, you are." Neville purposely did not look down. "But you have to take what comes with it. Like my sneaking back."

"Bleh to you." Meghan clambered to her feet and put out her tongue at him. "Bleh, I say."

"Do you? I'll be sure to make a note of it." Neville traced the four letters on the trunk of the tree, watching with satisfaction as they rose up in relief. "There you are," he said, tapping them with a finger. "My note."

"Silly." Meghan giggled, spinning in place. "I'm glad you can be now," she said, her voice rising and falling in his ears as she rotated. "For a while, in the summer, I thought you weren't ever going to smile again—"

She stopped, staring towards the castle. Neville leaned forward to follow her line of sight and blinked in surprise. A familiar head of bushy brown hair, along with its owner, had just vanished through the great doors of the castle.

*What is Mrs. Danger doing here?*

The silliness in the common room lasted until after Draco and Luna, wearing similar expressions of grim satisfaction, had returned from wherever they had been and joined in wholeheartedly. Once it was over, since no one seemed likely to start homework (or, for a miracle with the match less than a week away, Quidditch talk), Hermione thought it might be time to bring up something which had been troubling her for a while.

"Did anyone notice what we didn't have this summer?" she asked, after making sure that the rest of the common room was sufficiently engrossed in its own pastimes that only explosions would be likely to draw attention. "Other than fun," she added, cutting off Harry. "I mean us, the Pack. Something we've had every summer since we've come to Hogwarts."

"Enlighten us, O sweet sister," Draco drawled. "What didn't we have this summer?"

Hermione withdrew a scroll from her pocket and snapped her wrist, unrolling it across the table. "A prophecy," she said, as Warriors leaned forward to look at the verse lines she had copied from Danger's originals. "We never had a prophecy."

"But didn't we have one just before Christmas?" Harry slid his fingers down the scroll until he found the final entry. "This one—*When holly wand met wand of yew*. Wouldn't that have reset our once-a-year clock, so we shouldn't expect another one until right about now?"

"No, I think I see what Hermione's saying," said Ginny, examining the scroll. "Do you have all of them on here, Hermione? Every one Mrs. Danger's ever had?"

"Every one I could find." Hermione frowned. "Why?"

"Tell you later." Where the boys couldn't see, Ginny's fingers formed the sign for *Not bad, just funny*. "But what did happen this summer, everything we all did and went through, that was important. We should have had a prophecy about that. And we never got one."

"Prophecies don't always work like that, though," said Luna. "Sometimes it's the little things that matter the most, and the things that seem most important to us, in the long run, really aren't."

"Thus speaks someone who would know." Draco squeezed Luna's hand briefly. "But I see your point too, Ginny. The prophecies Danger gets tend to tell us about the things we would consider important. And I think Padfoot losing his magic, Letha getting her memories wiped, Moony nearly being killed, Neville's dad dying—all of that ought to have qualified. So why didn't it?"

"That's what I was thinking, too." Hermione flattened the scroll on the surface of the table. "But then I remembered something Danger learned a long time ago, the very first time she ever went to the Founders' Castle, the night before Padfoot's trial. There are rules about what they can and can't say in the prophecies. And one of those rules is, they can't tell us anything twice. So what if Danger hasn't had her prophecy yet this year because we're still missing something we should have worked out in one of her older ones?"

---

*I can't believe I'm doing this.*

Danger stepped into the entrance hall of the Founders' Castle, looking around appreciatively. She hadn't been sure that the small ritual Aletha had written to her, copied from the notes she'd taken from Neville and Meghan's dictation, would work, but no sooner had she voiced her request and closed her eyes than she had seen the star-studded dream-path, stretching away at her feet.

*I wonder if that's how Remus saw it, when he came after me that first time...*

"Danger," Maura Gryffindor greeted her from the top of the marble staircase. "Looking for anyone in particular?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Danger approached the staircase and leaned against one of the banisters, trying to stay casual. "You wouldn't know where I could happen to find Alex, would you?"

"Ah." A surprising amount of understanding, chagrin, and sympathy was packed into the single syllable. "The last I saw him, he was headed for the Owlery. But I give you fair warning, he's not in the best of moods. Without any intent to offend, if you're angry with him, this may not be the best time to approach him."

"No, not angry." Danger shook her head. "Maybe I should be, but I've always known we couldn't rely on foreknowledge forever. And he did..." She stopped, recalling just how very against the rules Alex's intervention in the events of the summer had been. Fortunately, Maura seemed indisposed to pry. "Mostly, I'd just like to know why, and if this is absolutely the end for my little rhymes or if I should be watching out for anything else."

"In that case, go right ahead." Maura blew into her palms, then tossed the small, shining object which had materialized down to Danger. "That will take you where he is as soon as you're ready."

Danger smiled, looking at what she now cradled in her palm. "A Snitch," she said, rocking it back and forth. "Or a sculpture of one, anyway. Is there any truth to the story—"

"Now, that *would* be telling." Maura winked. "Be off with you."

The colors of the room blurred around Danger, re-coalescing after a moment or two into a different set. The Owlery, in the Hogwarts below filled with the warmth of feathered bodies and the earth tones of their feathers, was here a cool, wood-framed room with a shallow layer of straw on the floor, awaiting whatever messengers the faithful Founders and their children might receive. The vivid green of Alex's robes where he leaned against one of the chest-high walls, staring into the distance, was the only jarring note in an otherwise peaceful picture.

*Unfortunately, I'm about to inject another one.*

Danger cleared her throat.

---

"Wow," Ron said succinctly, reading over a copy of the first prophecy Mrs. Danger had ever received, his heat spell in place so that the letters glowed slightly to his eyes. "She knew right off where Wormtail was, if she'd just been able to put the pieces together."

"She had a few other things to think about," Harry pointed out. "Like falling in love with Moony, stealing me and Padfoot, getting everyone into hiding at Letha's place in London."

"True. And..." Ron trailed off, running his finger along the first line. "*Black to red and red to brown*"...why do I feel like I should know what that means?

He glanced over the top of his scroll at Harry and Ginny, curled side-by-side on the sofa, her head against his shoulder and his arm around her waist as they pointed out details on their own scroll to one another. Although his eyes could no longer register such details, Ron's memory painted a vivid portrait of their contrasting colors, Harry's tan from the summer, somewhat faded by now, to Ginny's plentiful freckles, Ginny's eyes of chocolate brown to Harry's leafy green, Harry's endlessly disordered mop of black hair to Ginny's sleek red mane—

*Wait, what?*

Ron looked down at the scroll again, then up at his sister and his best friend. The view had not changed.

*Probably a good thing I didn't object too much to their getting engaged, then. Seeing as how it was fated and all.* Ron allowed himself a little smirk at his brotherly forbearance, then returned to the perusal of the prophecy. *But that's only half the line. What's this other part mean, this "red to brown"? Is it still hair colors? And if it is, who...*

His eyes slid a few feet to the left, and the answer hit him like a Bludger to the pit of the stomach.

*No wonder her parents didn't seem surprised!*

---

Alex didn't jump, adding to Danger's certainty that he'd known she was coming. "Yes?" he said in a monotone. "If you're looking for answers, I'm afraid I'm fresh out."

"Not really." Danger leaned back against one of the walls, resting her elbows on the ledge. "I was thinking more along the lines of spending some time with a friend. Expressing... not understanding, perhaps, I don't think anyone could understand what you went through unless they'd been there themselves. Though in some senses I have. But I think the word I'm looking for is 'sympathy'."

"As in 'tea and'?" Alex laughed hoarsely. "It's too late for that. Years, hell, centuries too late."

"Too late for me to be sorry that my friend is in pain?" Danger moved a foot or two to her left, wrinkling her nose as she did. For one instant, she had caught the scent of her goddaughter and the Pride's beta male.

*But nothing says it has to be a fresh scent. I know they come here sometimes, just for fun, just because they can. They wouldn't be here now, not in the middle of the day, not with all the work I know they have to do. And they know better than to eavesdrop, even if they are...*

Ignoring the fact that Meghan's knowing better seldom stopped her from doing anything she thought would be fun, Danger continued. "Whatever's happening with Amanda, it's hurting you. Hurting you now, not in the past. Because whatever she's done, whatever she's doing, she's still your daughter, and you still love her. Don't you?"

"Don't I wish I could stop, you mean." Alex turned around at last, revealing red-rimmed eyes and a face set in grim, bitter lines. "She's a fool, Danger. A single-minded, double-dyed, triple-brewed fool. And her crazy, meaningless crusade is meddling with people we both love. Meddling with *you*. Or weren't you wondering why I hadn't been in touch this summer like I usually am?"

Danger nodded slowly. "Hermione had some thoughts about that," she said. "I didn't want to dissuade her, because going back through all those prophecies seems like a fine idea in its own right, but it struck me that just because you can't tell us things twice, says nothing about not telling us about some things at all. In the past, that's been used as a punishment, usually when you broke the rules. But by the time you broke the rules in July, we were already into things you'd never mentioned. For which I'm not blaming you," she added as Alex, his eyes narrowed, started to reply. "I might have, if I'd thought of that at the time, but since I didn't and it's over, there's no sense in getting angry about it. Only in finding out what happened, and fixing it if I can."

"Well, I don't know." Alex sighed heavily. "How good are you at getting people to give up ideas they've been cherishing for the better part of a thousand years?"

---

*"Eyes of ashes, hair of sun, a heart with paces never run..."* hmm, I wonder who this could be meant for. Draco traced the two lines with his finger, making Luna, beside him, giggle. *It really was spelled out for them, wasn't it?*

*At least, that's what it looks like to us, sitting here after it's all happened. It was probably a lot harder to see back in the thick of things.*

*And "salvation, justice, vengeance"—yes, yes, and yes. All of the above. He spent a moment examining his life and found it very good. Even if I do have to die, at least I had a chance to live first. To enjoy myself, to have fun, to be happy. And, yes, to rub it in Lucius's face just how much of a blood traitor I really am. He snickered. Thank you, Mother, for that.*

"It even predicted us," Luna murmured. "Here, in this part. Harry and Hermione and Meghan, and your parents, of course, taught your heart what it meant to love, how to trust people and care about them and want what's best for them more than you want anything for yourself. And after that..."

"After that, you came along," Draco finished. "And won my heart just by being you."

*The only problem is, Amanda did the same thing. Not exactly the same way, but I don't think I'd be*



*happy having either of you as just a friend anymore. And I'm certainly not crazy enough to ask a pair of girls if they'd be willing to share!*

He looked back at the prophecy, trying to will the words into taking effect on his heart. *Luna's the only one mentioned here. She's the one Danger's seen for me over and over, right back to that wedding she's always dreamed for her and Moony. She's the one I know, the one I trust, the one who's already promised to carry on what I might not be able to finish. Why can't that be enough for me?*

The answer, if any existed, was not forthcoming.

---

"A thousand years." Danger nodded slowly. "That tomb the cubs found, near what's become their Sanctuary, the serpent's daughter who is not evil. That's hers, isn't it? And she bound herself there as a revenant, hoping to end the curse on your line? Turn it back to its caster, shift it to someone else and let it fade away, or even bind it to something unliving?"

"Not exactly, but..." Alex waved a dismissive hand. "You've got the majority of it. The rest is details, or things I can't tell you yet. But what she never could accept, still can't, is that there *is* no way to turn a fatal curse. Trust me, we looked." He ran his fingers restlessly through his hair, heightening his resemblance to Harry. "And even if there was, what would be the point now? My line, our line, died out a few hundred years ago." He snorted a reluctant laugh. "Which makes it all the more ironic that their surviving relatives should look so very much like them. I suppose the first Lucius Malfoy was trying to fix it in people's minds that he was William Beauvoi's rightful heir by heightening the family resemblance."

"So if Draco should be suddenly transported back those few hundred years, no one would have any trouble believing that he was a Beauvoi." Danger smiled. "He'll be glad to hear that. You know how much he's always hated looking like his father."

"If that'll take his mind off everything else, tell him and welcome." Alex paced restlessly towards the door, but stopped short of it and turned back. "I just don't understand why it had to be now," he said plaintively. "She's been waiting so long—couldn't she have waited just a few more years? But no, she had to jump right into the thick of things, and she may not physically carry my blood anymore, but her soul is the same, which means her magic. And she's my daughter. *My* heir. Which means, in terms of power..." He spread his hands helplessly.

Danger sucked in her breath as everything came clear. "She's the reason why we never had a warning this summer, isn't she," she said, the words statement rather than question. "She has the same magic you do, and because she's living in the world, mingling with us and being part of things, she's throwing off what you do for me. Muddling everything up by getting too close." She stopped, frowning, as the implications of this became clearer to her. "But that means..."

Alex smiled one-sidedly. "Why do you think Matthias's line believes Parseltongue is all they have?" he asked softly, stepping nearer. "They lied to themselves for so many years, Dad and Matt and his kids after him, that they couldn't bear to look at the truth anymore. So they denied our

greater gift was ever there, claimed snakey talk was the only thing that distinguished the family, and at this point, I'd bet my however-many-greats-nephew believes it. He's proud as a peacock of being able to talk to little wiggly things, and completely missing the bigger picture of what he ought to have had." His smile spread a bit, becoming warmer, more real. "Draco was closer than he knew when he mentioned the Pythia to you. We've got at least one, possibly more, somewhere up the family tree."

"How have I missed that all these years?" Danger laughed. "Even before I knew who you were, every one of my crazy dreams was always in the same voice. Your voice. Why would that be, unless you were the only one who could tell me those things?"

"It's not always as clean-cut as it seems," Alex warned. "After so long, I cross with our resident Fates quite a bit. But then again, seeing now and seeing ahead are two sides of the same coin. Luna's always had a little of both."

"Which is why you could speak to her like you did to me sometimes, isn't it?" Danger nodded, remembering. "She's had one or two of your iambic tetrameter specials along the way. One of them, if I remember right, even quoting from my first one..."

---

Harry called Ron and Draco into a huddle at one point, apparently discussing something they had done shortly after the abortive werewolf attacks in the early days of the year, which left the girls free to have a quiet conclave of their own.

"You may want to add these," said Luna, handing Hermione two slips of parchment. "One is Mrs. Danger's, but I don't know that she ever showed it to anyone. She told Ginny about part of it, but that's because it told her to."

Hermione scanned down the lines, then looked up at Ginny. "When?" was all she said.

"The day you left for your first year." Ginny had a small, secret smile on her face. "I tried to convince myself for the longest time that she hadn't meant what I wanted her to, but now I'm pretty sure she did. They've always known, haven't they?"

"Yes, they have." Hermione glanced over at Ron. "Though I think they were wise not to tell us too much to start with. What's the other one?"

"It's mine." Luna folded her hands in her lap. "The one I spoke the day Harry told us about the first part of the prophecy, just after we'd become the Pride. It names the Pack-friends and your parents, and if you read it carefully, it tells you who we would all end up with. Only we weren't old enough to realize that was what it meant."

"Cat and dragon, phoenix bright..." Hermione's voice dropped to a mumble as she continued to read, following the lines with her finger. "Yes, all right, there are the adults, but I don't see where—oh." She laughed once. "Now I do. Silver pearl, well, Pearl is obvious, and Neville's for his silver fur. And silent snow, for Snow Fox and an owl, who flies silently." She set the parchment on

the table, shaking her head. "They knew our Animagus forms, even before we did. That doesn't seem fair, somehow."

Ginny shrugged. "We all got what we wanted in the end," she said, tapping a fingertip against the words "black to red". "How much fairer than that can we ask?"

---

"One thing they may find that they'll think is me repeating myself," Alex told Danger as they strolled out of the Owlery together. "It's that bit about the lion's line continuing. Tell them to pay more attention to details, and to bear in mind that things can change." He grimaced. "And that I'm not always sure what I'm talking about either. Some of this I come up with, working with things I see as clearly as I'm seeing you, but some of it..."

"Dumped into your head, rather the way you used to dump it into mine?" Danger chuckled. "Not that I blame you. I would have had a much harder time adjusting to this, when I started out, than I did to random prophecies." Her hand gesture indicated Alex, the castle, and the tiny, hyperreal world it and the Founders inhabited. "It seems almost...disrespectful, or it would have to that girl I used to be. She would have been horribly shocked at how *human* you all are."

"Which is why I went for the swirling colors and echoing voice approach back then, and why we can just go for a walk together now." Alex hefted Danger's hand in his, as though weighing it. "Your cubs aren't the only ones who've grown up over the last fifteen years."

"Yes, but don't tell Sirius that. He still considers maturity a disease, or claims to." Danger smiled fondly. "We've all been so happy together. And that was because of you, Alex. You and the others, of course, but in large part because of you." She stopped, turning to face him. "You gave us the gift of each other. It's a gift we might never have had any other way, and it's a gift that has done so much good, for so many different people. Please, when you're counting up what you've done or haven't in your time here, don't ever forget that."

Alex shut his eyes, drawing a ragged breath. "Thank you," he whispered, and did not resist when Danger drew him gently into an embrace.

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"All right, I think we've got it narrowed down," said Harry, surveying his reunited Pride. Neville and Meghan had emerged from one of their various hidey-holes a few minutes earlier, looking slightly startled but none the worse for wear, and joined in what Ron had dubbed the prophecy crawl with vigor. "There's only two bits we can't identify as being something that's already happened, and one of them looks like it's for the very end of the war—the very last bit of the first one Danger ever had, I mean. *When they who saved the savior* and so on. So that we can probably leave. But this..." He tapped the six lines in front of him. "This, we may need to talk to somebody about."

Hermione picked up the parchment and began to read aloud.

"When holly wand met wand of yew,  
"The endless fight began anew;  
"A third there is, with cloak and stone—  
"Who'd win must call them first his own.  
"But they shall come, as shall those shells  
"In which unhallowed spirit dwells..."

"Then it goes into things we already know about," she said, lowering the parchment. "The spell-breaking year and so forth. Holly wand is obviously you, Harry, and yew wood is traditionally linked with Dark magic so I wouldn't be at all surprised if it was what Voldemort's wand is made from."

"And when your wands met, at the Ministry after everything that happened at the Department of Mysteries, it started the Second War for good and all," said Neville. "Gryffindor versus Slytherin, the way it's always been." He glanced upward. "Most Slytherins, anyway," he said in an apologetic tone.

"A third there is'," read Ron, frowning at the parchment. "A third what?"

"Wand, probably," said Ginny. "It's the only thing that there were two of mentioned already."

"Wand, cloak, and stone," murmured Luna. "Traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight..." She leaned over and whispered a few words in Draco's ear. He pulled a small item from his pocket and handed it to her, and she hurried off towards the stairs to the girls' dormitories.

Draco shrugged when everyone looked at him. "Wants to Floo her dad," he said. "Did anyone recognize what she said there? It sounded like a story, but I can't place it offhand."

The other Pack-cubs shook their heads, but the Weasleys were nodding tentatively. "It sounds like one of the Beedle stories Mum used to tell us," said Ginny. "Only the time was off. Mum always told it happening at midnight."

"Best time to encounter Death, you know?" Ron made a grand, vague gesture. "Symbolic and all that."

"Encounter Death?" Hermione repeated, a trifle shrilly. "You mean the story is about people dying?"

"Oh, I know it now." Neville snapped his fingers. "Three brothers. They thought they had tricked Death, but instead Death tricked them, so two of them died pretty soon after the meeting anyway. Only the third brother, the one who wasn't arrogant or rude but just careful, got to live out his life and do everything he wanted to."

"So the moral of the story is 'Don't be rude to Death'." Draco shook his head. "Still better than Muggle fairytales, I guess. What does it have to do with a wand and a cloak and a stone, though?"

"They got to ask Death for gifts, and those were the gifts. An unbeatable wand, an invisibility cloak..." Neville trailed off, turning, as did the rest of the Pride, to look at Harry.

Harry returned their looks skeptically. "You've all seen it," he said. "Used it, worn it. If it was some kind of present from Death and going to drag me off to die, don't you think it would have done it by now?"

"But that's the point, Harry. It won't." Ginny motioned a hood and drape of fabric with her hands. "The cloak was the one gift that *wasn't* a trap, because all the third brother wanted was a way to keep himself hidden from Death until he decided it was the right time. He didn't try to master Death, so Death never mastered him either. Maybe..."

"Yeah." Harry nodded. "Maybe. A lot of maybe. But an unbeatable wand? What's that all about? And what about the stone? What did that do?"

"That was the second brother," said Ron. "Story says the first brother asked for a wand that would always beat his opponent, and the second brother didn't think that was enough, so he asked for a way to bring people back from the dead. But magic can't do that, so all he got was a sort of a picture of the girl he wanted, like an animated memory."

"The story says he was seeing her as if through a veil," Ginny recalled. "And he eventually killed himself out of grief, because he couldn't really be with her, even with the power in the stone."

"And the first brother bragged about his unbeatable wand, and got himself murdered in his sleep by somebody who wanted it more," Neville finished. "Great bedtime story for little kids, isn't it?"

"Remind me to tell you the original versions of some Muggle ones sometime," said Hermione, as Luna came trotting back across the common room towards them. "Any luck, Luna?"

"The Elder Wand," Luna announced, laying her finger on the word "third" in the prophecy, then moving it to indicate each item as she gave its name. "The Cloak of Invisibility. And the Resurrection Stone." She sat down beside Draco again. "Together, they're called the Deathly Hallows. This is their sign." She drew her own wand and sketched it in the air in lines of light: an equal-sided triangle, a circle inside it touching each of its lines at the center point, and a vertical line bisecting both. "And Daddy says that some of the stories claim whoever owns them all at once will have power over death."

"Power like...reversing it?" Meghan asked timidly. "That isn't supposed to be possible, not when someone is truly all the way dead..."

"Maybe not reversing it," said Harry, copying the sign in flame between his hands. "But I bet they'd be a nice boost for someone who wants to keep it away. And an unbeatable wand doesn't exactly sound like the sort of thing we'd want him to have either."

"Definitely not." Draco stretched, then put his arm around Luna. "So what do you suggest we do about..." He stopped, looking at the parchment Hermione had set back on the table. "Correct me if

I'm wrong," he said, pointing at it, "but that wasn't there before."

The Pride turned as one to see four new, neatly written lines beneath the six they had just been discussing.

*It does not count as telling twice*

*If all I do is give advice.*

*If you'd know more, your phoenix-friend*

*Go ask, and to his words attend.*

The handwriting was old-fashioned and ornate, but entirely readable, and Harry grinned to himself, fitting a name to it without much difficulty.

*Trust Alex to find a way to be snarky, even at long distance.*

*Looks like we'll be paying Professor Dumbledore a call sometime pretty soon...*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 11: Because She Said Please (Year 6)

"Witches and gentlewizards, students of all ages—are you ready for some *QUIDDITCH*?"

The answering roar was deafening, and the dark-complexioned announcer holding the magical megaphone, bundled up in a warm coat and a red-and-gold scarf against the chill of the November day, grinned in response. "I can't *hear* you..."

The second roar was even louder.

"That's more like it! Introducing... the mavens of might, the apostles of ambition, the snakes from under the lake... iiiiiiit's *SLYTHERIN*!"

Another huge burst of cheering from the section of the audience dressed largely in green, mingled with hisses and boos from the areas in other colors, as seven verdant-robed blurs shot out of one of the passageways to circle the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch in tight formation.

"Facing off with... the champions of chivalry, the knights of nobleness, the high-flying lions... give it up for *GRYFFINDOR*!"

Applause and catcalling magically swapped sides as a septet of shapes clad in crimson sped onto the pitch and took their lap in the opposite direction, the team's captain leaning down as he passed the scarlet portion of the stands to collect a row's worth of high fives.

"With these two sides on the pitch, we know the competition will be intense. Both teams field an excellent squad of Chasers, though Gryffindor may have the edge in experience, and two well-seasoned Keepers, so a nice even bout in that position, though neither squad has had much chance to shake down with their Beaters, both playing rookies in those important spots today. A new captain for Gryffindor this term, which could lead to a change in overall strategy, and one thing's for certain, witches and gentlewizards—with Slytherin a part of this match, fouls will be much in evidence—"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor," said Lindsay Jordan, sounding not at all apologetic. "Madam Hooch is in the center—Bludgers away—Snitch away—Chasers ready, on the whistle—"

A shrill note cut through the crisp late-autumn air, and the cheering spiked again as the Quaffle flew high into the air.

The first Quidditch match of the new school year had begun.

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*Rookie Beaters on both sides, that's true. But ours are skillful rookies, and theirs... Harry dodged*



an inexpertly hit Bludger, nudging the Firebolt higher over the pitch. *What brainiac came up with the brilliant idea of giving Crabbe and Goyle Beater's bats and turning them loose out here? They're more a danger to their own side than they are to ours!* He grinned to himself. *Which is not really a cause for complaint... like Padfoot always says, "Never correct your enemy, just take advantage."*

And he was about to do exactly that.

Sitting more upright than usual, he released the Firebolt's shaft, guiding the broom with knees and weight alone. It cut his speed, but gave him more precision of flight, which was one of the things he most needed at the moment.

*The other one is silence. Which this style of flying also happens to provide, since I'm not moving fast enough to create any audible wind...*

Drifting forward and to his right, hands raised as though he saw the Snitch and was sneaking up on it (which he didn't and wasn't, but if the crowd thought he did and was, so much the better), Harry nudged his broomstick towards Gregory Goyle, who was clutching his bat like a teddy bear, his head pivoting constantly through the half-circle which was all his meaty shoulders would allow. The Gryffindor stands were behind him, and he could hear gasps, squeals, a gradual rise in cheering as his Housemates thought their Seeker was about to end the match early—

*Sorry, everyone. But I am about to do something I think you'll like almost as much!*

"Get Potter!" shouted Urquhart, the Slytherin captain, pointing at Harry furiously. "He's *right behind you!* "

Goyle spun. Harry ducked. The Firebolt, responding like the thoroughbred it was, carried him swiftly out of harm's way.

The same could not be said for Goyle, Nimbus Two Thousand and One or not. The Slytherin clearly hadn't had the chance to practice much with his heavy wooden bat, and the extra weight on his lunge had unbalanced him. His broom swung through a crazy spiral involving all three dimensions of flight, causing him to yelp like a five-year-old girl and cling to it with both hands. His bat, disregarded, wafted towards the ground (being treated with the same spell as the Pennifold Quaffle, so as to give inexperienced school-age players a chance to retrieve their equipment without making student-sized dents in the grass), and his face turned nearly the same shade of green as his robes.

At which point a Bludger, hit late and off-target by Vincent Crabbe, arrived on the scene, and finding no one nearby except Goyle, promptly performed its proper function.

"And one of the Slytherin Beaters is going to need a time-out!" Lindz shouted gleefully above the shrieks of merriment from the Gryffindors and their allies. "Forced by—would you look at that, the *other* Slytherin Beater! More practice next time, boys!"

"Practice?" said Draco, pulling up beside Harry as Madam Pomfrey and a pair of student helpers (neither of which, for a change, was Meghan) hurried onto the field, wands upraised to guide a shaky Goyle to a safe landing. "They really think those two will be improved by practice?"

Harry shrugged. "They could go from 'dangerous to themselves and others' to just 'absolutely hopeless', I guess," he said. "But how much do we want them to?"

"I rather like my skull the way it is. You know, intact." Draco rubbed the back of his head. "Still, the way they're playing, I suppose it's most likely they'll be breaking their own heads before they manage to get around to any of us."

"And with them," Harry finished as Goyle collapsed on top of the student mediwitches, pinning them both to the ground, "even that would be an improvement."

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Ginny held aloof for a few moments from the exuberant mob of Gryffindors rushing the pitch at the end of the match, chanting Harry's name as her mate took his victory lap above their heads, the Snitch safely caged inside his fingers and waving its wings in time with the cheering. Professor Dumbledore had just finished shaking Professor McGonagall's hand, and was now watching not the action on the grass but an area just above it, his eyes behind their half-moon glasses focusing on—

*Me. Well, me and Draco.* She nodded politely to her Headmaster, and received a brief smile in return before Dumbledore's attention returned to the pale-blond Gryffindor captain, who was signing something to his twin on the verges of the crowd below.

*Have the house-elves double-check the food for the party,* Ginny translated automatically, her mind following the flowing gestures as easily as it would have spoken words. *I thought I heard one of the Slytherins saying they'd found a way to slip us some Blistering Brews.* She winced, having no trouble imagining the havoc that might cause, and looked back at Dumbledore.

Who was waving Snape over to his side, his face unusually grave.

Snape's frown turned momentarily thunderous when Dumbledore had finished imparting whatever information he had to give, and the Head of Slytherin House moved off purposefully into the crowd of students, headed for the castle. Ginny had no doubt a number of Slytherins of the Death-Eater's-child persuasion were going to find themselves in particularly unpleasant detentions tonight, not so much for what they'd been planning to do to her Housemates as for the unforgivable sin of getting caught at it.

*None of which touches on the most significant thing I've just learned, which is...*

Slowly, she raised her hands to the "ready" position in front of her chest, bringing Dumbledore's eyes back to her, and began to sign, making her gestures a bit larger than usual to compensate for the long distance between them.

*May we see you tonight? Late, after bedtime? Come in through the door from—* She was about to sign "the Den", but substituted "the Heart" at the last moment after remembering the Hogwarts Den's official title. *Important questions to ask. The big snake upstairs sent us.* She paused, then added one final sign. *Please?*

With a twinkling smile, Professor Dumbledore nodded assent. His own hands rose, moving a bit stiffly and hesitantly but signing a fully understandable response.

*Only because you said "please",* Ginny read from his fingers.

She sent her Cleansweep Ten into a steep dive, laughing as she went, and kissed Harry on the cheek in passing.

*This looks like it's going to be a very special day in a lot of ways.*

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"Den-night?" Ron frowned. "How come? Full moon was a week and a half ago, we're almost to new..."

"Ginny thinks tonight would be a good time to ask Professor Dumbledore those questions Alex said to ask him," said Hermione, dipping the ladle into the punch bowl. "Since Harry finally had a breakthrough with Occlumency on Thursday."

"Helped in Defense, too, didn't it?" Ron accepted the cup of punch and sniffed it cautiously before taking a sip. "Why didn't any of us think of that before? We've only had these—" He tapped a finger against his pendant chain. "—for going on four years now."

"More like three and a half." Hermione poured herself a cup of punch as well. "But it's true that we should have thought of it a long time ago. We just never made the connection from the nonverbal *speech* that the pendant chains allow, and the concentration you need to get across what you want versus just letting all the random thoughts crossing your mind slip out, to nonverbal *spells* and the concentration *they* require—which is almost exactly the same thing." She smiled at him over the rim of her cup. "Not feeling quite so backwards anymore, are you?"

"After popping a good one in past Snape's guard, and doing it with thinking about telling Draco off for spying on us snogging in a broom closet?" Ron snickered. "I'm not sure what part of that was more fun." He had another drink of punch. "Don't need to know, either," he added. "When it's all good... well, it's all good, and that's all there is to it."

"Words to live by." Hermione tapped the rim of her glass against his. "Or drink by. *Cien-cien.*"

"Cheers." Ron drained his cup and handed it over for a refill. "So have you heard anything about what the Ravenclaws are cooking up for Christmas?"

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"Everybody ready?" Harry asked, looking around. Seven heads nodded, and he grinned. "Good,

because if you aren't, here we go anyway. Thank you, Helga!"

The oversized bathtub of the Hogwarts Den, in which the Pride was currently standing, fully-clothed, obediently began to turn itself inside out, its bottom rising like a lift until it was as high above the surrounding tiles as it had been below them a moment ago. Then, in the calm and orderly fashion Harry had come to associate with the work of Helga Hufflepuff (*and isn't that something I can't say anywhere but here*), a set of tiles at the far end of the tub floated upwards to form a staircase, disappearing into a hole which had opened without fanfare in the ceiling far above.

"Ladies first," Harry said, stepping back to wave Ginny and Hermione onward.

Professor Dumbledore was waiting for them, sitting in his usual place behind his desk, Fawkes the phoenix fluffing up his feathers in greeting before beginning to preen a wing as Draco, the last one out, closed the hole by the fireplace with the same words Harry had used to open it. The Pensieve, empty for the moment, sat in the center of the desk, in front of which eight chairs were arranged in a tight circle.

"Professor Snape informs me that you are making progress in your Occlumency lessons, Harry," Dumbledore said while the Pride settled who was sitting next to whom. "Specifically, he expressed a certain level of surprise at the sudden leap in your abilities, and hinted that he should perhaps not have made the suggestion he did, as it may have given you an unwarranted boost in confidence."

"Unwarranted, sir?" Harry asked, taking the chair closest to the desk, Ginny on one side of him, Meghan on the other. "Unless S—*Professor* Snape is going easy on me, I don't think it's unwarranted to say I'm doing better. I was able to stop him every time this last lesson."

"Indeed, and I doubt Severus would 'go easy' on you, especially now that you have begun to show true improvement. Still, do not neglect your practice or become overconfident." Dumbledore's eyes, which had been twinkling with amusement, were now grave and cool. "Remember that Lord Voldemort is both a powerful and a ruthless Legilimens, and has, unlike Severus, no reason to hold back should he decide that your mind would be a good ground for his next attack. In fact, it might make his task easier were you to become... unbalanced, shall we say. I know that you have defenses, and defenders, of your own, but vigilance never goes amiss." He smiled faintly. "And as I am sure you remember, it should be constant."

Neville, on Meghan's other side, covered a snicker with his hand, and Luna nodded thoughtfully beside him. "How is Professor Moody, sir?" she asked. "We haven't seen him for a while."

"You are unlikely to. He is overseas, following certain reports that Voldemort may be recruiting in Russia or the Baltic states. Which is, of course, not to be repeated." Dumbledore sat up straighter, laying his hands flat on the desk. "As is everything you will see and hear in this office tonight. Perhaps we should discuss that point now."

Draco squeezed Luna's hand once, and Hermione bumped shoulders with him, then threaded her

own fingers through Ron's. Harry felt Ginny's arm brush against his where the armrests of their chairs touched. Meghan had her legs drawn up under her, her head resting against the corner of Neville's chair.

"I was, to some extent, forewarned of the topics about which you wish to ask me, and I have prepared to show you those things which you ought now to know." Dumbledore gestured towards the Pensieve and a shelf to one side of the room, cluttered with objects large and small. "There are portions of this information, however, to which there is currently no need for you to be privy. You are all old enough to understand that I am not withholding this knowledge simply for the joy of having secrets, but because it could be genuinely harmful, to you or to the war effort, if you knew these things at the present time." His eyes moved slowly around the circle, looking directly at each Warrior in turn. "Do you understand?"

"Sir," said Draco a bit diffidently. "No disrespect intended, but—what if you die before you get a chance to tell us something?"

"A fair question." Dumbledore nodded, as though Draco had asked something as innocuous as in which shed the extra school brooms were kept. "I have made arrangements, in the event of my death before the end of the war, for each of you to receive the additional information you may need to fulfill your tasks. Nothing will be lost, even should that death occur tonight." His smile returned, touched with irony. "Though I do hope it will not, as you would be likely to find that alarming."

Harry attempted not to snort a laugh and was only partially successful.

"With that in mind, shall we begin?" Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "The night grows no younger, nor do we."

Hermione extracted from her pocket the slip of parchment onto which she had transcribed the six lines of Danger's prophecy and the four Alex had added, along with the information Luna had received from her father about the Deathly Hallows, then passed it around the circle for Harry to lay on Dumbledore's desk beside the Pensieve. The Headmaster perused it, nodding to himself. "On which topic do you wish to begin?" he asked when he was finished, looking up at the Pride. "The Hallows, or the other items mentioned here?"

"I think the Hallows, sir," Harry said after a brief poll of Warriors by eye. "Only because we already know a little bit about them, and we don't know anything about the other ones. Not even if they have a name."

"They do have a name, Harry, and one you might find surprisingly familiar." Dumbledore's smile broadened briefly. "Might I recall to you the term 'Horcrux'?"

For one instant, Harry's mind was blank. Then his eyes fell on the Pensieve, and everything came back to him in a rush. *The summer before my fourth year—Professor Slughorn and that altered memory—I'd just finished my Animagus, and I was able to use what I could smell about him to play on his emotions, convince him to give me the true copy—*

"However, as you have requested, let us start with the Deathly Hallows." Dumbledore set the parchment aside and steepled his hands again. "What is it you wish to know?"

Hermione glanced at Luna, then swallowed and spoke out. "Sir—are they *real*?"

"They are very real," Dumbledore said gravely. "And the quest to find them has consumed more than one life. I have seen them all over the course of my own lifetime, though never—" A moment of darkness seemed to touch his eyes. "—never all at once, nor often under the best of circumstances."

"Is the Elder Wand really unbeatable?" Ron asked. "I mean, what if the wizard who had it wasn't even trying?"

"It does require action from its master, yes, as does any wand." Dumbledore drew his own wand and laid it on the desk in front of him. "It could not, for instance, defend me now if one of you were to attack me." He smiled at Luna, who was tilting her head to one side, regarding the wand curiously. "Does its magic have an unusual signature?"

"Not unusual." Luna blinked several times, returning her eyes to their normal focus. "Only very powerful, and linked even more strongly to you than most people's wands are to them. How would someone get to be its master?"

"In the same way that one becomes the master of any wand, either by the wand's own choosing—as happened to all of you when you were young, in Ollivander's in Diagon Alley, when you were chosen by the proper wands for you—or by defeat of the wand's current master in some form of true combat, with an objective in play other than what are commonly called 'bragging rights'." Dumbledore slid his wand away again. "Have you ever tried to use another person's wand for more than the most rudimentary of spells?"

Neville nodded. "It doesn't work quite right," he said. "Dad's never did, for me, and it took me a while to get used to having my own." He grinned reminiscently. "I turned one of Professor McGonagall's walls into ice cream my first day back for winter term that year."

"Strawberry, if I remember correctly." Dumbledore nodded. "And if, for some unknown reason, you had attempted to use that wand *against* your father, I doubt it would have acceded to your wish. Most wands will not attack their masters effectively, and the Elder Wand, by all accounts, will refuse to allow *any* spell to be cast with it which its master does not desire, even should it somehow pass out of its master's hands."

"So if I had the Elder Wand, and I dropped it," Ron said, sketching the situation with his hands. "And, say, somebody like Draco picked it up. He couldn't use it against me, because he never beat me at anything?"

"What do you mean I never—" Draco began hotly. Hermione and Ginny treated him to a tandem *look*, and he turned pink and closed his mouth.

"If he had never beaten you at anything since you had become the Elder Wand's master, that is correct," Dumbledore said as though there had been no interruption. "Or if the defeat had been friendly, a pick-up match of Quidditch, perhaps, or a chess game to pass the time between classes or while riding the Hogwarts Express. You see the distinction."

"And that's why wands don't change owners when we're just dueling in class, or at DA practice," said Hermione. "Because even though we may not like some of the people we're dueling with, it's *practice*. No one's going to get hurt or killed if we lose, and we aren't going to be able to escape our enemies or steal a thing we need if we win."

Dumbledore inclined his head to her. "Cogently and succinctly put. Are there any other questions on this topic before we continue?"

"Does anyone know where the Elder Wand is now, or who has it?" Meghan asked. "I'd think if Voldemort knew it was real, he'd want it very much."

"He would, and does." Dumbledore's expression darkened again. "As he has, I am sorry to say, drawn the correct conclusion from the linkage between your wands, Harry, at the Ministry of Magic last year near this time." He held out his hand. "May I see it?"

Harry snapped his wrist and deposited his wand in Dumbledore's palm, watching as the Headmaster turned and showed the wand to Fawkes. The phoenix bent to examine the wand, then sang one soft, penetrating note, half-spreading his wings.

Ron squinted and shielded his eyes with a hand an instant before Harry's wand began to glow all over with a warm red light.

"Fawkes!" Meghan exclaimed. "Did the feather for Harry's wand come from you? But then—" She stiffened, and Neville covered her hand with his free one.

"Precisely," said Dumbledore, handing Harry's no-longer-glowing wand back to its owner. "Just as no wand will fight effectively against its master, no wand fights willingly against its brother. Lord Voldemort will therefore be seeking another wand to offset what he sees as a deficiency in his own. The attempts made on Mr. Ollivander's shop and person, both over the summer and more recently than that, suggest to me that either Voldemort desires to have a new wand specifically constructed for him, or that he wishes to gather information on wand lore and simultaneously deprive his enemies of that information."

"Neither of which is a good thing," said Draco. "But you said attempts, sir? He didn't succeed?"

"He did not." Dumbledore looked faintly smug. "For which I may congratulate myself in part, though my contribution was only the latest in a long line of security charms. It is, as you may imagine, difficult to break into a place so inherently magical as a wand shop. But enough self-flattery on my part. Shall we continue exploring the world of the Deathly Hallows?"

"The Resurrection Stone," said Hermione immediately. "What does it *really* do? No magic can

awaken the dead..."

"So it cannot, but memories and images of those who have passed from this life can be evoked through the offices of the Stone." Dumbledore glanced upward at the portraits, most of whom were listening avidly. "Not unlike another method wizards have been known to use, in the service of keeping some semblance of the past alive."

"Oh." Hermione subsided. "Well, if *that's* all it does."

"Having no personal experience with the Stone, I cannot state it with certainty, but such is my belief," Dumbledore added.

"I thought you said you'd seen them all, sir," said Neville.

"Seen, yes, but my acquaintance with the Stone was cut short by... unfortunate circumstances." Dumbledore tapped a finger against the back of his right hand. "You and Meghan may recall assisting me with the consequences of one of those circumstances."

"Are the Hallows dangerous, then?" Harry asked, thinking of the nasty curse-induced burns Meghan and Neville, with the Pride's help, had been able to partially heal on Dumbledore's hand two summers before.

"The Stone had been meddled with, I believe, by someone who did not recognize it as such but valued it for another reason, and I was careless enough to miss the signs of that meddling." Dumbledore sighed. "I paid the penalty for that carelessness, as I am sure you remember. The other Hallows are, to the best of my knowledge, untainted." He looked at Harry. "Or has your father's Cloak been misbehaving recently?"

Harry shook his head, wondering for one instant why the Invisibility Cloak had come up.

Then he remembered the third item which completed the Deathly Hallows.

"No way," said Ron, shaking his head in turn. "No way ." Then his ears flushed as he remembered to whom he was talking. "Er, sorry, Professor. But..."

"But it seems incredible that an object you know so well, one which you have seen, touched, and used many times, could also be an article out of legend?" Dumbledore finished. "I fear you must steel yourself for worse shocks than that before this night is over, Mr. Weasley. But I digress. Has your curiosity been satisfied regarding the Hallows for the moment?"

"Are we going to need them, sir?" asked Luna. "To fight the war, I mean. Even if they can't really bring back the dead, they sound like very powerful magic. Maybe we should look for them, to have them in reserve. In case we need the extra power for a spell, or we find a magical creature like a dragon or a goblin which has what we want and collects powerful things. Then we could trade."

"An excellent point." Dumbledore smiled. "However, as it happens, I am cognizant of the current



location of all three of the Deathly Hallows, and will share that information should it be needed. As you say, Miss Lovegood, whether we eventually wish to use their magic or merely bargain them for something we like better, the important point at this juncture is that Voldemort *cannot* use them. And as you have brought up goblins, I will ask you to remind me before we disperse tonight that I have a favor to ask of Harry and Meghan regarding that very point."

"I will, sir." Luna nodded, sitting back in her chair. "So what is a Horcrux? Or is that not where we ought to begin?"

"Perhaps not where we ought to, but as the question has been asked, I will answer. Under one condition." Dumbledore got to his feet, looking down sternly at the Pride. In the back of Harry's mind, Wolf gave a quiet whine but stood his ground, refusing to cower. "You will shortly be hearing things which have taken me many years of my life to learn, not the least of which time was spent in ensuring that I could learn them in secret. No one—*no one*—must hear of them from you, or my time will have been wasted, and what is far worse, our task in this war, *Harry's* task, will become exponentially more difficult. It may even become impossible. Do you understand?"

Meghan was gray-faced, Neville pale, but they nodded in unison. Luna inclined her head solemnly, Draco's nod a beat behind her. Hermione whispered, "Yes, sir," Ron lifting their joined hands slightly to indicate that what she said went also for him. Ginny brushed a finger in an X across her lips, symbolically sealing them.

Harry met his Headmaster's eyes steadily. "We understand, sir," he said in the formal tone he reserved for the moments when he spoke not only as himself but as the alpha of the Pride. "Should we do something about it?" he added, dropping back to his normal manner of speech. "To remind ourselves, just so we don't forget and slip?"

"As it happens, I come prepared with something which may serve." Dumbledore seated himself again, his momentary seriousness sliding away to be replaced by his more usual expression of good cheer. "A variant on a Tongue-Tying Jinx, which will make your lips and tongue prickle and itch if you begin to veer too close to indiscreet conversational subjects in public."

"Isn't that a little risky?" Hermione objected. "I mean, I apologize if you've thought of this already, Professor, but you're saying that people's *lives* could depend on our not telling these secrets. Shouldn't we be, I don't know, Vowed against telling?"

"Oi!" Ron glared at her. "All very well for you—you never forget anything! What about the rest of us, who don't have that perfect memory of yours?"

"There is another consideration as well," said Dumbledore calmly, cutting off Hermione's hot rejoinder. "Anyone who finds the traces of a Tongue-Tying Jinx on a wizard or witch your age would most likely assume that he or she had recently been the subject of a schoolchild's prank. An Unbreakable Vow, or any of the related spells with slightly less serious consequences, would tend to lead instead to the conclusion that sensitive information is involved."

"I see. That does make sense." Hermione nodded, settling back in her chair and crossing her

ankles. "So what *is* a Horcrux? I've never come across that term before, not even in the N.E.W.T.-level books Moony found for me."

"You would not come upon it until well beyond that point." Dumbledore's expression was neutral to a point which clashed painfully with Harry's scent-borne awareness of his distaste verging on disgust for this topic. "A Horcrux, in simplest terms, is an item with a soul, or rather, with *part* of a soul..."

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What seemed like a very long time later, but by Harry's watch had been no more than a couple of hours, the Pride emerged from the final memory through which Dumbledore had escorted them, that which Harry had obtained from Slughorn two summers before, pale and shaken. Draco, in particular, looked badly disturbed by what he had seen and heard, the hand of his which was not crushing Luna's closed tightly around his chair's armrest.

"He made *seven* of those things?" Ron said incredulously, removing Harry's pendant chain, through which the seven subordinate Warriors had followed Harry and Dumbledore through The Life of Tom Marvolo Riddle, Abridged. "How much soul has he got *left*?"

"Judge for yourself by his actions." Dumbledore removed the silver memory from the Pensieve and returned it to its bottle. "But no, Mr. Weasley, not seven, but six. He wished his soul itself to be divided into seven parts, and one of those parts he has retained within his own body."

"Well, that's good, I suppose. But *still* ." Ron shuddered. "He really is mad, sir, isn't he?"

"No, he is quite sane, but it is the peculiar type of sanity which recognizes no being other than itself as truly human." Dumbledore set the memory bottle on the shelf to the left of his desk, beside a blackened ring with a heavy, ornate setting and a stone cracked down the center, as if it had been through a fire. "If you take that into account, all his actions make perfect sense. They benefit and ensure the continued existence of the one true human in the world, and if a few lesser beings suffer along the way, what does that matter?" He frowned, returning to his desk for the Pensieve. "Though I suppose I must amend my earlier statement, as no truly sane person enjoys the suffering even of lesser beings. Lord Voldemort goes out of his way to cause it."

Neville and Meghan had been whispering urgently together. Now Neville looked up. "Sir," he said, a curious air of suppressed triumph about him. "Have we ever come into contact with any Horcruxes? I mean all of us, the Pride."

"You have," Dumbledore acknowledged, sitting down again. "Two, by my count. And a third, in Harry's case, but that was before she, or rather it, became a Horcrux."

Harry had little trouble parsing this, remembering what Snape had gone out of his way to tell him after the disastrous third task of the Triwizard Tournament. "Nagini," he said. "I killed her at the graveyard, and then he turned her into an Inferius." He frowned. "But wouldn't killing her mean the bit of soul in her got lost? I mean, if she died, that means *her* soul went away..."

"I don't think it works like that," said Draco, his tone dead. "Otherwise why would he have bothered?"

"It does not," Dumbledore confirmed, looking grave. "If a living being is made into a Horcrux, the only way in which the soul piece is released by the being's simple death is if its creator kills it with full intent to do so. Otherwise, the soul piece remains tied to that being's body until no pieces of it are discernible as the remains of a living creature. Which takes, as I am sure you know, a very long time indeed. Still, it seems Lord Voldemort wishes to keep the last of his Horcruxes close at hand, and a snake Inferius fits his multiple obsessions admirably." He smiled slightly. "And here I am, babbling on about random tangents yet again. I do beg your pardon. You were saying, Mr. Longbottom?"

"I think I know what they were." Neville was sitting very straight in his chair, one hand resting lightly on his potion piece. Beside him, Meghan was practically quivering with excitement, the same expression on her face that Harry usually associated with her birthday. "The Horcruxes we've seen. I think I can tell you what they were, and how we'd know if we saw another one."

Dumbledore made a small, palm-up gesture of invitation. "Please, enlighten us."

"The diary was one!" Meghan burst out, clearly unable to contain herself another moment. "Tom Riddle's diary, that you killed in the Chamber of Secrets, Ginny—I *knew* it felt nasty for a reason, I just *knew* it!"

Ginny let out a long breath of astonishment. "No wonder it could possess Percy and me so easily," she said on the tail end of it. "It wasn't just an enchanted object—it was a piece of Voldemort himself!"

"Which means the other one must be the locket we found at Grimmauld Place, the one that Regulus Black stole from the cave and gave to Kreacher to bring home," said Luna, quirking an eyebrow at Neville, who nodded in confirmation. "That would certainly explain why I could see Voldemort in it. He was really there."

"Which means you can see them," said Harry, pointing to Luna. "And we—" His finger indicated Neville, Meghan, and himself. "—can all *feel* them." He grimaced. "For whatever good *that* does. We can't exactly go around touching everything in the country on the off-chance it might be a Horcrux!"

"No, you cannot," Dumbledore agreed, his eyes twinkling. "But there may be a way to winnow down the number of objects which must be so discerned. Have you hit upon the common thread among those who react to the presence of Lord Voldemort's Horcruxes? Other than our Seer, of course," he added, smiling at Luna, who awarded him a small, seated bow.

"Heirs," said Hermione after a moment. "You're all Heirs of the Founders. And so is Voldemort, he makes a fuss about it every chance he gets. And didn't he say—"

"The locket," said Ron, snapping his fingers. "It was one of old Gaunt's family treasures, because

it was 'Salazar Slytherin's, what do you say to that, eh?'" He imitated Marvolo Gaunt's cracked tones with a surprising degree of success. "And then the cup Riddle tricked that old woman into showing him, whatever-her-name-was Smith—"

"Hepzibah," Neville supplied. "She was a cousin of my grandfather's, a couple times removed. Gran used to tell me stories about her, how her house-elf had poisoned her by accident." He scowled. "Except she didn't."

"And that fits, too." Ron pointed at Neville. "Can't you see it? The locket came down from Slytherin, the cup from Hufflepuff..."

"It all comes back to the Founders," said Draco, looking up. "So should we be looking for things that belong to Ravenclaw and Gryffindor as well?"

"Maybe not Gryffindor," said Harry, glancing up at the Sorting Hat, reposing innocently on its shelf. "Remember his talent for putting magic into things, magic that would last a thousand years and still be strong? I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to put a piece of my soul into anything like that, especially if I knew its magic wasn't going to like me."

"Point," Draco acknowledged. "But that still leaves us with Ravenclaw, and that's a place to start." He smiled, the expression thin but true. "We've got an advantage over some people, anyway."

"You mean how we can actually go and ask her?" Hermione inquired with a little giggle. "So tell me if I have this right, Professor." She held out her left hand and tapped her thumb. "We have the diary. Destroyed in our second year, Ginny's first." Her index finger. "The locket. You took it away from Grimmauld Place, and I don't know what you've done with it, but somehow I don't think you would have lost it."

"Your confidence in me is quite overwhelming, Hermione," Dumbledore said blandly. "Please, continue."

Hermione smiled and went on, tapping her middle finger. "We have the snake. Or Voldemort has the snake, but at least that means we know where she is." Her ring finger. "And we have the cup. We may not know where it is, but we know what it looks like." She hooked her little finger around the thumb of her other hand. "Which means there are two we don't know anything about. One of them might be something of Ravenclaw's, but we can't be sure." Letting her hands fall to her lap, she lifted her head. "Is that correct?"

"Almost." Dumbledore drew his wand and Summoned an object from the shelf on which he had placed the memory. It was, Harry noticed as it zoomed through the air, the ring he had noticed earlier, the ring which, if he was not mistaken—

"Sir, isn't that the ring Marvolo Gaunt was wearing?" he asked, leaning forward to have a better look at it. "The ring he said belonged to another pureblood family he was the last descendent of, besides Slytherin's?"

"Peverell," Hermione put in, craning her neck. "He said it had the coat of arms of the Peverell family on it." She frowned. "Though I don't see any coat of arms there, only a couple of scratches."

"Hard to see anything about it with that great big crack down the middle, and all the soot everywhere," said Ron. "Did it get burned at some point?"

"I fear I am the one responsible." Dumbledore smiled grimly. "Though it was hardly an act of neglect." He tapped a finger against the ring. "This, my friends, *was* a Horcrux. It is no longer. Which means, on that tally of yours, Hermione, that we are down to only one about which we know little or nothing. And even that may no longer be the case, thanks to a certain lady who was kind enough to share with me a memory with which Voldemort unknowingly gifted her..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 12: Morning, Noon, and Night (Year 6)

The crash was what woke him. The associated sounds, such as the small tinkling noise made by a shower of glass shards hitting the floor, the guilty whisper of "Uh-oh", and the three sets of pattering feet, one significantly larger than the other two, moving hastily away from the scene of the crime made an impression on him only after the fact.

*The Unholy Trinity strikes again.* Remus opened his eyes, administering a mental caress to Danger as she stirred beside him, her mind beginning its usual slow climb towards the light (which would, he was sure, have been a great deal faster had she not already registered that *he* was awake and dealing with whatever had just been knocked down, fallen through, run over, or otherwise destroyed). *I'll have to ask Sirius if house-elflets are usually this much trouble...*

Though, on second thoughts, perhaps he didn't have to bother. House-elflets, after all, would usually have been raised in strict seclusion, trained in the duties they had been born to perform by the parents they would one day succeed, and taught from birth that the mark of a good house-elf was never to be seen by the humans of the household unless a master or mistress had an order to give.

*Whereas these two...* Remus swung his legs out of bed, lighting the logs which had been laid in his and Danger's fireplace with an absent flick of his fingers. *Well, I can't fault the way Echo is taking to her work. Never happy unless she's got something to do, that one. And since Cissus's only duty at the moment is to companion Bernie, he's actually doing what we've asked of him quite well. The only problem is, Echo may be growing up faster than they are, but she's still only the equivalent of a human nine-year-old. Not quite to the age where she can rein them in, and young enough to want to play with them as soon as all their chores are done. Which means...*

Pulling on his dressing gown, he opened the door.

The source of the crash was immediately apparent. What had been a glass-fronted curio cabinet, set into a nook halfway down the third floor corridor of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, was now a leaning pile of bent and twisted wood, shattered glass, and fragments of knickknack. Remus regarded the wreckage for a moment, then returned to the bedside to find his slippers. Stepping barefoot on small sharp objects was not his idea of a pleasant start to the day.

**Mmm**, Danger said sleepily, the inaudible sound carrying with it a freight of feelings and images, conveying her own notion of what might constitute a more enjoyable morning activity.

**Will this do?** Remus asked, leaning down to lay a light kiss on her lips.

**For now.** One slender arm reached up and rested a hand against his wrist for a moment as he straightened, before its owner burrowed back down into the bedclothes so far that only a tangle of brown curls betrayed her location. Stifling a chuckle, Remus returned to the door, leaning against the frame and looking out at the tiny disaster area.

"Good heavens, what a mess," he said lightly. "Still, nothing a little magical help couldn't put right. If someone were to *ask* for that help, of course."

For a moment, he thought he had misread the scents drifting along the corridor, but then a small hiss of whispering voices from Arthur and Molly's empty bedroom brought a smile to his lips. *I knew I hadn't lost my touch that far...*

Farther down the hall, another door opened, and Voni Pritchard, sleep-tousled, stepped out, her face a study in tried maternal patience. Somewhere downstairs, Remus was sure, Winky was or shortly would be wearing an identical expression.

In the way of early mornings, a random association of ideas caught his mind and presented him with an image of the fountain in the Atrium at the Ministry of Magic, and he found himself wondering how centaur and goblin mothers dealt with rambunctious offspring. Were centaur children—*or would that be foals?*—ever enthusiastic and overflowing with energy, or were they born with the grave demeanor which generally characterized their race? And what did one call goblin children, anyway? He doubted the guardians of the wizarding world's money supply would take kindly to his mind's irreverent suggestion of "goblets".

*Or was that my mind, hmm?*

**What makes you think I'd have anything to do with a pun that awful?** Danger inquired from the depths of her nest. **Other than experience, I mean. And if you're really so curious, write to Amy. I'm sure she'll know.**

**So she would, and so I may. But in the meantime...** Remus emerged from his brown study to discover a trio of sheepish-looking children, one human and two house-elf, all standing in the doorway of the bedroom in which they'd taken refuge and intently studying the pattern on the hallway carpet. **I think I'll defer this one to the actual parent involved.**

"Bernie," Voni said gently, bringing her daughter's head up to look at her. "What happened?"

"It was an accident," Bernie blurted all in a rush. "We were trying to see how fast we could go and still be quiet and not wake anybody up and I went *too* fast and bumped it with my shoulder and—" A shamefaced wave of her hand indicated the resulting damage. "It's my fault, not theirs, please don't get angry at them!"

"We were running too," said Echo quickly, over Cissus's vehement "I bumped it first!"

Sirius, who had emerged silently from his bedroom next to Remus and Danger's own during this exchange, glanced over his dressing-gown-clad shoulder at Remus, raising an eyebrow. *Takes you back a bit, doesn't it?* Remus translated. *Only we had four of them, and they were all human...*

"No permanent harm done," Voni was saying now, several graceful waves of her wand having restored the cabinet to its original position and condition, the knickknacks flying back together as she spoke. "But this is why we don't run indoors, isn't it? Especially not when people are trying to



sleep. Now, if you all have that much energy to spare, why don't you take it down to the kitchen and see if there isn't something you can do to help with getting breakfast ready. And then, later this morning, I have some errands to run in Diagon Alley and I'll need helpers to carry bags..."

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The woman who had once been named Evanie Meade curled herself into the round sill of her tower room's window and watched the sun come up.

*It's like being Rapunzel, only without the hair. She cast a glance behind her to the wide, comfortable bed where her husband, shifting fitfully, slept on without her. And I don't suppose Peter would be anybody's idea of a prince but mine. Still, he is mine and I intend to keep him. Her chin rose, defiantly, in the general direction of the main body of the manor house. No matter what his so-called Master may have to say on the subject.*

The longer she was married to the man most of his acquaintances still called Wormtail, the more Evanie was certain that her first impression of him had been correct. He had no predilection for evil or cruelty, as so many of the Death Eaters did, and had certainly never intended to betray his friends or join the other side of the magical war from theirs. But once he had succumbed to bribes, threats, or persuasions (she wasn't sure which, but suspected a combination of the latter two from some of the nightmares she'd coaxed him out of) from the Dark side, he had thereafter been caught in a downward slide, unable to back away from that single fatal step.

*None of which excuses him from what he did, but he isn't asking to be excused. Evanie's eyes softened as she watched Peter toss restlessly on his pillow. He regrets it every day, and especially every night, of his life. And if he ever saw a way to escape from here, a way that wasn't just a trap waiting to happen, one that would truly leave us free and not looking over our shoulders forever...*

But then, Evanie reminded herself, freedom could take many forms. Peter had offered her the literal sort once, had in fact ordered her to return to the Muggle world from which she'd been taken by the Death Eaters, and she had refused.

*Because I knew he wouldn't be there, and I wasn't about to go away from the only person who had ever looked at me and seen more than a nuisance or a convenience. Who looked at me and saw me, Evanie, and wanted me. Needed me. Just like I needed him, and wanted him, in a world where that hadn't been true for him for a very long time.*

Hopping down from the windowsill, she slipped back under the covers, allowing her feet a moment to warm up, then slid into the center of the bed, catching Peter's flesh-and-blood hand in her own and planting a kiss over his wedding band. He stilled immediately, whatever dream had been tormenting him chased off by her presence.

*We are one another's freedom, now. And no escape would be complete, or true, unless both of us were able to take it. So until one comes along, we'll keep our heads down and stay out of the way. She smiled, allowing him to pull her close, fitting her body against his and accepting his sleepy nuzzle into her hair. And who knows? Maybe by the time we find that escape, "both of us" may have become "all of us"...*

Aletha Black shut her office door behind her, shook it slightly to be sure the lock had engaged, and started for the stairs, her mind setting aside consideration of the essay she was planning to assign the third-year Gryffindors and Slytherins today to ponder the far more interesting question of what might be available in the Great Hall for breakfast.

*And if the Pride isn't at this meal, I'm speaking to Minerva. Whatever it is Albus has had them running and finding out for him over these last two weeks, it shouldn't be allowed to interfere with their normal schedule. At their time of life—especially my Pearl, young as she is, but all of them are still in that transitional stage—they need to eat and sleep on as regular a timetable as possible.*

*Besides, even if they're getting special attention from the house-elves, their friends are going to start noticing when they keep skipping meals and free periods. I even heard one of the Gryffindor Beaters complaining the other day that Harry and Ginny had missed a practice! She shook her head, smiling. If there were any better way to tell the world that you're Up To Something, boy-cub, I can't think of it. Not with as Quidditch-mad as the entire school knows you are.*

Something prickled at the edge of her consciousness, something she ought to be aware of. She frowned, stopping in the middle of the corridor, trying to track it down. Was it a thought? A way of thinking? A shift in viewpoint, something that her thoughts had implied? Or was it—

*What it is, is gone. And rightfully so, if I'm going to pursue it so vigorously that I frighten it away.* Aletha sighed and resumed her purposeful progress. *I'm sure it will come back when I'm more ready to let it appear in its own time.*

Checking both ways to be sure she was unobserved, she ducked behind a tapestry to which she'd been introduced four years before, one which hid a most useful secret passage. Not only did it give her two floors' head start in getting from her office and quarters to the Great Hall, it had a gently curving nook off its entrance (or exit, if one were using it in the opposite direction) which was just the right size to hold two consenting adults...

*All right, Mrs. Black, that will do.* Under her breath, she chuckled. *Just because you've been thinking lately about how chilly and empty your bed is feeling is no reason to call up the sorts of memories which will get you awkward questions—or worse than that, knowing looks—from the other teachers at the breakfast table!*

Whatever her fleeting thought had been, she noted, it must have been a good one. She hadn't been this cheerful in the morning in...

*Well. Quite a long time.*

Humming the Paradox Trio under her breath, Aletha continued on her way.

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Harry perched on the edge of the crow's nest on the pirate ship the Hogwarts Den had obligingly

supplied upon Draco's whimsical comment that the introduction of Horcruxes into their lives meant they were off on a hunt for buried treasure, reading over the letter Professor Dumbledore had "strongly suggested" he write to his Aunt Amy. He was, for once, alone in the Den, the rest of the Pride being down in Sanctuary supervising the small army of house-elves which was setting up a picnic lunch for the yearmates.

*I wonder if they're related? House-elves and goblins, that is...*

He leaned back against the mast, yawning. It was nice to know that Dumbledore considered him and the Pride old enough not to be sheltered from ugly truths, but some of the reading about Horcruxes had left him staring sleepless at his bed's canopy for hours at a time or waking in the middle of the night, mercifully without screaming, from some of the worst non-Voldemort-induced dreams of his life.

*Though I suppose these are Voldemort-induced, really. Just not as directly as some of mine have been.*

Shaking off this line of thought as unproductive, he returned his attention to the letter.

*Dear Aunt Amy,*

*How are things between the three rivers? Has it snowed there yet? We've had a few sprinkles here, but nothing that stuck so far. The lake is starting to get bits of ice on it in the mornings, though, and we haven't seen the giant squid in a week.*

*I'm into my sixth year at Hogwarts now, and I thought it might be easier since we aren't rushing towards O.W.L.s, but I was wrong. Everything is a big step up from what we were doing last year, but I've kept up with it so far. Now I just have to find time to breathe!*

*In any case, the reason I'm writing is that I need to learn a few things about goblins, and someone suggested to me that I might want to ask you. Can you tell me why it is that goblins and wizards don't seem to trust each other, or define certain words the same way?*

*If you want to write back, that would be fine, but that same someone was also suggesting that Christmas is coming, and it's been a while since you came to visit us. I think Letha would like to see you again. I know Meghan and I would, and Neenie and Draco.*

*I hope to hear from you soon.*

*Your favorite nephew,*

*Harry*

As literary efforts went, Harry knew he'd done better, but it got his point across.

*Besides, Meghan's writing to her too, and Aunt Amy's a smart witch. Both of us together asking her to come for Christmas won't tip anyone else off—just in case somebody happens to be reading her*

*mail—but it ought to clue her in right away that something's up. And those questions about goblins look like they could be for a school project... except they're not.*

Letting the letter roll back up into its loose tube, Harry stretched, aware as never before of the dagger at his hip. He'd known it was an excellent weapon and a dangerous one, but he'd never realized that Ginny, plunging it into Sangre's face in the Chamber of Secrets, must have hit one of the basilisk's venom sacs with the blade.

*Because I used it to kill the diary afterwards, and it wouldn't have done that on its own. But goblin-wrought silver, or really any metal they've worked, absorbs whatever will make it stronger or more potent—and basilisk venom definitely counts!*

*I wonder if goblin-wrought weapons take masters the way wands do? He drew the dagger, careful to hold it properly, and laid it flat on his palm, squinting across its blade. Or if there's some other way it can know what I want, even if I don't know it myself? Because I've used it for things basilisk venom would ruin—cutting strings or ropes when I do Muggle magic with Ginny, crushing or chopping ingredients in Potions... His grades, under the doubly beneficent influence of the Half-Blood Prince and Professor Black, continued at a level which gave him hope for the eventual O at the N.E.W.T. level he knew he would need to be accepted as an Auror apprentice. Even when Moony and I made the blood-bond locket, we used it for that, and it didn't kill us.*

The thought of blood brought up another memory—the first day he had ever seen his dagger, seated around the Christmas tree with the rest of the Pack, and the first thing he'd managed to do with it, attempting to imitate Moony, who'd been holding Draco's blade on a single fingertip to show off its balance—

"Well, that would make sense." Harry sheathed his dagger and willed it back to its place under his robes, a weight so familiar he forgot half the time it was there. "I got my blood on it. Probably the first blood it ever felt, unless one of the goblins who made it was careless. And then Ginny girded me with it." He had to snicker at the memory of the long-ago awkwardness of that Christmas afternoon, of his own fervent desire to keep Ginny from thinking there was anything other than friendship behind his request. "Could be either of those, or some of both. More likely to be the blood, though." He stroked the chain of his Pack-pendants, but then his smile faded as he glanced down at the crook of his left elbow, where a tiny scar lay hidden by the sleeve of his robes.

*Voldemort used my blood to come back to life. Or no, not come back, he was still more or less alive—because of his Horcruxes, finally it makes some sense that he didn't die when the Killing Curse bounced off me and hit him instead—but to get back a body, one that wasn't patched together out of unicorn blood and snake venom. He couldn't resist a smile, wobbly but real. Just out of his dad's bones, Wormtail's hand, and my blood. None of which has anything to do with Salazar Slytherin...*

"But I suppose Hermione would tell me that doesn't matter," he said, scooping up the letter and starting down from the crow's nest one-handed. "That the three elements of the ritual are just points of similarity, ways for the magic to know who this person is and what their original body was like, so it can build them a new body exactly like the old one." He paused halfway down the

mast. "And that was really scary, how I knew all that straight off. I'd better not be turning into Hermione, one swot in the Pride is enough..."

*In any case, it doesn't matter where he came from. What matters is beating him, and doing it soon. We've already started, what with the diary and the ring, and finding the locket, even if we can't get rid of it yet. Knowing what the other ones are doesn't hurt either—weird how he accidentally gave away the last one to Letha, showing her that memory about killing her dad and taking her mum's brooch. But I guess he thought she'd never work out what it meant, or get a chance to tell anyone if she did.* Harry grinned, Wolf-like. *Too bad for him he was wrong.*

Jumping the rest of the way to the floor, which obligingly softened at his landing spot, he headed for the Den's library, which let out inside the hospital wing, the closest approach (this week) to Sanctuary's entrance behind the mirror on the fourth floor.

*Which I could also now use to sneak out to Hogsmeade, if I were feeling rule-breaking. Which...* He pretended to feel his forehead, as if checking for a fever. *Eh, not today. Too much to do right here, especially with den tonight.*

To the yearmates' satisfaction, they had indeed been able to excavate the cave-in which had originally scratched the mirror's tunnel off the list of secret ways in and out of Hogwarts. Still, clearing it had been the easy part, Harry admitted. Making sure it wouldn't happen again had been more difficult, and was only solved now thanks to Ravenclaw planning, Hufflepuff tenacity, and Slytherin ingenuity. Specifically, the Ravenclaws had worked out the proper angles at which the walls of the tunnel would stably support one another, the Hufflepuffs had done the extra-strength bracing spells which held the dirt in the right place, and the Slytherins had sprayed on a potion concocted from two common classroom brews which fused that dirt into stone.

*All of which was done last month, and we're halfway finished with the dormitories already. I even know some people who're planning to use them tonight...*

The thought of the second Pride, as always, gave Harry a brief chill. His own Pride had come together when they were too young to really know what they were getting into, to understand the full repercussions of the promise they were making. So far, they'd been lucky enough or strong enough to hold up to it, but they were going into a war, and at least one of them had already been seen switching sides.

*What is the Founders' Oath going to do to Luna when her vision comes true? And what about the others, Lee and Maya's Pride? How far are they planning to take this—and are they going to be the only ones? They used a modified oath, so it probably won't "give them no rest in life or in death" if they break it, but promises matter in magic, just like blood...*

Sliding to a halt inside the tunnel which exited near the hospital wing's fireplace, Harry flattened his hand against its curved wall, focusing on the smooth, cool texture of the stone against his skin, using it to calm his mind and slow his racing thoughts. *Nothing I can do about any of that now, he reminded himself. Nothing I'm supposed to do about most of it. My problem right now is Horcruxes, and ways to kill them, and places where they might be hidden.*

*Which is why I'll need to stop at the Owlery before afternoon classes. He patted the pocket where he'd tucked away the letter to his aunt. Because the best place in the wizarding world to hide anything is still Gringotts, and the only way into Gringotts is with the help of the goblins...*

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"Welcome to the Pepper Pot! What can I get you to drink today?"

Percy Weasley, on his lunch break from the Ministry at the newest eat-in spot on Diagon Alley, toyed with his mug and watched Crystal Huley at work. The blonde Muggle girl wore a white apron and a broad smile, stepping briskly from table to table, order pad in her hand and pencil behind her ear when it wasn't moving across the page.

"Does the 'bit of fluff waitress without a brain in her head' pretty well, doesn't she?" George remarked, strolling up to Percy's table and depositing a plate in front of his brother. "Here you are, ham and cheese on rye with fresh-made crisps on the side. A refill on the hot spiced pumpkin juice?"

"Yes, please." Absently, Percy pushed his mug towards George, his eyes still on Crystal. "And all the while, she has her eyes and ears wide open, and her fully functional brain engaged."

"Sure does." Summoning a heated pitcher from the far side of the restaurant, George topped off Percy's mug and handed it back. "And our enemies are awfully likely to assume the waitstaff are deaf and dumb, because what've they got doing the chores around their houses, most of them?"

"House-elves." Percy smiled, blowing on his beverage. "Which might as well be deaf and dumb, if ordered not to tell their masters' secrets. And the vast majority of purebloods do not learn new habits easily."

"So they'll yammer away all day long about whatever comes into their heads, and never bother to realize what's happening right under their noses." George grinned. "I can't wait to see their faces after the war at their trials, when Crystal steps up to testify and produces a load of order slips as evidence, and they realize this little Muggle waitress is the reason they were all caught..."

"That will be enjoyable," Percy agreed, concealing his small spike of dismay at the thought and the guilt which quickly followed the dismay. He *wanted* the war to be over, so that innocent people could stop dying, so that his father would stop looking haggard and the ghosts would leave his mother's eyes, so that he could stop running himself ragged trying to keep up with his Ministry job and the various functions of the Red Shepherds. There was no reason, no reason in the world, that he should want the fighting to continue.

*Being in close proximity with Cr—with Miss Huley, he self-corrected meticulously, is enjoyable, yes, but battles are not necessary to bring that about. I will see her often even after the war ends. After she and George are married. He sipped his pumpkin juice, grimacing as he swallowed. It was still a bit too hot for comfort. They may choose to remain at the Burrow for a time or establish their own household immediately, but whatever they decide, I am sure I will be in contact with them frequently. It would occasion comment, were I to do anything else.*

And that, Percy told himself, was that, and took a bite of his sandwich to punctuate it.

---

"Lee, here!" Dean called, dodging around Selena. "I'm open!"

A lean, dark wolf with a ropy thatch of fur covering the top of his head barked once in response and swatted the round ball across Sanctuary's lawns with his snout. Before Dean could receive it, though, a slightly smaller wolf, with a golden pelt and a tufted tail, galloped across its path and knocked it away with her front paws, bounding towards the goal which had been set up near the main entrance.

"Foul, Maya!" shouted Graham, as Natalie, Selena, and Lindz cheered. "You're not allowed to touch it with your hands!"

Maya stopped and gave her cousin a long, level look. Then, very deliberately, she turned around and kicked the ball into the goal with one of her back feet.

"To be fair," said Roger in a tone of devil's advocate over the girls' second spate of cheering, "the rules don't say anything about paws. Do they, Dean?"

Dean shook his head, surveying the whole scene. "I don't think the people who invented football quite had this in mind," he said. "But no, they don't."

"It's nice to have a game we can all play together, though," said Selena, retrieving the ball. "Even when some of us can't fly. All right, that ties us at two-all—shall we call this game point, and then move on to stories and hot chocolate by the fire in the dorm?"

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Corona Gamp sat sidesaddle on her broom, laughing as she leaned into the wind, urging her inanimate steed faster. Beneath her, Brian Li, his fur the color of aged parchment, bounded across the snow-dusted hills outside Hogsmeade, keeping pace seemingly without effort. The full moon high above cast her shadow across him every few moments, when the clouds moved aside enough to let its light through.

*It is very nearly a perfect night.* Corona blew a kiss to Brian, who snapped it out of the air and returned her a wag of his tufted tail and a quiet, admiring howl. *I would, of course, prefer that my love not be forced to transform, especially since it causes him so much pain to do so, but the Wolfsbane Potion means I need never fear him. More, it means he need never fear himself, which allows him to accept my love, and give me the same in return...*

She spent a few moments considering the life she had once expected ("looked forward to" was a misnomer, as she had done nothing of the sort). That Corona Gamp would likely already have been married, and have known her bridegroom only because the circle of available purebloods was small enough that if one spent more than three seasons in society, one could not help but meet them all. An evening like this one would have been spent either entertaining guests at her husband's showplace of a home, attending others' entertainments at their showplaces, or

attempting to amuse herself without contravening the complex web of tradition, custom, and unwritten law which stated what a pureblood witch might and might not do. She would never have known hunger or cold, but boredom and frustration would have been her daily companions.

*Instead, no two days of my life are the same. I can never be sure in which town, to say nothing of which bed, I shall sleep on any given night, and I have known need, though only in the course of my duties.* She smiled faintly. *Another word to which that other me would have been a stranger, except as it pertained to her husband. Whereas this me has chosen her side of the fight, made up her own mind what she will and will not do, and her skills—as strange as it still seems to me sometimes—are prized.*

The death of Rubeus Hagrid nearly a year ago had been a tragedy to the Order of the Phoenix, not only for its own sake but because of Hagrid's near-mystical skill in handling any and all magical creatures the Order members might encounter in the course of their work. When Corona had timidly offered her own services in this capacity, her colleagues had seized upon her with collective delight, and she now carried one of the Order's precious American-made Zippophones with her at all times, in case there should be a call while she was in the field with Brian.

*Yes, Brian. From whom the old me would have fled in horror, and to whom the new me turns at the start of every day, as naturally as breathing.* She guided her broomstick higher into the air, taking advantage of a prolonged patch of moonlight to play shadow-tag with her beloved. *I wonder sometimes what he is waiting for, to ask me to marry him—or if by chance he is not yet sure what the answer will be...*

She would have to consult with the married witches of the Order, Corona decided, to see if they could offer any advice about dropping delicate hints in that direction.

Brian sprang back from her approaching shadow, his lolling tongue and flagged tail indicators of delight as clear to her now as any human smile or laugh, and Corona set aside her thoughts to give herself wholly to the game. Schemes, clues, and even the war itself could wait until the morning. This was a night for play.

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"Oh, this is fascinating," Hermione murmured, her nose buried in one of the thick, musty books Professor Dumbledore had lent the Pride, with strict injunctions that they were not to be taken farther than his office or the Hogwarts Den. "I never would have guessed that..."

"Something new about Horcruxes?" said Draco, lying on his back on the padded floor, Luna braiding a bit of his hair just above his ear. "Their being practically indestructible and able to possess people who hang onto them for too long isn't enough?"

"No—I mean, yes, it's something new about Horcruxes, but it's not bad. At least, not all bad." Hermione marked her place with a finger and laid the book in her lap. "Apparently it's possible to make one by accident."

Ron swallowed a mouthful of cocoa just in time. "*By accident?*" he repeated incredulously. "How



d'you *accidentally* shut up a bit of your soul in something?"

"That's what I thought at first too, but if you listen, it makes sense." Hermione reopened the book as the rest of the Pride gathered around, drawn by the topic of conversation which had dominated all their thoughts since the night Professor Dumbledore had taken them into his confidence. "It starts with the sort of person who would never make an ordinary Horcrux." She grimaced. "If you could ever call such a Dark thing 'ordinary'."

"The kind we know most about, call it." Harry filched a biscuit from Ginny's plate when she wasn't looking. "So a person who could make an accidental Horcrux is likely to be decent, not a murderer. How does their soul get split, then?"

"Guilt." Hermione located her place and began to read. "'Through endless musing on a death to which they were in some way connected, whether they believe that they bear partial responsibility for its occurrence or simply loved the deceased most dearly, an otherwise innocent witch or wizard may tear his or her soul almost as completely as any murderer. Four outcomes are then possible, though one is a matter only of legend, with no documented case occurring in the course of wizarding history. The first, and simplest, is that the soul heals itself, not through remorse as would be the case for a torn soul inflicted by a killing but through self-forgiveness, acceptance, and moving on.'"

"Simplest in some ways," said Neville quietly. "Not in others."

Meghan laid her arm briefly against his, then frowned, as though hearing again something Hermione had said. "Almost as completely?" she asked. "Does that mean the person's soul is still partly held together?"

"That part's coming next, Pearl." Hermione returned to her place and continued. "'The next two outcomes are those which lead to the so-called accidental Horcrux, though in neither case is the survival of the soul guaranteed as it is to the witch or wizard who summons the necessary fortitude to create a true Horcrux.'" She paused for a moment to shudder before going on. "'The fragment of soul which has been partially detached may, if its owner has some item on which he or she sets great value, embed itself into this item, much in the nature of the true Horcrux. If the aforementioned self-forgiveness should then take place, the fragment of soul embedded in the item will lose its grip on the majority of the soul, leaving only an item containing a very vague sense of personality, too tenuous to be called a ghost.'"

"Well, that wouldn't be too scary." Ginny slapped Harry's hand away as he reached for a second biscuit. "No worse than inheriting things that belonged to one person for so long that they still 'feel' like that person. Maybe a little stronger than that, but it doesn't sound like that would be dangerous at all. What happens if the person doesn't forgive themselves, though?"

"I'd get to that faster if I didn't keep getting interrupted," Hermione said mock-huffily, and continued reading over several sets of snickers. "'If, however, the wizard or witch is unable to complete such a reconciliation, the item containing the fragment of soul acts much as a true Horcrux, binding its owner to the earth past his or her own bodily death. The soul thus held is

classified..." She looked up to grin at Ron. "...as a revenant, resembling the "ghost with unfinished business" so popular in Muggle folklore. It may seek to possess the living in pursuit of its own affairs, especially if a living wizard or witch takes up the item which binds it to the world, but will more often restrain itself to requesting help. In general it should not be considered excessively dangerous."

"A lot of hedging in that sentence," Ron commented, deftly removing a biscuit from the plate Ginny was guarding against Harry. "In general', 'excessively dangerous'. I'd rather it not be dangerous at all, thanks."

"What's the fourth way?" Neville asked. "We've heard about the person who forgives himself and heals all the way, the person who forgives himself but leaves a bit of soul behind, and the person who doesn't forgive himself and gets stuck. Aren't we missing one?"

"Yes, we are." Hermione found her place near the bottom of the page. "Here it is. 'Of all possible outcomes for such a scenario, however, the most curious must be that of the purely theoretical Horcrux Vivens, which requires not one but two people with torn souls, and postulates that if they were to—'" She broke off, shocked. "Oh, no!"

"What's wrong, Neenie?" Draco asked, looking over.

"The page!" Hermione turned the book around so that they could all see. "It's been torn out! How are we supposed to find out what a Horcrux Vivens is now?"

"I don't think we are," said Luna thoughtfully. "That page isn't missing by accident."

"Oh, wonderful." Harry ran a hand through his hair, not affecting its appearance in any material way. "More things we're not allowed to know. Could this get any more frustrating?"

Luna perked up. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"What the hell." Harry waved two fingers in a circle, signaling her to continue. "It is den-night, after all."

"Well." Luna settled herself more comfortably on the padded floor. "In the first place, you're very lucky that Professor Dumbledore is allowing all of us to know about Voldemort and Horcruxes. He could have just told you and said that you shouldn't tell anyone, or that you should only tell one or two people. And then there's how quickly we got all the information—if he'd been busier, or more worried about people noticing that you were spending a long time with him, he might have had to tell you in little pieces over weeks or months or even a whole year. And it was just sheer dumb luck that Mrs. Letha remembered what Voldemort showed her about her mother's brooch. If she hadn't, we wouldn't have any idea at all what the last Horcrux was." She beamed. "Should I go on?"

"No, thanks, I think that'll do." Harry leaned over to Ginny. "Is it just me, or was that the politest way ever of telling me to quit whinging and be grateful for small favors?" he asked.

"You do need reminding from time to time." Ginny patted him on the head. "But don't worry, we'll take care of you."

Behind Ginny's back, Draco scooped the remaining three biscuits off her plate, stuck one into his own mouth, and handed the other two to Luna and Hermione simultaneously. Ron attempted to cover up a laugh by taking a hasty swig of cocoa, and Meghan grinned at Neville, who managed a small but genuine smile in return.

*We really do have it very good.* Hermione bit into the biscuit, savoring the sweetness and the flavor of the different spices with which the house elves had baked it. *Still, we're not home free yet. The spell-breaking year's only halfway over, and we have three Horcruxes yet to find.*

*But with so many allies, I can't help thinking we're bound to win in the end.*

She swallowed with a small grimace. *I just wish we didn't have to lose people along the way...*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 13: Just Another Day (Year 6)

"Good morning," said Fred, Apparating into the dining area of the Pepper Pot half a second behind George.

Crystal scowled, replacing the lid on a tureen of breakfast potatoes. "Who says?"

"We do." George bent to kiss her on the cheek. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Have you looked at the calendar?" Crystal fussed with the arrangement of the teapot and the cups on the table. "It's the second Friday of the month. A month that started on a Sunday. And you know what that makes it?"

George made a small noise of understanding, but Fred still looked confused. "13 December?" he hazarded. "Payday at the Ministry of Magic? One week to end of term at Hogwarts?"

"Friday the thirteenth." Crystal emphasized each syllable carefully. "*Not* a good day."

"Oh, that." Fred snorted, pulling out a chair and sitting down. "Load of Muggle rubbish. Why would you even—" He broke off as Crystal huffed indignantly and disappeared through the swinging kitchen door. "What did I say?"

"Do me a favor?" George hooked out his own chair with a foot. "Don't refer to stuff as 'Muggle rubbish' in front of her. She doesn't care for it."

Fred smacked himself on the forehead. "Forgot about that. But still, that's what it is, isn't it?"

"How well did you take it the day she laughed herself into hiccups over the way we look in our dress robes?"

"True point."

---

With a creak, one of the suits of armor lining the second floor corridor turned its helmet to watch Harry and the Pride pass by. Its breastplate, Harry noted, had been frosted in honor of the season, and a design of a sprig of holly melted into it.

*I wonder if the Ravenclaws did that, or if it's just part of the normal castle decorations? More likely just part of the decorations, they're already doing two things, where the Hufflepuffs only did one ...*

"Harry, hurry up!" Meghan called from the end of the hallway. "We'll miss today's country if we're not there pretty soon!"

"On my way." Harry sped up, rejoining the Pride at the top of the last staircase but one. Though he

never would have believed it, he'd found himself looking forward to the miniature lectures various members of Ravenclaw House had been delivering over breakfast all month, showcasing the widely differing traditions surrounding the Christmas season around the world.

*It helps that they made sure they got at least one food-related tradition every time, so we can all have a sample of whatever it is. Those iced buns yesterday, for St. Lucia's Day up in Sweden, those were really good. He amused himself for a moment imagining Hermione in the costume Amanda Smythe had modeled, a simple white robe with a red sash and a candle-studded crown made of evergreen branches. Wonder how many girls set their hair on fire every year?*

*And then last week, when Cho had everyone take off their shoe and put it on the table for St. Nicholas's Day, we had no idea what was going on, until suddenly all the shoes were full of sweets, because that's what Dutch kids do instead of hanging stockings ...*

He smiled to himself, letting his eyes drift absently across Ginny, who appeared to be arguing a point from a History of Magic lesson with Luna. *I don't know what I was thinking, with Cho. Or maybe I do, because I wasn't thinking at all, just feeling. Second time lucky, though. Luckier than I deserve, some days. And in less than six months—*

Hermione, much to his secret chagrin, was already deep into planning for his and Ginny's wedding, though thankfully she had listened to the Pack-parents' gentle suggestions that she abide by the requests of the people actually getting married. By Harry and Ginny's combined and fervent wish, the ceremony itself would be quiet and very private, with only their immediate families and Pride-mates present.

*I like Ginny's idea, to have it here at Hogwarts, on top of the Astronomy Tower. Right at dawn, as the sun comes up. Not only is sunrise a strong time for good magic, it will mean there's no possible way we can be undertime on the year, since we started it at midnight last May Day. And at least there's no question who should be in the bridal party ...*

Had he been marrying anyone else, Harry knew, he would have had a harder decision as to who should stand as his best man, but the old tradition that the best man was there not only for moral support to the groom but also to marry the bride should the groom not be able to fulfill his obligations had rather limited his choices.

*Besides, I'd rather have that moment to remember with Draco, before... Harry grimaced, glad that he was at the back of the party as they passed through the doors into the Great Hall. Well, before. And there was never really any question who Ginny would choose as maid of honor, even if I had gone with Ron as best man.*

His imagination had little trouble painting the picture. He and Draco would naturally wear their dress robes, though they might need new ones, since Harry knew for a fact he'd grown since Padfoot and Letha's magical wedding the summer before, and Draco had outpaced him by an inch or so. The girls, he knew from bits of conversation he probably hadn't been meant to overhear, were already working on Ginny's wedding gown, and on re-tailoring Luna's best robes to look less bridal, since it wasn't proper for anyone except the bride to wear white to a wedding. Dumbledore,

as officiant (they hadn't asked him yet, but Harry had a hard time believing his Headmaster would say no), would wear his own best gray and blue, probably the same ones Harry could recall from holidays throughout his childhood in the two Dens...

*It doesn't seem like that long ago that we were kids. Our biggest problems were keeping our mouths shut over den-secrets and beating each other to the last piece of cake. He slid into his seat at the Gryffindor table between Neville and Hermione. And now, we're practically grown up—Ron'll be of age in two and a half months, the rest of us won't be too far behind, we're in the middle of a war and I'm getting ready to get married, of all things—*

*Are we completely mad to do this? To rush into it this way, without any confirmation whether it will or won't help end the war?*

*Except we do have confirmation. Danger's prophecies have never been wrong before. He spooned eggs onto his plate, only half-hearing the discussion about the platters of golden bread, studded with raisins and colorful squares of fruity-smelling substances, which occupied a prominent place every few feet along the table. Cryptic sometimes, but never wrong. And "lion's line continue must ere elder serpent's fall to dust".*

*Which is a really long, convoluted way of saying no, we're not completely mad to do this, I've just got nerves. Harry cracked a smile. I think I'm actually more nervous about this than I am about having to face Voldemort again...*

*Of course, all Voldemort can do is kill me. Screwing up being married to Ginny could wreck the rest of my life .*

"Lovely cheerful thing to think about two weeks before Christmas, Harry," he muttered through a mouthful of bacon. "Got any more holiday-friendly thoughts you'd care to share?"

"Arguing with yourself again?" Draco inquired from across the table. "You ought to know by now, you never win."

"Hush," said Hermione absently, peering up the length of the table as a trio of Ravenclaws entered by the door behind the teachers' dais, the first one carrying what appeared to be a large yellow mushroom, the other two each holding covered dishes. "They're getting ready to start."

"In Italy," announced the Ravenclaw in the lead, a fifth year girl Harry didn't know but suspected Ginny would, "Christmas baking often includes a sweet, rich bread filled with raisins and candied citrus peel. This is known as *panettone* , and is traditionally baked in a cylindrical mold." She lifted the loaf in her hands high above her head, so that everyone could see it. "It's so delicate that it can't be cooled on a standard metal rack—magical chefs usually cushion their racks with charms like the ones used on brooms, and Muggles will often lay the loaves on pillows to cool them."

"Must be what this stuff is," said Ron, picking up a slice of the lightly toasted bread from the platter. "Smells good." He bit into it. "Is good," he said around his mouthful. "What've the other two got? I don't see anything else on the tables..."

"Christmas Eve in Italy," said the Ravenclaw boy who'd entered the hall second in line, swapping with his Housemate and beckoning his friend forward as well, "is marked by the feast of the seven fishes. These can be almost anything a family wants, so long as it comes from the sea, but two which are usually included are fried smelts..." He waved towards his friend's platter, which, its cover removed, proved to contain tiny fish, about as long as Harry's fingers, fried whole to a golden brown. "...and *baccala*, or dried salted cod." He lifted the cover off his own bowl, revealing a red sauce in which flaky chunks of white fish could just be seen. "This has to be soaked in cold water for several days before it can be cooked, because of the amount of salt used to keep it from going bad."

"And that's why there isn't anything else unusual on the tables." Meghan craned her neck to see. "That looks tasty, but not for breakfast. Maybe we'll get some with dinner."

"Remember," announced the boy who hadn't spoken yet, "there's only twelve days left until Christmas, and only seven until the Ravenclaw Christmas Gala! See you tomorrow, and until then..."

The Ravenclaws lined up across the front of the dais. "*Buon Natale*," they said in unison, bowed, and left the way they'd come to scattered applause from the rest of the hall.

"What's that mean?" said Ron, glancing at Hermione. "Or is it the same as the rest of them have been?"

"What do you think, Ronald?"

"I try not to think too much. It hurts my head." Ron helped himself to another slice of panettone. "But if I had to guess, I'd say it's the same. 'Happy Christmas', just in Italian."

"And you'd be right." Hermione lifted a slice of her own off the platter as Ron waggled it in her direction. "It looks a bit like fruitcake, doesn't it? Only it's fruitcake people want to eat."

"Yet Muggles believe there's no such thing as magic." Draco intercepted the platter on its way back to its original spot. "A little something good before a double period with Snape—I think I deserve it."

"And I'm going to be out in the cold most of the morning, with Professor Kettleburn," said Ginny, scooping up two slices. "Harry, one for you?" She gave him a brief glare. "So you don't have to go picking bits off mine?"

"Thanks," said Harry, holding out his plate for Ginny to deposit the bread on it. Hermione, he noticed, was methodically breaking bite-sized pieces off her slice and removing the raisins from each one before eating it. Draco, seemingly intent on his conversation with Luna about ways to impress an examiner during a Care of Magical Creatures O.W.L., was nonetheless helping himself to each pile of raisins as Hermione completed it. Neville, apparently reminded by Draco's offhand comment, had his Defense textbook out and was rereading the paragraphs Snape had assigned them on Wednesday, Meghan looking over his shoulder with a small frown on her face, as though



trying to reconcile the more complex ideas and spells in the sixth year text with the ones she was learning in her own third year.

*The wedding won't change the Pride. Sampling the panettone, he silently seconded Ron's opinion. We'll all still be the same people we are right now. Ginny and I will just be putting a new label on ourselves, making what we always knew we had a little more formal between us. Nothing's really going to change.*

*Not until 5 June, at any rate .*

If he'd ever had any questions about Draco's Sorting, the months since the revelation of Luna's vision would have laid them to rest. Somehow his brother had managed to set aside the sure knowledge of his own death, to concentrate instead on the everyday joys of living without allowing them to be overwhelmed by the fear of what was to come. It was something Harry wasn't sure he could have done himself.

*And it's not something I ever wanted him, or any of us, to have to do. He bit a piece of candied lemon peel in half, savagely. We'll make sure to get Lucius but good for it. No more than he deserves, than he's deserved for years.*

*Now the only question is, what would be most appropriate? Just killing him feels too quick, too clean, for everything he's put Fox through, not to mention the rest of us ...*

---

"So we're settled?" Draco inquired of Luna as they made their way out of the Great Hall after breakfast. "We both liked the one we found in that book Moony lent me, but it's a six-month brew, so we'll need to get it started right away if it's going to be ready. Even if I get some powdered dragon's teeth from Professor Black, that only cuts about a week off the brewing time."

Luna nodded. "I like it because it makes sense of some of what I saw," she said. "If I'm only agreeing to go with him because that means I can get close to him." Her hand slid across Draco's hip and came away with a gleaming dagger, its green pommel stone resting against her wrist. "Close enough to stab him with this, with its blade dipped in my cauldron before I go." She glanced upward, her eyes glinting dangerously. "We'll let luck decide whether the silver or the potion gets him first..."

*We're going to have a damn dangerous range of daggers before we're through. Draco watched Luna as she feinted left, then right, then checked her appearance in the blade before returning it to him. He sheathed it and willed it back to its place under his robes. Basilisk venom in Harry's, and the Imprimatus in mine. Wonder what Neenie and Pearl will eventually have in theirs?*

The book in which they had found the Imprimatus Potion had been one of those Moony kept only for reference, a tome of magic which hovered dangerously within the gray area between Light and Dark, and his Pack-father had visibly hesitated before agreeing that Draco could borrow it. Had he known what they were planning to do, Draco was sure the hesitation would have lasted a great deal longer.

*Or possibly not happened at all, and the answer would've been a big flat no .*

This particular potion, according to the notes which accompanied its list of ingredients and instructions, had originally been intended to allow wizards to subdue and control particularly dangerous magical creatures, whether they were Dark or simply savage. A footnote in tiny text at the bottom of the page had stated that it had even more profound effects on creatures with minds capable of human-style thinking.

*Like centaurs, or goblins. Draco grinned briefly to himself. Or werewolves. Handy, that.*

Whether it was drunk as a liquid or administered directly into the bloodstream, as Luna planned to do, the Imprimatus worked so quickly that its victim would have only a few seconds to realize what was happening to him, not enough time to fight against it.

*Or so we hope. I'm just sorry I won't be able to see his face when Luna whispers to him what we've done ...*

For once the potion reached his brain, always assuming the silver of the dagger didn't kill him first, Lucius Malfoy would lose all capability for rational thought. He would retain his magic, and some rudimentary ability to speak and understand English, but that was all. The parts of his mind which had once been devoted to reasoning and logic would instead be filled with an utter, doglike devotion to the first human he saw after the potion took effect, and he would no more be able to think of disobeying her orders than he would be capable of flying without a broom.

*Too bad we can't get him with it before June, but even if we did, I bet the vision would still find some way to come true. Visions are like that .*

The thought, somewhat to his bemusement, no longer woke the unreasoning panic in him that it once had. He supposed he'd worn it out through sheer repetition. Dying was still nothing he was looking forward to, but knowing that his death would help to bring about the Pack's greater safety, and that he would be swiftly and thoroughly avenged, helped take some of the sting out of it.

*Besides, I have a strong suspicion where I'll end up, and it's somewhere I know at least a few of the other Marauders can go. Warriors too. There might even be work for me to do there, some way I can help everyone who's still fighting ...*

But thinking about that could wait until later, Draco decided. For now, he was going to enjoy every bit of the run-up to Christmas, as much as one could enjoy a Defense class taught by Professor Grumpy.

*Though figuring out ways to show him up that he can't take offense at is fun .*

*Or would be, if he hadn't proven repeatedly that he can take offense at absolutely anything, intentional or not ...*

---

The Pride ran across Blaise and Colleen in the entrance hall after lunch, Graham Pritchard pouncing at Meghan from behind his Housemate's robes, making her squeal and everyone else laugh. "It seems strange to think about it before we've even had Christmas, but we should already be considering what we're planning for Valentine's Day, shouldn't we?" Blaise asked as the group scattered, Natalie Macdonald waving Graham and Meghan up the marble staircase to join her, Ginny and Luna hurrying towards one of the secret passages which would take them quickly to the fourth floor, the sixth years moving at a more leisurely pace towards the dungeons.

"Well, that depends on how fancy you want it to be." Hermione finger-combed a knot out of her hair. "Obviously, the Ravenclaws went a little on the elaborate side, compared to the Hufflepuffs, but that suits them, suits what they do best. What were you thinking, or hadn't you discussed it yet?"

"We've had several ideas make the rounds, but the one I think will win out in the end comes in two parts." Blaise bent to pick up a quill Colleen had dropped without breaking stride. "The first on the evening of the 14th, a semi-formal dinner for the entire school. Elegant rather than frilly, charming rather than imposing, possibly with a few brief etiquette lessons beforehand for those who might not know how such things are done."

"Showing off what's good about being pureblood," Neville hazarded. "Highlighting the traditions of the wizarding world, the continuity and permanence of it. The things we'll want to hang onto, even though we have to fight against some of the purebloods."

"Yes, exactly." Colleen accepted her quill back with a smile, brushing its feathered end against her fingers. "But then, after the younger students go to bed, we have something a little different in mind..."

"Uh-oh," Ron muttered.

---

Meghan was laying out a few of the Pack's Christmas traditions to Graham and Natalie, who were discussing how their own Pride might adopt or alter them, when the suit of armor which had watched them pass that morning (Meghan recognized the holly on the breastplate) suddenly began to sing as they walked by it in the opposite direction.

*We three kings of Orient are,  
Tried to smoke a rubber cigar...*

Natalie and Graham both stopped to stare. Meghan completed the line within her mind and gulped. "I think we should hide," she said, suiting action to word behind one of the other suits of armor.

"Why—" Graham started to ask. Natalie snatched his hand and pulled him around the corner as the armor continued singing.

*It was loaded, it exploded...*

The *boom* battered at Meghan's ears, and she braced herself against the wall, using her bag to shield her head as pieces of armor rained down. When she finally dared to look, she had to giggle a little bit at how silly the metal boots looked standing there by themselves, without the rest of the suit on top of them.

Graham poked his head gingerly back around the corner. "There are days I love attending Hogwarts," he said, his voice oddly flat to Meghan's hearing. "And then there are days I don't."

"Me too," Natalie agreed, peering around him in awe at the armor-littered corridor. "I wonder what made it do that?"

---

She was walking around her classroom, dropping a hint here, praising a technique there, when the thought she'd been unable to run down a few weeks before suddenly returned, bouncing in her head as excitedly as a third year on a Hogsmeade weekend. Her foot halted in midair, between one step and the next, her mind whirling with shock as all the implications sank in.

*It happened. It truly happened. I never thought it would, and now it has ...*

By an effort of will she hadn't known she possessed, she set her foot carefully down on the stone floor and continued her walk, clearing her face of all undue anxiety. Her students deserved her full attention for as long as they had her, and the person who would be most likely to help her with this realization would not be available until after normal class hours in any case.

*It would have to be now. A week before the end of term, with all the excitement of Christmas and the Ravenclaw Gala coming up. If there were ever a time I can't afford to be less than fully in control of myself—*

But this happening, she reminded her whiny side sternly, was not necessarily a bad thing. Some part of her had been desiring it since a day some months previous, when a man's quiet soliloquy had reshaped her ideas about him, herself, and her entire world.

*Still, I ought to know better than most that what we want isn't always what we ought to have, or what we get. She murmured a correction just in time to stop one of her students from irredeemably ruining today's lesson. And that we can want many, often contradictory, things at the same time. And—the only absolute in the whole messy business—that change, even desirable change, is always frightening to some degree.*

Frightening or not, the change had happened, creeping up on her so gradually that she would have been hard put to say when one state of mind had ended and another had begun.

*And that's assuming there was any such hard and fast boundary, which I'm starting to doubt. This is always where I was headed—the only question is how long it was going to take me to get here. She glanced at the calendar on her desk. Not quite five months. Surprisingly short, for such a large change, though I suppose on some level it was less a change and more a...*

She stopped before she could think the final word, smiling to herself. *Not here. Not now. The students don't need to know any of this, they have their own troubles and joys, and no need to share in mine.*

*Always excepting a certain subset of them, of course ...*

Returning to her slow pace around the classroom, she resisted the urge to look at her wristwatch every ten steps, but it was difficult. Even when she'd been attending Hogwarts herself, she had never experienced the end of class taking so long to come. Finally, though, her students (*the last class of the day, thank God*) finished their work, cleared their workspaces, repacked their bags, and decamped, chattering about the upcoming Gala, their plans for the Christmas holidays, and the possible magical, ethical, and monetary repercussions of an attempt to cross-breed Chocolate Frogs and Peppermint Toads.

She waited until she could no longer hear any of their voices, and another three minutes for good measure, then left her classroom, letting her feet choose the fastest route they knew towards the Headmaster's office. Students, professors, ghosts all greeted her as she hurried through the Christmas-decked halls, receiving smiles and slightly absent nods in return. Finally, she was on the revolving staircase, rehearsing the words she was about to say. Two more turns—one more—her hand was on the door—

"Good afternoon," Professor Dumbledore began, looking up from his scrolls, but she wasn't waiting for him to finish.

"You knew," she said accusingly, stepping into the office and leveling a finger at him. "You knew this was going to happen to me. It's one of the reasons you asked me to take this position, isn't it, to have me under your eye and make sure everything closed up on schedule? You never do anything for just one reason, Albus—" She caught herself up, half-laughing. "And there I go! Calling you by your first name, thinking of certain people by their nicknames and knowing them inside and out, being as ready as any of the students to go home for the holiday—you *knew*!"

Dumbledore shook his head, his soft smile somehow harmonizing rather than clashing with the gleam of tears behind his half-moon spectacles. "Say rather that I suspected," he said. "Certainly I hoped. But until this moment, I knew no more than you." He rose and came around the desk, holding out his hands to her. "Though I can conceive of no better time of year for it to have happened. Will you wish to have the weekend to yourself, so that you may inform the other parties most directly affected?"

"Yes, I think so." She accepted his handclasp, then laughed under her breath and embraced him. "Thank you," she murmured into his ear, smiling at the familiar fragrance of phoenix, lemon, and wool socks he always seemed to exude. "For whatever you did, or didn't, do. It worked perfectly."

"As always, you are welcome." Dumbledore released her, stepped back, and gestured towards the fireplace. She crossed the office to stand before the flames and dipped her hand into the flowerpot on the mantelpiece as casually as though she had known where the Floo powder was kept in this office for more than a decade.

"Number twelve, Grimmauld Place," she announced clearly, stepping into the green flames, and was gone.

---

Graham, Natalie, and Maya lurked in a small group outside the doors of the Great Hall, watching as groups of laughing, chattering students finished their dinners and departed for dormitories, library, or other destinations known only to themselves. Finally, though, their quarry came in sight, and they prepared to pounce.

"Selena," said Maya, touching her friend on the shoulder. Selena yelped theatrically and spun to face them, letting out an exaggerated breath of relief when she saw who it was.

"Don't do that to me," she scolded, shaking her finger at them. "I'm jumpy enough as it is, thinking every little noise I hear is Zach crying! Now I have to worry about my own Pride-mates sneaking up behind me?"

"We just wanted to talk to you," said Graham. "About this."

From behind his back, he produced a scorched, slightly twisted gauntlet and laid it in Selena's hands.

"What is it?" Selena asked, frowning at it. "I mean, I can see what it is, but why are you giving it to me? This looks more like something Peeves would do..."

"Except he hasn't been near that corridor in days," said Maya, folding her arms. "I checked with the Bloody Baron and everything. And the human scent on the armor was *almost* erased by the smoke from the explosion, but not entirely."

"Er." Selena tried for a winsome smile. "It was all in good fun?"

"It was funny," Natalie admitted. "But it was scary too. And if Meghan hadn't known the song and told us to hide, we would have been standing right next to it when it went off."

"What's Harry always talking about at DA meetings, Selena?" Maya shook her friend's arm lightly. "Warding spells. Safeguards. You didn't use any, none at all, and our Pridemates, our yearmates, our *friends* could have been hurt because of it." She lifted her shoulders and looked Selena squarely in the eye. "You will be more careful next time."

Selena squirmed. "It was just a prank," she complained. "You're being awfully harsh about it."

"What if everything we've done towards the spell-breaking year, all the work we've put in on Sanctuary, every bit of that had just been destroyed because one member of the year hurt others?" Maya gestured to Natalie and Graham, standing side by side, their fingers brushing in a gesture just shy of officially holding hands. "Would you say I was being too harsh then?"

"No," Selena admitted on the tail end of a sigh. "Because you'd be right, just like you're right now."

"I'm sorry," she told the third years. "You weren't hurt, were you?"

Graham shook his head. "Meghan's ears rang for a little while, but she knew how to fix that," he said. "And I'd like to see what would happen if you set the armor to go off while some other members of our House are walking past."

"Some of the nastier ones, right?" Selena chuckled. "I think I can manage that."

"But with the warding spells, please?" said Natalie hastily. "I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Always practice safe pranks," Maya intoned.

Selena looked levelly at her friend. "Too late," was all she said.

The remaining students in the Great Hall crowded the doors, trying to find out what was so very funny in the entrance hall.

---

Draco unfolded his portable tripod, settled its feet into place, and hung his second-best cauldron from the hook, tossing a wink at his observer, who was seated on top of her favorite cubicle, watching intently. "Thanks for letting us barge in on you again, Myrtle," he said.

"Oh, it's no trouble." Moaning Myrtle waved a translucent hand airily. "I do like having company now and again. Though I wish Harry would come by occasionally—do you know, I've barely seen him for over a year?"

"He's been busy," said Luna, unpacking ingredients onto the square of canvas she'd brought for this express purpose. "What with the DA, and his Occlumency lessons, and Quidditch practice, all on top of his usual classwork."

"Yes, well, you two are busy too, but you still find a bit of time to come and visit me." Myrtle pouted. "I don't think it's very heroic to ignore your friends that way."

Draco busied himself with the bluebell fire charm Hermione had taught him to keep Myrtle from seeing the look on his face at this.

---

"What do you think?" Neville asked Ginny, holding out a half-open rosebud.

Ginny pressed her fingers to her mouth, then quickly held out her hand to receive the flower.

"Neville, it's perfect! How did you ever—no, never mind, you *did* it, that's all I need to know," she corrected herself, grinning at the knowing smile on Neville's face. "Are there any more like it yet, or did you just do the one to start with?"

"Just the one, along with about a dozen other types." Neville stroked the edge of the rose's petals proudly. "We were trying all sorts of different techniques, and this is the one that worked the way

we wanted."

"Now that we have the steps down, we can grow you a whole bush of them in time for May Day," Meghan chimed in. "And one of the ones that wasn't quite what we thought it would be turned the most beautiful dark red instead, and Luna can carry those!"

"Thank you both, so much." Ginny tucked the flower behind her ear, then flung her arms around her fellow Warriors. "It's just what I wanted for Christmas!"

The rose in her hair, though unmistakably pink, nevertheless had a warm golden heart which meshed with the flaming Weasley red as though it had been grown for that precise purpose.

---

The scion of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black returned to his family's ancestral domicile fairly late that evening, humming "Here We Come A-Wassailing" under his breath. A glimpse of a triangular, glimmering shape through the front window as it shouldered into sight changed his musical selection to "O Christmas Tree", which triggered a memory from another London address at which he'd once lived.

*Fox's first Christmas with us, back at the Crozer Street Den. He was just coming out of his shell, starting to understand that we weren't going to slap him around or ship him back to his father if he made a little bit of trouble, and Harry and Neenie were only too happy to nudge him along the rule-breaking path. Was that the year they toppled the tree playing broomstick chase, or was it the year after? I think it may have been the year after, he wasn't quite up to that yet, not so soon ...*

Besides being Draco's first Christmas with the Pack, it had also been the first one at which Meghan was old enough to be an active participant, though Aletha had been forced to place a Safety Charm around the tree after Hermione had come howling into the kitchen to report that Meghan was sitting underneath the lowest branches and happily smashing ornaments to bits with her bare hands.

*I wonder, was she Healing herself from that, unconsciously? Sirius shook his head, mounting the steps to the front door. No, that's right, Ravenclaw Heirs can't Heal themselves—or they can, but only once. It works, but it sets up a feedback loop, burns the power right out of them, and they'll never have it again. So Pearl was just lucky that she didn't get cut by mashing that pair of glass balls into the carpet ...*

He unlatched the door and opened it, stepping into the dimly lit hallway beyond.

Then he froze.

He could smell dinner, wafting up the stairs from the basement kitchen like always. He could smell the clean pine scent of the Christmas tree, the smoke from the charmed candles which illuminated it, the bitter whiff of the mistletoe Moony'd hung over the entrance to the front room. But he could also smell rosemary and clean clothing, sea wind and fresh air, and there was no reason, no reason at all, why those scents should be waiting for him here, unless—



"Sirius," murmured the voice which matched the scents, and a piece of the darkness stirred. "You're home."

"So're you." Sirius undid the leaf pin which fastened his cloak and hung it on its usual hook without looking. "I thought term wasn't over for another week."

"It's not. But I had to come and see you." Aletha moved into the doorway of the front room, where the tree's candles cast a dim, shimmering light across her face. Sirius almost whimpered, but got control of himself at the last second. No matter how beautiful she was, he reminded his whiny side sternly, he had to respect her wishes. She'd gone to Hogwarts to learn about who she was now, to get to know herself without interference from him. It would be wrong to move in closer, to draw her into his arms and slide his fingers through her hair until he was cradling the back of her head in his palm, to send his other hand on a journey of exploration across her shoulders to find the places where the stress of her day had her muscles knotted up—

*Or would it?* whispered a daring voice deep within his mind. *Take a sniff—her scent says "want" as clear as yours does! Maybe, just maybe—*

"I thought you should be the first to know," Aletha went on, turning her head for a moment to regard the Christmas tree, then looking back at Sirius. He felt his breath stop short at the look in her eyes—she hadn't looked at him like that since—

*Since before this whole nightmare started. Since the moment she was telling me to go ahead and Obliviate her, that she loved me and trusted me enough to put her whole self, everything she knew and remembered and was, into my hands—*

His wife stepped forward, joy and incredulity warring for place in her expression.

"I'm back," she said.

---

"And there we are," said George, tapping the face of his wristwatch. "Midnight. It is no longer Friday the thirteenth, and nothing bad has happened."

"Nothing *much* happened either," Fred pointed out. "We fed people here, sold them fine pranking products at the shop, Percy came by to test the security charms on the back windows... it was just another day."

Crystal shrugged one shoulder. "Just another day," she agreed. "For us, anyway."

"And who else should we be concerned with?" George slid an arm around her shoulders. "Come on, I'll take you home, if you can promise your dad won't try and do to me whatever it is Muggle dads do instead of hex the boys who bring their daughters home after midnight..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 14: The Ravenclaw Christmas Gala (Year 6)

"Now it is Christmastime,  
"Oh, now it is Christmastime,  
"And now we'll sing and dance till Easter,  
"Then when it's Eastertide,  
"Yes, then when it's Eastertide,  
"We'll sing and dance until it's Christmas!"

"Firm grasp of the obvious the Swedes have," Draco remarked to Harry, skirting the kiosk he'd named where it sat between the Norwegian one and the Finnish along the wall of the Great Hall. They'd lost Hermione to a hunt for lucky swallows somewhere in central Europe, and Meghan had slid herself deftly between Graham Pritchard and Stewart Ackerley to join the ring-dance which was taking place to the cheerful children's song.

*Around the world in eighty Christmases.* Harry glanced around the Hall. *Though there aren't nearly that many kiosks set up...*

Each team of Ravenclaws who had presented a country at breakfast, and quite a few who hadn't, were manning the kiosks which lined all four walls of the Great Hall on this, the last afternoon of the Hogwarts term. The small, round tables Harry recalled from a few other occasions had reappeared in place of the long House tables, and his schoolmates thronged them, dressed in their holiday best, eating, drinking, chattering, and pointing here and there.

*It's not as tightly organized as I would have expected from the eagles, but that's probably the inter-House influence. Getting them to loosen up a bit, let a few of the details take care of themselves.* Harry grinned to see the various combinations of faces at the tables within his immediate range of vision. *Take that, Voldemort—we're beating you without ever having to step onto a battlefield.*

*Not that we're doing so well there.*

His mood slipped a notch or two. The war outside the walls of Hogwarts was grinding on its dismal way, with every few days bringing more notices of death and destruction to the *Daily Prophet*. The Order and the Red Shepherds were helping, he knew, but there was no way they could be everywhere.

*It's like Ron said that one time—we're on defense here, and we can't possibly cover all our hoops with the Keepers we have. They can hit us anyplace they like, attack Muggles or mixed families or magical targets, because to them, anything's legitimate. We have to find them before we can take them out, and they've had fifteen years to get good at hiding from us...*

*But I'm not going to think about that right now.* He drew a deep, deliberate breath through his nose, enjoying the scents of spice and pine and smoke that wafted to him from the various kiosks'

decorations and food offerings. *This is Christmas, the last one we're going to have as a whole Pack. We need to make it the best we possibly can.*

"Seen Ron anywhere?" he asked casually, letting his eyes scan the Hall, looking for Weasley red.

"He said he was heading over to Australia..." Draco pointed. "There he is, on the beach."

"The beach?" Harry craned his neck to see. "Oh, that's right. Christmas comes in the summer for them." He frowned, a detail from that particular day's breakfast lecture recurring to his mind.

"Think they were having us on when they mentioned kangaroo salad?"

"Why don't we drop over there and find out?"

"Sounds like a plan."

---

"Your change is two-twenty, and enjoy your holiday," said the silver-haired woman in the apron, handing first the bakery bag, then the money, across the counter. "Next, please?"

"I'm still thinking." The man she had addressed looked up from the glassed-in shelves of baked goods with a small, polite smile which warmed his blue eyes. "Go ahead and help someone else."

"I—yes, of course." Sue Robertson turned to her next customer, her mind whirling. *What's Remus doing here? Not that I'm unhappy to see him, but does he have bad news?*

*No, he wouldn't leave me hanging if something'd happened to Dorothy or Terry. It must be just a visit to say hello—*

*Or it could be a trick. Someone using his face to gain my trust.*

A moment's examination of her memories told her how she could find out.

When the bakery department was clear for the moment, she went to the oven and retrieved a sheet of fresh bread rolls as the timer sounded, then walked to the pass-through, holding the tray in one oven-mitted hand. "I don't suppose you brought me anything new to read?" she asked as Remus came to the other side of the counter. "Maybe something by that one author we used to talk about?"

Remus smiled and displayed the cover of the book he had under his arm, decorated with a picture of a lady's fan. The title was *The Maiden Remains*, and the author's name...

*Valentina Jett. But someone could have guessed that—*

Sue glanced down as the weight of the tray lessened in her grasp. Remus had relieved her of it with his free hand.

On which he was not wearing an oven mitt, or anything else of the sort.

"Well, then," she said with an answering smile, opening the pass-through to let him in. Strictly speaking, that was against store rules, but she doubted anyone would notice. "How've you been?"

"Up and down. More up these last few weeks." Remus set the tray down on a cooling rack and handed Sue the book. "We had a few things happen we'd all been hoping for, but hadn't been sure were possible. But I'm talking in riddles, which is rude. What I'm really here to ask is, can you spare an hour or two after your shift is over? Danger's making dinner, and before that, there are some things we could use your help with."

"My help?" Sue hefted the book in her hand, enjoying its thickness and weight. A quick glance at the back cover showed her the ever-welcome words *Volume I*. "Is this to do with that secret project Terry keeps writing me bits about? Nothing that would give anything away," she added quickly as Remus frowned. "Just that he's involved in something big, something to do with the war, and something that I might get to know about one of these days."

"Not precisely Terry's project, but one that dovetails with it. One started by a young man you might remember. Percy Weasley."

"Ah yes." Sue nodded. "The boy who'd lost his girlfriend in that attack, and wasn't sure what to do with all his anger. He found something, did he?"

"Several somethings. But this one has an amusing side to it, one I think you'll appreciate." Remus followed her towards the staffroom. "It has to do with travel..."

---

"No, no, *no!* I told you and *told* you, we're starting out on the *right* foot! Let's try again. Arms linked—heads up—aaaand weeee're *off* to see the—"

*Crash.*

A red fox leapt clear of the collapsing pile of bodies and boxes, scampered several feet away, and rose onto its hind legs, chittering in amusement. "Need some help?" George Weasley asked as he emerged from his Animagus form, still laughing, and drew his wand. "Maybe a dance instructor?"

"Dancing, we can do," said Danielle Reading, shoving a box to one side and sitting up. "Walking, apparently not. You all right?" she asked the small, furred form revealed as George levitated another box out of the way.

The fox, to all appearances identical to the one which had escaped the minor disaster, wrinkled its nose as though thinking hard, then nodded and reared up as the other one had. "Fine, just fine," Fred Weasley told his girlfriend, rotating his shoulders with a wince. "Though I've got to get better control than that. Transforming in public would be bad for my image."

"I thought you were registered," said Lee Jordan, uncovering his head. "I know I am."

"Registration's not the point." George Vanished two other boxes, then stowed his wand away and

bent down to the person lying beside Lee. "The point is, we're supposed to be the ones who do the surprising of other people. Not the ones who get surprised ourselves."

"And uncontrolled Animagus transformations are a decent giveaway that one was surprised." Fred climbed to his feet. "All right, there, Crystal?"

"I'd be better if you lot could do a simple skip-step without tripping over your own feet," Crystal Huley grumbled, but she was smiling as she accepted George's hand to pull her upright. "At least we're not doing this in the Diagon Alley shop, or in the Pepper Pot. Can you imagine?"

"I'm trying not to." Danielle winced. "And I'm also trying not to think too hard about Percy in charge alone at the restaurant, and Roger at the shop. If they get busy—"

"Which is why we're doing our best to find a quick way back." Fred waved towards the crimson-painted portion of the floor in the vacant shop in Hogsmeade, wide enough to take four people walking abreast, seemingly dead-ending at the wall. "But it's not working very well yet. Shall we just go this once, and try the fancy stuff later?"

"Be still my heart." Danielle gaped at him. "Fred Weasley is warning people not to get too fancy!"

Before Fred could fashion a suitable retort, the red-painted section of floor suddenly lit up, two lines of light shooting upward from its outer edges to form an archway on the wall. Brighter and brighter it shone—two figures appeared within the glow—

"Good afternoon, everyone," said Remus Lupin, releasing Sue Robertson's hand. "How go things? I'm not sure if all of you have met Sue or not—"

Introductions filled several moments, during which George and Lee set up enough boxes to serve as seats for everyone. "So what was it like?" Danielle asked after shaking Sue's hand. "How did it feel?"

"Fast." Sue shook her head, as though trying to dislodge water in her ears. "I've taken the M1 out of London before, but never quite like that!"

"The Red Roads." Fred inclined his head towards the painted boards on the floor. "A simple, yet practical, magical transit solution."

"M for Muggle, meaning one member of your party must be without magic." George nodded to Crystal and Sue. "And A for Anyone, which is just what it sounds like."

"Set up to take advantage of the existing Muggle roadway system," Lee finished. "With some very, very impressive spellwork by Mr. Percy Weasley." He frowned. "I still can't quite catch how he did it..."

"He's using the fact that even Muggles have a form of magic." Remus drew his wand and sketched a human figure in the air with a thought bubble over its head. "When enough of them believe in things, know and trust that things exist, those things take on a life of their own." The figure

doubled, quadrupled, multiplied immensely, with the individual thought bubbles merging and growing until the cloud above the figures' heads dwarfed the figures themselves. "Muggles know that the roads they call by these names will take them quickly from one place to another. Percy simply tapped into that collective body of thought and added a touch of magic." He spread his hands, vanishing his drawing. "Though 'simply' is the wrong word for a spell of this caliber, and I strongly suspect 'touch' is as well. How long have you been working on this?"

"Three months, and a lot of help from the Order," said Danielle. "And it's still nowhere near what we were planning to begin with. Muggles can't use the Roads alone, there isn't enough magic in the spell to hold up to that, so it won't work if you've just got a load of Muggles being chased by Death Eaters, they'd have to have a witch or wizard with them..."

"They probably would in any case, if they knew about these," Sue countered. "Which you have to, to find the entrances and to know the words that start them up." She chuckled. "Who came up with that?"

Crystal raised her hand. "I wanted something memorable, and something the purebloods wouldn't likely know," she said. "This seemed to fit both categories."

"And speaking of purebloods, we should get back." Fred pushed himself to his feet. "Davies is competent enough, but he hasn't got any proper business sense. He'll probably be giving people discounts on the merchandise if they can answer Christmas trivia questions or some such."

"We're giving them discounts if they give us ideas for new products," George pointed out.

"That's not the same, not the same at all."

Still wrangling, the twins escorted Crystal to the front lip of the red-painted section of floor. Danielle fell back to take the hand of Sue's that Remus wasn't holding.

"Whenever you're ready, ladies," said Lee with a gallant bow, stepping up on George's right.

Crystal cleared her throat, Sue lifted her head, and in careful unison they spoke the five words which triggered the activation of the Red Roads. The painted boards began to glow once more, the archway formed out of light, and the two parties stepped forward, Crystal and Lee and the twins first, Remus and Danielle and Sue behind them—

And vanished into the wall, the glow dimming into nothingness behind Sue's right heel.

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Kangaroo salad, to Harry's amusement, was real, and surprisingly tasty. He'd also enjoyed the lamingtons on offer at the Australian kiosk, and was currently nibbling the coconut off the chocolate coating of his second square of vanilla cake as he wandered through the Hall, listening with half an ear to the bits and snatches of contrasting Christmas music. Here a melancholy Russian carol about a rose garden, there a cheerful French one about torchlight—

The clear notes of a flute rang out through the din, carrying a melody Harry knew well, one he remembered from the first December he'd ever spent at Hogwarts. It was coming from the direction of the American kiosk, where a mock-up of a rustic living room had been erected, honoring the film in which this particular song had made its debut. Leaning against the side of the upright piano, eyes half-closed in concentration, Draco was playing "White Christmas" to Hermione's softly-chorded accompaniment from the bench.

Harry glanced around and spotted the person he wanted, thankfully only a short distance away. A quick wave brought Colin Creevey to his side, and a few whispered words made Colin grin and nod fervently. Harry moved away into the crowd, letting himself drift without any specific goal in mind, smiling secretly as he heard Colin's camera go off behind him.

*Fox usually hates getting his picture taken, but he's too far into his music to notice this time, and he never has to see this one anyway ...*

---

Draco surfaced from the half-trance he often fell into while he was playing to hear applause. He and Hermione had garnered an audience, a dozen or so younger students, a few closer to his own age, and—

"Tonks!"

"Wotcher, little cousin." Tonks caught his halfhearted punch on her open hand and ruffled his hair with her other one. "Now, now, none of that. Nice idea, House holiday parties. I'm only sorry it didn't happen while I was here."

"You look...festive," said Hermione, coming to join them.

"Bit bright for you?" Tonks grinned, tucking a strand of red-and-green striped hair behind her ear. "It's got its uses, though. Charlie and I are headed to France tonight—Bill's going to the Delacours' for Christmas and we said we'd fly wing for them—and this will help make sure we don't miss each other over the Channel. You lot are still at Headquarters, aren't you?"

"Far's I know." Draco frowned, turning his head, as a trace of a familiar voice caught his ear. *Either one of the Ravenclaws did a lot of research into a mid-Atlantic accent, or—*

"Forgot to tell you why I'm here," Tonks added in a studiously casual tone. "Auror Office got contacted by Gringotts the other day. Seems some important American witch or other was planning on coming over here for Christmas, and the American goblins would take it very kindly if we didn't let her get hurt in our silly little war. So they assigned me to keep an eye on her until she met up with her family." She looked past Hermione. "Which it looks like she has."

Hermione turned around and beamed. "Aunt Amy! Happy Christmas!"

"Same to you," said Amy Freeman, releasing Letha—which I think I can get away with calling her again, since term's technically over—just in time to intercept Hermione's running hug. "And don't



you look nice?"

"Thank you." Hermione blushed a little, straightening the silver collar on the red plush robes she'd chosen for the occasion. Draco knew she generally preferred cooler colors, but he'd dropped a hint or two in Luna's and Ginny's ears, and as he'd hoped, the advice of his twin's fellow Warriors had prevailed.

*A nice dark green for me, nothing too fancy, just in keeping with the season. A lot like Harry's, actually. We're different enough that the same shade flatters us both. As for Pearl... Draco snickered under his breath, spying his little sister across the Hall with no trouble and beckoning her over when she looked his way. Looks like what Luna wore to the Yule Ball, only more so. Much more so. Silver and sparkles everywhere.*

*And the saddest part is, she's cute enough to make it work.*

"I'll be taking the train home with you tomorrow," said Aunt Amy, grinning at Meghan's gleeful squeal from across the hall as she spied her great-aunt. "Letha has work to do elsewhere."

"Work?" Draco cocked an eyebrow at his Pack-mother. "Everything all right?"

"Everything is just fine, Draco," said Letha in a particularly cool, quelling tone.

*The one she only uses when she's got mischief on the boil.*

*Especially mischief meant for us.*

*I think I'm scared...*

---

"So," said Aunt Amy the next day, settling into the corner seat in the Pride's usual compartment on the Hogwarts Express. "Goblins." She smiled slightly. "Best place to start, as always, is what do you know already?"

"Goblins and wizards don't get along," said Ron immediately. "Because goblins won't share their secrets for crafting metal and putting magic into it, and wizards won't repeal the laws that mean goblins can't use wands."

"I've heard Bill talking about them sometimes," Ginny added. "He gets frustrated at having to explain to them over and over how wizards think about owning things, because they either can't or they won't learn it."

"But should they have to?" asked Meghan tentatively. "I mean, if the things that we're talking about were theirs to begin with, shouldn't they go by the goblins' rules?"

"How can you have different ways of owning things, though?" Neville frowned in puzzlement. "Either you own something or you don't."

"Not quite," said Harry. "Think about my Nimbus Two Thousand, back in first year. I wasn't permitted to have my own broomstick, so Fox and I shared it, because then it wasn't my own, it was ours." He grinned. "Which is rules-lawyering to the last degree, but that's what Marauders do best."

"True, and a good place to begin," said Aunt Amy, drawing all eyes back to herself. "Because you've got an advantage or two if you're going to have to go talk to goblins, Harry, coming out of who and what you are."

"I do?"

"You do." Aunt Amy tapped a finger against her shoulder, in the spot where Harry's pendant chain could just be seen before disappearing under his robes. "You have your Pack, and your Pride. And to some extent, your DA. That's the first thing to understand about goblins, is they're far more group-oriented than most wizards these days, even your purebloods. Every decision they make is weighed not just for how it will affect them, but how it will affect their clan and the other clans they're allied with. Or feuding with." She grinned. "If you ever need to stall a goblin, just get him talking about the latest marriage-alliances his clan's working on, and how that affects various lines of inheritance. He'll be good for a couple of days."

"So do they think of most wizards as too individualistic?" Hermione stroked Crookshanks, wincing as his claws pierced her robes in rhythm with her petting and his purr. "Too much interested in only themselves, and not in how their choices change everything around them?"

"Among other things." Aunt Amy glanced out the window at the trees and mountains, blurring into obscurity as the train rushed along its tracks towards distant London. "They also think wizards rely much too heavily on what they call book magic. Even if those laws you mentioned were repealed, Ron, I don't know how much they'd take up wand-using. There've been partial repeals in a few states back home, and we haven't had hordes of goblins rushing the wand stores."

"What sort of magic do they use, then?" Luna was tracing a pattern on a maze-like design emblazoned on the back cover of this month's *Quibbler*, and her voice was more distant and dreamy even than usual. "And how do they learn it, if it isn't from books?"

"Oh, they use books. But they also have a lot of emphasis on learning for themselves, and on finding personal ways to do things. They're a bit contemptuous of most wanded spells, because anyone can use them. Just repeating, they call it, parroting back what you've been told. Not *real* magic at all."

"But...that doesn't make sense." Hermione frowned. "You have to learn your own tricks and twitches about any spell before you can make it work really well for you! It's all in what you imagine, what you think about when you're casting, and that's as personal as anything could possibly be!"

"True enough, but how's a goblin supposed to know that, with no experience with wanded magic?" Aunt Amy chuckled. "They see classes full of children repeating back the incantation the teacher

told them to say, and all of them getting more or less the same results from it, so that's all they think it is."

"I'd think they don't understand wands very well, either." Ginny drew her own pine wand from her pocket. "It's like Professor Dumbledore was reminding us the other day—every wand is different, as much alike as they may look. And the wand chooses the witch, or the wizard." She smiled. "But that runs into the same problem, because if most goblins have never had wands of their own, they couldn't know that."

Aunt Amy nodded, looking impressed. "Letha told me you ones would be quick to catch on," she said. "All right, so that's one of the reasons goblins don't think much of wizard's magic. But what you'll need to understand most, Harry, is another of those reasons. Most goblins believe in keeping everything in their lives, their magic and anything else they do, firmly rooted in what's around them." She patted the seat, the wall, the window. "In the physical, the everyday. And like wizards, their magic is rooted in their souls. So the common belief among goblins is that into every piece of work a goblin craftsman creates, he places a tiny fraction of his own soul."

Eight breaths were sucked in simultaneously.

"Just like—" Meghan began, then broke off, looking distressed. "Something else we've been studying," she finished rather lamely, making a face. "That was silly of me, wasn't it?"

"At least we know the Jinx works," said Harry. "Sorry," he added to Aunt Amy. "We'd tell you if we could, but..."

"Don't fuss, I've been under operational security myself." Aunt Amy drew a finger across her lips. "Need to know. Which I don't. But obviously you're all familiar with the concept, which makes my job easier. Knowing that much about goblins and their magic, can anyone tell me why goblins might get a bit huffy when humans claim to own their work in perpetuity?"

"Because if there's a bit of soul in there, then it's almost a person," said Neville. "And you can't own people." He frowned. "You can hire them, though. Buy their labor, or something else about them that you want, if they're willing to sell it. Is that how goblins think about selling their work? Like hiring out to do a job?"

"Points to the wizard with the potion piece." Aunt Amy grinned. "That's precisely how they think about it. And precisely why they're so offended when wizards, quite understandably by wizarding rules, keep the items they've bought from goblins and pass them down to their own children. To them, it appears very similar to slavery."

"But what happens when the goblin who made whatever-it-is dies?" Ron had his pendants out and was spinning them on their chain in time with his words, his carvings and gems blurring into a rush of gold-red-gold. "Who's got the rights in it then, if the goblin whose soul's in it isn't around anymore?"

"Is that why goblins make a big deal of inheritance and alliances?" Draco glanced at Aunt Amy,

who was nodding approvingly. "Because it isn't just about what you've got now—it's about everything your ancestors ever had or made. And it's got to be clear, perfectly clear, who inherits what, because there are bits of people's souls in play and they...need to stay with their descendants?" He frowned. "Or at least their own clan, if they didn't leave any kids or their bloodline died out further down in history."

"Very, very good." Aunt Amy applauded softly. "Anything else?"

"What about putting wizarding magic on goblin-wrought things?" Hermione drew her dagger from under her robes and held it flat on her palm, then concentrated for an instant. It fell through her hand and clattered to the floor. "Would the goblins be offended that Draco used his green pendant-jewels to make our daggers do that? Or that Harry's has basilisk venom in it? Though that's not really magic, not conscious magic, the dagger just absorbed it when Ginny stabbed Sangre in the face..."

"Would your parents be offended if someone else taught you a strong, useful spell?" Aunt Amy countered. "A good spell, one you could use to make your life's work easier?"

The Pride shook their heads.

"The same rule applies. It's one of the few times goblins approve of wizarding magic, is when it's used to improve their work. And since you brought up your pendants, Hermione, I've been meaning to ask if I can see them while I'm here. The stories Letha's written me about them, how you made them and what they do, make me think you might actually have reproduced some of the goblins' working methods by accident."

Harry sat up suddenly, struck by a thought. "Goblins aren't offended if wizards improve their work with magic," he repeated. "But what if they don't? Improve it, I mean? What if a wizard..." He paused to work out his phrasing, to make sure he would get a meaningful answer without violating the Tongue-Tying Jinx. "If a wizard was Dark, very Dark. And he wanted to perform a really nasty spell on a goblin-wrought piece, a spell that's even a little like what the goblins do to make their work special, to make it magical. Only it takes what they do and it twists it all around, it turns it evil. If he'd done that, and done it more than once..."

Aunt Amy looked piercingly at him, but her voice when she spoke was level. "Once would be quite enough to get the cooperation of the goblins towards stopping that wizard and bringing him down. *If you could prove, to the satisfaction of the clans, that such a thing had been done.*"

Harry Wolf-grinned, seeing his excitement mirrored on the faces of the Pride around him. "I think we can do that."

*Given that we still haven't worked out how to get the locket open, and Kreacher said nothing he could do to it affected it while it was shut...yeah, I think we can do that. They ought to be able to tell the difference between a goblin's soul-bit and Voldemort's, that's for sure!*

*And once we have the goblins on our side, anything Voldemort might have hidden at Gringotts will*

*be ours. Whether that's the cup, the brooch, or both. He crossed his fingers. Here's hoping for both—wouldn't that make our lives so much easier?*

But, Harry acknowledged with a sigh, that was unlikely. Voldemort had his faults—which is the only reason we're still in this war at all—but stupidity was seldom one of them, and placing two of the items which kept him alive in the same location, no matter how secure, definitely qualified as stupid.

*So we need to be thinking about other places he would have considered safe, or important, and what kind of safeguards he might have used. He buried the ring at his mum's old house with a curse on it, he woke up the memories in the diary so it could control people and gave it to Lucius Malfoy to hide— Harry allowed himself a brief snort at the multitude of ways in which that clever plan had gone wrong—and he tucked the locket away in that cave by the sea Kreacher told me about last summer, with all the Inferi and that nasty potion you'd have to drink. Probably found the cave that one time the matron mentioned to Dumbledore, when he hurt those little kids ...*

*And he keeps Nagini, or her Inferius, with him all the time. So we'll just have to plan to get her right before we do him.* Harry settled his weight more comfortably in his seat, licking his lips to savor the scent of Ginny beside him, the rest of the Pride around him, with their mingled pleasure and anticipation of both the Christmas holidays and this new lead on finding and destroying their enemy's treasures.

*Treasures.* His eyes rested on Hermione, happily comparing with Aunt Amy a point of magical theory as taught by Hogwarts and American schools. *Hard to believe it's been almost a year since Hagrid died. I remember when I was little I used to think Father Christmas must be very tall, because Hagrid always came to visit us at Christmastime, and he always had the best presents for us.*

*I still miss him. We all do.* His hand sought Ginny's and pressed it. *But the girls are safe because of him, and he gave us so much besides that. His love, his loyalty, the way he always believed in me, no matter what I was up against...*

He closed his eyes, the better to remember. It was a few days after the ill-fated third task of the Triwizard Tournament. He and the rest of the Pride had gone down to visit Hagrid, and he, Harry, had become lost in his memories, so many of which circled around this place...

*Harry walked slowly around the cabin, touching things as he went, while Hagrid made tea. Here was Hagrid's big chair, where he'd sat on the gamekeeper's knee when he was four... here the big bed he'd hidden under when he was seven... this table was the one Wormtail's cage had rested on, the night Ron and Meghan brought him here...*

"Harry."

Harry jumped. From Hagrid's tone, this wasn't the first time he'd called his name. "Yeah."

"You all righ'?"

*Harry nodded.*

*"No, yeh're not," said Hagrid. "But yeh will be. Trust me."*

*Harry smiled to himself. And I did, and I am. Not perfect, not the happiest person in the world, but all right.*

Another moment from that same visit came to him, and rang true against Danger's words from the summer.

*"What's comin' will come, an' we'll meet it when it does."*

*"When you have enough for tonight, you have all you'll ever need."*

Harry opened his eyes and smiled at Ginny, who was watching him curiously. "You're my enough for tonight," he told her. "And whatever's coming, I can meet it as long as I've got you."

"Good to know." Ginny grinned at him. "Because Ms. Freeman told us something else about goblins while you were off having the guided tour of the inside of your head. Their females don't often leave their home caverns—dealing with wizards is considered dirty work, not the sort of thing a properly-brought-up goblin girl would do—but every serious negotiation between goblin clans involves both males and females. So if you want to prove to the goblins that you're willing to talk on their terms, you're going to have to take one of us—" Her free hand indicated herself, Hermione, Luna, and Meghan. "—with you."

"Not you," Harry said promptly, pointing to Meghan, who stuck out her tongue at him. "And sorry, Luna, but I think the goblins might get nervous if I brought a Seer to a bargaining session."

"I understand." Luna turned the *Quibbler* ninety degrees and began to trace the pattern again. "So will it be Ginny, or Hermione?"

Harry looked at Aunt Amy. "Will it make a difference?" he asked. "If the goblins are all about family, they might think better of me if I had my sister along. Adoptive sister, but still."

"But that's like saying you're ashamed of Ginny," said Draco before Aunt Amy could reply. "Or that you think you're too young to be sure about her. Which, yes, you're young, we all are, but we're not unsure or ashamed." He shrugged one shoulder. "Most of the time, anyway."

"I am your alpha female, Harry." Ginny's freckles were standing out more than usual, but her voice was clear. "If you're going to talk to the goblins as if the Pride were a clan of its own, I really ought to be the one to go with you."

"And if we did things the way goblins do, with arranged marriages for the benefit of the clans involved, you two would make a good match even if you didn't love each other," said Hermione. "Counting the Pack as one clan and the Weasleys as another—which you almost are," she added to Ron, who smirked. "It's an excellent alliance, on both sides. Strength to strength."

"Sounds like it's settled, then." Harry squeezed Ginny's hand again, enjoying the power behind the return pressure. "Anything else I should know?"

"Plenty, but we have your entire vacation to discuss that." Aunt Amy paused, frowning. "Though there is one I should bring up now. Goblins always open meetings by exploring the links between themselves and the people they're meeting with, and between all members of the various parties. Don't be offended or put off if they seem to be spending a lot of time on that. It's just their way of establishing who they're dealing with. And having said that..." She grinned and Summoned a broad, flat, wrapped package from the shelf above Harry's head. "Who wants one of their Christmas presents early?"

Several spirited rounds of magical Cluedo, complete with working secret passages and animated pieces similar to wizarding chessmen which occasionally tried to murder one another with whatever weapon came to hand, occupied the rest of the train ride.

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"What did Tonks give you before she left?" Hermione asked Draco under the bustle of disembarking at platform nine and three-quarters. "You looked so sad, and so happy, all at the same time."

"It was something she found in Aunt Andy's papers, when she finally got around to going through them this fall." Draco withdrew a folded, faded letter from within his denim jacket, where it had rested against his heart. "She thought I ought to have it."

Hermione took the letter from his hand and frowned as she unfolded it, as though the handwriting was awakening faint echoes in her near-perfect memory. It ought to, Draco knew. His sister had seen it before, though she might not at first think to connect a letter received many years ago by Andromeda Tonks with her twin's magical adoption contract.

*But when she sees who wrote it...*

"Oh!" Hermione let out a little gasp. "It's—" She looked up, her smile shaky but true. "Of course. Of course she would want you to have this." Her fingers rested against a passage near the end of the letter. "Especially because it happened just like she wanted. All of it."

"I have saved my son and ruined my husband," Draco quoted softly, accepting his mother's letter back and returning it to its place. "My work is done."

The twins clasped hands for one moment, sharing joy, sorrow, fear, peace, but strongest and deepest of all, love.

Then they turned to follow their Pride out into the bustle of King's Cross station four days before Christmas.

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"Harry, I'm a little worried," Meghan confided as she and her big brother left platform nine and

three-quarters side by side. "Why do you think Professor Black didn't ride home on the train with us? Is she all right?"

"I'm not sure, Pearl, but—" Harry stopped, looking past Meghan into the station. "Maybe," he said a trifle unsteadily, "she wanted to tell us something."

Meghan followed Harry's line of sight.

Then she shrieked.

"*Mama!*"

The weekend crowd at King's Cross, magical and Muggle alike, turned with indulgent smiles to watch the sobbing teenage girl hurtle across three lanes of foot traffic and fling herself at a tall woman, who closed her arms around the child with a look of boundless love on her face.

"Hello, Pearl-girl," Aletha whispered, hugging her daughter tightly as Sirius embraced them both, smiling through his tears, and as the rest of the cubs converged on them, Harry grinning from ear to ear, Draco and Hermione wearing near-identical smirks of satisfaction. "I'm home."

---

Hermione hummed "Go, Tell It on the Mountain" as she hurried along one of the corridors of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, looking its most festive for Christmas Eve. Letha's restoration to her full self had the Pack in fine fettle for the holiday season, and pranks of the silly and harmless variety had been in full swing for the last few days.

*Which just means I'd better check my bed very well tonight. After that seven-fishes dinner Danger decided she wanted to try, the one from Italy. Hermione smacked her lips, giggling at her own silliness, but it was a fact that both her forms were very fond of fish. But for right now, I need to find a set of Hogwarts robes and give them to Dobby or Winky to be cleaned and pressed, because after dinner, we're having our picture taken.*

Padfoot had explained his idea for replacing his mother's portrait in the front hall of Headquarters, and Hermione liked it a great deal. *Number twelve belonged to Dark wizards, or at least wizards who didn't care how they got what they wanted as long as they did get it—and that's almost worse—for too long. We need to put our own mark on it, to make sure the world knows who belongs here. Especially if Meghan means those things she's always saying, about her and Neville living here someday...*

"Hermione?"

Taken by surprise, Hermione squeaked. "What—Harry!" She pressed a hand to her heart, smiling weakly, as the person she'd named stepped out of a doorway. "Don't do that to me!"

"Sorry, didn't realize you hadn't spotted me." Harry glanced up and down the corridor. "Do you have a moment?"



"Of course, but why—oh." Hermione had just seen what Harry was holding partly behind his back. "Does it have to be now? Shouldn't we wait until tomorrow?"

"I got you something else for tomorrow." Harry handed her the wrapped package. "This is private. Ron helped me get the workings right, but even he hasn't seen what was meant to go inside it." He smiled sheepishly. "Mostly because I didn't have it until an hour ago, when Colin's owl got here. I'd been wondering if it was going to arrive in time, but it did, so happy Christmas, Hermione."

"Colin? Colin Creevey?" Hermione laughed, beginning to undo the wrappings. "Whatever did you get me that you needed help from Ron and—"

She broke off with a gasp as her fingers stripped off a layer of paper and revealed the answer.

The glass globe between her hands was about the size of one of the crystal balls she had seen in the memory Ron had once shared with them of Professor Trelawney's Divination classroom, but the vision inside was obscured only by bits of falling white. Surrounded by snow, her three-dimensional photographic self sat at a piano, dressed in red and silver, playing soft chords—chords, Hermione realized faintly, that she could *hear*—to accompany Draco, in his forest green, smiling at her with his eyes as his fingers moved deftly along the stops of his flute, the pure, clear tones soaring out to bring his good wishes for Christmastime to everyone who could hear him.

"May your days be merry and bright," she quoted, watching the tiny twins within the musical snow globe. "And may all your Christmases..." Her voice failed before she could finish.

"It won't ever be the same without him," Harry said softly from beside her. "But now, whenever you look at this, you can be there again. At the Ravenclaw Christmas Gala, when everything was still all right."

Hermione nodded, her throat still too tight to say anything. Instead she pulled Harry into the biggest hug she could manage on short notice.

*Because only you would think to do this for me. To give me this little piece of happiness I can always keep, to drive away the bad memories before they're even made.*

*This is why I love you, Harry Potter.*

*And this is why, no matter who he kills, Voldemort can never win.*

"Happy Christmas, Harry," she whispered when she could speak again. "And thank you."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 15: Line, Bond, and Oath (Year 6)

Draco perched in one of the trees which grew around the cottage he and Hermione had crafted in their favorite dreamworld, swinging his legs idly, watching Harry and Moony spar in the clearing below. Harry wore a shirt of chain mail and a segmented helmet, as he had the day Voldemort had pursued them here, and the sword in his hand was Gryffindor's, its blade alight with silvery flame.

*I like what Danger came up with the other night, if we can find a way to do it. Linking his dagger and the sword by magic, so that all he has to carry day-to-day is the dagger, but as soon as he speaks the right password and makes the right movement, he's got the sword instead. He grinned briefly. "Get a bigger hammer", wizarding style. Plus, if we do it right, it'll mean the sword has basilisk venom in it as well, which should be useful...*

Moony, for his part, wore a coat of scale mail and a helmet cast in a single piece, padded to fit his head. The likewise fire-coated sword with which he was parrying and thrusting was longer and slimmer than Harry's, but he held it so lightly that it seemed almost an extension of his arm. Harry, though capable, looked awkward in comparison.

*Practice is all it is. Moony's had a lot longer to refine his technique. Even when we were little, in London and later on in Devon, I can remember him taking an hour or so every few days to work with a couple of sticks he'd Spellotaped together to be about the weight of his favorite sword, to advance and retreat, strike and block, attack and defend. Because the more you know, the more ways you can fight, the more practice time you put in, the better you become at everything.*

Near the foot of his tree, Padfoot and Letha were tumbling with Hermione and Meghan, practicing counters to holds, incapacitating blows on a larger enemy, evasions and escapes. Doing it in a dream meant the girls could learn to strike full force, as they would have to do in real life, without harming their Pack-parents thereby. Draco was all in favor of both parts of this.

*And I was down there working with them, until I got tired of it. I'm already pretty good, and there's no point in working to exhaustion when I've got the patterns drilled into my muscles by now, so Padfoot said I could have a break.*

If he conjured a mirror from the stuff of the dreamworld around him, Draco knew he would see his face strong-boned and triangular, his hair in ruffled brown waves, his eyes a brilliant blue. He no longer had to think about calling up such a look when he entered the Pack's shared dreams. It was his born face he had to struggle to create.

*I think, maybe, I wouldn't mind the way I look so much if I just knew about one decent person who'd looked like I do naturally. One person who wasn't a pureblood maniac, or mad and dangerous. Or both.*

Draco had discovered in the course of some research for History of Magic (in which he had not been expecting to continue past O.W.L. level, but Professor Hestia Jones's lessons had changed his

mind for him) that his paternal grandfather had actually been alive until shortly before the start of his second year at Hogwarts. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on one's point of view, complications from dragon pox had addled Abraxas Malfoy's brain to the point of imbecility near the time the First War had ended. Lucius, to his credit, had set up a comfortable home in one of his more secluded properties for the old man rather than consigning him to St. Mungo's, arranging a trust through Gringotts for his continued care, but after that had ignored the fact of his father's existence.

*To the point where I never so much as knew about him. The trust continued even after Lucius went to Azkaban, and we never noticed the gold missing from the vault because there's just so damn much in there—or was, until I moved it to Moony's before my third year. Funny how the timing worked out... if my grandfather had still been alive then, we would have learned about him sooner, when whoever was caring for him went to draw the money and found the vault was empty...*

He shrugged. It hadn't happened that way, and by all accounts, Lucius had come by his worldview honestly, so mad or sane, Abraxas Malfoy was no role model Draco Black found himself impelled to follow.

*Can't exactly climb Mother's family tree either. I mean, sure, there's Mother herself, there's Padfoot and Regulus, Aunt Andy and Tonks, even Padfoot's Uncle Alphard, but they all looked like Blacks. Except Mother, maybe, but I haven't got much of her in me. He grimaced for an instant, then chuckled under his breath. Not in my looks, anyway. In my heart, and in my soul, I'm her son through and through, and that's what counts.*

Still, it rankled a bit that his face, the part of him on which people would base their first impression, said "Malfoy" clear as a bell to anybody who knew anything about the wizarding world. He'd had his worst time with those feelings back in his third year, for obvious reasons, but they had never truly gone away, and he wanted to try to deal with them, to clear them off.

*Since I don't think they'll be very useful where I'm headed.*

A light tap in the back of his mind brought him to full awareness. Someone, somewhere along the edges of the dreamworld, was politely requesting admittance.

Draco slid off his branch and landed not in the clearing by the cottage, but at the edge of the forest, the traditional boundary he and Hermione maintained as their own. Anything on the other side was neutral ground, free to be shaped by anyone who happened along and had the proper power.

The black-haired, green-robed person who awaited him beyond that boundary qualified.

"Go away," Draco said haughtily, sticking his nose in the air. "This is a private party. No outsiders invited." He let his eyes travel downward to the bulging bag dangling from one of the newcomer's hands. "Unless you say the magic words."

Alex hefted the bag slightly. "I have presents."

"Those would be the magic words." Dropping the manner, Draco grinned and opened the wards on the dreamworld, allowing his honorary Housefather to step through. "What sort of presents? And who are they for?"

"A little something for everyone. You'll see when we get there." Alex looked around at the forest appreciatively. "Nice work you two have done here. Quite an eye for detail."

Draco shrugged, grateful this skin tone didn't show a blush as easily as his natural one did. "No point in doing something if you're not going to do it right. So how's everyone?"

"Busy. You lot having a war means more work for us." Alex swapped the bag from one hand to the other, rolling his shoulders. "But I'm sure you knew that, and there's not much I can talk about anyway. It either wouldn't make sense, or it would tell you things you can't know yet. Why don't you fill me in on what you've been up to instead?"

"If you insist." Draco kept pace easily with the older wizard. "You know about the House holiday parties, I'm sure—the first two went off really well, and the plan for the Slytherin St. Valentine's Soiree sounds like loads of fun, though I think Ron's having some trouble wrapping his brain around the second half of it. Why, after what he got Hermione to wear on Halloween, I don't know..."

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Most of the Pack had worn off the edges of their energy by the time Draco and Alex arrived back at the clearing, so that everyone was only too happy to adjourn to the cottage, clean up with spells which worked even better in a dreamworld than they did in real life, and settle into seats around the den room, watching avidly as Alex unpacked his bag.

"First, for Harry," he said, tossing a small package towards the wizard he'd named. "From Uncle Rick."

"Hmm." Harry shook the package, frowned at the lack of sound, and ripped into it instead. "It's...a book?" He flipped open the front cover. "*On the Proper Maintenance and Upgrading of Magical Weapons*— hey, does that mean—"

"He wanted to be sure you got it right the first time," Alex said over the various noises of understanding and appreciation. "Wait until after you talk to the goblins, though, they made them both so they'll be able to help you get all the subtle stuff lined up. Next, for Meghan." He slid a round bundle along the polished wood floor. "From Rowena, and the three Fates."

"Do they know you call them that?" Meghan asked, pausing in her first eager rip.

"They call themselves that. I'm just passing it along."

"Fair enough." Meghan tore into her gift. "Ooh, a crown! Or not really, it's not quite big enough—a coronet, then? Or a tiara?"

"Weena prefers 'diadem'." Alex grinned, clearly relishing the chance to get away with his elder's disrespectful nickname. "She had the goblins make it for her around the same time they were making Dad's locket, and Uncle Rick's sword, and Gaga's cup. They tossed in that brooch you're after as a thanks-gift, because it's bronze instead of gold or silver, and because it was a smaller piece, not as intricate."

"What does it do?" Meghan was turning the intricately-worked diadem over and over in her hands, squinting at it. "It's meant to do something, I'm sure it is..."

"It was supposed to confer wisdom on its wearer." Alex shrugged. "Not quite sure how that would work, since in my experience, wisdom is what you get right after you needed it, but that's what she was trying for. The real thing—or the physical thing, I should say, this version's got its own reality—was destroyed by accident in 1205, by a witch named Melinda Hastings."

Hermione frowned. "Melinda Hastings? Didn't she invent Portkeys?"

"Yes, she did." Alex snickered. "In 1206."

Everyone winced.

"How did she get it, though?" Letha asked. "Was she—"

"Sophia's," said Alex without preamble. "Brenna never had any, and Margaret's you know about."

Letha chuckled. "So we do."

Meghan hefted the diadem once more, then visibly came to a decision. "I shouldn't have this," she announced. "It isn't right for me. But I know who it's right for." She turned to her mother. "Mama Letha? Will you?"

"Are you sure, Pearl?" Letha frowned. "It was given to you."

"Which means it's mine, and I can do what I want with it," Meghan countered. "Alex, isn't it okay?"

"Might actually work out better that way." Alex leaned back on his hands. "Go ahead and do the honors, then."

Smiling, Letha sat very still as Meghan ceremoniously crowned her with the diadem. It sparkled for a moment against her black hair, then seemed to melt into the sides of her head and was gone.

"Ravenclaw wisdom powers, activate," Padfoot quipped under his breath. Danger reached over to smack him.

"For Hermione..." Alex lobbed a small, silvery ball through the air towards Draco's twin, who caught it smoothly. "And a little bit for Draco, though I've got another one for you later," he added in Draco's direction. "An answer to a question you've probably had for a while."

Hermione frowned at the ball for a moment, then smiled and crushed it between her hands. When she drew them apart, spreading her fingers wide, a canvas spread itself across the air. Perhaps a better word would be a screen, Draco thought, as the person pictured there was moving, his muttered speech audible to all.

*Not anyone I really wanted to be spying on, but it must be important.*

"But how to stop the cross-contamination from having unwanted results?" Lucius Malfoy leafed through the book lying on the desk in front of him, frowning. "His proper magic he must have back, which means a blood connection, yes, and the taint will die when *she* does, but I must be sure the traces do not linger...and to have his appearance change, even for such a short time, might dishearten him, turn him further from me..."

Draco had little trouble tracking this, which perturbed him slightly. *The blood-bond between me and Neenie—he wanted to be sure it would clear out properly after I'd "taken back" her magic and he'd killed her ...* He glanced over at his twin, receiving a cheery grin and wink from her. *See how well that worked.*

*But he also didn't want me looking like her. Which I don't. So something must have gone right for him...*

"Ah." A small sound of satisfaction, and Lucius tapped a paragraph in the upper left corner of his book. "I knew there must be a way. Here it is. To freeze the outward appearances of the two thus blood-bonded, the following steps will suffice..."

"Makes sense someone would have come up with that," said Padfoot as Hermione slashed her hand through the canvas, making it disappear. "Given that spell was originally invented so purebloods could sneak their Muggleborn sweethearts past their parents' blood-purity ideals. You wouldn't want your girl, or your boy, suddenly looking like somebody else—even if the bond does create a fully legal and viable blood connection, which it does—just when you'd finally got the go-ahead to marry!"

"We can tell you how to take the freeze off, if you really want it," said Alex to Draco and Hermione. "Just fair warning, though, you might have a hard time explaining it to your friends if your faces suddenly changed for no apparent reason."

Hermione glanced at Draco. "We'll think about it some," she said. "Who else do you have presents for?"

*We'll think about it some?* Draco wanted to scowl, but kept the expression purely internal. *You go right ahead and think, Neenie. I already know what I want. A chance to look less like him and more like the people I actually care about— yes, please—*

*Except it has to involve her too.* He sighed quietly. *And she might not want to look more Malfoy. For which I can't blame her. So... yeah. We'll think about it some.*

"We couldn't come up with anything for you two better than what you've already got," Alex was saying to Padfoot and Letha, who were, as they had been for days whenever the chance came up, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, arms around each other. "But I can answer anything you've got questions on, that the lady hasn't already covered herself."

"Did it make a difference, that I Obliviated her myself instead of being Imperiused into it, or even making His Dark Evilness do it?" Padfoot asked promptly. "I mean, my guess would be yes. But I just want to know for sure."

Alex nodded grimly. "If you hadn't, Voldemort would have totally destroyed her mind," he said. "Or rather, forced you to do it. And the consequences to your own magic, by your vows, were directly proportional to the damage done by the magic you worked on her. So if you'd destroyed her..."

"Then he would have died," Letha finished, her eyes momentarily bleak. "Or been mind-blasted himself, perhaps. Or soul-blasted, if there is such a thing."

"There is." Alex's voice was flat. "Hope you never see it." He laughed once. "And isn't this a charming topic for the night after Boxing Day. Shall we move to something more cheerful? Like..." He extracted a scroll from his bag and tossed it to Danger. "This?"

Danger snagged it out of the air and unrolled it, frowning at the contents. "Alex, is this—"

"I'm not totally unblocked yet," Alex cautioned. "For reasons I think you already know. But this much came through the other day, and I can give you more as soon as that spell-breaking year of the Pride's is over. And no, that's *not* because you're doing anything wrong," he said forcefully as Harry, Hermione, and Meghan all made sounds of indignation. "It's more because you're doing it right. I'll explain later." He nodded to Danger. "Which goes for you too."

"I'll hold you to that, now." Danger sat up straighter and looked around at the Pack. "It's a prophecy," she said. "Short, but the best ones always are."

Draco mentally sharpened his ears as his Pack-mother began to read.

*Earth to wind and flame to water,  
Father, mother, son and daughter,  
Champions, Heirs, and Consorts all  
Must gather ere the darkness fall.  
Despair not when your dreams come true,  
Seek out your patterns, old in new,  
And know ye that the time now nears  
When serpent's younger child appears.*

"Serpent's younger child?" Padfoot repeated, a look of disgust creeping onto his face. "Merlin, Alex, you're not saying Voldemort—"



"No," Alex said hastily. "No, no, nothing like that. He doesn't even think in those terms. It's..." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter to him. Never been a part of his life, not at all. The most he might do is take a ceremonial Consort, since some of the really old spells he'd enjoy call for two participants with that kind of link between them. But no, no little Riddles for you to worry about."

"What does it mean, then?" asked Moony. "Another line of descent from Slytherin? I thought you had said your Heirs died out." His eyes did not move to Draco, for which Draco was grateful.

*I know perfectly well I'm not responsible for what my ancestors did, but that's no reason to rub it in.*

"They did. But it's a funny world." Alex rubbed his left hand, a smile growing on his face. "Funnier all the time. Don't be too surprised by anything you see, that's all I can tell you. But now, for the best of all. Saved, as is tradition, for the last." He turned to Moony and Danger, scooting back a bit to include Draco and Hermione in his field of view. "Back in September sometime, you and Sirius were talking about Heirs and lines of descent yourselves. You hit on an old story he'd written down, Sirius had, about the Beauvoi family, and Danger, you asked a very good question."

"I did?" Danger frowned for a moment. Then her face cleared. "I did. What *did* happen to the Beauvoi daughter? Angharad, I think her name was?"

"It was. And that, I am allowed to tell you." Alex repeated Hermione's motion from earlier, spreading a canvas between his hands. The Pack shifted to get a better look.

This time, Draco thought, canvas was precisely the right word, as the people present held still, in the manner of a wizarding portrait when its occupants knew they were being admired. There were six of them, three men and three women, dressed in an ancient but becoming style, but that wasn't what sent his heart into his throat, sent his hand reaching out for Hermione's only to find hers halfway there already.

The three people at the center of the portrait, two tall gentlemen, clearly brothers, flanking their seated sister, had the elegant, fine-boned, pointed features, the pale skin, the white-blond hair and silver-grey eyes which in the modern wizarding world summoned up the name of Malfoy.

And yet... and yet...

*It's not. Not quite. Hardly surprising, it has been a thousand years!*

But the differences in the portrait went deeper than mere time could explain. Here, at long last, was the reality of the image he had seen in his first year, in the depths of the Mirror of Erised. Here, on faces like his father's, like his own, he could see wisdom, compassion, humor, kindness —

*Everything I want to be when I grow up. And everything Lucius isn't, and never was.*

**Everything you already are,** Hermione murmured to him through their link. Draco winced—they

usually refrained from silent speech in a shared dream, simply because it came through so very loudly—but also nodded, accepting that she, at least, thought he was the things she'd named.

*I don't see it, but we'll save that argument for later.*

"Lord Owain Beauvoi and his wife, Lady Avice of Thornbury." Alex indicated the man on the left and the plump, placid, brown-curled woman beside him. "Muggles, but knowledgeable about and friendly to the wizarding world. Their male line of descent died out about a hundred and fifty years after they'd lived, and while a few-times-great-grandson of theirs through the female line eventually got the family to agree that he had a right to bear the name of Beauvoi and pass it along, the title and property had already passed to the nearest male heir."

Meghan humphed loudly, and Alex shrugged. "Not terribly fair, no, but the way the world was in those days. Which is how what's now Malfoy Manor came into the hands of the next line down." His finger moved to the man on the right and the slender woman beside him, her red hair cascading across her shoulders. "The descendants of Dafydd Beauvoi, and yes, you guessed it right. Amanda Slytherin. My daughter."

Draco wondered if he was the only one who could hear the pain in Alex's tone. From the look of sympathy on Danger's face, he thought not, but decided not to make an issue of it. Instead he scrutinized the image of the long-ago Slytherin Heir, looking for resemblances between her and a certain Ravenclaw witch.

*Which...there aren't. Not many, anyway. I mean, yes, red hair, green eyes, slim build, but Harry's mum had all those too, and you wouldn't mistake any of the three for each other.*

The knowledge was obscurely comforting. He'd already known Amanda Smythe wasn't a ghost, but falling in love with even an image of the far-distant past would have been a little too weird for Draco Regulus Black.

"So a property and a title passed from a Muggle line to a magical one?" Hermione was asking now. "Didn't that get tangled up with—oh, no, it was before the Code of Secrecy was passed, wasn't it? So there weren't any problems."

"Problems, there were, but nothing insurmountable. And speaking of property, this painting still exists there. At Malfoy Manor, I mean." Alex batted his hand through the corner of his insubstantial canvas. "If you ever get a chance to reclaim the place, you might be able to salvage it. But you were asking about Angharad Beauvoi, and who she might have married." He waved a hand around the images of the seated woman and the sandy-haired man who knelt beside her, wearing a coat of scale mail and a warm, welcoming smile. "Her sister-in-law introduced her to her future husband. His name was John, but because he was so fierce in battle, but so caring everywhere else, his friends and family usually called him..." He winked at Harry. "Wolf."

Draco felt his mind freeze solid. *They called him—but that wizarding genealogy said—*

Across the room, Moony seemed to have worked it out too, as his eyes widened and Danger made

a soft sound of wonder. Padfoot barked a laugh. "How'd their kids turn out?" he asked. "Magical, most of them?"

"Most of them," Alex acknowledged, meeting Letha's small grin with one of his own. "And despite the best efforts of various wars, diseases, and the general perversity of the universe, that line of descent also continues to the present day." He inclined his head to Moony. "*Nature's Nobility* may be biased, but you have to admit the editors do their research, even if they later deny their own conclusions."

"Of course," said Moony with a bit of a sneer. "They have to know what the facts are before they can start twisting them to fit their own theories." He sighed, waving that away with one hand. "But it doesn't matter, not here, not now. What does matter is the gift you've given us." A smile blossomed on his face, nigh-identical to the one on the portrait-features of John the Wolf. "All of us." Now he did look at Draco, and the smile grew warmer than ever. "But especially myself and my Fox."

Hermione took a small scoot back and twiddled her fingers, and the grey smoke of a Privacy Spell sprang up around Draco and Moony. Draco spared one thought to shape the image of a thumbs-up out of that same smoke beside her, a silent token of thanks. Then he was across the floor as Fox and twining himself around Moony's arms, whining in quiet glee. Moony laughed and rubbed the corner of Fox's jaw, the side of his neck, the base of his ears. "I thought you'd like that," he murmured. "It may be far back in history, but that doesn't make it any less true."

Fox shook his head, then disengaged to sit down on the floor beside Moony in human form once more. "I don't care how far back it is," he said. "I could wish more people knew about it, but that'll come. What's important right now..." He would never have admitted it in the waking world, not even at a den-night, but this was the place and time where such words could be said. "It puts that link between us. It makes me yours. Really yours, the way I always wanted to be."

Moony shook his head, but with a finger upraised, warning that he had something to add to the simple gesture of negation. "I'm glad it does that for you," he said. "But for me..." He took Draco's hand in his own, then looked up to meet his eyes. "You've always been mine, Fox. The blood is just a bonus."

*Oh, now that's not fair. How does he always know what I want to hear him say?*

**Because I'm your father,** said a quieter mind-voice than Hermione's. **Because I know you, and I love you. And no power on earth—and not many beyond it, either—can change that.**

**Spying on my thoughts.** Draco pretended to pout. **No fair again.**

**Which also falls under the fatherhood clause. Parents are permitted to do a great many things which are not in the least bit fair.**

**I've noticed. At least you and the others were usually pretty even-handed with the Den rules—it helped that we knew all the stories about what you used to get away with, and could**

## bring them up to you as valid arguments...

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"I do believe they need a moment," said Alex, turning his back on the Privacy Spell. "So, what has everyone else been up to? I heard from the Fox, which means I've got a decent idea about the Hogwarts contingent—not that we haven't been watching, and again, very impressive work you're doing there—but how about you two?" His double-handed point indicated Sirius and Danger. "How've you been passing your time?"

"Slowly, in my case," said Sirius, grimacing as he thought of the current pace of his day job. *I might as well put in a patch of horklumps at the Office—I'd have time to tend them in between everything we get done in the day...* "We're following up on leads about Death Eaters, of course, but it's hard to do when they're as thin on the ground as they have been. And of the ones we do get, half of them peter out before they turn into anything workable. We could patrol likely targets, I suppose, but then that would alert the DE's that we were onto them, and they'd just swap out for something different. Honestly, I feel like I could be doing more good elsewhere. If I just had an idea where elsewhere might be."

"Always the problem with a guerilla war. Or really, any kind of war." Alex nodded in understanding. "Far and away the most of it is waiting. Then there's the tedious, repetitive, boring work involved. And finally, a little tiny portion of frenetic action, usually incorporating a fair load of sheer, howling terror."

"Anyone would think you'd encountered war for yourself," said Aletha with a laugh. "Which I know you did."

"I did. But ours dragged on longer than yours is looking to do. We never got around to finishing it until I was well into my twenties, married and having kids of my own, and here you are with your cubs not quite seventeen, the older of them, and already after the Snitch. Or Snitches, if you will..."

Harry hissed something at Alex in Parseltongue, who replied in kind, looking not at all chastened. "I'm being reminded not to let kneazles out of bags unnecessarily," he explained when he was finished. "Personally I think you ought to know what they're up to, but it's not my decision. And speaking of getting married—" He glanced back at Harry, who flushed. "That embarrassed about it already? There's still time to back out, you know."

"Not likely," Harry retorted, his blush fading. "I can read a prophecy as well as anybody. 'Lion's line continue must'—that's me, isn't it? Gryffindor's Heir?" He paused, thinking. "Gryffindor's Heir," he repeated. "And we have Ravenclaw's in the Pack already, and Hufflepuff's, though Captain's Pride only, not Pack. But what about this 'serpent's younger child'? Are we going to have to find him and swear the Oath with him too? If we're going to have all four, shouldn't they all be sworn?"

"Good call." Alex looked impressed once more, Sirius thought, though there was a trifle of worry in the expression as well. "I can't tell you too much about that, but I can tell you not to spend too

much time thinking about it. You'll know what to do when the time comes. And if you were wondering, the answers are no, no, and yes, in that order."

"So no, we won't have to find your Heir," said Hermione. "Because...he'll find us?"

"Or she," Meghan added. "It could be a she."

"And no, they won't have to swear the Oath with him, or her," said Danger. "I'm not sure why, but you're probably being overly clever again." She chuckled. "It must be genetic."

"Yes, it must." Alex looked at the floor, then up again, a blush of his own rising to his cheeks. "I wasn't sure if I was going to tell you this or not, but with an opening like that, I don't see how I can pass it up. So here goes. Bit of a logic puzzle for you to start with, and then you get the prize afterwards. Growing up, there were eight of us kids who were magical. Of our Founder parents, each one took two of us as students. Rick took his own two, and Weena had Brenna and Sophia—and Margaret sat in on most of their classes, magic always fascinated her even if she couldn't do it herself—what does that leave?"

Everyone looked at Hermione and Danger, who looked at each other, their eyes holding identical expressions of calculation. "It leaves you and Matthias, and Adam," said Hermione. "But who's the fourth, then?"

"Emrys," said Harry, snapping his fingers. "Godric's stepson, remember? Professor Jones told us about him after term ended last year."

"Right, of course, Emrys—" Hermione's eyes widened. "Emrys, who became Merlin. The greatest wizard of all time."

"And he learned to be great from a wizard who cherished greatness," Danger murmured. "He studied under your father, didn't he?"

"He did." Alex stared into the distance as though he could see those long-gone days passing before his eyes. "One of those little historical ironies, wouldn't you say? A wizard who's best remembered for protecting a Muggle king and court, studying magic under the tutelage of one who's best remembered for loathing all things Muggle with a passion. But that wasn't really what Dad was about, not at first. It only got to be an obsession with him as time went on, as he saw more and more Muggleborn kids showing up at Hogwarts, flooding out the purebloods, by his way of thinking, losing the chance to keep magical traditions and ideas strong, and to breed for the strongest and best magic. I'm sure I didn't make it any better, not after..." He stopped, grinning ruefully. "Sorry. Bad habit, that. Getting lost in the past."

"It seems like a past worth remembering," said Aletha. "So Merlin was a Slytherin. A member of that House, anyway."

"And if Matthias went with your dad when he left, then that would probably mean he studied under him as well." Harry was doodling in the air with fire, making different-colored squares to

which he assigned small stick figures. "Yes?"

"Yes," Alex agreed, his grin broadening. "Worked it out yet?"

Sirius glanced at Harry's colored boxes, at Danger's grin which was sprouting to answer Alex's, and blinked as the answer came to him. "Wait. Wait, that can't be right. But you said—"

"I said two of us studied under each of the Founders." Alex waved a hand, clothing himself in basic Hogwarts black. "If we'd had Sortings then, the way you do now, two of us would have been in each House. Paul and Maura in Gryffindor, Brenna and Sophia in Ravenclaw, Emrys and Matt in Slytherin..."

A flick of his finger added the single House crest not yet mentioned to his robes.

"Oh, you were not," said Aletha, her lips twitching, as Harry, Hermione, and Meghan all burst out laughing simultaneously. "Though it does fit you."

"So why wasn't I, then?" Alex brushed a bit of imaginary dirt off his Hufflepuff crest. "I wear green most of the time because blood does matter, and because if I didn't, Dad's House wouldn't have a representative at all. And they do deserve one. But that's not who I am, not who I ever was. My only ambition in life was to be happy, to make a better life for my kids than I'd had." His eyes hardened momentarily. "And my only ambition now is to keep idiots like my dad and brother eventually turned into from stopping other people being happy and making better lives for *their* kids."

"Thus, your helping us," said Sirius, waving a hand around at the Pack. "For which, if we haven't said so already, thanks. Thanks a lot."

"You have. Quite a few times. But I'll always take it again, and pass it along to the rest." Alex stroked the badger's head on his crest again, his smile softening. "Nice to be in my proper colors for once. My other proper colors, I should say, I've got a perfect right to wear the green too, but doesn't this just bring back memories..."

Danger frowned, as though chasing down an elusive thought. "Your mother," she said slowly. "Your mother, and Merlin's, who became Paul and Maura's. And Adam's father, and the Fates'. Do you remember them at all? Tell me to back off if it's too personal," she added hastily, "but it's something that's always niggled at me. Whatever became of them? And were they magical? They'd almost have had to be, especially with what your father came to believe, but in that case why don't we know them as Founders along with the ones we do?"

"You told me once your mum went with your dad when he left," Harry added, bringing Alex's head around to focus on him. "Before we knew who you were, when you were still just Al, the portrait in the Hogwarts Den."

"Ah, the good old days." Alex wobbled a hand in the air. "So to speak. It's not that painful a subject, Danger, don't worry about it, but it is a bit touchy in other ways. But yes, Harry, I did tell

you that, and it's true." He ran a hand across the fabric of his Hogwarts robes, the cloth bleeding into colors where it had touched it, yellow, green, red, blue, before fading back to black.

"Our parents all had magic," he said finally. "But the ones you don't know had a different sort than the ones you do." A brief flicker of a grin touched his face again. "And someday if I really want to knock you toes over head, I'll tell you why, and where they came from, and one of the reasons Dad and Rick and Gaga and Weena were so good at magic so young. It even explains their heraldry a bit. But for today, I've actually stayed about as long as I should. Not that the company isn't congenial, but I ought to be getting back."

"Thanks for popping 'round," Sirius said, getting to his feet along with Alex, as the Privacy Spell around Remus and Draco dissipated, revealing both of them with satisfied smiles, and Draco with —

*Well, well.* Sirius had a good look under the guise of bending down to help Meghan up. Their Fox had shifted his personal appearance once again, from the fully Moony-and-Danger look he'd used for the past couple years in dreams to something which split the difference between that and the face Sirius was used to seeing in his waking life. *Probably close to what he'd end up with, if he and Neenie took that freeze off their blood-bond like Alex was saying. Maybe one of these days, assuming that vision of Luna's doesn't pan out the way they're all assuming it will, we can give that a try...*

"Always good to see you," Alex was saying, shaking hands all around, adding a wink and a few words in Parseltongue to Harry, who snickered at whatever private joke had just been exchanged. "And hang onto that fifth line in the prophecy, will you? It's important."

"Fifth line," said Danger, raising the scroll in salute. "We'll remember."

"Excellent." Turning in place, still in his Hufflepuff robes, the younger son of Salazar Slytherin Disappeared, the last thing to vanish being his broad smile.

Sirius glanced over at Aletha. "Cheshire kneazle much?" he hazarded, and heard her rich chuckle in reply as the memory to which he'd referred came easily to her mind. The sound filled him with a wash of joy, as did her easy, comfortable squeeze of his hand.

*Some days you just get luckier than you deserve to be.*

"Remind me," said Remus, stretching his back. "What does the fifth line of that prophecy say?"

"*Despair not when your dreams come true,*" Hermione recited before Danger could read it. "But—oh." Her eyes had fallen on Draco before she could get more than one word into her sentence.

"And you know, I'm not," said Draco thoughtfully. "I'm really not anymore." He looked over at Harry. "It's like Hagrid said that one day after the Triwizard."

"What's coming will come," Harry said, nodding. "And we'll meet it when it does."

"And we'll meet it together," said Meghan with certainty, holding out her hand. "Pack together."

"Pack forever," the rest of the family chorused, placing their hands atop hers.

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Far away, though they could not see it, Alex's smile lingered, though it held traces of sadness now as well as joy.

"Hold onto that one too," he murmured, loading a quill with one hand as his other traced rune patterns on the surface of a basin like a Pensieve, though it was filled with ordinary water rather than the silvery fluid of thoughts. "You're going to need it more than you know."



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 16: Something Old, Something New (Year 6)

"I don't quite understand it myself, so I don't know how much I can tell you," Aletha said, sitting with her back to the wall of the drawing room. The Pack, much to her private amusement, had chosen to see in the new year in the same room as the restored Black family tapestry.

*Though it does make sense, if you look at it logically. The old, the new, and the fusion of both, which is what this night is about. Discussing who we're going to be in the future, in the presence of the physical reminder of our past...*

Her thoughts, conveniently enough, curved back into what she'd just been saying.

"There wasn't any hard and fast boundary on this side, not like there was to begin with," she went on, most of the Pack unaware she'd ever paused, though Sirius was watching her closely.

*Though he's been doing that ever since I came home to him. Making sure I don't vanish, I suppose.*

"You accepted being Aletha as well as Mare, and the memories just...closed the gap?" Danger hazarded. "Became more and more your own, until the two of you were one, the way you were to begin with? Or not exactly, but close enough for Ministry work?"

The cubs all laughed at this, and Aletha smiled. "Something like that," she said. "At first, I had to make a conscious effort to access my old memories. Like remembering a spell you've memorized but haven't practiced. And even then, they weren't fully real, they weren't personal and strong. They weren't...me."

"And yet, they were." Remus had his fingers twined through Danger's hair, tiny flames running down the strands, smoothing the snarls her wild curls tended to pick up over the course of an average day. "Even if you couldn't bring them fully into your consciousness, you felt the familiarity in them. You'd make most of those same choices again, because who you were hadn't changed with the Memory Charm, only what you knew."

"That's right." Aletha winced. "And thank you for putting that 'most' on there. I've had my shining moments of idiocy over the years."

"Who hasn't?" Sirius covered her hand with his. "But the longer you thought about yourself as yourself, warts and all, the closer the memories got. Like practicing that same spell over and over, until you do it without even thinking about it. It's reflex, muscle memory, drilled into you at the deepest levels you've got."

"And once that happened..." Shutting her eyes, Aletha relived that single brilliant moment of realization, in the middle of an everyday Potions lesson, that she was no longer the woman called Mare with the implanted recollections of a witch named Aletha Freeman-Black but both of them at once, her memories running in a single unbroken stream at last. "I may not be perfect, but I am

myself. And I'd like to think there's more good than bad in me."

A cold nose against her elbow made her yelp. Wolf had crept up beside her while she was thinking, and was now favoring her with his best soulful green-eyed puppy look.

"Troublemaker." Aletha scratched the back of the dark-furred neck vigorously, earning herself a long-legged, sharp-toothed lap decoration. Meghan, leaning against her other side, batted away Wolf's muzzle as it encroached upon her space. Across the way, the two halves of a furred yin-yang, white and calico curled neatly into one another, lifted their heads to observe their siblings with complacent tolerance. Danger laughed and reached over to stroke both of them, one with each hand.

*How could I ever have resisted this?*

The sight of her Pack, together and savoring the quiet joy of their den-night, brought another line of thought to Aletha's mind. She tagged it for later discussion with Remus and Danger, privately. It wasn't the sort of thing the cubs should hear.

*Not that it would be any great surprise to them, but even in a Pack, some things don't need to be shared.*

"Someone else's turn," she said aloud. "Best and worst moments of this past year, and hopes and fears for the year to come..."

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"Any wishes for the new year?" George Weasley asked Crystal Huley as they sat together at a table in the Pepper Pot, the rest of the Red Shepherds occupying the other tables around them. The membership of the small group had grown somewhat over the course of the autumn and winter, but even so, the tiny restaurant was far from overcrowded, and George could have named every member without trying hard at all.

*But quality's going to beat quantity every time, unless the quantity's ridiculously high. And the more we can expose about what the Death Eaters really think and believe, the better our chances of cutting down their membership, because a movement like theirs only ever gets really wide popular support if it manages to disguise itself behind something like what Grindelwald used to spout—"for the greater good" and all that rubbish—until it's so firmly entrenched that nobody dares to fight it...*

"Oh, the usual. Peace on earth, good will towards Muggles, all that sort of thing." Crystal sipped her drink. "But I do have one that's a bit different." She glanced around them. "Can you..." One finger twiddled in a circle. "You know. So nobody hears us."

"Sure thing." George drew his wand and cast a Privacy Spell around them, taking the extra moment to Disillusion it from the outside, so that his brothers and the rest of their cohort would see not a wall of gray smoke but himself and his girlfriend, still chatting about inconsequentials. "What's on your mind?"

"It's a bit delicate. I'm not sure if I can explain it properly." Crystal set down her mug, spinning it back and forth between her hands. "You and Fred, you're close. Well, of course you're close, you're twins, but what's between you goes beyond even that. You've got almost everything in common, most people think you're interchangeable...but you're not." She looked up at him. "Because I'm not in love with Fred. And I am in love with you."

George sat very still, feeling a wave of heat sweep across his face, drawing the corners of his mouth upwards into quite possibly the biggest, most idiotic grin in the world.

*And I've seen a few in my time.*

"How flattering," Crystal said dryly, but she was smiling. "But I mean it, George. I do love you. And if you love me back—you don't have to say it, I'm not asking, but if you do—then there's something I'd like you to do for me. A piece of your trust I'd like to have, if you're willing to share it."

"I..." George coughed once, clearing the squeakiness out of his voice. "I think I can do that."

"Then tell me your biggest secret." Crystal met his eyes steadily. "Tell me how I can always tell which of you is which. I know there's a way, because I do it every day, but my mind won't let me in on how I'm doing it. And I don't like having to say 'because I just know', because sometime I could be ill, or tired, or Confused, and I wouldn't 'just know'." She grinned briefly. "I promise not to tell your mum. Or your brothers or Ginny, either. But I want to know for myself."

*All these years, brother mine.* George smiled ruefully to himself, thinking back over his lifetime of changing places with Fred at will, of using their inborn talents for wreaking havoc to spin all probabilities in their favor, of baffling even their own parents and siblings with ease. *All these years, and it's my very Muggle lady-friend who finally susses it out. Who'd have thought?*

"All right," he said aloud. "But only because you promised not to tell Mum."

Leaning close, he let her in on the secret, even going so far as to provide a demonstration.

"Goodness." Crystal held up her hands, looking at them closely. "Well, that makes a great deal more sense than it doesn't. But something that big, that obvious—"

"People see what they expect to see," George reminded her. "Besides, we've both trained ourselves to swap at need. But in a pinch, if we're startled or moving too fast to think about it...I'm only glad Mum never did suspect. There aren't many people in the world who scare us, but she's high up on the list."

"She won't hear it from me." Crystal sketched an X on her chest with one finger. "Cross my heart. Or do wizards use something else?"

"Unbreakable Vow." George held out his right hand, and Crystal clasped it with hers, grinning.

"Appropriate," she had time to say, before George took advantage of their respective positions.

The Privacy Spell dissipated to the applause of the rest of the Red Shepherds, with Fred and Danielle leading the chant of "Snog! Snog! Snog! Snog!" in time with Roger and Selena's "Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven..."

No one noticed Percy, near the back of the room, turning his face discreetly away.

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"Three...two...one..." Peter Pettigrew snapped his pocket watch shut. "A very Happy New Year to you, my dear lady," he said formally to his companion, bowing to her.

"And to you, good sir," Evanie replied with a deep curtsy, though the effect was somewhat spoiled by her giggle.

Peter laughed in answer and scooped her into a hug, marveling as he always did at the incredible miracle that was this woman and the tiny sanctuary of joy she had carved out for both of them, nestled in the heart of the darkness he'd thought he would never escape.

*She gave me back the person I used to dream about being. The man who had a future, had a life beyond scuttling through the shadows, doing what he's told, and hating every minute of it. And someday, if we're both lucky and we stay strong, we might get a chance to have that future, have that life, together.*

*What more than that could this year bring to me?*

"So, now you're going to tell me," he said, setting his wife down and tapping his wand against the side of the bottle he'd slipped away to a Muggle shop to buy a few days earlier. "Why in the world did you insist this be non-alcoholic?"

"After you pour." Evanie caught the cork as it rocketed through the air and laid it on the palm of her hand, smiling secretly. "There's no hurry, you see. We've got quite a few months still to go."

*Quite a few...*

Peter set the bottle down hastily, just in time, as both his hands, flesh and silver, began to shake uncontrollably.

"When?" he whispered, staring at Evanie's small figure, still so slender but suddenly, impossibly, doubly precious to him. "When?"

"September." Evanie tipped her hand back and forth, letting the cork roll around in the cup of her palm. "I began to suspect a few days ago, and one of the house-elves was able to confirm it for me —"

She broke off in a squeak as Peter snatched her into his arms again, holding her as close as he dared, feeling the rise and fall of her shoulders through his own violent trembling.

*How could you do this to me?* he wanted to demand, at the same time as he wanted to collapse in a fit of fear, and to laugh hysterically for the wild improbability of it all. *How could you—you know perfectly well how frightened I am just for you some days, I can barely make it through what's expected of me for waiting to see if my ring will heat up or cool down, how could you load another person onto my shoulders, someone else for me to care about, to be afraid for—*

"Well, then," he said into the brown head resting against his chest. "We'll just have to look into getting a larger room."

*Or into doing again what I once did. Only with all the roles reversed, this time. He bared his teeth briefly, as his other form might when cornered. I can never fix what I did in the past, but I can admit that I was wrong, and make new choices, better choices, for our future.*

*And I refuse to raise my child, our child, in a world containing the Dark Lord—no, containing Voldemort—for one instant longer than necessary.*

Bending his head to kiss his wife, Peter Pettigrew never noticed the tremor which ran through his right hand, nor the momentary burst of heat from the wedding band on his left.

Gold is worth more than silver as long as it is true.

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*A new year, a new start. Or, in a lot of cases, a continuation.*

Harry stepped from one tile to the next in the front hallway of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, imagining each step as another task he had to complete over the course of the new calendar year.

*Step. Enjoy what's left of my holidays. Hop. Train with Percy and the other Red Shepherds on how to use their Red Roads, so we can train the rest of the DA when we get back to school. Three steps in quick succession. Go on with that same training, and with building Sanctuary, in between classes, Quidditch, and studying up on Horcruxes. A small, careful step. Sneak in a little time for sleep and eating somewhere along the way. Stretched-out, long step, across several tiles at once. Meet with the goblins at the end of the month...*

His great-aunt's influence had worked in his favor, as he'd hoped it might, and he and Ginny were due in Gringotts' lobby on the evening of his own half-birthday.

*Good thing that's a Friday. Aunt Amy says goblin negotiations can go for hours, even days...*

Another step, and a little leap in place. *Then comes the Slytherin St. Valentine's Soiree. Harry grinned to himself. Wonder how many people will be expecting what they came up with for it? It's both sides of Slytherin, both good sides of Slytherin—first the traditions, the certainty of ritual, of question and answer where everyone knows what it ought to be, and then later into the night, they'll give us that touch of wickedness, that openness to unconventionality, in pursuit of getting what it is that you truly want.*

"Having fun?"

Harry craned his neck to look up at the speaker, who had appeared on the landing above him. "I'd have more if you'd come down," he said.

Ginny seated herself on the banister. "If you insist," she said, and pushed off.

Laughing, Harry darted up the hall to catch her as she arrived on the ground floor. He spun her once, cutting their momentum, then came to rest with her cradled against him. "Hi," he said, looking down at her.

"Hi yourself." Ginny leaned up to kiss his cheek. "May I get down?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On whether you're my Ginevra or her evil sock-stealing boy-snogging trick-doing banister-sliding house-elf twin Virginia."

"Well, you did just pick me off a banister." Ginny made three mystic passes with her free right hand and produced a Knut from thin air. "And I can do plenty of tricks. Like this one." With her left arm, still around Harry's neck, she hoisted herself up in his grasp.

"Takes care of boy-snogging," said Harry a few moments later, a trifle breathlessly. "And I think we can skip the other bits for the moment." He planted a foot on the lowest step and balanced Ginny against it. "So you're real after all. I'd been wondering."

"Yes, Harry, there really is a Virginia." Ginny tapped his nose with the Knut. "And she'd like to know what had her Harry grinning when she first spotted him, as she thought *she* was the only thing which put that particular look on his face."

"Oh, it was her. Or you. Or both." Harry shrugged. "Whichever. But you, or her, or both, put together with the Slytherin party." He set her on her feet. "Both parts of that as well, really. Formal teas usually aren't much fun, but I'm looking forward to seeing what you come up with for dress robes, since I don't think you'll want to wear the same thing then as you will on May Day—"

Ginny snorted. "I should say not. Those have to be new, absolutely new. The shoes, though, those I'll wear ahead of time. That way, they'll already be old by May Day."

"Makes sense. So you'll have something else for St. Valentine's, something pretty, like you always have." Harry slid his fingers into Ginny's hair, thinking of the way Moony had fire-combed Danger's the night before. "Not that you really need anything special to look good, Lynx. Honestly, I like you best in your Quidditch robes, because that's one of the truest yous there is. Fast, strong, sneaky, and dangerous. Prefect or not, you'll probably be captain next year, after..."

"Yes. After." Ginny turned with Harry to look at the photograph of the Pack now hanging on the

wall where the portrait of Walburga Black had once held pride of place. Meghan was giggling silently as Padfoot and Moony rocked back and forth the cauldron she'd been photographed inside. Photograph-Harry tossed and caught the Snitch he'd been pictured holding, dodging fiery Bludgers created by Danger and swatted his way by Letha with Danger's wooden spoon as a bat. Hermione had taken over Padfoot's chair and was pointedly ignoring the chaos behind her, her nose buried in *The Horse and His Boy*.

Standing to one side, the gold captain's C gleaming on his red Quidditch robes, Draco twirled his flute between his fingers, watching his Pack play with a wistful look in his eyes, as though a date engraved in stone had already separated them forever.

"Knut for your thoughts," Ginny murmured after a moment, planting the coin in Harry's palm.

"Nothing you probably aren't thinking yourself." Harry closed his hand around the small disc of bronze, feeling the engravings on it pressing into his skin. "Except that I'm hoping you never have to stand here looking at me that way."

"Seconded." Ginny leaned back against him. "But if we do a good job with the goblins, that'll get less likely. How do you want to handle that, or should we wait until closer to the actual time to talk about it?"

"A little preplanning never hurt." Harry slipped the Knut into his pocket. "Though really, it shouldn't be too hard for either of us. Don't let rudeness rattle us, since goblins do that on purpose, to see if they can get a rise out of wizards—answer back whatever we get with more of the same, manners with manners, bluntness with bluntness—"

"No lies," Ginny added. "Not out-and-out lies, anyway. Telling part of the truth, playing with words, seeming to say one thing but actually saying another, goblins respect all of that, because they think if you're not clever enough to see through it, then you deserve what you get. But an outright lie, or even stating something you're not sure about and later having it fall through, will lose you their confidence forever."

"And if we're not sure about something, or we don't know it, or we've been told not to tell it, we can say so, because they understand all those things." Harry slid a finger along his pendant chain. "Though they might be a bit surprised that we do, because they think of wizards as completely undisciplined, without any structure or order in their lives. Doing whatever they want, whenever they want, answering to no one and nothing."

"Clearly they have never met my mum." Ginny twitched an eyebrow at Harry. "Or yours. Either of them."

"Yes, speaking of which." Harry sat down on the step, Ginny seating herself beside him. "How're we supposed to handle the goblin girl? Woman, female, whatever—" He pounded the step lightly in frustration. "How am I supposed to talk to her when I don't even know the right word?"

"You might try her name," Ginny suggested lightly. "I'm guessing she'll have one."



"Yes, but how do you know she'll give it out? I'm a wizard, remember. Proper goblin girls don't talk to the likes of me."

"Then we ask the goblin man if we can be introduced to his companion, and go from what he tells us." Ginny tweaked a strand of Harry's hair between her fingers. "Direct and honest, remember? We don't know what's right and what's wrong, so we ask. It should impress them."

"From your mouth to the Founders' ears." Harry glanced upwards and coughed significantly, then leaned forward to give some attention to the part of his girlfriend he had named.

A mental wolf-whistle just as they were getting to the good part nearly made both of them choke.

"Very funny, Alex," Ginny muttered against Harry's lips.

**That wasn't me!** protested Alex's mind-voice. **That was Paul!**

"Oh, I *beg* your pardon. Very funny, *Paul* ."

**Thank you, thank you very much,** said the only son of Godric Gryffindor in a near-perfect imitation of the voice Harry had used during his brief acting career in his fourth year.

Ron, coming downstairs to see where Ginny had got to, found both his alphas rolling on the tiles of the front hallway, helpless with laughter.

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"Well, here we are," said Remus, shutting the library door and flicking an Imperturbable Charm onto it before sitting down at the table with his wife and Pack-sister. "So what is this good news and bad news you have for us?"

"Start with the bad news," Danger added. "That way, we'll hear the worst of it first, wail and weep and tear our hair, and then we can be cheered up by the good news."

Aletha laughed. "It doesn't work quite like that, not with this set, but if you insist." She opened the folder she had carried into the room with her. "The bad news is: it would almost undoubtedly kill you. Remus, that is."

"I would tend to consider that fairly bad news, yes." Remus twined his hand with Danger's. "As I have quite a number of reasons to go on living these days. So what could possibly be the good news to go with that?"

Turning her folder around, Aletha pushed it across the table towards them. "Something you've both wanted for as long as I've known you," she said. "A way for you to have children, born children, of your own."

Danger perked up, peering at the parchments inside the folder. "Just how deadly are we talking here?" she said.

Remus released her hand and pointedly hitched his chair several inches away from her, making both women laugh. "A good question, though," he said when they were finished, returning to his place beside his wife and joining her in perusing the reports and articles Aletha had culled in her research. "You said 'almost' undoubtedly..."

"In the same way that falling out of a high window without a wand would 'almost' undoubtedly kill you." Aletha sat back in her chair, running over the information in her mind as she watched her Pack-siblings taking it in. "Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, or even more than that, you'd die."

"But if I remember the story right about a certain Pridemate of our cubs', there's just the slightest chance you might bounce." Remus was sitting back now as well, his eyes shut, Danger's swirling with equal parts blue and brown. "What would the equivalent be here?"

"Honestly, I don't know. It's why I wasn't certain I should tell you about this yet, but at least it is progress, even if it's not quite what I was hoping for." Aletha drew her wand and sketched an outline of a human body in the air above the table. "The problem is limiting the spread of the potions I'd have to use." Another flick of her wand highlighted the portion of the body most directly affected. "There's no way to safely reroute the blood flow around this area without irreparable harm to some very delicate tissues, both there and elsewhere, but allowing it to continue would spread the potion throughout your body. Which, as I said, would kill you." She shrugged. "I suppose I could use a Stasis Spell, but that stops *all* change, including the one I'd be trying to make. The only way I could really see to do it effectively..."

"Yes?" Danger said, looking up when the pause had gone on for several seconds.

"Please note, I'm not advocating it here." Aletha scratched absently at her left elbow. "But I might be able to make these changes safely on a body which was already dead."

"How glad I am she took the time to state she's not advocating it," Remus remarked to thin air, then returned his attention to Aletha. "And would you mind telling me what the point would be, in that case? I somehow doubt I would have the capability to appreciate this particular new ability of mine, if the condition you have mentioned applied to me..."

Aletha shook her head at him. "You weren't listening. I said, on a *body* which was dead. By which I mean, heart not beating, blood not flowing. That would isolate the potion very nicely, and if I worked quickly, I could have everything finished inside two minutes. Which is well within the limit most Healers recognize."

"Recognize for..." Danger stopped, her eyes widening. "Of course. Of *course*. If only the body has stopped working, if the mind is still undamaged, the soul still present—even Muggles can do that much, I learned the basics in school when I was sixteen! Restart a person's heart, get them breathing again—"

"It's still a risk," Aletha pointed out. "Quite a large one, even with magic. But yes, I do think it would work. As you said, Danger, Muggles have the capability for that as well—would you believe one of the cubs' yearmates is living proof?"

"Oh?" Remus sounded politely inquisitive, but Aletha could hear in his abstracted undertone that his thoughts were working at lightning speed. Though he would remember her words, he was not truly hearing them at the moment, simply using them as a way to keep the top layer of his mind busy while the rest of him considered this new information.

*The way I'll play over a piece of music I already know very well, when I'm trying to work out the precise proportions of ingredients for a new potion. Or, alternately, brew something common and much-needed, like burn salve or Pepper-Up Potion, when I'm thinking over how a new bit of music should sound...*

"Yes, I found it in the St. Mungo's records while I was researching," she went on, watching as Remus's hands moved idly back and forth, as though he were already writing out his ideas on a scroll. "Obviously, I can't give you a name, but I can tell you it's a Muggleborn girl, about their age, who fell into a swimming pool when she was three years old. Her father was able to get her lungs emptied, get her breathing again, her heart restarted, but the doctors all told them it was hopeless, she'd been under too long, she would never recover, never wake up..."

"And instead, she woke up magical." Danger laughed. "I do love happy endings."

"What was it doing in the St. Mungo's records, if she's Muggleborn?" Remus asked, blinking out of his trance. "Unless she has magical relatives from somewhere else."

"No, it was a follow-up visit, after her Hogwarts letter had come. Her parents wanted to be perfectly sure she didn't have any lingering issues."

"Makes sense to me." Danger nodded. "They'd want to take advantage of everything they could to make sure their daughter could enjoy her new life."

She looked over at Remus, her eyes whirling with color again. He returned the look for a long moment, after which they both sighed in unison.

"Thank you for telling us, Letha," Remus said, standing up and coming around the table to embrace her. "It's a bit unsettling to think about, and certainly nothing I want to try while the war's still going on, but it's a place to begin, isn't it?"

"And that's better than what we had yesterday, or the day before," Danger added, waiting until Remus finished before bestowing her own hug on Aletha. "Or all the days, and years, before that." She shook her head as Aletha let her go. "What's the matter with me, anyway? A Pack like ours ought to be enough for any sensible woman..."

Remus and Aletha traded a long look of their own.

Danger whirled. "I heard that, Remus John Lupin! I'll deal with you later," she snapped over her shoulder to Aletha, then spun back to face Remus, transforming as she went. Moony the lion was already most of the way out the door by the time wolf-Danger's paws hit the carpet.

Aletha chuckled under her breath, stacking her parchments back in their folder as the crashes and growling began in the hallway. "And thus ends another calm, adult discussion among Packmates," she said. "Why did I want to come back to this again?"

*Oh, that's right. Because as mad as it inevitably becomes, it's also the most fun I've ever had.*

With a happy sigh, she strolled out of the room to watch the battle.

---

"So how do they work?" asked Ron, peering at the bit of floor which looked a bit different than the rest of the boards. To someone with normal eyes, like the rest of the Pride, currently also observing the Pepper Pot's entrance to the Red Roads, he knew it would be a bright shade of scarlet, but to his modified sight, it appeared...the best way he could describe it was "shiny".

*English doesn't have words for this sort of thing. Might have to make up my own...*

"Well, it started as a tap into the Muggle collective consciousness of roads, with sufficient Cheering Charms to counteract the general gloominess found there." Percy glanced across the Pepper Pot's back room at Crystal, who was doing something fancy with ink and parchment. "Present company excepted, of course, but Muggles seem rather a dreary lot overall."

"Why do you think I was so happy to come play in your world?" Crystal blew on her parchment. "You've got your own troubles, but at least you believe there's something you can do about them. Most Muggles seem to believe everything's a bit useless and everybody's got a nasty streak a mile wide. Including themselves."

"Lovely," commented Ginny. "So you took the way Muggles think about roads, Cheered it up a lot, and then what?"

"Combined it with the basic theory behind an Undetectable Extension Charm." Percy held his hands about six inches apart. "The spell which is used to create what's often called wizardspace. The sort of thing Dad did on the seats and boot of our car, or your godfather's family, Harry, on his townhouse."

"Bigger on the inside than the outside." Harry grinned briefly. "And it's not even a police box."

Crystal choked at this. Percy looked baffled, but went on. "Roughly, that's correct. So it occurred to me, if we can make something small larger by magic, why couldn't we make something large smaller? Or, more precisely, something long shorter?"

"So if I walk along the Roads, I can get anywhere that Muggle roads go, but a lot faster than I'd get there, even by car?" Hermione edged a foot towards the shiny boards, but pulled it back before it broached the line. "What does it feel like, when you're riding on them?"

"Ever been to an airport?" Crystal asked, looking up. "Or is that a stupid question?"

Hermione grinned. "Actually, we all have," she said, indicating herself and the Pack's other cubs. "We flew to America to visit our Aunt Amy when we were about seven."

"Excellent." Crystal skimmed her hand along the table's surface. "Think of the people movers they've got there." She pointed at Harry and Draco. "Those two probably tried to walk against the motion and tripped each other up, and your parents had to stop them from tripping other people as well."

Meghan giggled, as did Hermione and Ginny. Luna regarded Draco curiously. "Did you?" she asked. "It seems like the sort of thing you would have done."

"He did," Hermione recovered enough to say. "And it's a little sad that you knew that, just from knowing them now," she said to Crystal.

"I may not have brothers, but I have a boy cousin or two, and I've had friends who're boys all my life." Crystal leaned back in her chair. "I know what boys get up to."

"In any case," said Percy in a tone which suggested he wasn't quite sure how he'd lost control of the conversation, "because we're using the theoretical underpinnings of the Undetectable Expansion Charm, but not the exact incantation of the Charm itself, we won't run into the spaces that other wizards have borrowed over the centuries—we're starting fresh, in a space all our own. The space where the Red Roads run is similar to, but not exactly congruent with, the roads in the Muggle world that each individual Red Road is named after..." He stopped, seeing the same glazed look on most of the Pride's faces that Ron could feel on his own. Hermione was nodding eagerly, Draco frowning in concentration, and Ginny was chewing on a bit of her hair as she did when she was thinking her hardest, but Harry, Neville, Meghan, and Luna all looked as baffled as Ron felt.

*Though with Luna, you can't tell—she always looks like that.*

"While you're traveling on the Red Roads, you won't be physically in the same place as all the cars using the Muggle roads," Percy tried again. "Though you'll be following the same line of travel, and you might see them as...images, I suppose. Translucent, rather ghostly in appearance. Or they might see you, in the same way." He paused, apparently struck by a thought. "I wonder if this, or something like it, is the source of some of the more ridiculous ghost stories Muggles like to tell?"

"I suppose it could be, but there's no way to tell." Crystal blew on her parchment once more, then got up and came over to the shiny square of floor, holding out what she'd made for Percy to see. "What do you think?"

"That'll do." Percy drew his wand and stuck the parchment to the wall, then traced the little rune Ron knew well, the one that made anything dark on a flat surface glow with just enough heat that he could see it.

*He never forgets to do that for me. Fred and George do sometimes, Mum every now and again, even Ginny or Neenie or the rest of the Pride have once or twice, but Percy never does.*

The knowledge buoyed Ron as Hermione's sharing her eyes with him had once done. Not even his reading of the sign, as he could now see it was meant to be, could deflate his good mood.

## WELCOME TO THE RED ROADS

Please respect your neighbor!

Keep to the left at all times.

No running, no horseplay, and

ABSOLUTELY no broomsticks!

Harry's hands wove in patterns as soon as Percy had turned away. *Going to need some new lines on there if Padfoot and Moony ever try these out*, Ron translated, and snickered under his breath.

*Fred and George too*, he signed back. *Want to set them up against each other? Old Marauders versus new?*

*Maybe if there wasn't a war on*. Harry grimaced. *Snakeface ruins all our fun*.

*Which is why you need to kill him*. Ron glanced at the rest of the Pride, who nodded in agreement. *We'll help*.

*Thanks*. Harry grinned reluctantly. *I appreciate that*.

"So," said Crystal, coming back from the table where she'd been tidying up her inks. "Who's for a run on the Red Roads?"

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 17: Something Borrowed, Something Blue (Year 6)

"While unicorns are certainly one of the strongest and most Light-focused magical creatures, it is a matter of Muggle folklore that that they can tell the state of a human being's..." Professor Sylvanus Kettleburn coughed, his face flushing. "Yes. Well. Unicorns tend to prefer women over men, but there is no truth to the stories which seem to state that they will not allow themselves to be touched by anyone who is...that is, who has...or rather, who has not..."

"He doesn't seem to want to say 'virgin'," Ginny murmured to Luna as their classmates exchanged baffled looks. "Care to do it for him?"

"No." Luna shook her head. "He ought to be braver than that, if he's a professor. Especially for Care of Magical Creatures. He has to face all sorts of terrifying animals."

"Sometimes human beings are more terrifying than animals ever could be." Ginny took another look at the spindly, stammering wizard. Judging by the snickers and comments now rising from her class of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, he'd finally managed to get his point across. "He's not married, is he?"

"No ring." Luna tilted her head, her eyes going unfocused, then focusing again. "And no other signs on him. Even if the stories were true, the unicorns would still let him touch them. But..." She blinked, an incredulous smile starting to spread on her face.

"What?" Ginny asked, then switched into Pride-sign as a couple of her Ravenclaw classmates shot glares at her. *Is it something good? You look happy.*

*It is good. But it's also sad.* Luna pulled out her *Monster Book of Monsters* and stroked it down the spine before opening it to the entry on unicorns, her hands continuing to talk in the interstices of her movements. *He thinks it can never happen. Which, he's just borrowing trouble because he's never even asked, he's a few years older than my Draco's Pack-parents so there's not that much of a difference between them, and they're both magical so they've got lots of time left in any case...*

*Who?* Ginny demanded. *Who is it?*

Luna signed the answer.

The entire class turned to see why it had taken Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood so much longer to get the joke than anyone else.

---

Madam Pomfrey looked down her nose at Harry despite his several inches' height advantage, an ability she shared with most of the mothers of his acquaintance. "And what is it *this* time, Potter?" she inquired coolly. "More Quidditch injuries?"



"Sort of." Harry nodded awkwardly at his left arm, which he was cradling against his chest with his right. "We were experimenting at practice with this one hex I got from my godfather, you cast it on a Beater's bat, it turns a wooden Bludger into iron for a little while after the Beater hits it, and I was looking the other way at just the wrong time, and..."

"I would have thought you'd had quite enough experience with that particular spell." Madam Pomfrey beckoned him into the hospital wing, pointing at the bed she wanted him to sit on. "Or don't you recall how it happened that you made a certain memorable visit here in your second year?"

"Yeah, I know. But I was..." Harry almost shrugged, but remembered in time not to jostle his arm. Both forearm bones were broken, but in different places, which somehow made it hurt worse than if he'd snapped them in the same spot.

*And isn't it sad that I can tell the difference?*

"It's not like what happened to me was the spell's fault," he said finally. "It was the person who cast it, and the person who used the bat it was cast on."

*And one of them's dead now, while the other one, or an older version of him, wants me dead...*

"Besides, I thought it would be good practice for some of the things I've been doing with the DA," he went on, sighing in relief as Madam Pomfrey conjured a sling around his left arm, freeing his right hand to take the goblet of potion she was holding out to him. "We don't really have a teacher sponsor anymore, so I have to keep on top of things." He grinned to himself between swallows of potion. "Even if we do have a visiting professor of sorts, now."

"Yes, and what Dumbledore is thinking, to let *him* back into this school after everything that went wrong the *first* two times..." Madam Pomfrey *hmpf* 'd and poked Harry's arm with her wand, muttering a spell under her breath. The pain was already gone, courtesy of the potion, but some sensation remained, and Harry grimaced as he felt his bones slide back into place and knit themselves together.

*It feels like someone has my arm, just my arm, under Imperius. I wonder if that would be possible? A partial Imperius, to control only a part of a person's body? Maybe you could make someone, oh, I don't know, strangle themselves. Creepy to think about.*

*Could you make them cast a spell, if you got their wand arm? No, you'd need their mouth too, to say the incantation. But you could make them shoot a potion piece. Or a Muggle gun. Bad news all around, both of those...*

"There, that should do it." A backwards swipe of Madam Pomfrey's wand removed the sling, and Harry flexed his fingers, checking his range of motion. "Have Meghan check you tonight to be sure, and nothing too strenuous with that arm for a few days. Give the healing time to settle in." The nurse planted her hands on her robed hips. "Which *means*, Potter, no more borrowing overly creative and thoroughly illegal hexes to try out during your all-too-mad-as-it-is Quidditch

practices. Stick to flying and tactics. And you may tell that 'visiting professor' of yours, from me, that he's not to encourage you to do anything madder than he used to get up to."

"Does that mean I can be as mad as he was?" Harry scooted out the swinging door before Madam Pomfrey could come up with a rejoinder for this.

*Because if so, that would give me a lot of leeway...*

---

"Moon, more wrist, less elbow," Sirius instructed, walking behind the line of DA skirmishers firing spells up the indoor range for which he'd commandeered an unused classroom. "Abbott, good, but put a little more power into it. Finnegan, ease back some, you don't have to blow it to bits every time..."

*That 'somewhere else' I was mentioning to Alex, that I thought I could do more good than I can at the Office full-time, came and found me after all. Where better than right here at Hogwarts, three afternoons a week? These kids aren't bad, certainly—they beat the robes off us pretty handily last year!—but you can't fix the little mistakes you're making if nobody ever tells you what they are, and spotting what they are takes an observer. A trained, adult observer by preference, and one who actually cares about what he's doing, instead of—*

The Zippophone in his pocket buzzed. He pulled it out and flipped it open. "Black here."

"Snake's in the lane!" hissed his daughter's voice. "Snake's in the lane!"

Sirius groaned under his breath. *Here we go again...* "Thank you," he said aloud, then snapped the lighter shut and waved his own wand at the lights, making them flicker three times. Instantly, the skirmishers broke off their practice, pairing up and beginning to duel one another, using a wide variety of the spells Sirius recalled his cubs recounting with relish in their stories of the DA Silly Duel Tournament.

*The one with the flying boat could actually be useful, if you could get it large enough...*

But the point of these spells was not to be useful, and the point of his being here, at this precise moment, was not to guide these students into better use of their magic, but to play into a certain person's favorite stereotype of him.

*As much as I love giving him new things to twit me on.*

Quickly hiding the targets the skirmishers had been shooting at, Sirius began to stroll around the room, correcting a wand grip here, a spell motion there, but in a desultory, haphazard fashion, rather than the brisk, no-nonsense tone he'd been using a few moments before. When a spell's incantation or results struck him as funny, he made sure to laugh instead of keeping his emotions in check, sending answering waves of snickers around the room.

*Perfect. The brainless Auror wannabe, only in the Office because his name was in the news a few*

*years back and it would be bad press to fire him, and a bunch of incompetent kids who think they can fight the Unforgivables with Hair-Thickening Jinxes and hot apricot preserves...*

A ripple of black robes caught his eye, and he groaned loudly, thrusting his wand into the center of a haphazard duel between Katie Chi and Blaise Zabini. "No, no, no! That's not how to do a Color-Changer, not at all! Here, let me show you—stand still, Zabini—"

Blaise, recognizing his cue, dodged swiftly to one side, avoiding Sirius's spell.

The person standing in the doorway of the classroom was not, quite, able to do the same.

Sirius grimaced broadly as Severus Snape, his hair and robes now a delicate shade of sky blue, stepped back into view, glaring at every student present as though cataloging their names for future detentions. "Sorry 'bout that, Snape," he said a bit too casually. "Let me fix you up here—"

"I will do it myself. Thank you." The last two words were added in a tone which suggested the speaker had just dropped a full cauldron on his foot. "I had come to see what the noise was about, but I suppose, since they are with you, *Black*, that this is an *authorized* school activity..."

"As official as they come," said Sirius heartily. "Defense Association practice—just putting in a few extra hours with the kids who need it most, you know. Care to stay and watch? You being the proper Defense teacher and all, I mean, I'm just a volunteer when you get right down to it."

"No, I think I have seen enough." Snape stepped two paces into the room, located the full-length mirror Sirius used to help the students see the problems with their casting motions, and restored himself to normal appearance with three insultingly lazy flicks of his own wand. "Do recall that we have a general curfew, and that club meetings, even with an...*adjunct instructor* in attendance, are not considered sufficient reason to flout it."

Turning on his heel, the Hogwarts Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts stalked out of the room.

"Do recall that we have a general curfew," Sirius mocked, not truly under his breath, to the accompaniment of hisses, boos, and groans from the DA. "I'll curfew him...just because the kids aren't perfect, he thinks he can come in here, bully everybody...and whose fault is it they're not much good, anyway? Not theirs, not if they aren't being *taught* how to do this stuff..."

The Zippo, still in his right hand, buzzed again, and Sirius flicked open its top. "All clear!" Meghan chirped before he could acknowledge. "Carry on!"

"Thanks, love." Sirius shut the lighter and tucked it away again. "You heard her," he said to the skirmishers, restoring the targets to visibility with a broad wave of his wand. "Back to your marks. Two more rounds at that distance, one a bit longer, and then we'll pack it in for the night."

*Having just provided Snape with the perfect report to hand off to Moldy-snort. "Yes, my lord, I have observed the so-called 'Defense Association' at practice...no, my lord, nothing to be*

*concerned with, they are more concerned with learning foolish spells to play practical jokes on one another than with any true skill in battle..."*

He returned to his steady pacing behind the line of students, letting his eyes watch for problems without any conscious input needed from his mind. *And he won't have to use Occlumency for it at all, except to hide what he suspects. Which, if Moony's to be believed, is a fair bit easier than hiding what you know.*

*Thus, our little game, to be sure Old Grumpy never knows anything more than would be good for him about these kids.*

An aberrant movement snagged his attention, pulling him out of his thoughts. "Ah-ah, Entwhistle, too much wind-up—you're giving your opponent time to get his own spell off if you swing back that far, make it short and sweet. Good, Smythe, very good, but don't get overexcited. Remember, the more worked-up you are, the more likely it is your enemy can beat you with your own nerves..."

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"Can you believe someone fronted the entire sixth year their Apparition lessons?" Ron asked incredulously as the elder five of the Pride made their way down to the Great Hall in company with their Housemates. "There's what, at least forty of us, and the lessons are twelve Galleons apiece..."

"Four times twelve is forty-eight, times ten is four hundred eighty," Hermione calculated aloud. "That is quite a lot of gold, but maybe the school governors got up a fund because they want to be sure every student can Apparate, because of the war."

Harry, recalling a conversation he'd accidentally overheard during the holidays, kept his mouth firmly shut and his eyes away from Draco.

"Fred and George say the instructor's rubbish, though," Ron went on, scowling. "Goes on and on about his 'three Ds' and never really explains how it's supposed to work, or what you're meant to do. Just what *not* to do, which isn't really helpful, y'know? Not for something we've never done before, something this complicated..."

Neville shrugged. "We all managed our Animagus work," he said, keeping his voice down as a matter of habit, since the rest of the Gryffindor sixth years were uniformly DA members and had seen what the Pride could do. "How much harder can Apparating be?"

"Creative Splinching 101," Draco murmured. "Legs over here, arm over there..."

Hermione developed a quiet case of the giggles.

Stepping through the door of the Great Hall, Harry had a look around. The House tables were gone, as he'd expected given the size and character of this lesson, and the four Heads of House were standing on the teachers' dais talking, but the fifth person awaiting them was no one Harry

had expected from Ron's description.

"Professor Jones?" said Hermione in surprise, stopping short and nearly causing a four-student pile-up in the doorway. "But—I thought—"

"If she's qualified, why not?" Ron ducked around his girlfriend and caught her sleeve, towing her out of the way. "She can't be any worse than the Twycross bloke Fred and George were talking about, the way they tell it they had to learn everything practically on their own when they'd sneak out to Hogsmeade on their free time..."

Harry glanced back at Draco, who had a small, satisfied smile on his face. *How'd you set it up?* he signed under cover of finding spots for them near the front of the Hall.

*Asked Moony who'd satisfy the Ministry and the school governors both, while still properly teaching us how it's done,* Draco signed back. *He who pays the piper. A brief laugh, silent but real. Or in my case, is the piper.*

About to answer this, Harry stopped at Draco's quick sign of negation. Professor Jones was stepping up to the edge of the dais, looking over the assembled sixth years.

"Hands up all those who've had older siblings take this course in the past," she said, her voice easily reaching the back of the Hall. "Or any relation, really, anyone you know who's attended Hogwarts within the last ten to fifteen years and might've told you what it's like."

About half the assembly's hands went up.

"As I thought." Professor Jones nodded. "Now, hands up all those whose relations told them the course was practically useless except for making the Ministry *think* you'd been trained."

Amid ripples of snickering, the same set of people raised their hands.

"Again, no great surprise." Drawing her wand, Professor Jones conjured a simple wooden shape on the dais beside her, two uprights with a crossbar at the top. Harry was reminded of the empty doorframe on which he and the Pride had practiced sneaking through Death Eater wards the year before, when they'd been planning to rescue Graham Pritchard. "Something to remember in your future lives, ladies and gentlemen. Just because you have a certain skill, it doesn't always follow that you can *teach* that skill. But enough from me about my predecessor's shortcomings. What is this?" She laid a hand on one of the uprights. "Go ahead and call it out, and don't think too hard, I'm not trying to trick you. What would you say this was, if you saw it in the middle of a wall somewhere?"

"A door," said Su Li promptly. "But it isn't in the middle of a wall, Professor, it's just out in the open air..."

"True enough, but the point still holds." Professor Jones stepped through the frame to the other side, then back again. "It's a door. A means of getting from one place to another. Which, ladies

and gentlemen, is all Apparating is, at its heart. You begin in one place, and you end up in another."

"But you're just stepping across the dais," Justin Finch-Fletchley objected. "You could as easily go around it!"

"True enough." Professor Jones smiled. "But if I do *this* —"

She stepped through the door again—

And vanished with a small pop as her body passed through it.

Though Harry knew the sixth years had all seen Apparition before, a small wave of "Ooh" still passed through them, and heads started turning as people began to look around the room.

"Back here," called Professor Jones's voice, and the students wheeled as one to see her standing just inside the door to the entrance hall. "The Anti-Apparition wards over Hogwarts grounds have been lifted only for this one hour, and only to the edges of this room," she cautioned, striding forward towards the dais again. "Just in case you were thinking of having a bit of practice on your own. Don't."

*Unless, of course, you know how to get to Hogsmeade, Harry finished inside his mind. And maybe have a professor or two, or maybe an "adjunct Defense instructor", who'd be willing to go with you and run security, to be sure no Death Eaters sneak up on you.*

*We might even be able to get some of the Order, or the Red Shepherds, if they can be spared from fixing up the Roads and trying to locate DE strongholds. His eyes found Artemis Moon, who was looking rather bored—he suspected she, like her sister, had learned to Apparate early, either from her parents or from her boyfriend Adrian Pucey, who had left Hogwarts now but was, if not an official Red Shepherd, loosely affiliated with the group. But that's always assuming we need the extra time. If Professor Jones is half as good at teaching Apparating as she is at History of Magic, we might not...*

"So, you've seen my little demonstration," said Professor Jones, boosting herself up onto the dais again with a lithe movement which reminded Harry that she'd been one of Padfoot and Letha's teammates on the Gryffindor Quidditch side in her day. "Now let's get to what it means. A door is a very simple way of getting from one place to another—you simply step forward through the door, and there you are. But what if the door takes you, not just from one room into the next, or from your house into the outdoors, but from a platform onto a train? What then?"

"You'll...go where the train is going?" hazarded Theodore Nott after several seconds of baffled whispering among the students.

"Precisely." Professor Jones pointed to him, beaming. "Five points to Slytherin. Apparating can be likened to having your own personal train, which can take you anywhere you wish to go. *Almost* anywhere, that is—most wizarding homes and institutions are warded except in specific areas

designated for arrivals, and though you generally could break those wards if you tried, it's considered most impolite to do so. But, just like riding on that same train, Apparition has its dangers. How many of you have mothers who've shouted at you from platform nine and three-quarters when you're about to leave for Hogwarts?"

Harry hid a snicker and raised his hand, along with Draco, Hermione, and most of the rest of the room.

"And what is it they most often say to you?"

"Get back inside that train this instant," Harry quoted, a rumble of voices around him all saying the same thing in different words.

"Because if you've got bits of you sticking out of the train, you could get hurt." Professor Jones stepped up to the doorframe again, this time with her elbow deliberately sticking out. "And if I try to pass through this door but I'm not looking where I'm going..." She rapped her arm lightly against the left doorjamb. "Ouch. Only if you happen to be Apparating and you're not looking where you're going, as it were, it's a great deal more painful, because parts of you can end up left behind, or at other random destinations. This, of course, is known as splinching, and depending on the magical skill of the witch or wizard involved, can take several forms..."

A lecture as brief and incisive as Harry had come to expect of Hestia Jones followed, but instead of laying out the reasons behind certain seemingly nonsensical wizarding laws or the root causes of endless clashes with goblins, she was enumerating the levels of splinching. Only an inexperienced Apparator, she explained, usually caused any true injury to himself while splinching, because even a few months' practice would accustom a witch or wizard's magic to the transitions of Apparating, meaning if and when they splinched themselves, although the parts of their body were physically separated from one another, they remained magically connected.

*Which is why Moony was able to get himself back together pretty quickly at the World Cup, with Letha's help—if he'd been younger, the age we are now, his magic wouldn't have been used to Apparating, wouldn't have been able to maintain the connections between the pieces of him, and...* Harry winced away from this image. *Yeah. Not pretty.*

"There are spells laid over the Hall tonight, as there will be at all of our lessons, to help maintain this unity for you," Professor Jones announced. "Meaning that you will not die if you splinch yourselves here, as will probably happen to all of you at least once as you're learning how Apparition works. It will hurt quite a lot, there's not much we can do about that, but we'll get you put back together as quickly as possible." Her wave included the Heads of Houses, sitting in a row of chairs on the dais behind her. "Do try not to kill yourselves once you're licensed, though, the Ministry tends to frown on that."

Hermione broke away from a rather heated Pride-sign conversation with Draco and raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Granger-Lupin?"

"How do you keep yourself from splinching, Professor?" Hermione had her eyes resolutely forward, away from Draco, who was glowering at her. "Is it just a matter of holding your concentration long enough, or is it more like some of the higher levels of Transfiguration, where you've got to know a bit of the basic structure involved or you might end up with something that looks right but doesn't work properly?"

*You had to bring that up, didn't you?* Harry groaned under his breath. Draco had not, as Harry had half-suspected he would, been forced to drop Transfiguration after his O.W.L. year, but the E he'd earned on the dreaded exams had probably been only by a point or two, and his lack of natural talent was becoming more and more apparent as the year progressed. Their latest lesson, a day or two ago, had ended with Professor McGonagall pulling Draco aside to try his conjurations behind a Privacy Spell, after several of the witches in the class had threatened to be sick over the bits and pieces of mouse which kept arriving on his desk in random (and occasionally twitching) piles.

*He's not quite the worst one there, but he comes close, and you had to go and blurt that out in front of everybody. Not that they don't all know it by now, but still.*

"It's a bit of both, and five points to Gryffindor for bringing me so neatly into my next topic." Professor Jones leaned against the doorframe, sketching a human figure in the air with her wand. "To go back to our analogy of the train, to keep from getting hurt, as your mothers have told you repeatedly, you need to stay inside the carriage at all times. When you're Apparating, though, you make your own carriage, and that's where the concentration comes in." A swirl of her wand created a halo of light around the figure. "You do need to know the basic structure of your body, to be sure you're telling your magic to take all of you, your entire self, along for the ride, but there's no detailed anatomical study needed."

*All of you, your entire self.* Harry twisted at a bit of his sleeve. *Why does that sound familiar?*

"Just now, when you're starting out, it would be a good idea to have a mental checklist," Professor Jones went on. "Right leg, left leg, right arm, left arm, and so on. The more aware of your body you are, the more likely it is that you'll get that whole body to its destination in one piece."

*Aware of your body—legs, arms, torso, head—*

Harry stopped himself just in time from whooping aloud in glee as the connection hit him.

*Borrowing from what we've already done, just like I did for Occlumency, and for nonverbal spells—Neville even mentioned it on our way in here—*

"So, who wants to give it a try?" Professor Jones stepped back from the doorframe. "Come on up here, tell yourself this door will take you to the back of the Hall—I'll give you a target, to make it a bit easier—" Another wave of her wand created a second doorframe, prudently standing three paces inside the Hall. "And step on through. One word of warning first. You do all have your wands with you?"

Snapping his wrist, Harry exhibited his, watching as most of the DA did the same, as the other



students rummaged in pockets or pouches to bring theirs out.

"Good." Professor Jones drew a red circle in the air with a slash through it. "*Never try to Apparate without your wand somewhere on your person. Even if you don't have it in your hand, as long as it's with you, your wand acts as a focusing point for your magic. Without it, Apparition is very, very difficult, and incredibly dangerous even if you do manage it. I can only think of a few wizards, off the top of my head, who could so much as get it started, and fewer than that who could pull it off without killing themselves.*"

Hermione made a small squeaking noise, pulling the Pride's eyes to her. She was looking past Professor Jones, Harry saw as he turned, looking at the Heads of House, at the end of their row, the part furthest into the shadows of the Hall—

*At Snape? But why—*

Draco let out a soft "Ahh" of comprehension. *Den-night story, he signed when Harry glanced at him. The day we left the London Den, Snape Apparated out of our backyard to the Ministry, remember, when Moony caught him with a Memory Charm halfway through it so he couldn't give us away? But Hermione had his wand, Snape's, I mean, she was up the tree with it, we had to return it by Dobby before we left...*

Harry whistled under his breath. He'd known that Snape must be a powerful wizard, given various magical displays throughout his Hogwarts years and the strength of the attacks he was still occasionally unable to block in his Occlumency lessons, but hearing what Professor Jones had to say cast his Defense professor's abilities in a new light.

*But then, I already knew he could fool Voldemort. Compared to that, almost anything has to look easy.*

"So, who's my first victim, then?" Folding her arms across her chest, Professor Jones surveyed the room. "Come on, now, don't everybody speak up at once..."

Reminding himself once more of the connections his mind had made, of the skills he'd already acquired, Harry raised his hand.

"All right, Potter, let's have you." Professor Jones beckoned him forward. "Right up here by me, if you would."

Rather than use the stairs, Harry hoisted himself onto the dais with his arms as Professor Jones had done, and caught a look of approval in her eye as he straightened. "Stand straight on to the door, now," she instructed him, pointing to the spot where she wanted him. "Get a picture of your whole self in your mind, tell your magic to take you from this door to that one, and step through. If you've done it right, you'll feel squeezed for a moment or two, and then you'll be there." She moved back a pace. "Good luck."

Harry half-closed his eyes, searching for the focus he used while watching for the Snitch or trying

to throw Snape out of his mind. A deep breath or two helped calm his nerves to the point where he could call up his memories of what it felt like to transform back from being Wolf, of the first few seconds of settling into his human body again.

*That's me*, he told his magic, feeling it wash through him, warm and red, from his core just below his breastbone outward to the tips of his fingers and toes, then settle around him in a shell that included such important items as hair, clothing, and glasses. *That's what needs to stay together. Now take it, all of it, and—*

He stalled for an instant, trying to think of how to tell his magic to connect the two doors, but another memory came to his rescue, Percy's careful voice explaining the theory behind the Red Roads.

*I didn't understand everything he was saying, but I got that the Roads are actually in another place, another world almost. It touches our world at the places where Percy and the other Shepherds set up entry points for the Roads, but the distances between those points are shorter in that world than they are in ours.*

*Maybe, when we Apparate, what we're really doing is taking ourselves into and out of a world where the distance between this door —he glanced up once more at the wooden construction in front of him—and that one —a quick look over his classmates' heads at his target—isn't the entire length of the Great Hall, but just—*

Holding tightly to the image of his human self whole and entire, adding in the overwhelming desire to be at the other door, to be there *now*, Harry strode forward.

*—one step—*

An instant of the familiar compression and blackness of Apparition, and then he was looking at the backs of his classmates' heads, and over them to the teacher's dais. Professor Jones looked surprised and pleased; McGonagall was smiling more broadly than Harry had ever seen her anywhere except the Den; Flitwick was rubbing his eyes like he was having trouble believing what they were telling him; Sprout was nodding matter-of-factly, as though he'd done nothing more interesting than correctly juice a Snargaluff pod; but Snape—

Harry didn't bother restraining his grin. It had only lasted for an instant, but he'd caught it. Professor Severus Snape, for a fraction of a second, had looked approving of something he, Harry Potter, had done.

*I'm never bringing it up to him. He'd just deny it anyway. But it might be funny to let him see that I know next time we do Occlumency...see if he chokes on it, starts turning odd colors...*

The rest of the class was turning around now, beginning to applaud as it registered with them that Harry had managed a successful Apparition on his first try. Harry took a quick bow, then returned to his place beside the rest of the Pride, Neville smiling fully for once and Ron pumping his fists above his head. Hermione beamed at him in awe, and Draco flashed him a sign of thumb to little

finger, then hand fully extended, as Professor Jones called the class back to order.

*One for the record books*, Harry translated, recognizing the sign as one the Pride had borrowed unchanged from the Marauders rather than altering it for their own use as they had so many others. *More than you know, Fox, more than you know...*

---

"It's such a pretty color at this stage," said Luna, gazing into the cauldron which hung from Draco's tripod in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. "Almost the same as the fire you conjured for it. Or as these." She extracted her pendants from her robes, fanning them out to display her jewels. "But I couldn't ever do what Mrs. Letha did—Professor Black, I should say—"

"We're alone, you can call her whatever you want," Draco pointed out from across the room, where he was rinsing a handful of mixed pepper seeds in one of the sinks (not, as he'd made carefully sure, the one which hid the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets). "And what do you mean, you couldn't do what she did?"

"I've used all my blue jewels already." Luna tapped her finger against each pendant in turn as she spoke. "One to help us talk to each other, the night we gave baby Norbert to Tonks to take to Charlie in Romania, and then one to take my Seeing powers away and one to bring them back again. So all I have left is my red one, and that doesn't do the same thing." She let the pendants fall back against her chest. "How many do Meghan and Hermione have left, do you know?"

"Pearl has...two?" Draco dropped his pepper seeds on the cloth he'd spread out on the counter beside the sinks and started to pat them dry. "No, one. Because I know she used one the night we rescued Pritchard, and then another one during the Diagon Alley attack, to watch me and Neenie going after Harry in that dreamworld. And Neenie should have one as well, because she used one to talk to me when Moony and Danger got so sick, the same summer as the World Cup, and then she gave me one of the two she had left at the birthday party that summer, up at the Founders' Hogwarts. I'd have to check with them, but I think that's right. Why?"

"I was just curious." Luna edged carefully around the cauldron and came to Draco's side, peering down at the pepper seeds. "How many of each do we need?"

"Six, so twenty-four all together. Let's get them sorted out first, and then we can pick the ones that look the best. Why were you curious?"

"Because I had a dream." Luna spread the seeds out with gentle fingers, beginning to separate the various colors into smaller piles around the edge of the larger one. "About Hermione having a dream. And I didn't think it made sense at first, but now that I know she's given you a blue jewel, it does."

"A dream about Hermione having a dream?" Draco frowned. "How does that work?"

Luna laughed. "First I went to sleep up in Gryffindor Tower," she said, her hands never ceasing their quick, deft motions. "And then I Saw Hermione, asleep and dreaming. She was at the Den,

and she looked younger than she is now, maybe about fourteen, so it could even have happened that same summer you'd mentioned, the year before the Tournament. But I couldn't see into her dream then, not while I was dreaming too, so I had to make myself wake up to go looking, because I wouldn't have dreamed of her dreaming unless her dreaming was important."

Draco pieced this together and nodded. It made at least partial sense, which was better than he often got with Luna. "What was she dreaming, then?" he asked, spreading out Luna's small piles of pepper seeds to better see which ones were plump and symmetrical, being careful not to mix them in the doing. "Could you tell how it was important?"

"I think it had something to do with one of the...things." *Horcruxes*, Luna's hands shaped, a cage of fingers around an empty center, signifying the "shells" by which Danger's prophecy had referred to the receptacles of Voldemort's bits of soul. "Because Harry was holding what looked like the cup Professor Dumbledore showed us in his memory from Madam Smith's house-elf. Perhaps that means he and Ginny will be able to persuade the goblins to give it to us. But you were there as well." She drew her pendants out from under her robes again and closed her fingers around them. "Holding one hand like this, with blue light gleaming. I couldn't understand it—though I do now, of course—but I still don't understand what Hermione said."

"Why? What did she say?"

"She said..." Luna released her pendants, letting them fall. "She said, 'No, don't do it.'" Her eyes rose to meet Draco's. "And I'm not at all sure which of you she was talking to, or what she meant by it."

*Nor am I.*

*Though I can't say I like any of the possibilities.*

But, Draco reminded himself, like Luna's vision, Hermione's dream would happen when it happened, and worrying about it beforehand would change nothing.

*And besides, maybe Neenie's wrong. Maybe she's telling me not to...oh, I don't know, channel a load of magic into my blue jewel and use it to drag Voldemort's mind and soul into the cup Horcrux, so we can kill him outright when we stab it with Harry's dagger. He grinned briefly. Wouldn't that be a funny little ending to the war?*

"We'll find out when we find out," he said, returning his attention to the pepper seeds. "Let's get this done."

*Because whatever happens, to me, to Harry, to anyone else, one thing's for certain.*

*I'm not leaving my father around to go after the Pack and Pride once I'm gone.*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 18: Deep Magic (Year 6)

Hand in hand with Ginny, Harry climbed the stairs of Gringotts. They'd come through the Vanishing Cabinet from Sanctuary (where one large and three small dining halls, a three-sided "open-air" stage, and a full dozen small and soundproofed multipurpose rooms were nearing completion under the wands of the yearmates) to the Pepper Pot.

*Safer than the Floo Network or brooms, safer than Apparating—I may have figured that out, but I'm still not licensed, I can't Side-Along yet, and there's always that spell Malfoy used on Padfoot way back when—and safer even than the Roads. Not that they aren't safe, but the Death Eaters might be able to figure them out. Some of them are more Muggle than they let on, it's always possible they could work out the trigger phrase and get onto them.*

*Though I like what Percy set up in that case. Harry snickered under his breath. If anyone Marked tries to ride the Roads, all the Cheering Charms disappear, so they'll come off the other end more angry and depressed even than your average Muggle. Snape helped him test it, Percy said, and it worked just like it should.*

*Of course, with Snape, I'm not sure how you could tell.*

Percy himself, along with Charlie and Tonks, had been waiting at the restaurant, closed for the evening, to escort Harry and Ginny safely through Diagon Alley to the towering marble edifice which was the aboveground portion of Gringotts. The elder Weasleys had hugged their sister for luck and shaken Harry's hand, while Tonks had treated them both to one of her patented big-cousin knuckle rubs. If he looked over his shoulder, Harry knew, he would see them still there, watching.

*But looking back means I'm nervous, and the goblins are probably watching already. I know I'd be watching, if it was goblins coming to see me. Especially if I had a feeling they wanted something out of me, something I might not be willing to give up. What if they don't believe me? What if they do, but think maintaining their reputation for protecting their vaults at all costs matters more? What if—*

"What if you calm down?" Ginny murmured, her voice almost too low for Harry to hear even over the few inches separating them. "They're definitely not going to be impressed if you go in there all knotted up with nerves."

"Easy for you to say," Harry began heatedly, then forced himself to stop. "Sorry. It's just..."

"That you've never done anything like this before, that the whole war could turn on it, and so on and so on," Ginny finished for him. "All true, but I have a feeling this won't be the last time you're in that situation. And this one, at least, isn't likely to kill anybody." She glanced up at the tall, bronze doors. "I hope."

"Only with embarrassment." Harry squeezed her hand lightly. "But I don't have to do it alone. That

counts for a lot."

"Good." Ginny smiled and lifted her free hand. Harry did the same, and together they pushed open one of the enormous outer portals, stepping over the threshold as one.

The silver doors beyond gleamed dimly in the fading evening light. Harry's mind provided the words carved on them, the words he could still remember proudly reading aloud in chorus with Neenie to the strange, shy boy standing beside them.

*But if you seek beneath our floors  
A treasure that was never yours...*

*We're not here to steal. We're here to talk.* He and Ginny passed through the second door together as they had the first. *Maybe to talk the goblins into stealing for us, but that's beside the point.*

The interior of Gringotts' vast hall was darker than Harry had ever seen it. His eyes adjusted quickly, if not as fast as Wolf's would have, so that within a few seconds he could see the long counter, the hanging lamps, the roped-off waiting areas. To his left, near one of the doors which led down to the carts and the vaults, stood a small figure, a shaded lantern in its hand.

*That's got to be our contact.* Harry was about to tug on Ginny's hand, drawing her attention to the waiting goblin, when she turned her head in the correct direction without prompting, and Harry caught the change in her scent as she saw what he had seen. A quick squeeze told him she thought he should take the lead, but that she was aware, alert, ready to follow any cue he might give her.

*Here we go, then.*

"Good evening," Harry said, pitching his voice just loud enough to carry. "My name's Harry Potter. This is Ginny Weasley. I believe we're expected."

"You are," the goblin replied after a brief pause, unshading his lantern to reveal the features of his dark, pointed face, not materially different than any other goblin Harry had ever seen—

*But then, that's what I used to think about house-elves, until I started spending more time in the kitchens at Hogwarts, and then training with the DA. They're really not that hard to tell apart, once you start taking the time to look. Bet goblins are the same.*

"If you will follow me, please," the goblin continued, turning on his heel and setting off. Harry exchanged a small smile with Ginny as they did so—the words had been polite enough, but the tone was brusque, as if to say that the speaker didn't much care what they did one way or another.

*He's trying to annoy us. Trying to get on our nerves by showing us how little he thinks of us. A laugh threatened to escape Harry at this tactic, and was firmly suppressed, but the smile won the day with its rearguard action. On a lot of wizards, I'm sure that works, but I grew up with the Pack and Ginny has six older brothers...*

They were working their way through a maze of passages now, and Harry could see Ginny's lips

moving. He suspected she was trying to keep track of the turns they were making, just in case everything should go impossibly sour and they had to fight their way out.

*We can always follow our own scent back, though. Unless they know we're Animagi and they're leading us in circles on purpose...except that we'd figure that out pretty quickly, once we started getting fresher scent of ourselves, and then we'd just cast about for an older one...*

Pulling himself out of his own double-think, Harry ducked his head to follow the goblin through a low doorway. Ginny's red mane just brushed the lintel as she stepped inside.

*Everything's sized for them. Another test. They get along in our world, where things are always too large for them, so how will we do in theirs?*

Harry let his eyes roam without, he hoped, being too obvious about trying to get his bearings. The room was the size of the bedroom he and Draco shared at the Den, with a vertical pole in the corner resembling the coat tree at Headquarters, on which the goblin who'd guided them was just hanging his lantern. A low, oblong table took up the room's center, with four chairs clustered at the end furthest from him. One of them was occupied.

"Ma'am," he said with a bow to the seated goblin, feeling rather than seeing Ginny's curtsy beside him. It was only a guess, but he thought a fair one, given what his great-aunt had told him about goblin negotiations, along with the more delicate, sculptured features of this goblin's face as opposed to their guide, who was just taking a seat beside her. "Sir," he added, broadening the bow to include both goblins. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us."

The goblin woman's eyes widened, and she said something to her companion in Gobbledegook. He replied, shooting small, sharp glances in Harry and Ginny's direction. "Be seated," he added in English in the middle of the discussion. "This will take only a moment."

Ginny frowned, but Harry tugged her elbow lightly, guiding her down to the floor beside him. *He gets one for free*, he signed once his fingers were available again. *Soften him up a bit, let him think he has the upper hand.*

*If you say so*, Ginny signed back, her face dubious. *But I don't see...*

"I am Rarzal," the goblin man announced, turning back to them. "Twelfth in rank in the clan of—" Here followed a word in Gobbledegook that Harry could only liken to chewing a mouthful of rocks. "My clan has exchanged blood three times with the New World clan of—" Another mouthful of rocks, this one adding gargling to the chewing. "Landog, third in rank of this clan, exchanges money and services with the witch Amy Freeman, whose brother's daughter is the wife of your godfather, Harry Potter. Is this so?"

"Yes," said Harry, careful to keep the word neutral, a statement of fact and nothing more.

"And Ginevra Weasley." Rarzal turned to look at her. "Youngest sister of William Weasley, with whom my clan has exchanged money and services for some years now. Is this so?"



"It is," Ginny acknowledged, then let her eyes slide sideways to the goblin woman. "May we be made known to your companion?"

Rarzal did not move, but his scent eddied a waft of surprise in Harry's direction. The goblin woman made a small, breathy sound which, in a human, Harry would have called a suppressed laugh—

*Which means that's probably what is for her too. We're not that different.*

"I am Kunora," she said, her voice carrying traces of a guttural accent but entirely understandable. "The clan of my birth is—" Yet another name in Gobbledegook, this one with a spitting hiss in the middle of it. "I hold no rank as men reckon such things, but my voice is heard in the councils of the women." A quick, sidelong glance at Rarzal. "Both in the clan of my birth, and in the clan of this, my work-partner, with whom I have exchanged blood twice in the five years since our contract was signed at the Feast of the Shining Fire."

Harry hoped Ginny had understood this better than he had himself. It ought to be obvious, he knew, and if he just had a moment free to think about it, he was sure his mind would be able to translate Kunora's statement into human terms, but taking that moment would give the goblins more of an edge than he was willing to cede them—

"Congratulations," said Ginny warmly. "What sort do you have? Or is it one of each?"

"One of each, yes." Kunora smiled in return. "They are a great blessing to us."

*Ah, got it! Harry tapped his fingers against Ginny's hand in the pattern which meant "thanks", letting his new knowledge settle into his mind. Work-partner, that's one of the basics of goblin society and it can mean lots of things in human terms, but in connection with a contract and changing clans it means they're married. And exchanging blood, that much I should have been able to figure out on my own, especially after everything Moony and Danger have been through—they've got kids, a boy and a girl...*

"And the two of you?" Rarzal took back over, a trace of hostility creeping into his tone. "Are you paired only for the convenience of these negotiations, or is there something more to it?"

Ginny bristled. Harry pinched the webbing between her finger and thumb to stop her from saying anything she'd regret. "Ginny is already my work-partner, and my friend," he said. "We'll be signing our own contract at the beginning of May, though we won't be exchanging blood until late in the summer."

"A human claims another as a work-partner?" Rarzal's hostility edged up from trace to streak, with a healthy dose of sarcasm joining in. "How is that? Do you place your hands together on a wand you did not craft as you parrot your little spells in a corrupted form of a language you do not understand?"

*Here we go with the rudeness. Counter with...just honesty, I think, we can always ramp up to rude*

later if we need to. "We've both mastered some skills that don't need wands," Harry said, releasing Ginny's hand and taking a small scoot away, adjusting his posture as he did, so that he was kneeling rather than sitting. Ginny did the same, arranging her legs to one side of her. "And we helped each other with the incantation we did have to craft for ourselves, *and* understand, to finish that work. Ginny gave me the missing piece of mine when she wasn't even thirteen, and I did the same thing for her not quite a year later."

"But even before that, we'd joined our magic to make something," Ginny took over smoothly as Harry paused. "Something special, and important." With a practiced hand, she scooped her pendants out of her robes, holding them up so as to display the four medallions. "These."

Kunora's eyes widened. Rarzal breathed what Harry thought might be a curse, then wheeled to face him. "Do you have such as that?" he demanded, pointing towards Ginny's pendants. "Show it to me!"

Harry leaned forward, willing his pendant chain free of his clothing, then sat back. "There," he said, indicating the chain and its contents where they hung against his robes. "You've been shown."

Rarzal cursed again, at greater length. Kunora hissed like cat-Neenie in a bad mood and smacked her husband on the arm, then held out one palm, demandingly. With a scowl, Rarzal reached into his pocket, counted out three small coins to her, and shoved his chair back from the table, stalking off to the far corner of the room.

"This is a custom of ours," said Kunora, facing the humans again, jingling the coins in her palm and smiling faintly. "I believed one thing and Rarzal another, so we each risked money on our own belief—"

"We bet on things," Harry interjected, indicating himself and Ginny. "My fathers and her brothers, especially, do it all the time. Not us personally quite so much, but we have."

"Ah, good." Kunora nodded. "But when a—bet, do you say? When a bet is lost or won, what each must do is decided by custom. Rarzal has lost, so he must..." She frowned, seemingly searching for a word. "He must be angry, and hurt, and go to be alone for a time," she said finally. "And I, who have won, must...laugh, but with words." Her smile returned, more wicked this time. "Our ancestors found that we would do these things in any case, so they made them a matter of custom. It gives them...walls?" She shook her head, her smile twisting ruefully. "Your English is not an easy tongue."

"No, it's not," Ginny agreed. "And of course it's turning into the one people use all over the world. But let me think about this. Rarzal has to...sulk, would you say, Harry? Because he lost?"

"Sulk' sounds right," Harry agreed, glancing at the goblin thus named, who had his back to the room and his shoulders hunched petulantly. "And laughing with words...'gloat', maybe?"

"I like that. But 'gives them walls'..." Ginny shaped a circle in the air with her hands in front of

her, as though she were using her clay to model a Quidditch stadium or a dragon's holding pen. "Kunora, do you mean that having these things, the sulking and the gloating, as customs instead of just doing them, that it gives them limits? Makes sure they start and stop where they should, that people don't hold onto them for too long?"

"I do." Kunora tossed and caught her handful of money. "You are very clever, Ginevra Weasley."

"Just Ginny for everyday. And I like that idea." Ginny laughed. "Harry's little sister could use it for sure. Sulking and pouting for days on end are her specialties."

"Oi, no picking on Meghan," Harry protested. "What about Fred and George? When was the last time they knew when to stop gloating over one of their pranks going right?"

"They're getting better. Especially George. But you've got a point." Ginny looked back at Kunora. "What did you bet about?" she asked. "Or aren't we allowed to know?"

"You may know." Kunora pocketed her winnings. "Rarzal believed, when we received the request for this meeting, that even though the one who spoke for you took care to tell us that proper speakers would be sent, that nothing would truly change. That you would ignore me and speak only to him, hurrying into your business, though it is not right for any speaking to begin until all the speakers are known to one another. That even if you spoke to me, you would not show me, or him, honor. And most of all, that you would seek to..." She frowned, first laying her hands over each other, then separating them and pressing her palms together. "To be always at the top, or at the bottom. Not to meet as one, as the same."

"And you bet the other way?" Harry asked, keeping his grin in check but allowing it to escape in his voice.

"I thought that if you were clever enough to offer proper speakers, that you might also be clever enough to learn *how* to speak properly." Kunora grinned in her turn, and pushed her husband's chair out for him as Rarzal returned to the table. "And I was right."

"You were right, my partner," Rarzal agreed, taking his seat. He turned to Harry and Ginny, looking them each in the face for a moment. "*May* I examine the work you wear around your necks?" he inquired. "And learn how it was done? It bears traces of remarkable magic, and very little of that the sort I would expect from your people."

"Mine you can hold, if you're careful with them," said Ginny, removing her pendants. "Harry shouldn't have his off, there's magic on them he needs, but I think..."

Harry took his chain in both hands and pulled it out longer, causing Kunora to frown and Rarzal to pause in the act of reaching for Ginny's. "More yours, I think, than mine," he murmured to his wife. "Would you agree?"

"I would." Kunora accepted the medallions Harry deposited in her cupped hands and spread them delicately across one small, callused palm. "But the flare we saw before, that was more of your

type."

"Indeed." Rarzal laughed under his breath at the confused look on Ginny's face, and the one Harry was sure matched it on his own. "Goblin magic makes a sharp distinction between male and female," he said. "Both are strong, both necessary to life, but the difference is there and cannot be removed."

"And you can tell, just from seeing the magic get used, whether it was first done by a witch or a wizard?" Curious, Harry drew his dagger, careful to move slowly and keep the weapon's point away from the goblins. "What about this?"

"Male," said Rarzal immediately. "Strongly male. Power, giver, and master, all are male, and the power is one which is also here." He tapped Ginny's pendants against his palm. "But for your dagger to have taken you as its master, Harry Potter...I had not thought wizardkind remembered the ancient rites so well. Or at all. Who taught you the way of the blade?"

"My godfather and my foster father. My blood-father, now, though he wasn't then." Harry laid the dagger on his palm, watching the reflection of the lantern's flame in the blade. "But I don't know that they ever had us do anything with these that was magic..."

"Perhaps not, but magic was done nonetheless. And you speak of blood." Rarzal reached over with one long finger to stir the pendants in Kunora's hands until the tiny locket containing Harry's and Moony's bloods was revealed. "You mean this."

"Yes." Harry frowned. "Why, what else would you—"

Then he remembered his own thoughts in the Hogwarts Den, the day he'd written to Aunt Amy.

"I cut myself, the first day we had these," he said, planting a finger on the flat of the dagger's blade. "Letha, that's my godfather's wife, Amy Freeman's niece, she made it wipe it right away, told me never to leave a blade dirty, but I bet it still counts." He turned to smile at Ginny. "And then the lady of my heart girded me with my weapon. Even if we didn't know it yet."

"Maybe *you* didn't." Ginny looked smug.

Harry and Rarzal exchanged a glance which went beyond species boundaries.

"So wizards begin to learn again the magic of blood." Kunora wrapped Harry's chain around her fingers. "Blood shed freely, that is." For a moment, her eyes were bleak. "They know all too well the Dark power born from shedding the blood of others."

"Some wizards think that's the only kind of blood magic there is." Harry sheathed his dagger again, recalling Cho's horror at discovering the Pack and Pride had sworn to one another in blood. "That all magic done with blood is Dark and dangerous."

Rarzal snorted. "Do they consider their own lives dangerous?" he asked. "Blood is life. Necessary to it, and the strongest symbol of it. It has power, yes, but so do all things have power. Power is to

be controlled, not to be controlled *by*. And what is fear but a form of control?" He nodded towards Harry's and Ginny's pockets. "Do you fear your wands?"

"Maybe we should." Ginny drew hers speculatively, stroking its length with two fingers before setting it on her lap. "More than we do, anyway. Do you remember, Harry, the last Defense lesson with Professor Moody—I'm sure he would have done it with your class the way he did with mine —"

"A wand is a deadly weapon," Harry quoted. "But so's my dagger. So could these be, if I used them that way." He reclaimed his pendants from Kunora's hands and tweaked the chain to return it to its usual length. "So could *I* be, with the training I've had. The difference is me. I don't go around randomly hurting people with what I know, whether that's fighting or magic or even just knowledge."

"Because words can be more painful than any blade or spell." Kunora nodded, her face approving. "Were there words in the making of the work you wear?"

"Yes, there were." Harry tapped four fingers against his palm. "Not anything long or complicated, but it's ancient." The tense recitation around the Den's kitchen table, the awkward partial swearings in Ron's room at the Burrow and in the antechamber at Hogwarts, the uncertain full-Pride circle on the floor of Neville's bedroom at Longbottom House, flickered through his mind. "I suppose you could say it's come down in the family."

"And blood." Rarzal's tone made it a statement of fact, rather than a question, as he returned Ginny's pendants to her. "Blood freely shed, and words freely spoken, and items of power. Items through which hope, or faith, or love, or all of them together, had already been channeled."

"Rings." Ginny slid her pendants back over her head, then touched the interwoven silver circlet Harry had placed on her finger a little more than a year before. "Harry used his parents' wedding rings, I had my mother's promise ring from my father, my brother put in a ring he got from our grandfather..."

"So young, to know so much." Smiling, Kunora displayed her own left hand, on which a gold ring gleamed. "This too was forged from blood, and words, and gifts given in love, on the day my partner and I signed our contract." Her long fingers curled around Rarzal's, putting Harry strongly in mind of his own parents, whether seeking comfort through a moment of trouble, sharing and amplifying some little daily joy, or simply affirming by touch that the beloved one was near. "We are more alike, I think, than we are different."

"More alike than different to these, my partner," Rarzal corrected. "And I think their similarity to us makes them more different than they know from the majority of their own kind." He turned a penetrating gaze on Harry and Ginny. "Yes?"

*If we're more different than we know, how would we know it?* Harry almost asked, but stopped himself in time, helped by Ginny's sidelong *look*. She had obviously been taking mindreading lessons from his mothers, or her own. "We are different from most wizards," he acknowledged.

"But it's a difference that, once people understand it, a lot of them like it. Some of them even want to be part of it for themselves. It might not work for everyone, but it does for us."

"So it does." Rarzal was still looking intently at them, first at Harry, then Ginny, then at a spot between them. "And I believe I see one of the reasons. Do you know that you are bound by magic not your own? Not inimical," he added quickly, raising a hand as Ginny sucked in her breath and Harry started to speak. "It means well by you. *She* means well, I should say. Female, strongly so—yes?" he asked Kunora.

"Yes." Kunora tilted her head to one side, then the other, as though seeking a better angle of sight. "She is no blood to either of you, but there is great love here, and many sorts of love. Bindings on bindings..." She broke off and started to speak rapidly to Rarzal in Gobbledegook, gesturing emphatically as she did so.

"Who'd have put magic on us both that's a witch?" Harry murmured to Ginny while the goblins conferred. "We're Gryffindor honorary, and it wasn't Maura who chose us..."

"Maybe try closer to home," Ginny began, but stopped, forming the *Pride*-sign for *Later* with her free hand, as Rarzal looked up again.

"There seems no good word in English for what the magic is that we see on you," he said without preamble. "It is like that which permeates your pendants, and like that which binds your dagger, Harry Potter, though it is more...lively than those. Still, they are all of the same type, and if I did not know better, I would wonder how you had come so far into favor with my own people." He smiled faintly. "As it is, I can tell that this work was done by a witch, but there is no trace as would be left by a wand, no sign of any potion. It is an older magic, more..." His hands shaped aimless circles, moving ever lower. "...broad. Less defined than your narrow, everyday spells. The magic which underlies all, which has always been and will always be..."

Harry smiled to himself as words in Padfoot's story-reading voice echoed in his distant memories. "Deep magic," he suggested, "from before the dawn of time."

"A good way to say it." Rarzal nodded. "Are the words yours?"

"No, it's something I read once." *Or had read to me. Though I've read them all at least once for myself, if not as many times as Hermione has.* "Do you think you can tell us anything else about the witch who put the deep magic on us? Maybe what it's meant to do, if you can tell that?"

"It...binds you." Kunora linked her forefingers together, tugging at them. "Not to hold you or hurt you, but to make you strong. Stronger together than you are alone. And not just the two of you, but others as well..."

"Six others, maybe?" Ginny suggested, flipping aside her pendant with the battery and muffin tin to display the one with the carvings representing the *Pride*. "These six?"

"It could be." Kunora peered more closely at the pendant. "Yes. And the power was given to all of

you, when you were linked as one. Linked in..." She waggled her hand, searching again for a word. "A...work-trance, my partner?" she asked Rarzal. "Such as we share when we work as one?"

"Work-trance sounds good," Rarzal agreed. "For English, that is." He smiled toothily at Harry and Ginny. "Is it a time you recognize?"

"When we made these, would be my guess." Harry tweaked Ginny's pendant chain between his fingers. "The second time, when Ginny was along, not the first..."

Ginny sat up straighter. "The light," she said intensely. "The red light, Harry, do you remember, that connected us all just when we'd finished swearing the oath? That didn't happen when the Pack swore, did it?"

"No, it didn't." Harry shut his eyes. "And it started..." Calling up his memory of that night in Neville's bedroom, he watched the light spread through his Pride, though they hadn't been called that then, then made it run backwards, tracking the light to its source. *Ginny and Luna, Ron and Draco, and from there...*

"Hermione," he said, opening his eyes to the dimly-lit room. "It started with Hermione. My sister," he added to the goblins. "Foster sister, I suppose, technically, but we've been together so long I can't really imagine being without her. Pack-sister is what we call it, after our family, the Pack. And what Ginny and I lead, that's the Pride, and that's what ended up getting affected by this magic. But the magic started around Hermione, so that means it's connected to her somehow..." He shook his head. "Never mind, it's not important now. We'll figure it out later."

"How long have you been together, then?" Kunora asked curiously. "Your...Pack?"

"All of us?" Harry did the calculations in his head. "Coming up on thirteen years, this July." *Even if we won't all be here to see it.* "Hermione and I, a bit longer than that. Fifteen years, starting out when her big sister Danger used to mind me for my Muggle relatives..."

He stopped as the answer spread itself naturally across the front of his mind.

*Danger. Hermione's sister, one of the strongest blood-links there is. No blood to me or Ginny, but there's no question she loves us. And her wild magic was almost out of control all those times through my first year at Hogwarts, but then it seemed to go away some, quiet down to the way it was while we were growing up, and I just thought she'd learned to handle it better, or that the Founders had helped her get it settled...*

"That's the answer, isn't it?" Ginny murmured, proving to Harry's satisfaction that his fiancée no longer needed a pendant chain to read his mind. "It's Mrs. Danger's magic, or it was. She must have given it to us the night we swore the Oath. That's why we've always been able to do more together than we can alone. It's not just our own powers multiplying—there really is magic that's dependent on the Pride-bond, magic we can only tap when we're all working together." She frowned. "Or most of us, anyway..."

"This...Danger." Rarzal frowned, as though trying to trace the logic which made this word a name, but shook it off after a moment. "What is she to you, Harry Potter? What role does she play in your life?"

"She's my mum, my other mum than Letha." Drawing his wand, then glancing at the goblins for permission, granted by Kunora with a flicker of fingers, Harry outlined a square in the air, called up his memory of the portrait which now hung in the entrance hall at number twelve where Walburga Black had once held sway, and focused his mind on the word *Exstaetheris!*

The rush of colors from his wand's tip, instead of dressing Snape in Augusta Longbottom's clothes as Harry had done at the Hufflepuff Halloween Extravaganza, filled the frame he had delineated with eight variously-garbed figures of wizards and witches. Kunora laughed aloud as Meghan and her cauldron were revealed, and Rarzal made a faint noise of satisfaction as he regarded the three standing cubs, Hermione in the center, Draco and photograph-Harry on either side of her.

"They make sense together," said Ginny quietly. "The Pack. You can feel, you can almost see, how they keep each other going, how they balance out and make each other stronger. They've always been that way, since I can remember, and they came to live near us before I was even seven years old."

"The day you saw me cross my fingers." Harry held up the named body parts, already in the mentioned configuration. "We were still in hiding," he told the goblins, "so I had to claim I wasn't Harry Potter, and Ginny spotted that I had my fingers crossed behind my back, because I was lying. No one else ever caught me out on that."

Both goblins burst into laughter. "More alike than different indeed!" Kunora chortled. "I was six years of age when I began to see mistakes in the work of one of the boys of the clan who lived in the next cavern to ours, and to point them out, and sometimes even to make them right with my own power..."

"And I was most offended that a girl not of my own clan, and one younger than myself, should be so perceptive about my work, and thus I returned the favor when she grew old enough to begin learning her own techniques. Which, in turn, offended her, until we squabbled every time we met." Rarzal smiled, sliding a fingertip back and forth across Kunora's ring. "I could not understand why my parents, and hers, and the other elders in our two households looked so satisfied with us both."

"We swore ourselves as work-partners, as children will, with some of our clan-siblings from both sides, when Rarzal was just ten and I a year younger than that," Kunora took over again. "With the signing of our contract, we became..." She frowned again. "Two-partnered, would you say?"

"Double-partnered, maybe," Harry suggested. "So it's extra powerful to swear an oath twice over with some of the same people?"

"It is." Rarzal nodded firmly. "And you, Harry Potter, and these..." He pointed at the figures of Hermione and Draco in Harry's replica Pack-portrait. "Such a doubled bond, if I am not mistaken, binds the three of you, as well as this younger one." His finger moved down to Meghan, before



returning to the twins. "And even a further binding upon these elder two, of which I have heard—a full binding in blood, done upon their bodies by one who wished them ill, but that they have embraced to turn to good..."

Kunora shuddered. "We do not alter the blood in our bodies," she explained when Harry and Ginny both looked at her. "Not unless there is no other way. Amulets or talismans, like yours, Harry Potter, can be crafted and worn for a particular work, but they are always ended when that work is done. To change the source of one's blood is to die a little death, like having a piece of one's work destroyed beyond hope. To think of that being done *to* someone..."

"Verging on Dark magic, or even all the way there?" Ginny guessed, squeezing Harry's hand once. Harry nodded, sitting back to let her take the lead on this part. "And having your work destroyed being like dying a little—that's because there are souls in goblin-wrought things, aren't there? Bits of soul, anyway. Bits of the goblin, or goblins, who made them, who loved them, who worked hard over them and wanted them to be the best things they could possibly be."

"You know a great deal, Ginny Weasley." Rarzal crossed his arms, his expression shading back down into hostility. "One might wonder why you have come to speak with goblins, if all our secrets are already unfolded to you."

"It's because we know something that you may not know," said Harry, vanishing the Pack-portrait and re-outlining the frame. "Information we've been given by one of our elders, information we thought you ought to have."

"And for this information, what price?" Rarzal rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. "Nothing in this world comes free, Harry Potter."

"No, it doesn't," Harry agreed. "But in this case, the only price we're asking is that you do *something* about it. What you do, or how you do it, is up to you."

*Which is the biggest risk we're taking, because what if they decide that the best thing to do is to sit tight and wait until all this Voldemort business blows over? But no, if they consider their work being destroyed as a 'little death', they won't take the introduction of a wizard's soul bit torn off by murder lightly...*

"What is it that you would have us do *something* about, then?" Kunora's question sounded light, almost casual, but Harry's nose was sending him signals of curiosity, of worry laden with fear. Clearly the goblin woman, inexperienced outside her home caverns as she might be, was very far from stupid.

"This," he said, repeating his earlier spell to fill his invisible frame not with the faces and forms of his Pack, but with the images of a delicate golden cup with two handles and a bronze, blue-enameled brooch in the shape of an eagle. "We think one of these two things—possibly both—is here at Gringotts. Stored in a vault, the vaults your people pride themselves on holding secure against all outside invaders."

"We do," said Rarzal slowly. "And our pride is justifiable. No thief has ever escaped goblin justice."

"What about someone who defiles goblin work?" Ginny tossed the words lightly into the center of the room, where they hung on the air, almost visible. "And I don't mean just the stupid wizards who don't understand that a part of you remains with your work always, and what that ought to mean about who owns that work. I mean someone who works Dark spells, the sort you have to power with murder, on goblin-wrought artifacts. Someone who might even be interfering with the magic, with the souls, within those artifacts. What would goblin justice have to say about that?"

Kunora had her hands pressed against her mouth, breathing heavily as though she were trying to keep herself from being sick. Rarzal was glowering at Harry's painting on the air, his eyes narrow and fierce. "Do you tell me this has happened?" he said harshly, his gutturals more pronounced than before. "From your own knowledge, do you tell me this is so?"

"Not from my own knowledge, not about these," Harry admitted. "But this..." He twirled his wand in a small circle, adding the picture of a gold locket the size of a hen's egg engraved with a serpentine S. "This, I've seen, even touched it once or twice. My magic reacts to it, and not in a good way. Wizards and goblins may not get along, but I wouldn't be responding to goblin magic the way I do to this thing." Casually, he brushed his left hand along his forehead, momentarily exposing his lightning-bolt scar. "And a wizard I trust, one I'm sworn to obey, tells me these other two things have been bespelled in this same way. By the same person."

"We can show you the locket, if you need to see it," Ginny added, "but you'll have to come where it is. It isn't safe for us to take it away from there."

"No." Rarzal shook his head jerkily. "No, it would not be." He turned to Kunora and spoke one rapid sentence in Gobbledegook, to which she responded with a torrent of words, her long forefinger stabbing towards Harry's picture, then snapping shut into a fist which she pounded into her opposite palm. Her husband, for his part, jabbed his hands back and forth as though slicing at something, then twisted them in opposite directions as though he would like to snap whatever it was in half.

*I think we got them, Ginny signed to Harry. Good idea, to make it their problem what they do about this—then we're not the nasty wizards who're demanding they open their vaults to us or hand over something they were given in trust by their customers, just the good neighbors who're telling them what they didn't know themselves...*

*It wouldn't have worked if you hadn't been able to dance around what we can and can't say under the Jinx, Harry signed back. How do you do that so well?*

Ginny grinned. *Practice, my dear Wolf. Years and years of practice.*

Harry was about to respond to this when Rarzal whipped his hands to the side, cutting Kunora off mid-sentence, and looked up at them. "We must consult," he said brusquely. "Not just our two selves, but our elders, perhaps all our clans. We will contact you when a decision has been made."

His chin jerked towards the door, a clear dismissal.

Kunora bridled again and swatted Rarzal's shoulder. "We thank you for the information," she said clearly. "It is an act of right thinking to share knowledge." Rising, she stepped around the table and extended her hand to Ginny. "The action of a friend."

Rarzal hissed in shock, his own hand making an abortive dart, as though he had contemplated for a split-second trying to snatch his wife back to their own side of the table. Harry buried his amusement under a layer of fire as thick as any he'd ever used defending his mind against Snape. Laughing at goblins, though it wasn't as stupid as some of the things he'd done, still didn't seem like an entry on the list of ways to ensure a long and healthy life.

*Of course, I haven't been anywhere near that list since I was about eleven...*

"Friends," Ginny agreed, and met Kunora's hand with her own. "And thank you, for being willing to listen to us."

"Thank us when the decision is made." Kunora curtsied briefly to Harry. He gave her a seated bow in return. "Until then, fare you well."

"You too." Harry vanished his picture, got to his feet, bowed to Rarzal, and took Ginny's hand as she straightened from her curtsy. Side by side they left the room, and Harry let Ginny guide him back the way they had come, until they were opening first the silver doors and then the bronze ones, walking down the marble steps together. Percy and Charlie's Disillusioned figures emerged from the night as an elderly wizard with a straggly white beard straightened up from his hunch and became Tonks with her zebra-striped hair.

"How'd it go?" Charlie asked, scooping Ginny off the steps and planting a kiss on her cheek before setting her back on her feet.

"It went." Harry glanced over his shoulder at Gringotts, as towering and impassive as it had ever been. "We got our message across, but the goblins have to talk to their clan elders. We'll find out what they have to say when they're good and ready to tell us."

*But whatever happens, we made another friend. That's never a bad thing.*

*And maybe, just maybe, we're a little closer to settling the problems between wizards and goblins for good.*

"Let's get going," he said, taking Ginny's hand in his again. "Percy, any chance of some dinner when we get back to the Pepper Pot? We neither of us ate much at Hogwarts, too many nerves..."

"You call what you put away not eating much?" Ginny snorted. "Two pieces of chicken, three scoops of peas, and a potato bigger than my hand?"

"He's a growing boy," Tonks said before Harry could. "He needs his nourishment."

"He's growing all right," muttered Ginny. "Going to be growing right out of his Quidditch robes if he doesn't watch it."

"More likely out of my hats, with all these compliments you keep giving me," Harry returned. "And here I thought you were supposed to be the *nice* Weasley..."

"I do believe you've mixed her up with me," said Percy dryly.

Laughter echoed from the walls of Gringotts as the wizards and witches went on their way.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 19: The Slytherin St. Valentine's Soiree (Year 6)

"The antidote for a blended poison will be equal to more than the sum of the antidotes for each of the separate components."

"Well recited, Miss Granger-Lupin. Golpalott's Third Law, word-perfect from your textbook." Professor Black leaned against her desk. "Now, can you tell me what it *means*?"

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said demurely, her tone causing both Harry and Ron a brief, stifled snicker fit. Draco kicked Harry and elbowed Ron as Hermione continued. "It means that if you have a poison made out of other poisons, just mixing together the antidotes for the component poisons still won't give you an antidote for the blended poison. You need to add one final ingredient, something that ties them all together, that makes them work as one to counteract all the effects of the blended poison."

"Very good." Professor Black nodded. "Now, who can tell me why this is one of the more frustrating laws of potions-making, especially to someone in my other field of work?"

Draco had his hand in the air even before Hermione this time.

"Yes, Mr. Black."

"Because most poisons work fairly quickly, and even if you had the regular antidotes all ready, there might not be time to do the analysis you'd need to come up with the missing ingredient if you're going to save someone who's been poisoned. But if you did have some time..." Draco shrugged. "Some poisons work on a specific time limit. Like, say, twenty-four hours. That would probably be long enough to analyze the components, find out what pulls them together, and get the full antidote prepared."

"I would certainly hope so. All the more since you're not going to have nearly that much time in this case." Professor Black indicated the vials lining the front of her desk, each filled with a different dark and gruesome-looking substance. "Twelve blended poisons, ladies and gentlemen, no two alike. Come up and take one apiece, perform Arafinwiel's Analysis to determine the component poisons—we covered this process in November, if you need some help remembering—and then get your antidotes started. I expect, if not a completed brew, one well on the way, along with a detailed description of any remaining steps, by the end of the period. As always, you may help one another with the bookwork, but brewing must be done alone."

"I'll get them," said Ron, shoving back his chair amid the sound of the rest of their class doing the same thing. "Anyone want a special one?"

"Second from the right, please," said Draco, as Harry and Hermione shook their heads no. "Nenie, you have your notes on the analysis?"

Hermione sighed. "What *would* you do without me?" she asked rhetorically, pulling a scroll from her bag and unrolling it partway. Harry weighted down its bottom corners with a jar of red coral powder and Ron's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* as Draco hit a spot on the table with a Temporary Sticking Charm, allowing Hermione to press the top of the scroll to it. "Arafinwiel's Analysis, Arafinwiel's Analysis, here it is." She laid her finger on a spot on the page and began to read aloud. "Step One: Using the incantation *Incanesco* and a motion consisting of two and a half clockwise swirls of the wand with a finishing counterclockwise twist, sensitize a scant handful of unicorn hair to degrees of Light and Dark magic..."

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"Moony?" Sirius's voice echoed down the corridor outside the War Room. "You around here?"

Without looking up from the two parchments he was comparing, Remus sent a small spurt of red fire out the half-open door.

"Oh, there you are." Sirius's thumping footsteps came through the door, and a chair grated on the floor. "Doing anything you can't put off?"

"Give me a moment..." Remus scribbled down the last thought which had darted through his mind on the alluring differences between the two reports, then set them aside. "No, I'm free now. Is everything all right?"

"Fine—well, *I'm* fine. I wanted to ask about you." Sirius was leaning back in the chair, watching Remus. "You've hardly been out of the house for months. Something I should know about?"

"Not exactly." Remus interlaced his fingers behind his head to stretch his back. "You had a lot to think about through the fall, so I didn't want to bring it up then, and it isn't as if it's a problem. Just...puzzling."

"Puzzles and riddles are my specialty." Sirius scooped up a bit of scrap parchment from the corner of the desk and began to fold it back and forth. "How's it go? Rhyming like Danger's prophecies?"

"We should be so lucky." Remus chuckled, sending a mental caress along Danger's sense in his mind as she 'looked up' from her preoccupations in the kitchen. She sent one back, then returned to what appeared to be three different dishes in various stages of preparation. "No, this is more along the lines of things that don't quite add up. Can you think of any reason for Lord Voldemort to have a personal onus against me?"

"Against you?" Sirius frowned. "You mean separate from your shielding Harry, or running the Pack?"

"Apparently." Remus conjured a small fireball to mold and flatten, as Sirius was doing with the parchment. "Albus talked to me about it over the summer. He was a bit cryptic, as he tends to be at the best of times, but from what he said he's gathered, and from some things the cubs told both of us, it would appear that Voldemort has a grudge against me personally." The fire flared up and went out. "Which makes less than no sense to me. I was a nonentity through the first war, the only

reason my name's ever been in the news is either through you and Harry or because of Hermione's custody case—"

"And wouldn't that just burn His Dark Lordliness?" Sirius interrupted. "He wants the werewolves thinking they've got nowhere else to go, no options, no choice but working for him." He grimaced. "I understand he's got Malfoy giving them their orders now that Greyback's out of the picture. Hope they've scraped his face up for him again. But you're undercutting all of that, Moony, just by existing, by being who you are. And who you are is a man good enough that you got that panel of warlocks to agree, werewolf or no werewolf, you deserved to be your Kitten's dad. Legally, I mean—you already were every other way."

"True enough." Remus smiled, feeling again the awestruck, breathtaking joy of that moment in the small, stuffy courtroom when the verdict had come down that his lycanthropy no longer automatically disqualified him as a legal guardian for the little girl who'd held his heart from the moment she'd fallen asleep on his shoulder on his twenty-third birthday.

"Besides, does it really matter so much why he's got it in for any of us?" Sirius shrugged. "He wants us all dead, we knew that already. Dead or being his obedient little peons. We've declined that honor, therefore he hates our guts. What else do we need to know?"

Remus waved a hand, conceding the point. "How are things going at Hogwarts?" he asked by way of changing the subject. "I'm more jealous than I think you realize that you've got a reason to be there again—if I didn't know perfectly well how Severus would take any interference in his current subject, I'd ask Albus if I couldn't take over a few of the lower-level classes to give him a rest. He has to be exhausted trying to keep up with all of that and his, shall we say, other duties."

"Oh, and you haven't heard the half of it." Sirius snickered. "The DA's driving him berserk, especially the fifth and seventh years—they do everything perfectly while he's got his back turned, and then bungle all their spells as soon as he looks at them..."

Making the appropriate encouraging noises at intervals, Remus sat back in his chair, letting Sirius ramble on. His mind was, for the moment, elsewhere.

*Because I don't think Sirius needs to know that Voldemort apparently believes I should be 'forever erased from the earth'. Or that I 'should have been his greatest triumph'. Or, if the new source Albus is cultivating within the Death Eaters is to be trusted, that any sign of me outside my usual protections is to be immediately reported to Mr. Riddle himself, no matter what else he happens to be doing at the time.*

*The only other person with that kind of standing order about him is Harry.*

*And if this source is to be believed, the order about me went out as soon as Voldemort had returned to his body—which was before Harry and I had completed our little blood bond...*

---

Hermione trotted down the stony tunnel towards Sanctuary, her hand on her dagger's hilt.



*I was getting all ready to be offended when Harry and Ginny told us that part of the mastery ritual for the daggers was being girded with it by the lady of your heart, because—for obvious reasons—I don't have one of those, and then I remembered. She grinned to herself. Female warriors are girded with their weapons by their fathers. And Moony did that for me the very first day we had these.*

"Probably because girls can start training with real weapons younger than boys can, because we steady down sooner," she murmured, imagining that she could feel her dagger warming in response to her words. "So we won't have a...a lord of our heart? Is that even right?"

*Champion, why don't we say, she decided after some cogitation. A female warrior may not know who her champion's going to be until she's a good deal older than when she gets her first blade. But she always has her father. She drew the dagger with one swift movement. And of course we went through with the rest of the ritual as soon as we learned about it—though that much should have been obvious a long time ago, from the way we made the Pack-pendants...*

She sheathed the dagger again as she passed into Sanctuary.

Then she skidded to a halt, staring at the tops of the stone pillars in amazement.

*Someone was very, very busy here last night.*

"I know, right?" said Ron, loping over to join her. "I can't see the colors properly, and I'm still impressed."

"Would you like to?" Hermione elongated her pendant chain with one swift pull, and Ron ducked inside it. A quick twist of minds, and Ron shut his eyes and stood still, allowing Hermione to walk slowly around him, viewing every angle of the new additions to Sanctuary.

*And I don't mean the theater and the practice rooms!*

Half of the twelve stone pillars which were the primary decoration of Sanctuary's walls now boasted inset circular windows of elaborately stained glass. Hermione smiled to herself to see the school crest in the one directly over the entrance from the harbor cavern, and the familiar towers of Hogwarts itself across from it.

**Like twelve and six on a clock dial**, Ron said, superimposing this vision momentarily on a view of Sanctuary from above. **Which puts the Gryffindor crest at two o'clock, Ravenclaw at four, Hufflepuff at eight, and Slytherin at ten...**

**It's beautifully done, whoever did it.** Hermione peered more closely at the details of the Hogwarts crest. **And it was all one person—the artwork, anyway.** She smiled. **I might even know who.**

**Luna, you think?** Ron removed the pendant chain, opening his eyes. "She always did love to draw," he continued aloud. "But how did she get it all in place without anyone noticing? How'd she

do the magic, for that matter? Transfiguring stone into glass, that's high-level stuff, and I know it's her O.W.L. year but that's well beyond anything we were covering last year at this time..."

"I suppose it'll have to stay a mystery for now," Hermione said absently, her eyes roving over a small knot of yearmates at the other end of the cavern. "She'll tell us eventually, or we'll find out some other way. For now, I just want to enjoy how beautiful it is."

She took a few steps forward and tilted her head back, basking in the green-tinted sunlight pouring through the Slytherin crest, which topped the pillar hiding the blocked-off entrance to the mysterious tomb about which she'd heard from Harry. Vaguely, she was aware that someone's eyes were on her, but only smiled and shook out her hair.

Here, in Sanctuary, being watched over was not an occasion for fear. Elsewhere, it might be, but that time was yet to come.

---

"Thank you," Luna said softly to Fred and George, watching Draco watch Hermione. "It was such a beautiful idea Fox had that I couldn't stand for it not to happen, even if neither of us can do that level of magic yet."

"Not a problem, m'lady." Fred bowed, hand over his heart. "It struck us that we had been a bit derelict in our duties towards the year."

"Being off doing Red Shepherd things may technically count, but we thought we ought to do our part for Sanctuary," George added with a bow of his own. "We just weren't sure what."

"So when you contacted us with this request..." Fred drew his wand and blew imaginary smoke from the tip, smugly. "Match made in heaven."

"Or at Hogwarts." George glanced up at the outline of the glass castle's towers above them. "Some might argue they're the same thing."

"With Snape teaching Defense?" Fred shuddered theatrically. "Luna, tell me the truth, now—has my beloved twin run mad?"

Luna laughed. "What would you do if he had?" she teased.

"Hmm." Fred appeared to give the question serious thought. "You know, I'm not sure. What would I do without you around?" he asked George.

"Blow up the shop because I'm not there to remind you how much doxy venom goes into a batch of Puking Pastilles?"

Fred slumped. "You are never going to let me live that down. Once. *Once* I get the proportions wrong, and he's *still* on my back about it!"

George raised an eyebrow. "Given that you put me on *my* back in bed for three days, *and* got us in trouble with both our girlfriends—"

"Yours was just angry we hadn't let her watch us brew it!"

Luna stepped back to let the twins have their argument, her eyes roving across them, across Draco, across Graham Pritchard, who was laughing with Natalie and Meghan as they ducked in and out of the various colors the Hogwarts crest made on the grass. For one moment, she bowed her head, pressing her lips together tightly.

Here, in Sanctuary, those she watched over were happy and free from fear. Elsewhere, at other times, it would not always be so.

---

"Do you know what we've never done?" said Selena Moon in a normal conversational tone, standing center stage in the "open air" theatre space of Sanctuary. "We've never tried out this spell we're trying to break. I think we ought to give it a go, at least once, before we can't anymore. What do you say?"

"I say the sound check is good," said Lindsay Jordan from the back of the seating area. "And I also say that sounds like fun. Anyone else?"

"Why not?" said Dean from a few rows over. "See if it's really all it's cracked up to be. Not that Sanctuary's a bad idea no matter what, but it'd be sort of funny if it turned out we never had to do this at all!"

Maya sighed from her place on Lindz's other side. "Some people's idea of funny," she said, tossing Selena a thumbs-up. "All right, gather 'round."

"Do we even know the incantation for this thing?" Dean inquired as he came down the stairs, meeting Lindz in one of the aisles midway and accompanying her to the edge of the stage where Selena was now sitting.

"*Aperio sanguinis*," said Maya promptly, joining them. "One of those things you learn if you grow up a certain type of pureblood." She grimaced. "Not that I ever truly thought I'd use it. Less, since..." She smiled around at them. "Well. Since everything."

"Since you and Lee," said Lindz, grinning at Maya's flush. "Since the DA. Since the Pride. Since, since, since."

"Exactly." Maya drew her wand. "Who wants to go first?"

"How about me?" Selena held out a hand. "I already know I'm pure—well, *pureblood*," she added at Lindz's incredulous snort and Dean's stifled snicker. "As if you two were any better!"

"Excuse me?" Lindz drew herself up in indignation. "We're not the first ones in a hundred and

fifty years to have a child while attending Hogwarts! And how did you manage that, anyway? There's a general spell over the castle that's supposed to stop that sort of thing from happening..."

Maya and Selena avoided each other's eyes carefully. Dean was edging away, clearly unsure he wanted to have any further part in this conversation.

"Well?" Lindz demanded.

"Er," said Selena finally. "Let's just say...the spell's only supposed to apply to students."

"So?"

"So it's only cast on areas that students are supposed to be in."

"So?"

"So..." Selena's blush looked positively painful. "So it's possible Zach was conceived somewhere that maybe Roger and I weren't supposed to be."

"Like?"

Selena mumbled two words. Maya was looking determinedly in the opposite direction.

Lindz blinked. "I did not just hear that correctly. Did I?" she asked Dean.

Dean backed up several more steps. "Oh, no. No. You're not pulling me into this."

"Some Gryffindor you are," Lindz grumbled, turning back to Selena. "Repeat that?"

"Um." Selena ducked her head. "A professor's office."

"That much I got. *Which* professor?"

One of Selena's slender fingers touched the Slytherin crest embroidered over her heart.

"That's what I *thought* you said." Lindz shook her head in mingled disbelief and admiration. "The things you find out building a Sanctuary with people."

"The things you never needed to know in the first place," Dean muttered. "Can we please get back to blood status? Please? Before my head explodes?"

"Right. Blood status." Lindz held out her hand. "Try me first, Maya. That should give us a proper reading for half-blood. Then we can try you or Selena, for pure..." She eyed her Slytherin Pridemate warily, receiving a glare in return. "And Dean's Muggleborn, so that's all three. Unless it goes down finer than that..."

---

Harry looked up from the diagram Lee had been showing him as half of Lee's Pride came trooping out of the theater area, looking bewildered and all talking at once. Lee turned to follow his line of sight and frowned. "Wonder what that's about?"

"Only one way to find out," said Harry, letting the diagram roll up into its scroll again. "Shall we?"

"...could be, but I thought it was an all-or-nothing shot," Dean was saying as the four came into Harry's earshot.

"Why don't we test it a bit more?" Maya suggested.

"Good idea. Who on?"

"What are we testing now?" Lee asked, tugging lightly on one of Lindz's earrings and nodding to Dean and Selena before sliding an arm around Maya.

"This spell we're supposed to be breaking," said Selena, drawing her wand. "It works just like it should on me and Maya, and on Lindz, so probably on you too—here, let me show you. *Aperio sanguinis* !"

Lee blinked as a bright purple light appeared around him. "Was it supposed to do that?"

"Purple seems to mean half-blood, so yes," said Lindz as Selena ended the spell. "At least, we think it does. It doesn't appear to be working properly on Dean."

"Not working properly?" Harry looked over at his dormmate. "How do you mean?"

"Well, it came up red for Maya and Selena, and then purple for Lindz, and now Lee." Dean shrugged. "I'd think it ought to have showed blue for me, wouldn't you? Unless blue's for just plain Muggle, not Muggleborn. Or could we be breaking it partly already?"

"Try me," Harry suggested, as his own Pride and the remainder of Lee's who were present began to drift over. "Does it do different shades, or just all one color of purple?"

"Don't know yet." Dean tilted his head to one side, studying the light which appeared around Harry as Selena repeated her incantation. "Looks about the same as Lee's, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, but not the same as yours," said Lindz, frowning in concentration. "Yours was more bluish. So maybe all the way blue *is* for Muggles..." She shook her head. "But that doesn't make sense, not if it was meant to tell the difference between witches and wizards. We already know how to tell the difference between wizards and Muggles—Muggles can't do magic!"

"What about me?" The question was quiet, but nowhere near as shy as it once would have been, as Natalie stepped forward with a smile. "What color will it show for me?"

"Let's find out." Selena swung her wand down into line with her smallest Pridemate and performed

the spell once more.

"All right, now that's blue," said Lee in satisfaction, regarding the light which now surrounded Natalie. "No two ways about it."

"But that still doesn't make sense of mine," Dean objected. "I'd have to be..." He trailed off, as though he'd just thought of something. "Suppose I could be at that," he said slowly, his eyes far away. "Mum never talks about my real dad, but I remember she didn't seem all that surprised when my Hogwarts letter arrived."

"You think she might have been expecting it?" said Ginny.

"Might've been." Dean flexed his fingers, staring upwards at the cloudless blue sky mirrored in Sanctuary's ceiling. "Weird. I never thought...but it makes sense, it does. If she already knew...if she thought I might be...*weird*."

"I can make it weirder." Draco grinned. "We're probably related."

"What?"

"That's true!" Hermione laughed. "The Blacks cross somewhere with just about every pureblood family there is—a lot of them within the last three or four generations! So unless your dad was a Muggleborn..."

"I thought *I* was a Muggleborn!" Dean groaned, dropping his head into his hands. "How did I get into all of this anyway?"

Lindz tapped him on the elbow and smiled sweetly when he looked up at her. "Hello," she said, wiggling her fingers at him. "Remember me?"

Dean regarded her for a few moments. "This is one of those trick questions, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Good to know."

---

"So Dean's a half-blood, but he never knew about it," said Neville later. "I wonder what happened to his dad?"

"Dunno." Ron shrugged. "Depends on how nice a bloke you want to make him out to be. If he was a decent sort, he was probably hoping Dean's mum and the baby would be safer without him—there was still a war going on, after all. And if he wasn't..."

"And we'll never know in any case, so there's no point in taking up a lot of time thinking about it," said Hermione briskly. "Dean's no different than he was yesterday, and we have homework to get done, because the Soirée is tomorrow and the second half of the party is probably going to run

very late, which will mean we won't want to do anything at all on Saturday, and then you," her eyes indicated Draco, "are probably going to want them," Harry, Ron, and Ginny, "out on the Quidditch pitch most of the day Sunday because I know the match with Hufflepuff is coming up soon, and—"

Meghan leaned forward and tapped Hermione on the arm. "Breathe," she advised when her sister turned to look at her. "It helps."

Several members of the Pride muffled grins or snickers in their sleeves.

---

To Harry's satisfaction, Hermione's magical needlework had been equal to the task of lengthening his dress robes to keep pace with his growth, so he hadn't needed new ones as he'd feared he might. The Hogwarts house-elves, punctual as always, had all six robes belonging to the sixth year Gryffindor boys pressed and ready by mid-afternoon of the fourteenth, and Harry returned from Arithmancy, his last class of the day, to find most of his dormmates already dressed.

"How're Apparition lessons coming?" he asked, peeling off his day robes and tossing them onto his bed. "Anyone else been able to get it down?"

"I'm almost there, but it's not like it matters," said Draco, straightening his hair with the help of the mirror (which was humming what sounded suspiciously like "All I Ask of You" in between making helpful comments). "I'm not seventeen until the end of July. No more are you or Neville."

"Being able to do it's what counts, not getting licensed," Ron put in from the end of his bed, where he was assembling something small and round. "I'll take a citation or a fine from the Ministry any day over not being able to get away from Death Eaters."

Harry, settling his dress robes into place, frowned at the item in Ron's hands. "What is that?"

"Puzzle bracelet for Hermione." Ron held it up. "The runes on it spell out different messages depending on which way you put it together. Fox tipped me off to it. Thanks," he said over his shoulder in Draco's general direction.

"You're welcome." Draco stepped aside, letting Seamus have the mirror. "What'd you get Ginny, Harry? Anything fun?"

"Earrings," Harry said, pulling the small velvet box from his pocket and opening it to display the complex twists of silver. "They match..." He gestured to his left hand. "You know. That. What about you?"

"What did I get Ginny for St. Valentine's? Are you sure that's the question you want to be asking me?" Draco grinned at Harry's rude reply in hand-sign. "I got *Luna* a hand flower. She'd said she wanted one."

"A what now?" said Dean, looking up from the small package he was wrapping in gold paper.

"Hand flower." Draco pulled a complex tangle of silver links from his pocket and untwisted it to reveal a triangle of open-work chain mail, set at each juncture with a translucent red bead. "See, the loop at this corner goes on her finger, and then the other two corners clasp around her wrist like a bracelet, and the whole thing sits on the back of her hand." He glanced up at Harry. "Apparently she's wearing red for May Day, so this'll match."

Harry nodded, surprised to find the thought of the next holiday on the yearmates' calendar, and what it meant for him personally, less panic-inducing than it had been.

*Maybe I'm getting used to it. About time!*

"Captain?" he said in the direction of Neville's bent head where his friend was kneeling between two beds. "I hope you didn't forget, Pearl's been known to throw silverware if she doesn't get presents when she's expecting them..."

One of Neville's hands rose above bed level, displaying the item on which he was clearly placing the finishing touches.

"Well, then." Draco returned Luna's gift to his pocket and brushed some imaginary dust off his shoulder. "Nothing like playing into her ideas of herself, is there?"

"It could be worse," said Seamus, removing a hand-sized bundle from his wardrobe. "I've got this one aunt, Aisling—she dresses a bit like Professor Trelawney, acts a bit like her too, and she swears up, down, and sideways getting a Hogwarts education 'stifled the natural expression of her magic', so the only time we see her anymore is when she comes by once a year to shout at Mum for 'inflicting such a horrible experience on your poor son'..."

The high-pitched screech in which Seamus rendered these final words brought a round of laughter, and the boys descended the stairs in good humor.

"Think they know what's coming at the after-party?" Ron murmured to Harry as they left the dorm, the last ones out.

"Doubt it." Harry let his eyes rove over the common room until he spotted Hermione and Ginny, Hermione wearing her red velvet again but with a gold collar and matching belt this time, Ginny in a misty shade of green set off by her sparkling silver necklace and shoes. "Would you have believed it, if we hadn't seen them bringing everything in yesterday?"

"I'm not sure I believe it even with that. How did they get Snape to agree to this again?"

"You know, that's a good question. We'll ask once we get there. But first things first."

"Surviving a big formal romantic dinner." Ron grimaced. "And how's it supposed to be romantic if we're all crowded into the Great Hall same as always?"

"If anyone can pull it off, it's the Slytherins." Harry started down the stairs. "Let's go find out what they've put together."



Neville waited to one side of the common room, watching the girls' stairs as pairs and clusters of his Housemates descended them. Meghan, he knew, would be ready in her own time.

*Which is usually a little after everyone else's. But I don't mind that. He smiled to himself. Not with the way she always ends up looking.*

Natalie Macdonald, dressed in a cheerful shade of sky blue, slipped out of the third years' dorm and caught his eye, nodding at him before she started down towards the common room. Neville glanced down at what he was holding, sending a quick pulse of magic through it to make sure it was at its best.

When he looked up again, Meghan was standing on her dormitory's landing, smiling down at him.

An answering smile spread across his face. He didn't even try to stop it. Instead he held up what he had made her.

Her hands flew to her mouth, imperfectly muffling a squeal of glee. Then she scooped up her skirts in one hand and bolted down the now-clear stairs.

He met her at the bottom and ceremoniously set the crown of roses, their petals of palest pink just matching her robes, atop her braids.

"How do you always know?" she murmured, taking his arm. "How do you always, always know?"

---

The Slytherins, much to Harry's relief, had decided on a distinctly understated scheme of decoration for the all-school portion of the evening. Silver was the primary note in the draperies along the walls, set off by abstract designs done in a light green not unlike what Ginny was wearing and a soft pink similar to Meghan's robes. The House tables were missing, but they had been replaced not by the small round ones Harry had seen before but by slightly larger ovals, each with twelve chairs grouped around it. Formal place settings, complete with all the silver and china he remembered from the lessons Padfoot had conducted with the Pack's cubs in pureblood-style table manners, were topped by—

"Place cards?" said Draco, standing on his tiptoes to try to get a better look over everyone's heads.

Harry put his hand up to his glasses, rubbing along one side of the frame. They obediently magnified his current field of view, giving him a better look at the elegantly written slips of parchment standing up on top of each tower of plates. "Place cards," he confirmed, taking his hand away, which released the magnification spell and returned his vision to normal. "I suppose they don't trust us to pick our own seats."

"No, they're just trying to replicate a truly formal pureblood affair," said Hermione, turning her new bracelet on her arm. "A proper hostess makes sure she knows where everyone at her table is sitting, so that they can have enjoyable conversations."

"Is that code for keeping the ones who'll wind each other up far, far apart?" Ron asked.

"Somewhat." Hermione smiled at him. "But it's also about keeping your guests entertained, finding people with whom they have things in common. And in this case, I would imagine it's about keeping as many couples together as possible."

"Also about finding a way to see that the students who aren't dating yet will still have an enjoyable evening," said Blaise, coming up to the Pride with Colleen, on his arm, wearing her favorite dark green. "We've been gathering information to make this work for the last two months." He shifted on his feet, an unusual sign of nerves for him. "I hope it goes the way we planned it..."

"You worry too much," said Colleen, shoving his arm lightly. "You'll like what they put together," she told the Pride. "It'll be fun even for the first years."

A soft chime sounded, which modulated into words as the chattering of the students packed into the entrance hall started to subside. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming, and welcome to the Slytherin St. Valentine's Soirée. Your servers will be escorting you to your tables momentarily. Thank you, and enjoy your evening."

---

"This is clever," said Luna to Draco, peering over the edge of their table's section of floor. "I wonder how it's done?"

The information the Slytherins had been gathering on their fellow students appeared to include who had been raised in a traditional pureblood household and who had not, who might have friends or relations who had taught them something about pureblood traditions and who might not, and who was and was not afraid of heights. Those students who fell into the former category on the final listing had been drafted to serve as judges for the evening, seated at what was usually the teachers' table. The rest of the school was engaged in cutthroat competition.

Each course was a round, and each table of twelve, generally a mix of three or more Houses and a number of different years, was a team. The subject of competition was the correctness of the team members' manners as they consumed their food and made light conversation. Coaching was both allowed and encouraged, though no physical contact was permitted (a Ravenclaw second year had already been reprimanded for snatching the incorrect fork out of his dinner partner's hand), and the teams which scored well in each round were rewarded with high marks.

*More literally than is usual even at Hogwarts.* Draco waved to Hermione, whose table, half the Hall away, was hovering a few inches higher than his and Luna's. *Who'd ever have thought those once-a-month "good dinners" we used to have at the Den would pay off like this?*

Turning back to his portion of baked fish, he sliced off a neat forkful, listening intently to the discussion between a Hufflepuff seventh year and a Ravenclaw third year over which of their Quidditch teams had a better Chaser squad. As soon as his mouth was clear, he'd be putting in his own two Knuts' worth. Beside him, Luna was happily explaining her father's theories on the habitats of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks to a pair of Slytherin fourth years.

*And I could be imagining it, but I think we're catching up with Neenie's table ...*

The first half of the soirée, to his mind at least, was a definite success.

*Now to see the looks on everyone's faces when they find out what the second half is about!*

---

"Mum's never finding out about this, right?" Ron muttered as he and Harry descended the stairs towards dungeon three, one of the largest of Hogwarts' underground classrooms. "You *know* what she'd do."

"Laugh?"

"No, if it was just you and me, she'd laugh. But it's not. It's Ginny." Ron pointed to his sister, giggling with Hermione and Luna just ahead of them. "And she probably wouldn't be too happy that Meghan's sneaking in either—"

"Who said Meghan's sneaking in?"

"Do you really think she's not?"

"Point," Harry acknowledged. "All right, I'll work on keeping it from getting to your mum if you work on keeping that part from getting to mine."

"Deal."

The boys shook hands, then followed the girls up to the door of dungeon three. Luna knocked three times, and the door creaked open a cautious slit. "Yes?" breathed a voice from the other side.

"Joe sent us," Ginny whispered.

The door slammed. A moment later, it opened just wide enough for the girls to slip inside, one at a time. Ron had to turn sideways to fit through.

The dungeon beyond had been transformed. The desks and chairs were gone, the stone walls were hung with dark curtains, and a circular stage occupied the center of the floor. And set around the stage, far enough apart that no contact could be made by anyone using them—

"How *did* they get Snape to agree to this?" Ron wondered aloud, surveying the trio of slim, silvery poles.

"What makes you think he wanted to know?" asked Draco, coming up behind them with a pair of butterbeers hanging from his right hand. "Something to drink?"

"Thanks." Ron accepted a bottle and uncorked it with his wand. "Think I'm going to need it."

"Anyone been up there yet?" Harry asked, taking the other butterbeer from his brother. "Or are

they waiting until more people get here?"

"Artemis Moon tried it out. Hung upside down for a little while, got some of the boys whistling at her. I think most of them want to wait until the music gets started, though. Then they can tell themselves it's just dancing." Draco shrugged. "Which, it is. Only..."

"It's not the sort any of our mums need to know about," Ron finished. "*Ever* ."

"I'll drink to that," said Harry, opening his own butterbeer.

Three bottles clinked together as three knocks sounded once again on the dungeon door.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 20: Collaborations and Consequences (Year 6)

Dear Molly,

The photographs from the second half of the Slytherin Soiree are enclosed. As you can see, almost all the clothing stayed where it was meant to, other than the usual effects gravity has on robes, and the most popular performer of the night was indeed one of your children—just not the one you might be expecting. Hermione apparently convinced him that they should top off their table's winning the manners competition by trying this out together. It's really rather charming.

I don't know why they thought they'd get away with keeping it from us either. They never do seem to learn.

All is well otherwise. Say hello to Arthur for me.

Aletha

P.S. Thank you for your suggestion of Gripping Spells on the poles. I'm told it helped a great deal. Do I smell a story of the "don't tell the boys" variety? And may Danger and I come over for tea one of these afternoons and hear all about it?

P.P.S. Plans for two Saturdays from now are going very well.

---

Neville sat sideways across two seats in the Quidditch stands, his Charms text and several scrolls of notes spread out around him, anchored by various bits of rock and root to keep them from blowing away. Meghan was perched in the next seat over, her ebony wand in her hand, transfiguring a swatch of cloth into a sleek wooden pawn from a Muggle chess set and back again, varying the color and design each time. A row or two down, Hermione and Luna had their heads together over what appeared to be Harry's Potions textbook, though Neville hadn't looked closely at it. If they wanted his help, they knew where to find him.

In the air above the snow-covered pitch, broomsticks swooped and swirled, the red blur of the Quaffle shooting dizzily from hand to hand, blending in the late afternoon light with the robes worn by the players as the Gryffindor Quidditch team honed their already considerable skills. They had a little over a week left before the match with Hufflepuff, and it was likely to be a hard-fought game.

*Though I wish that was all we had to worry about...*

As the frantic pace of building Sanctuary slowed somewhat, the yearmates were beginning to catch their breaths, to look around them more, and to acknowledge, grimly, that their work was going to be needed sooner rather than later. Neville's own sources, his gran and his mother, as well as the various adults from whom the Pride and the yearmates received correspondence, all

reported that the war was...

*A war. Which is to say, chaotic, painful, and deadly, for a lot more people than anyone wants.*

*Except ones like him. And her.*

Neville tightened his grip on his wand at the thought of the only two people in the world he could truly be said to hate. He wanted Voldemort and Bellatrix Lestrange dead, dead or stripped of their power or in some other way *stopped*, stopped from hurting anyone else the way they'd hurt him and his family. More than that, he wanted them to *suffer*—he wanted them to know that everything they'd ever wanted, everything they'd fought and struggled so hard to get, was just out of their reach, and would be that way forever—

*So we win the war. He glanced down at Meghan, who was critically examining the job she'd done of polka-dotting her pawn. We live. We love each other, and do what we want to do with our lives. Like combining the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw lines, and continuing both our Houses another generation, on our terms. And like teaching all our children, and all the Pride's children, and all the children in the wizarding world— he leaned momentarily into the power surrounding Hogwarts, and felt a warm pulse of acceptance in response—that it doesn't matter where you came from. It matters what, and who, you are.*

*Now if there were just some way I could let them see that, but not be able to ruin it...*

An idea teased at the back of his mind. Rather than pursue it, he scooped up *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six*, and flipped to the chapter Professor Flitwick had assigned. Long experience with the workings of his mind had taught him not to force his thoughts. They'd bloom when they were ready.

*Besides, I don't need to think about them this weekend. I have plenty of homework I need to get done, all the more so because tomorrow's a Hogsmeade day, and a very special one. He grinned to himself. The teachers thought they were going to have to cancel it for security reasons, but somebody was able to provide enough extra hands, and wands, that it ought to be safe to be out in the village for a while, even if we do have to get back sooner than usual...*

His eyes wandered away from his page, lingering for a few moments on one of the players still working with the Quaffle, a shaggy mop of red hair in more disarray than usual from the conflicting wind currents. Softly, he whistled a jaunty line of music, drawing a giggle from Meghan.

A certain Warrior of the Pride was in for quite a surprise tomorrow.

---

Ron leaned on his elbow at the Gryffindor table and scowled at a platter of sausages. Not even the prospect of Hogsmeade could cheer him up just now.

*It's my birthday. My seventeenth birthday. My coming of age.*

*And everyone flipping well forgot about it.*

He hadn't been expecting a huge bash or anything extravagant, but a few presents or the occasional "Many happy returns" would have been nice. Instead of which, the foot of his bed had been completely barren when he awakened, the Pride was chattering away about what they wanted to see and do in the village today, even Hermione had barely taken notice of the foul mood he was in —

*And that's not like her.*

Straightening up, Ron reached for a bowl of scrambled eggs, and used the motion to sneak a glance at his girlfriend. To all outward appearances, she was talking over their previous day's Defense lesson with Harry, but would even the unfairness of Snape docking points from Gryffindor for "exhibitionism" when Harry had decapitated all five of Snape's targets without saying a word bring that much warmth to her face? Or was she excited about something else?

*Hermione never forgets things. Especially not about people who're important to her.*

Adding a spoonful of ketchup to the eggs, he let his eyes rove across the Pride's faces, noticing the fit of giggles Meghan tried to bury in her pumpkin juice when she saw him looking at her, the sly little grin Ginny was sharing with Luna when she thought he *wasn't* looking, the satisfied smirk Draco wore as he adjusted the drape of the cloak he'd brought to breakfast with him—

*Merlin's blood, they're having me on. And I almost fell for it. They've got something planned, something out in the village—some of the rest of the DA might be in on it, or the twins and Percy, maybe even Mum and Dad—*

He hid his own smile behind a huge bite of eggs.

*Have to give them the proper reaction, though, don't I?*

---

"Do you think he suspects?" Ginny asked Luna as they waited in the entrance hall for Filch to check them over with his vibrating Secrecy Sensor.

"Maybe." Luna turned to look at Ron, who glared at her. "But he's determined to be in a bad mood, so he's convinced himself he's wrong."

Ginny sighed. "My stupid brothers," she said, bending down to retie her shoe.

While Ginny wasn't looking, Ron tossed Luna a salute. She inclined her head in response.

If Ron wanted to make everyone think they'd successfully surprised him, she wasn't about to ruin that.

---



The biting wind of early March made it easy for Ron to huddle into his cloak and not say anything as the Pride made their way across the lawns, out Hogwarts' gates, and down the road into Hogsmeade. Once there, they split naturally into smaller groups, Ginny and Luna sliding off together in the general direction of the Three Broomsticks, Meghan and Neville starting for Honeydukes, and Harry and Draco making a beeline for Zonko's. Ron watched them all go, trying to project an air of "I don't care what you do, go on and have fun without me".

*Maybe I should worry about how easy that seems to be...*

"What's wrong?" Hermione said close to his ear, startling him into a small jump.

"Nothing." Ron looked away from her.

"If you say so." She moved back a pace. "Care to take a walk with me?"

"Where to?"

"Just up to that shop the twins are renovating." Hermione pointed in the right direction with her chin, since her hands were tucked into her pockets. "They think they'll be ready to open by their birthday, did you know?"

*Was that a hint? I think that was a hint. Why not take it.*

"No, I didn't know. Because apparently my own brothers talk to you more than they do to me." Ron kicked moodily at a rock, sending it bouncing along the street in front of him and Hermione. "And speaking of *birthdays...* "

"Oh!" Hermione's hands flew to her mouth, her eyes wide and chagrined. "Oh, Ron—oh no, I'm so sorry—we've had so much going on, what with classes and the DA and the year, I'd completely forgot—"

*And the overacting award goes to...Hermione Jane Granger-Lupin.* "I'd noticed." Ron hoped Hermione couldn't tell that the reason he was grinding his words out between his teeth was not that he was too angry to speak any other way, but that he was afraid he'd laugh if he opened his mouth any further. "You, *and Harry, and Fox, and Ginny* —my own *sister* , even—"

"I wish there were something I could say that would make it better." Hermione was looking away, her head bent, and Ron strongly suspected she too was feeling the need to burst out laughing. "Something that would wipe it all out, let us start fresh. Help you understand it isn't that we don't care about you, really it isn't."

"Right, sure it isn't." Ron considered a snort, but thought it would be too likely to break his control. "Pull the other one, Neenie. What could you possibly say that would do that?"

"Oh, I don't know." Hermione looked up with a small smile as they drew level with the twins' shop, its exterior now sparkling with a new paint job and its windows plastered with gaudy posters advertising its opening date of next month. "What about—"

A loud crack behind him startled Ron into a yelp, and a pair of strong hands propelled him forward, through the door Hermione had just bespelled open, into the interior of the shop—

"SURPRISE!"

---

Harry dusted off his hands smugly, grinning at Hermione. She returned the expression, then slipped into the shop to join in the raucous chorus of "Happy Birthday" currently being sung in Ron's general direction by a large portion of the DA and the Red Shepherds, along with all four Pack-parents and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"Funny," remarked Draco, stepping out of hiding to join Harry. "He didn't *smell* surprised."

"No, he didn't." Harry wiggled his fingers and arched his back, making sure his Apparition hadn't left anything important behind. "But he was willing to play along, and that's what matters. Shall we?"

"Shouldn't we wait for the girls?"

"Won't be much of a wait." Harry pointed down the street at two small figures levitating an enormous carton of butterbeer between them. "Here they come now."

"Excellent."

---

"Check, check...test, one, two, three...is this thing on? Can anybody hear me? There was a young lady from Venus, who improbably sprouted a—"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor—guess that's a go, then—*gooooood* morning Hogwarts!" Lindsay Jordan's voice boomed out over the Quidditch pitch. "How's everybody feeling on this lovely chilly spring Saturday?"

Cheers and whistles filled the frosty air.

"That's grand, and today's match should get everything warmed right up for us, as we present the battle of the yellow and the red, the badgers and the lions, the tireless toilers and the fearsome fighters—witches and gentlewizards, I give you the righteously reliable, the tenaciously terrible, the hard-hitting heroes of *HUFFLEPUFF!* And their opponents for today, hoping to position themselves to repeat as Quidditch champions—it's the counts of courage, the barons of bravery, let's hear you roar for *GRYFFINDOR!* "

Locking his knees around his Firebolt, Harry sped out of the chute behind Beaters Jimmy Peakes and Ritchie Coote, his hands, like the rest of the team's, held high to acknowledge the thunderous yells being emitted by the red-clad portions of the audience. Draco waved them all into a rough

circle above their own end of the pitch. "Let's try and win," he shouted over the noise, "but if we can't—"

"Let's try and break a few heads!" the rest of the team chorused, grinning, and Ron sped off for the goal hoops as the Chasers headed for the center line. Harry climbed steeply, putting himself in position to see the whole game at once. Hufflepuff's team, he knew, was not only composed of talented individuals but had trained together fiercely, with the insistence on teamwork which characterized their House. If Gryffindor were likely to lose any match this year, this would be the one.

*Though they do have weaknesses. That one Chaser of theirs, what's his name, Cadwallader, he's fast, he's accurate, he's good all around, but he's afraid of the Bludgers. Harry kept his eyeroll mental. How do you hack it in Quidditch even at the school level if you're afraid of the Bludgers? I've had my arm broken twice and nearly died once from Bludgers, and I'm not afraid of them!*

But then, he had to admit, that might just be a temperamental difference between a Hufflepuff and a Gryffindor.

*Besides, it's probably a sign of intelligence to be afraid of the big nasty enchanted ball that likes to follow people around and try to knock them off their flimsy little flying sticks. Harry glanced down at the snow so far below, melting here and there to show off the patchwork of brown and green beneath. Means you're more likely to live to grow up.*

*Though Ron's managed that despite it all, and I'm getting there myself...*

Madam Hooch's whistle blew, and Harry's attention snapped to the center of the pitch.

He could be philosophical later. Right now, there was Quidditch to play.

---

A match against Hufflepuff, Ginny reflected as she leaned back hard on her broomstick to gain altitude, was definitely cleaner than one against Slytherin. On the flip side, it was also a great deal more difficult.

*Slytherin doesn't have any real practice regimen. They work hard on their trick plays and their fouls, but they aren't out here regularly, three, four, five times a week, doing their basic moves over and over, getting the patterns so engrained into their muscles that they don't even have to—* she swerved and pulled up more, dodging a yellow-clad Chaser who had made a grab for the red leather ball she had under one arm—*think about it, they just do it.*

*Whereas "regular practice" might as well be tattooed across every single Hufflepuff's...chest.*

Her self-censorship made her grin, and she turned height into speed, rocketing away in a shallow dive from another of the Hufflepuff Chasers, who had been attempting to force her towards a Bludger. Ritchie Coote barreled across her wake, his bat high, and the third Hufflepuff Chaser broke off what had looked to Ginny like a worryingly good angle of attack towards her proposed

line of flight with a shriek of pure terror.

*Wonder what that's about?*

But as much fun as wondering might be, she had work to do now. Lean forward, more, more, narrow eyes against the wind, hold tight to the Quaffle—dodge the other Bludger, shoot underneath Harry so close she had to resist the temptation to tug on his robes as she went by—here came the goal hoops and there was the hovering Keeper, now to get her throw at precisely the right angle—

"And Weasley SHOOTS and NO good, it's no good, Harris has—NOT saved it!" Lindsay bellowed into her megaphone over the scoring gong and the cheers of the Gryffindors. "WHAT A PLAY, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! Ten points to Gryffindor, scored by Ginny Weasley, with a perfect swat through the center ring, set up by Hufflepuff Keeper Harris's save to the left!"

"Nice one!" Harris shouted, diving to retrieve the Quaffle and tossing it to Madam Hooch as the flying teacher zoomed up. "You'll have to teach us how that's done sometime!"

"Be glad to," Ginny called back. "*After* we beat you."

Harris's chuckle followed her up the field.

---

*Here we are again...*

Ron gritted his teeth as the Hufflepuff Chasers shot towards him in a tightly bunched group, the Quaffle shooting from one to another of them so rapidly he was having trouble keeping track of who had it.

*Which is the point, isn't it?*

He'd failed to save six of their last seven shots on goal, including a run of three during which he'd been frantically dodging both Bludgers at once, until Jimmy Peakes arrived to Beat them back into general play. How or why the goals had been scored, though, mattered less than that they *had*, and Gryffindor was currently forty points behind.

*We won't be out of the running for the Cup even if we lose, and Harry's bound to spot the Snitch soon, but I'd rather not give away any more points if I can manage it. But how...*

The thought of Harry and of giving things away, along with the unaccustomed weight of his new watch in his pocket, sparked a train of thought in Ron's mind, and he looked sharply at the oncoming Chasers.

*No, no, no, no—yes!*

The girl in the center of the group, Hawkes he thought her name was, had just had the "color" in

her face spike to his vision, in the way that meant she'd made up her mind about something—and sure enough, the other two Chasers had peeled away, Hawkes was aiming the Quaffle at the center, no, the *right* ring—

*I don't think so!*

Ron's arm shot out, and his fingers dug into the tough leather of the Quaffle. "Sorry!" he shouted at the Hufflepuffs, holding the ball over his head to hear his Housemates roar in approval.

Nearer the center of the field, two blurs hurtled earthward in a dizzying spiral.

---

"So what are we supposed to call that move?" Draco inquired at the party in the Gryffindor common room. "The Wronski This-Is-Not-A-Feint?"

Harry bounced a Junior Mint Tadpole off Draco's forehead. Draco caught the tiny wriggling thing as it fell, popped it into his mouth, and licked the chocolate from his fingers before grabbing a napkin to do the same service for the Tadpole's point of impact.

Ginny, Hermione, and Meghan sighed in practiced, weary unison.

"I thought it *was* a Wronski Feint," said Ron, his hands swirling around each other to illustrate. "When I saw you both diving like that, with you in the lead, Harry, I was almost sure of it—and then you came up with the Snitch anyway!"

"Just luck at that point. It was there, so was I, and..." Harry grinned, holding up his prize, which obediently whirred its silver wings. "So we won it by a hundred ten, which puts us pretty comfortably out in front going into the match with Ravenclaw. They play Slytherin next, don't they?"

"They do," Ginny confirmed, offering Neville a leg of her Crunchy Frog, the crisped-rice bones just visible where she'd snapped it off. "And I think they'll likely win it. That'll cut into our lead some, but it shouldn't put them ahead of us, not unless it's a blowout. And unless it's a *total* blowout, we should still be within a Snitch capture, and it's not like we have the best Seeker in the school on our side or anything..."

"We don't?" Luna looked perplexed. "Do you like Cho Chang better than Harry, then?"

Ginny turned as red as her robes while the boys laughed themselves into hiccups.

---

"As this will be our last meeting before your Easter holidays, I have chosen today to conduct an impromptu examination." Snape's black glare raked over the sixth years. "On the off chance that a few of you may have learned something in the nearly seven months I have been attempting to instill a modicum of knowledge into your empty heads."

*Blah, blah, blah*, Harry signed under his desk, sending Hermione and Neville, bracketing him, into quiet snickers. *Doesn't he ever get tired of listening to himself be rude?*

"This is how we will proceed." Snape paced down one side of the room, his wand in his hand. "I will be moving about among you, as I might if this were a typical class session. At random intervals, I will direct either questions or basic wanded attacks towards particular students. Points will be awarded to every student who successfully answers the question or blocks the attack. Having been questioned, or attacked, once is no guarantee that I will not choose you again. We begin...now."

Harry sat back in his chair, making sure his wand was ready in his hand and that he could bring it above desk level in time to cast a Shield Charm or some other form of block. *Have to see if I can't get Padfoot to teach me that extra bit you can put on a Shield, the one that makes it so shiny it reflects back your opponent's spell at double power...*

"Li!" Snape whirled to face Su, who jumped. "Name the main weakness of the Inferius and the reason for it!"

"Fire, Professor," said Su promptly. "Inferi shrink from fire, because they know it can destroy them."

"Good. *Incarcerous!*" This spell was directed at Terry Boot, sitting next to Su, who promptly deflected it upwards, encasing the reptilian skeleton hanging from the ceiling in rope. Snape nodded and moved on.

Forty minutes into class, Harry was feeling nicely confident. He had stopped both spells Snape had thrown at him, one a Twitchy Ears, the other a nonverbal and therefore invisible Stunning Spell, and correctly answered all three questions, including one he'd only known because of Hermione's habit of reading her notes aloud in the common room after class.

*Not that I think I'll be telling her that.*

The rest of the Pride was doing almost as well. Ron's Orbis Block had rung like a bell when Snape's Impediment Jinx had hit it, but in a real battle that would have startled his enemy as much as it had him, so Harry didn't consider it detrimental. Neville's Shield Charm had ricocheted the Leg-Locker Snape had thrown directly back at its caster, and Harry thought he might have been imagining it, but Snape had looked almost impressed as he'd blocked his own spell in his turn. Hermione, of course, was being her usual brilliant self, annihilating questions and hexes with equal ease, which only left—

Snape wheeled around and fixed his eyes on Draco's. His wand stayed loose in his hand, his mouth did not open. Draco paled, but held his ground, staring back at his professor with his face set and neutral.

For five seconds, everything was silent. The two figures, so still that they drew attention to themselves by their very motionlessness, were locked in what Harry knew from experience was a

fierce and merciless battle—Snape had begun to sweat, Draco's hands were flattened against the top of his desk, but neither the black eyes nor the gray showed any sign of wavering—

Hermione, a trifle too casually to Harry's practiced eye, leaned too far forward and tipped her copy of *Confronting the Faceless* out of her lap.

The resulting slam snapped Draco's head around. Snape took a step back, blinking hard. "Full marks," he said, his voice very slightly unsteady. "Macmillan! What are the advantages and deficiencies of the corporeal Patronus?"

---

"Was he—" Harry began to ask his brother after Snape had dismissed them (for a wonder, five minutes early).

"Yes."

"And you held him off?" Ron said in admiration.

"Yes."

"It looked hard," said Neville, flipping his bag shut.

"Was hard." Draco rubbed the back of his neck, wincing. "He's strong."

"We knew that." Hermione looked worriedly at her twin. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Be fine. Head just hurts." Drawing a deep breath, Draco blew it out slowly. "Okay," he said on the end of it. "I'm okay." He gave Hermione a crooked smile. "Thanks for breaking it off. I think I would've been all right if I'd had a little time to prepare, but right off the cuff like that was *hard*."

"What'd you use?" Neville asked, leading the way out of the classroom. "Ice, like you were talking about that one time?"

"Yeah, and it worked really well. Except when he started chipping into it. Have to find some way to make it resistant to that, or maybe so cold no one can touch it at all..."

---

"Look, just go away, all right?"

The voice, feminine, familiar, and hoarse in the way that signified a worrisome closeness to tears, caught Sirius's ear as he descended the stairs towards the ground floor of Headquarters. *Who's Danger yelling at now? Not Moony, if she's going to shout at him she does it silently—Par and Voni are off checking on that rumor of a vampire colony near York, God, I hope they don't find anything, that's all we need—Dobby's getting the cubs' rooms ready, Winky's working on dinner, and Bernie and the elflets are in the attics playing dress-up, Echo's the equivalent of thirteen by now so we can trust them up there alone—*

"The Muggleborn is not Kreacher's mistress," responded a wheezing voice just as Sirius's mind came to the same conclusion on its own. "The little Muggleborn who looks like this one, *she* is Kreacher's mistress, but not *this* Muggleborn, Kreacher does not have to obey her—"

"No, but you do have to obey me," Sirius called, swinging himself over the banister and making it to the door of the War Room in three strides. "And I say that's enough."

Kreacher glared impotently at Sirius, who stared back coldly. He might no longer actively hate his family's house-elf, but he certainly wasn't going to be holding any parties in Kreacher's honor any time soon.

*Even if he and Regulus did get us "valuable information about our enemies' weaknesses", as Albus put it—huzzah, cheers and whistles, now can someone tell me why couldn't it have been this wrinkly little bastard who died for it, instead of my brother?*

*But then, Kreacher'd have preferred that himself. And I know that, and he knows I know that.*

*So it's like everything else in our lives lately. Way too damn complicated.*

He glanced past Kreacher to see Danger sitting in one of the chairs in the room, a file of what looked like *Daily Prophet* clippings on her lap and a suspicious shimmering in her mostly-brown eyes. *Handle the immediate problem, Padfoot. Figure out what's up with you and the grumpy house-elf later.*

"You know the rules, Kreacher," he said firmly. "You obey my guests like you obey me. You're doing better at being polite, which, good work there, but mistress or no mistress, Danger's allowed to give you orders, understand?"

"Yes, Master," Kreacher croaked, bowing nearly double. "Kreacher understands."

*And Kreacher still hates my guts. Which I knew, so no love lost there.*

"Good. Now go find something useful to do. Or go sit under the water tank and sulk, whichever you'd like. I don't really care which."

With one last poisonous glance, Kreacher vanished.

"He getting on your nerves again?" Sirius asked Danger, pulling up a chair beside hers. "Or is it something else?"

"Something else—well, a bit of both, he certainly didn't help matters by coming in here to 'tidy up' and refusing to leave, but..." Danger rubbed the inside corners of her eyes, heaving a sigh. "Sirius, did you ever know a witch named Bathilda Bagshot?"

Sirius laughed, surprised by the unexpected turn the conversation had taken. "Great Merlin, where did you dig *that* up? Old Batty—come on, we were twenty years old when we met her, James and I," he defended himself as Danger looked daggers at him. "What else did you expect us to call her?"



Never to her face, though, we had that much sense even then."

"So you did know her."

"Yes, I knew her. We all knew her. She was one of James and Lily's neighbors in Godric's Hollow, she used to mind Harry for Lily if Moony or Wormtail or I couldn't get away to do it. Old connection of Albus's, I think, she knew him when he was young—which would make her even more ancient than I really want to think about, wouldn't it? She still around?"

Danger shook her head. "She's been dead quite a few years now," she said, her voice regaining its earlier tone of tearfulness. "She died...well, here." Shuffling through the yellowing newspaper clippings, she selected one and held it out. Sirius accepted it and began to read.

The obituary was short and simple, stating that Bathilda Bagshot, noted wizarding historian, had been found dead in her home at Godric's Hollow. Her funeral would be private, and burial would be in the local churchyard. Instead of flowers, donations were requested for the fund that helped Hogwarts students in need get their robes and books.

Sirius frowned as he reached the end of the few lines of text. *It's a shame she's dead, but I don't see what's bugging Danger so much about it...*

Then he looked at the top of the page. The *Daily Prophet* from which the clipping had been taken was dated Sunday, 18 April, 1982.

"Merlin's teacup, she's been gone a while, hasn't she? I know, I know, you said as much," Sirius added at Danger's small noise of annoyance. "And I don't mean it rudely, you know I don't, but..."

He stopped and read the date again.

*That's awfully close to the time the Pack got going. And it was never any secret Bathilda was associated with James and Lily, and with Harry...*

His eyes snapped back to the text of the obituary.

*Found dead, was she? That sounds like she had a heart attack, a stroke, something else natural, it happens even to witches and wizards, we may live longer but we're not immortal...except in that case, why the need for the private funeral?*

"You think she was murdered," he said, looking up at Danger. "You think some of the Death Eaters went after her. Trying to find out what'd happened to Harry."

Silently, Danger extended a slip of parchment covered with dark, angular handwriting.

*Dumbledore—*

*Killing Curse, no question. Cruciatus signs on her as well. Possible Imperius. Not sure what they were after. I'd guess you don't want it getting out?*

—Moody

"We killed her, Sirius," Danger said softly, staring at the floor. "I killed her. Taking Harry out of that damned cupboard, I killed her, just as surely as if I'd run her over in the street."

"No." Sirius removed the folder from Danger's lap, set it on the desk behind him, and lifted her chin with two fingers, looking into her eyes. "No, you didn't."

"It happened because of me!" Danger snapped. "If I'd stopped to think about what I was doing, the repercussions it might have on other people, the trouble it might cause—"

"Then we might not have a Pack today," Sirius interrupted. "And what were you going to do about Harry? Leave him there to starve?"

"We could have handled it some other way, some way that wasn't so...I don't know, splashy!" Danger shoved Sirius's hand away. "Remus could have moved into the house with me and Neenie once we were married, we'd have offered to mind Harry for free, Petunia would have jumped on it—we'd still have come after you on that first full moon, you could have been Letha's dog instead of ours, we'd have put a lot of use on the fireplaces coming and going to see each other but who cares, that's what they're for—"

"And Letha and I would have driven each other mad within the first six months," Sirius interrupted. "We *needed* each other at that point, Danger. All of us, together. Not a Floo call away, in the same damn house. If we hadn't had you and Moony, and the cubs, we'd have stopped speaking to each other long before that September, to say nothing of sleeping together, and then where would I get my beautiful little Pearl?"

"She'd still have come along at some point," Danger objected, but Sirius could hear her weakening. "You and Letha would have made it up, found some way to co-exist."

"Yes, but I prefer living, not just existing. And living's what we've made work with the Pack." Sirius tugged a piece of Danger's hair. "And speaking of Pack and cubs, what about Draco? What would've happened to him, if we'd gone for the 'less splashy' option? He'd probably still be trapped in purebloodland, he'd be a Junior Death Eater by now..." He could see the thoughts churning behind Danger's eyes, and decided to play his high card. "And besides, how were you supposed to know any of this? Danger, you went after the problem you knew about, and you fixed it. You saved Harry. You can't take the blame for what a bunch of mad Death Eaters did afterwards. That's on them. Not you."

Danger glared at him for one more moment. Then her shoulders relaxed, and she sighed deeply. "As much as I want to smack you for that, I can't. Because you're right." She blinked a few times, her eyes acquiring more of their usual swirls of blue. "I didn't kill Bathilda Bagshot. Some of my actions may have started a train of events that led to her death, and I'll always be sorry for that, but it doesn't mean I killed her."

"There we go." Sirius leaned over to give her a quick hug. "Feeling better?"

"Yes. Not perfect, but better."

"Good. Because what I was coming down to tell you is that it's almost time to leave for the station to pick up the cubs and Letha." Sirius grinned at the sudden light in Danger's eyes. "That's more like it. Come on, drag that werewolf of yours out of whatever academic oddity he's buried in. We've got a holiday to get started."

---

Draco woke early the next morning, not by plan or predetermination but from simple restlessness. Careful not to disturb Harry, he got up and dressed, then slipped out of their bedroom.

The person he'd been expecting was waiting for him, book in hand, outside the girls' room on the floor below. She looked up and smiled as he approached, and he felt his heart lift.

"Morning, Neenie," he said.

"Morning, Fox."

A quick scent-touch for hello, and they meandered down the stairs towards the kitchen together. Danger blew them both scent-kisses from the stove, and Letha and Corona Gamp waved from the table, as they entered. "Just the people I'd wanted to see," said Letha, beckoning them closer. "How would you two like to earn a bit of extra credit in Potions?"

Hermione brightened immediately. Draco laughed and poked her in the shoulder, and she hissed and slapped him lightly on the side of the head, then relented and grinned at him. "We're listening," she said, sitting down beside Corona.

"It's about Brian," Corona began. "Or, well—not really about Brian, but about both of us. About me. And about..." She shook her head. "I'm not making a particle of sense, am I?"

"Give us the background we're missing first," Danger advised, plucking the last of her drop scones off its baking sheet with her bare hand, tossing it neatly into its cloth-lined basket, and sending the basket soaring across the kitchen with her wand. Hermione plucked it from the air and set it down on the table. "Then go on to what you're looking for."

"Background. All right." Corona held out her hands to the warmth of the basket. "It starts with what Brian and I do for the Order. Which you know perfectly well, but I'm not sure if you've heard how much more crucial it's becoming." She shuddered. "The Death Eaters have been sending the werewolves they command to attack Muggle children."

Draco growled, feeling his hands pull into fists without his conscious command. Though he knew werewolves attacking children was standard fare to most of the wizarding world, no more surprising than goblins being greedy or Slytherins not to be trusted, the Pack-instincts which had governed the majority of his life equated "werewolf" with "protector", turning this latest filthy amusement of the Death Eaters into a worse perversion than most.

*Not to mention hard to fight, because we can ward Muggle houses against random spells, we can defend specific families if we know the DE's are coming after them, but werewolves are more or less immune to pure magic, meaning they can walk straight through plain wards, and if they've taken Wolfsbane, they're also human-smart, so they can pick their own targets...*

"Are yours fighting them, then?" Hermione asked, her hazel eyes sparking with much the same mix of emotions Draco could feel swelling in his own chest. "Yours and Brian's, the ones he talks to?"

"Brian's, yes." Corona sighed, shaking her head. "Not mine, not most of them. They're terribly wary of ordinary humans—well, I can understand that, so would I be if the world thought that badly of me, but we learned the hard way that I can't even *touch* Brian before he goes out to speak to a new group of them, because if they catch so much as a whiff of my scent on his robes, they're certain I'm 'controlling' him somehow, and trying to do the same to them."

"Which means you have to stay completely out of the picture, back at wherever you're using for a base," said Letha, smiling thanks at Danger as a full teapot and a collection of mugs arrived on the table. "Not the worst thing in the world, but if Brian should ever get into trouble and need backup quickly..."

"Exactly." Pulling back one of her sleeves, Corona regarded the flesh thus exposed ruefully. "And if it weren't for the scent, I could pass as a werewolf quite easily, because working with the animals the Order finds, well..." She held out her arm, covered in a variety of scrapes and scratches in various stages of healing, for the twins to examine. "My grandmother would, of course, be horrified."

"So you need something that'll disguise your scent, then." Draco tested the heat coming from the basket of scones, then chose one for himself and a second for Hermione, handing it to her as he continued to speak. "As long-lasting as we can get it, without too many side effects, and preferably something you could brew yourself."

"Quickly," Hermione added, setting her scone on her plate to pour out two mugs of tea. "I know you don't stay long in any one place. Though if it turns out to be a potion with a longer brewing time, we could always make it for you, here at Headquarters or even at Hogwarts, and deliver it to you as you needed it." One mug, along with the small pitcher of cream, landed in front of Draco, who pushed the sugar bowl down the table in return. "Where do you think we ought to start?" she asked him, scooping up a careful half-spoonful and sprinkling it slowly into her tea.

"Samples," Draco said immediately, pouring a dollop of the cream into his own mug. "From Brian and Maya to start with, fan out further if we need to. Then a couple of controls—not any of us, we're around Maya and Moony too much and we don't want cross-contamination, but we can find somebody in the Order who isn't here often, they should do."

"I've got a few ideas for that." Hermione nodded. "Once we have the samples, we'll run some basic diagnostics, isolate the magical and chemical elements in the one set not present in the other—unless that's already been done?" She turned to look at Letha. "Would that be something they

might have on file at the Bonham School? What's present in a werewolf's body that isn't in an ordinary human's?"

"I couldn't say offhand, but I can certainly check." Letha smiled at Corona, who was regarding the twins with a look of wary bemusement. "And now you see why I suggested bringing them in on this," she said. "What they may lack in experience, they make up for in energy. We'll have a working brew or two by the end of holidays, possibly even a finished product if that information does happen to be on file."

"So soon?" Corona smiled in answer. "That would be wonderful. I worry about him, you know."

"I know." Letha sighed. "Believe me, I know."

"I think that's one of the functions of men," said Danger, coming to sit down beside Hermione. "To make women worry about them."

"And one of the functions of women is to do the worrying?" Draco hazarded.

He realized one instant too late how very outnumbered he was.

*Note to self: engage brain before opening mouth.*

It was his last coherent thought before he had to put all his attention into self-defense.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 21: Of Love and Honor (Year 6)

Maya Pritchard stifled a yawn behind her hand. Full moon wasn't for another week and a half, but Lee had been called away unexpectedly the night before by a sudden Red Shepherd mission (he hadn't given her details, and she knew better than to ask) and their little flat in Diagon Alley always felt empty to her without him there, so she hadn't slept well.

It didn't help that everyone else having breakfast in the Pepper Pot this morning seemed to know something she didn't. Percy had a look on his face she could only describe as a doting smirk, which should have been impossible but managed itself nicely on his features. Fred, George, and Danielle had their heads together over a timetable and were whispering to one another, pointing things out. Crystal kept whistling intricate bits of music which made Maya think of dancing fairies as she made sure everyone's plates were full. And Roger and Selena were grinning at each other over baby Zach's head every time they thought she wasn't looking.

*What are they planning? If this had happened last Sunday, I'd think they were going to throw me a surprise party for my birthday, but they all gave me my gifts just like usual on Tuesday...*

"What's Professor Black covering with you this year in N.E.W.T. Potions?" Danielle asked Selena across the table. "Just the standard curriculum, or did she mix it up a bit?"

"I think she mixed it up, though as I haven't been through the class before, I wouldn't know." Selena made a face at Danielle. "We did a whole section on potions that mimic spells..."

"Which we never covered, so I think you're safe to say she's changed things." Danielle nodded. "What sort of spells?"

"Oh, all sorts. There's one to help stop bleeding, like *Episkey* will do with a wand, one to help revive someone who's a bit groggy, like *Ennervate*—we were able to work from that one to get a better mix for the antidote patches on the potion pieces—even one that mimics the Body-Bind, though it wears off pretty quickly so I wouldn't recommend it for DA or Order use unless we could brew it up stronger. Works with contact or vapor, though, so that's a plus. And there's one that mimics the Animagus forcer spell."

"Always a good thing to have on hand, if you know anyone who's learning that," said Roger. "If they were to get caught in form, or even halfway between forms, you could transfigure them back before they were in danger of losing their human mind. And with the potion, you don't have to know the spell, which I understand is a tricky one."

"It is," Fred put in. "Nonverbal, multi-part, and not exactly the easiest thing to practice."

"It's a bit uncomfortable, being dragged out of your form," George added. "Feels different than a standard change. Different from being transfigured as well."

This led into a lively, all-hands conversation about the Animagus process and its downfalls, human transfiguration and the laws surrounding it, and the possibility of the war's impact on same. Maya let most of it flow past her. Her mind was busy puzzling at her friends' curious behavior.

*And it isn't just them, either. Graham and Natalie were whispering together all through the train ride, and Bernie and her elflet friends have been looking tremendously excited every time they've seen me this holiday. So have Aunt Voni and Uncle Par, come to think. And didn't Lindz say something to Dean at King's Cross, something about making sure he knows where the nearest entry point for the Red Roads to his family's house is?*

*What in the world is going on here?*

A rapping noise from the back room startled her. Crystal got up from the table and returned with a barn owl on her wrist, carrying a red envelope in its beak. Maya swallowed hard as she recognized a Howler, and again as she saw her own name written on the back. To her surprise, though, no one else looked worried. On the contrary, both twins had started to grin, and Selena was rocking Zach back and forth in time with Crystal's renewed whistling.

*Were they expecting this?*

She caught the envelope as the owl released it, tore it open, and quickly set it on the table.

"Good morning, Maya," said Lee's voice from the Howler, in normal tones. "Happy Easter. I'm sorry I can't be there in person, but it's bad luck for me to see you today. Or it will be, if everything goes the way I want it to."

Maya frowned, confused. *Bad luck—what is he talking about? And what does he want to happen, or not happen—*

"I asked you a question a little over a year ago, and you gave me an answer. I liked that answer a lot, and I'm hoping you'll give me the same one again, now that I'm asking with an extra word on the question." The sound of a deep breath, as though Lee were nerving himself up. "Maya Pritchard, will you marry me—*today?* "

*Today?* " Maya squeaked as the Howler went up in a silent puff of smoke. She hated even thinking the word in connection with herself, but it was the only possible descriptor for the sound which had just come out of her. "But—but I'm not *ready* , I don't even have a *dress* —"

"Madam Malkin's will be open today, just for you," said Danielle, beaming. "Your aunt's already there, she's picked out a few dresses she thought would appeal to your tastes. All you have to do is choose one and they'll fit you up right there."

"Lee and Lindz are out collecting Dean and Natalie, and their families," Fred picked up the Quaffle. "Once they turn up, and Graham and his lot from Headquarters, we'll hang onto the boys here and send the girls over to get fitted out as bridesmaids."



"Red and royal blue," said Crystal, nodding. "Excellent color choices."

"How did you—" Maya whirled to glare at Selena. "You set me up," she snapped. "All those questions all year long while we were working on Sanctuary, all those casual little conversations about what I wanted it to be like when we finally got married, Lee and I—you set me up for this!"

"Guilty as charged." Selena leaned back in her seat, smiling faintly. "Does this mean you don't want me for maid of honor?"

Maya lowered her glare to the baby in Selena's arms. "Maid I don't think you can claim anymore, not with a straight face," she said. "And honor...only if you're a Slytherin."

"Which I am." Selena lifted Zach to kiss him. "Q.E.D. So, do you want me there or not? And is it even happening?"

"Do I want you *where* ? Where in the world could Lee find for us to get married on this short of notice?"

"You mentioned it yourself," said Roger with a smile. "And it's not exactly short notice. He's been planning this for most of the year."

"Most of the—" Words momentarily failed Maya. While she was in the process of taking a deep breath to try to get them back, the place to which Roger was referring suddenly dawned on her.

"Sanctuary," she said in disbelief. "He wants us to get married in Sanctuary?"

"Why not?" George spread his hands. "Beautiful spot, magically important, needs as much good stuff as we can possibly cram in there..." He glanced over at Crystal. "Not a bad idea, really. Especially if you set things up for just the right time of day so the light's coming through one or another of those bits of stained glass, whichever one you like best."

Percy cleared his throat before Crystal's speculative expression could translate itself into words. "I believe there's a question still unanswered here," he said when everyone looked at him. A wave of his hand indicated the ashes of the Howler. "Will you, Maya?"

Maya closed her eyes and made herself consider the question calmly and rationally. It wasn't easy. Half of her wanted desperately to draw her wand or her potion piece and go looking for Lee to beat him senseless, while the other half wanted to find him for the purpose of kissing him into precisely that same state. It wasn't fair of him to ask her so soon, so suddenly, to take away all the fun of planning for the wedding—

*But he made sure he knew how I wanted it done. He got Aunt Vonni and Selena and all the rest of the girls to help him. And the "fun" of wedding planning is usually more than half frustration if I understand it right. Besides, we've been engaged for over a year, it's not like we're rushing headlong into this!*

And, she had to admit, if she had seen this scenario written down in a novel somewhere, she would

have sighed a little over how romantic it was.

*Which it is. Also annoying, and breathtaking, in both senses of that word, the good and the bad. But overall, I think there's only one answer I can honestly give.*

She opened her eyes and looked at her friends, her Pridemates, her fellow Red Shepherds.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I'll marry Lee. Today."

Fred let out a whoop of glee and leapt up to start dancing around the room. George joined him, but only after winking broadly at Crystal. Percy sighed through his teeth, then got up, pushed in his chair, and headed for the Vanishing Cabinet. "I'll be at Sanctuary if anyone's looking for me," he informed the room over his shoulder. "There are bound to be a few last-minute details that need to be handled."

"What's with him?" Danielle asked, frowning as the Vanishing Cabinet closed with a click behind Percy's heels. "I mean, not that there won't be things to do at Sanctuary, but he's acting like he doesn't want to be *here* ..."

"Penny." George stopped dancing. "Merlin's ear hair, we never thought of that. Today's bound to make him think of Penny."

Fred grimaced. "Hard lines on him," he said sympathetically. "But it's not fair to Lee and Maya to put that on their day. Your day," he corrected in Maya's direction.

"So, he's not." Crystal nodded towards the Vanishing Cabinet. "He's staying involved, doing his part, but as long as he's there alone, or mostly so, he can tell himself he's just setting up for a party of some kind. He'll probably leave before the rest of us get there."

"Hope he's over it by this time next month, at least enough to hold himself together through a ceremony." George shaped a tower with his hands. "Ginny won't like it one bit if we aren't all there at *her* wedding."

"But that being a month from now, and today being today, we need to get on with things," said Selena, standing up briskly and handing Zach to his father. "Come on, Maya—time to turn you into a bride!"

*A bride.* Maya let her friends pull her to her feet, let them escort her out into the sunny spring morning, let them sweep her down Diagon Alley, and slowly the truth sank in, bringing a disbelieving smile to her face, an almost unbearable lightness in her chest. *I'm going to be a bride. I'm getting married. Today. Bernie and Echo will scatter petals for me, and Uncle Par will walk me down the aisle—everybody in the year will probably be there, and all the Red Shepherds, and some of the Order of the Phoenix too—but none of that's the most important thing.*

*The most important thing will be waiting for me at the end of that walk. And when we stand there wand-to-wand and make those promises together, the whole world will know what I mean to him.*

*What we mean to each other.*

"Mrs. Maya Jordan," she murmured aloud, trying it out. "Lee and Maya Jordan."

It sounded, she decided, quite good.

*But I'm still going to get him back for this.*

---

Harry waved his wand through a four-sided pattern, keeping his mind focused on what he wanted the magic to do. *One* —lift a wooden chair from the top of the stack Ron had levitated into place beside him. *Two* —float the chair down the row until it was next to the other chairs he'd already placed. *Three* —lower the chair into place. *Four* —add a ribbon bow to the back of the chair, bright red if the last one had been royal blue, or vice versa.

*And repeat.*

On the other side of the aisle Lee's carefully drawn diagram had delineated, Hermione and Ginny were performing the same office, while Luna and Draco hoisted flower-covered arches into place along the length of the aisle itself. Neville and Meghan followed them, ensuring the flowers were in their fullest, most luxurious bloom, and would remain so through the time of the ceremony, scheduled for two in the afternoon. Coincidentally, that would bring the sunlight over Hogwarts pouring in through the Gryffindor stained glass crest, under which the platform had been erected on which Lee and Maya would stand.

Elsewhere in Sanctuary, Harry knew, other members of the year were overseeing the decorating of the largest dining hall for the early dinner reception, checking with the house-elves to make sure the food preparations were well underway, preparing the individual sleeping areas which had been completed before Easter holidays for any of the adult attendees who might enjoy a little too much of their favorite beverage and need a place to stay for the night. And as far as he was aware—he rapped his knuckles against one of the chairs as it went past—everything was, so far, going well.

*I'd call it a practice run for Ginny's and mine, but ours won't be anywhere near this elaborate. There'll be plenty going on that day, but all the attention should be focused on the Gryffindor May Day Fete. Not on us, and that's just the way we wanted it.*

Continuing his careful gestures, he let his eyes wander across the aisle, to Ginny, her wand rock-steady as she directed another stack of chairs towards Hermione. For all that she loved to be watched while she was doing what she did well, Harry knew his fiancée was at heart a private person, unwilling to put her emotions on public display.

*And I'm with her all the way on that one. We're getting married... He paused for the uprush of worried, astonished joy that filled him every time he consciously thought about this fact. Yes, yes, wonderful, amazing, but I don't want everybody and his pet kneazle coming to stare at us. And they would, if we gave them half a chance. I am, after all, a celebrity. "The Boy Who Lived".*

*But it's not "The Boy Who Lived" getting married next month. It's me, Harry Potter. Finishing a row, he hoisted the remaining stack of chairs with his wand, moved back two paces, and started a new one. So let's keep the attendance at the ceremony limited to the people who actually know the difference between the two. My Pack, Ginny's family, and our Pride. Full stop. Reception here in Sanctuary sometime that day, for yearmates only. Ex-yearmates by that point, really—our wedding is the last thing in the year, the spell will officially be broken—*

He grinned to himself. "Which means," he said aloud, "that the Ministry won't be able to do Traces anymore."

"Thinking about the year?" Ginny asked from the aisle. "And about me, maybe?"

"How could you tell?"

"Your color's slipping." With a small smirk, Ginny pointed to Harry's last few red bows, which matched not the vibrant crimson of the Gryffindor crest but the warm, bright shade of her hair. "Might want to fix that."

Harry made a face at her and shot a non-verbal Color Changer at each offending bow, restoring them to the proper shade of red. "There," he said as the last one hit. "Fixed. Did you just come over to tease me, or was there something else?"

"Well, teasing you is always good. But." The cheer slid away from Ginny's face as she beckoned Harry nearer. "I had a message," she said quietly when he was within earshot. "Professor Dumbledore would like to see us in his office. Immediately, if we can be spared. Hermione says she and Ron can finish here, there isn't much more to do..."

"And as important as Lee and Maya are, Dumbledore doesn't say 'immediately' for nothing." Harry slid the grip end of his wand into his sleeve, letting his holster's magic pull it into place, and hurried towards the cave which hid the passage to the fourth floor mirror, Ginny at his side. "Did he say what it was about?"

"Not in so many words. But I have a guess." *Horcruxes*, Ginny signed when Harry turned to look at her. *Goblins. Answer.*

"Right."

*And that would merit an "immediately". You don't keep goblins waiting.*

Harry picked up his pace a little.

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"Toothflossing Stringmint" sent the gargoyle outside the Head's office leaping out of the way, and Harry and Ginny stepped onto the revolving staircase. On the way up, Ginny brushed a few stray bits of ribbon off Harry's shoulders and Harry finger-combed a tangle or two out of Ginny's hair. They looked each other over at the top, nodded once, and approached the door.

"Come in," Dumbledore called before Ginny's hand could touch the knocker.

"How *does* he do that?" Harry murmured.

Ginny raised an eyebrow at him. "Magic," she returned without cracking a smile, and opened the door.

"Harry, Ginny, thank you for coming so quickly," said Dumbledore, standing behind his desk. "We have guests, whom I believe you may already know."

The scent in the air, cool and vaguely metallic, gave Harry his first intimation that Ginny's guess was right. He squeezed her hand as they stepped around Dumbledore's visitor's chairs together.

"Rarzal," he said, bowing in time with Ginny's curtsey. "Kunora."

"Harry Potter. Ginny Weasley." Rarzal nodded to them, Kunora dipping her knees slightly, making her skirts sway. "Those with rank in the clans have conferred, and I bring you their answer."

Harry schooled his face to composure, though the messages coming to him through his sense of smell were not conducive to this exercise. The main emotional notes in Rarzal's scent seemed to be annoyance and determination, while from Kunora he could catch nerves and a determination matching her husband's. But a distinct overtone wafted through the air as well, one he associated with a very particular act on the part of his Pack-fathers, his own Pride-mates, or Fred and George. A slight quiver at the corner of Ginny's mouth told him she had caught it as well, and found it just as amusing, if baffling, as Harry did.

*Because for a goblin woman to come here smelling like she's about to play the greatest prank in the history of the world...*

"We thank you for your information, and will act on it as we see fit." Rarzal bowed more fully this time, splitting the honors between Harry and Ginny. "Such is the answer of the ranked members of the clans, and thus you may tell anyone who asks. Now, I take my leave." A quick exchange with Kunora in Gobbledegook, a bow to Dumbledore, and Rarzal was at the fireplace, tossing in a sprinkle of Floo powder. "Gringotts Bank!"

*Thanks for telling us, we'll handle it? That's all we get? Harry stared at the green flames into which Rarzal had disappeared, trying not to let his anger and disappointment show. We went out of our way to tell you about this, and you're just going to—*

He caught his mental rant before it could go any further and pulled his thoughts back to what had just happened, rather than what he believed about it.

*All right, we got the answer from the leaders of the goblins, the answer that we're supposed to tell people about. But who'd be asking? Who'd want to know—*

As he drew a deep breath, trying to calm himself down, Kunora's prankster delight teased his sense of smell once again. Beside him, Ginny was starting to smile, and whiffs of excitement, of

anticipation, exuded from her.

*What does she know that I don't?*

Harry looked back at the goblin woman. She was gazing upwards, apparently entranced by the height of Dumbledore's office, by the portraits of past Heads which lined the walls, by the shelves filled with books and intricate magical machinery. "It is the work of goblin men," she said softly, "to guard our people's reputation, the appearance we present in the eyes of the world. And so my partner has just done. But." She began to turn slowly in a circle, her voice taking on the sound of a recitation, almost a chant. "It is the work of goblin *women* to preserve our people's *honor*. The knowledge we hold of ourselves and our actions." Her glance over her shoulder, towards Harry and Ginny, was full of the mischief that matched her scent. "And so I shall now do."

A familiar floating sensation took over Harry's midsection, similar to what he'd experienced in the moment of his first successful Patronus casting, or when he'd realized Horace Slughorn was giving him the memory Dumbledore needed. Ginny's grasp was tighter than ever on his hand, and Harry could hear the little jagged exhalations which meant she was stifling gleeful giggles.

*If we hadn't paid attention to what Aunt Amy told us...if we hadn't both gone to the talks, or thought to pay attention to Kunora, or to be as polite as they were...*

"My oaths forbid me from speaking goblin secrets to any living being," Kunora added, still spinning slowly in place. "So I believe that I shall speak..." One long finger pointed upwards, towards the corner of a bookshelf. "...to this Hat. If you will allow it," she added to Dumbledore.

"Certainly, madam." Dumbledore drew his wand and levitated the Sorting Hat down from its hook to the corner of his desk. Kunora climbed into one of the visitor's chairs and sat on its edge, regarding the Hat closely.

"Good day, Hat," she said. The Hat inclined its tip to her politely. "Shall I tell you a tale of Gringotts? Of the vaults and the corridors, the cart-tracks and the safeguards? Shall I tell you a tale of magic deep and strong, and how it is that goblins preserve what is given to them for safekeeping? I believe that I shall."

Unobtrusively, as he seated himself, Dumbledore made a small swirling motion with his wand, and two more chairs appeared behind Harry and Ginny. They sat as well, Harry releasing Ginny's hand for a moment to disentangle his shoe from the hem of his robes.

"Those goblins who enter the employ of Gringotts swear three oaths, three oaths in the deepest of magic," Kunora continued, still in her reciting tone, her voice soft and thoughtful as she kept her eyes fixed firmly on the Hat. "The first is an oath of fidelity, that they will keep faith with one another and with the wizards who give them their trust. The second is an oath of sharing, that they will help one another in the doing of such magic as will make the vaults safer for all goblinkind. The third is an oath of sealing, by which they dedicate their very lives to the fulfillment of the first two oaths. And this final oath is sworn, must be sworn..." Her lip curled in distaste. "...in the bodies and persons of those goblins who swear, that it may govern their lives with every beat of

their hearts."

Ginny tugged out her pendant chain and held it where Harry could see it. He nodded and slid it quickly over his head. **So three deep magic oaths bind Gringotts goblins to the bank, but only the third one changes the blood in their bodies,** he said once they were connected. **Sound familiar at all?**

**Maybe just a little.** Ginny grinned and flashed a brief mental image of a pair of people. **The tiniest bit.**

"No one who is not so sworn, three times in blood and once in the very blood of her body, may enter a Gringotts vault without a goblin's help." Kunora smiled. "But that is not the only way the vaults are guarded, depths below us, no! There are the shafts and the carts, which all wizards have seen and know, and which only goblins may guide...but other things than carts may move along open shafts, if there were some way that they would not be seen..."

**Broomsticks,** Harry said promptly. **Broomsticks, and Disillusionments, or the Cloak. One of us goes openly to Gringotts to make a withdrawal, and the two who'll be doing the actual work sneak along under the Cloak, and fly out of the cart whenever they get the chance...**

**One of them doesn't fly that well,** Ginny objected. **Though I suppose she could always ride on his shoulders, the way she used to do on Ron's. He's a good enough flyer to compensate for that. Or they could just ride double.**

"But, of course, the path to the deepest vaults is guarded by more than simply depth and open space." Kunora nodded gravely. "Simply finding one's way about is the first challenge. The Gringotts carts can find any vault they are asked to, but an intruder, without help, will swiftly be lost within the maze of shafts, and never find his way either to daylight or to his desired destination." Her small hand reached out to the desk and slid a piece of folded parchment deftly under the Hat.

**And that would be known as help.** Ginny was almost purring over the link. **What do you want to bet it's turn-by-turn directions to the vault we need?**

**I don't take sucker bets. Try that one on your brother.**

**That's not very nice.**

**What? You've got six of them, and I didn't specify. You can pick whichever one you don't like today.**

"Along the way, an intruder, or intruders, must also confront the Thief's Downfall." Kunora gestured as though drawing something down from the sky. "A torrent of enchanted water, which washes away all disguises and halts all unauthorized traffic. It will not harm any who are blood-sworn, but anything they might be using to hide themselves will be lost to them if they do not take care."

**Disillusionments, then. I'm not losing my Cloak if I can help it.**

"And once they pass that obstacle, there is the vault's ultimate guardian to consider." Kunora tapped her fingers together, tilting her head to one side. "For it has been taught to attack anything larger than a goblin which comes there alone. A goblin may drive it back with the proper sounds to which it has been trained, but should any human try it, though they had the very noisemakers my people use..." She shivered delicately. "To be eaten by a dragon is no fate I would wish even on a thief."

Ginny stiffened. **Bill would never tell us if it was true they used dragons...**

**Probably because they don't "train" them very nicely, Harry guessed. And he knew what Charlie would have to say about that. But did you hear how she led off this bit? That the dragon would attack anything *larger* than a goblin?**

**Yes, but humans are—** Ginny broke off, and Harry felt the mental equivalent of her hand contacting her forehead. **Humans are, she repeated. But cats and foxes aren't.**

"Though the dragon is fed on the last day of every month," Kunora added. "After which it is always sleepy. Slower to move. Unwilling to expend its energy on prey so small that merely catching it would use up more than eating it will yield."

**Last day of every month...I don't think we could pull this together by tomorrow. So we'll have to make it next month. 30 April, the day before the year ends. The day before we do what Lee and Maya are doing today.** Harry squeezed Ginny's hand, pressing a finger lightly against her ring. **Won't that be a fun stag night for me?**

**Yes, it will.** Ginny twitched her head, setting her silver-twist earrings swaying on either side of her smirk. **And I think the chance to get rid of a Horcrux is about the nicest wedding present anybody could give us.**

"The wizards and witch whose vault this is have laid their own magic on the items within it as well." Kunora glowered briefly, as though she were offended that the goblins' clients should find it necessary to take further precautions beyond that which the goblins themselves could provide. "Wanded spells, one of duplication—creating worthless copies of any item within the vault which is touched by a living being, enough to bury an unwary thief alive if care is not taken—and one of burning, to make even the copies painful to that same touch. But what wands may lay, wands may take away."

**And if there's anyone who can look up spells like that, and learn the counter-charms to them, in one month or less, it's Hermione.** Harry snickered mentally. **With Moony and Danger to help her if she needs it.**

**Plus I think she just handed us a great big hint as to whose vault we're plundering.** Ginny replayed Kunora's words of a moment before. **Take wizards, plural, and witch, singular, add in Death Eaters, the sort Voldemort trusts as much as he does anybody, and old-family**



**purebloods who'd have the deepest vaults at Gringotts, and what do you get?**

Harry had to fight to keep his whoop of glee silent as it came to him, and couldn't quite manage to restrain the grin. **The Lestranges. It has to be. Merlin's boots, I wish we could tell Padfoot, he'd get such a kick out of this...**

**After the war**, Ginny murmured, sending a calming caress across the link. **After we win.**

Kunora sighed deeply. "Sadly, only one of the items about which there was question is currently housed at Gringotts, or any other goblin institution," she said, with what sounded like true regret. "The cloak-pin in the form of the eagle was wrought by my people, certainly—the records of its making still exist—but we have no record of it being under our care at any time after that." She turned to look at Harry and Ginny. "Should it be located, we would be grateful to be informed."

"We'll do that," Harry said aloud, as Ginny nodded. "Thanks for looking."

"You are welcome." Kunora returned her attention to the Sorting Hat. "And thank *you*, sir Hat, for listening so well to my tale," she said with a smile.

"My pleasure," the Hat returned.

Harry felt Ginny's shock through the chain. **What?** he asked. **If it can sing and shout, it ought to be able to talk normally.**

**Yes, but I wasn't expecting it! And stop laughing at me!**

**I'm not laughing at you.**

**Not out loud, but you *are*. Ginny glowered at him. I can *feel* it.**

"And now I must take my leave." Kunora slid down from the chair, as Dumbledore returned the Hat to its hook. "My partner and our children will be wondering what has become of me."

"Give them our best, please," said Ginny, retrieving her pendant chain and sparing Harry a single dirty look before she went to one knee in front of Kunora and held out her hand. "And thank you, very much."

"It is quite truly my pleasure, Ginny Weasley." Kunora shook Ginny's hand, her smile as fierce as Ginny's own. "When this war is ended, we must speak more, you and I. Perhaps you could bring your clan-sisters, and I could bring mine, and we could do together those things women do to which men are not admitted..."

"A Girls' Night?" Ginny suggested. "Lots of chocolate, and fruity drinks, and talking about all the things our mothers still think we're too young to know?"

"I see the idea is not new to you." Kunora nodded briskly. "I believe it would be enjoyable. And informative, to both sides."

"Definitely. So that's a date." Ginny sat back on her heels. "Look me up as soon as we get this war finished. Which will be sooner, with what you told the Hat just now."

"As I thought." Kunora inclined her head to Harry, who bowed in reply. "Our thanks to you, Harry Potter, for that work which you will do and for that honor which you have shown us," she said softly. "I and mine stand in your debt for this, and will seek to repay you at the earliest time we may."

Harry managed not to goggle at the goblin woman, but it was a near thing. From what Aunt Amy had told them, goblins acknowledged debts to humans about as often as Snape gave points to Gryffindor. "I...thank you," he answered after a moment spent regaining his composure. "Though if you really want to pay me back..." He smiled, thinking of the place far below his feet where he would later today watch two of his friends join their lives. "There's this project we've been working on for a while now, here at Hogwarts. It's underground, and it needs to be as safe as we can make it. And everybody knows, if you want to keep things safe underground, you ought to be talking to the goblins..."

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A lull in the preparations about one-fifteen gave Maya her first chance to catch her breath, and she slipped out into the main area of Sanctuary after being assured by Dean that Lee was out in Hogsmeade checking on the security arrangements and wouldn't be back for at least ten more minutes.

The yearmates and their families were starting to drift in from the various entrances, choosing seats and chattering to one another, half-blood and Muggleborn students pointing out to Muggle parents and relations the features of Sanctuary which would have been impossible without magic. Maya kept her face angled away, hoping they would take her, in her plain black day robes still, for a bridesmaid or even a server, and wandered along the edge of the cavern until she saw a familiar figure. Graham, also in day robes, stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing up at the Slytherin crest.

"Have you threatened Lee yet?" she teased lightly as she came up beside him. "Told him if he hurts me, he'll have to answer to you?"

"We're going to do that right beforehand, Dad and I. Dean and Roger said they'd chip in too. Solidarity, you know." Graham glanced over at her before returning his eyes to the symbol of his House, high above them. "Did you ever wonder where we went so wrong?" he asked softly. "Slytherins, I mean. We're supposed to want to do great things with our lives. And this—" He waved a hand at the expanse of Sanctuary behind them. "This is a great thing. But a full three-quarters of my Housemates are too taken up with their stupid feuds and petty revenges to even suspect that it exists, and they couldn't be trusted with the knowledge anyway. And at least half of them would want to destroy it as soon as they knew what it was for. Since when is destruction greatness?"

"It's not." Maya slipped her arm around her cousin for a brief side-hug. "But I can see how they

could be fooled into thinking it is. Into believing that there's only one proper way to be great, and anything beyond or besides that isn't true, isn't right, and needs to be destroyed. As for where it started..." She sighed. "I suppose it was with Salazar Slytherin himself. But he wasn't always that way, Graham, he can't have been. He helped to build the castle, didn't he? And there have been plenty of good Slytherins since then. The sort who use their ambition, instead of letting it use them." She looked down—not nearly as far as she'd once had to look—and smiled at him. "Like you."

"Thanks." Graham leaned into her for a moment. "I just wish..." He shrugged. "I wish I knew something I could do. Something big enough, and important enough, that it would change everyone's minds about Slytherins. Even Slytherins. Something that would make us look at ourselves differently, and see what we really are, and what we could be if we tried."

A brief chill brushed down Maya's spine, making her shiver.

"Are you all right?" Graham asked.

"Fine, I'm fine." Maya rolled her shoulders, trying to dismiss the feeling. "An Augurey flew over my grave, that's all. Come on, I have to be out of sight before Lee gets back, and we should be getting dressed in any case..."

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Draco sipped from his cup of punch and listened with half an ear to a story with which Selena was regaling a mixed group of yearmates about an ongoing revenge chain of increasingly nastier pranks, apparently involving most of the older students in Slytherin House by now.

*I thought a lot of the Snakes weren't paying as much attention in class as they usually do. This might be why. Wonder what started it all off? Just that stupid thing from back in the fall about Pansy Parkinson's brother and that girl they hired to take care of their cars? He stifled a smile. Though "just" is hardly the word, when a precious pureblood wizard has run away with a tainted, poisonous Muggle! Well, good for him. I hope, wherever they are, they're making it work.*

Finishing his drink, he started back towards the buffet to get a refill, when a tableau in the corner of the dining hall caught his eye. Padfoot was almost knee-to-knee with a strong-featured woman Draco couldn't name, about his mothers' age but darker-skinned than Letha, dressed in Muggle clothes, her face set in determined lines and her hands moving in careful gestures as she explained something. As he watched, Padfoot pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it over, and the woman pressed it against the corners of her eyes.

*Do I know her? I don't think I know her...but I know someone who looks like her...*

Just then, the woman smiled, and Draco's half-recognition coalesced.

*Dean. She looks like Dean. Probably his mum, I know Lee invited all his Pridemates' families. But what would she be talking to Padfoot about, that would make her cry, and then smile, and—*

A sudden suspicion hit him. Glancing around the room until he spotted Hermione, he strolled casually in her direction, waiting a few steps back until she could finish her conversation with Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott, then beckoning her over when she looked his way. "Something wrong?" she asked when she was close enough to speak without being overheard.

"Not wrong. A bit weird, though. If I'm right." Draco pointed a shoulder in the direction of Padfoot and Mrs. Thomas. "Remember how I told Dean we might be related?"

"Yes?"

"Possibly we're a good bit closer than I thought we were."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 22: Turning Through the Years (Year 6)

"So Dean's not just a half-blood, he's actually our cousin," said Hermione to Harry as they watched Meghan and Natalie chattering excitedly at Dean himself, who was leaning against the wall looking somewhat stunned. "Isn't that amazing, that he has been all this time and we never knew it?"

"How could we?" Harry shaped a large rectangle with his hands. "The family tapestries usually don't show..."

"Informal children," said Hermione firmly. "And no, they don't, because they were designed to show lines of inheritance and alliances." She smiled slightly. "Rather like goblin clans, as Aunt Amy described them."

"True," Harry agreed. "But formal or not, the lineage spell came up positive. Dean's blood dad was Regulus Black."

"Which makes him Pearl's first cousin, and second for me and Fox." Hermione gazed into the distance for a moment. "I wonder how it happened. It wasn't anything bad, or Mrs. Thomas wouldn't have asked Padfoot about the resemblance she saw, not the way she did..."

Harry let his thoughts rove back in time, through the stories he'd heard, the pictures he'd seen, the bits and pieces his godfather occasionally let slip about his pureblood past. "Probably he was trying to prove to himself Padfoot was wrong about Muggles," he said, imagining a slender, dark-haired wizard in ill-fitting jeans and jumper, creeping out the back door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, torn between fear and excitement as he made his first venture into the uncharted territory of a world without magic. "And instead, he found out he was the one who was wrong, and had been the whole time."

"And he tried to push it away, forget about it, but it kept drawing him back." Hermione smiled a little. "*She* kept drawing him back. Suzanna Cullimore, as she was then. And the more he tried to tell himself she didn't matter, the more she really did."

"Until she turned up pregnant, and he realized he'd put both of them in terrible danger if any of the Death Eaters ever found out." Harry's mind painted Ginny and himself into a similar situation, and an echo of the bone-freezing terror Regulus must have felt shot through his limbs. "Or his mother, for that matter. After Padfoot ran off, and with the war heating up the way it was, she might have decided any heir was better than none, especially if she could get a chance to 'purify' the baby and raise it herself..."

Hermione shuddered. "So instead of letting that happen, he left her. Cut off ties with her, sent her money anonymously—probably as much as he thought he could get out of the family vault without his parents noticing, or he might have had a vault of his own he could tap—but never saw her again. Never knew if he had a son or a daughter, even."

"I'd have to check, but it's possible he died before Dean was born," Harry reminded her. "Depends on when that business with Kreacher and the locket happened. Speaking of which, and changing the subject completely, can you go ask Moony if we can stay here tonight and den? Ginny's working on her parents and Neville's mum, and you know Luna's dad."

"As long as he knows where she is, and that she'll be more or less all right, he wouldn't mind if she wanted to spend the night at the bottom of the lake." Hermione laughed. "What's going on? Anything bad?"

"Not exactly." Harry looked sidelong at her. "Are you up for a little Marauding with Fox next month?" Casually, he curved his fingers and brought his two hands together, signing a cage around empty air. "We got an answer we'd been waiting for."

"I see." Hermione nodded slowly. "I think we could handle that."

"Great." Harry bumped shoulders with her, then drifted off into the happy, slightly drunk atmosphere of Lee and Maya's wedding reception.

*Lee did a great job of getting everything together. And the ceremony was just right for the two of them. Short but not rushed, one or two of the pureblood touches because Maya did come from that tradition, and a fireworks display by Fred and George to celebrate their first kiss as husband and wife. Plus the exploding cake, but that was a dummy, they had the real one in the back still. Good thing, too, Lee looked about ready to blow them up...*

*Mostly, though, today was just a celebration of Lee and Maya making that promise to each other. "I'll be there for you, in the good times and the bad ones. I'll take care of you, no matter what happens to either of us."*

He smiled, snagging a fresh cup of non-alcoholic punch on his way out of the dining area, towards Sanctuary's main cave.

*I guess you could almost say the Pack's all married to each other. Except that would take it back towards what Cho thought about it, and that's just messed up. But we've made those same kinds of promises to each other. We changed them around a little, to mean a whole family instead of a couple, and then a group of friends for the Pride, but promises are where we began. And they've always been important to us...*

His mind swam backwards in time, to the immediate aftermath of the Triwizard Tournament's third task.

*"We'll get through this, Harry," Letha said, holding out her hand. Harry took it. "I won't make any promises I can't keep, like swearing that we'll all make it, but we will get through this. And we will win."*

*Harry smiled half-heartedly. "Promise?"*

*"That, I promise. We will win." Letha pressed his hand and released it.*

"And we will," Harry murmured aloud, blinking back to the present as a gleam of sunshine began to show ahead of him. "We just have to get rid of a few little things first."

*I killed the diary, and Dumbledore took care of the ring. We've got the locket, even if we can't get it open to kill it yet, and we'll have the cup in another month. He stepped out of the tunnel and squinted against the glare, shielding his eyes with a hand. Wonder if we could do something with the two of them to have them kill each other? Or maybe make one of them tell the other one to open up, if it only answers to Voldemort? Or—*

The hand which had been providing shade to his face was perfectly situated to smack himself on the forehead.

"Slytherin's locket, being used by the Heir of Slytherin," he muttered, stepping out of the direct sunlight. "Who'd already been into the Chamber of Secrets, and who'd want to make sure nobody else could open up his pretty toy to get at the prize inside it. What else would he use to seal it shut except the language only his family can speak?"

*One little problem with that. Harry grinned Wolfishly, thinking of snake-slides and stories in the Forest after dark. Not that we're going to tell him so. Except maybe right before the very end, if we're certain he can't get away...*

Nebulous, enjoyable thoughts of shock and horror chasing each other across Voldemort's parchment-colored face slipped away as Harry's eyes finally adjusted to the brighter light in Sanctuary's main area, revealing that he was not alone. Two people stood face to face across the cavern beneath the Slytherin-crested pillar, hands clasped at chest level between them, gazing into one another's eyes and talking in quiet, earnest tones.

One was Amanda Smythe. The other was Draco.

*Merlin's blood, what do they think they're doing? It'll destroy the year if Luna sees them now—I have to stop them—*

But before Harry could get more than three steps towards them, Draco leaned in, kissed Amanda's cheek once, and released her hands, turning away. His eyes, as he looked around Sanctuary with an expression of curiosity which struck Harry as odd for someone who'd helped build the place, almost seemed to be glowing—

*Wait a second.*

Harry reached up to the sidepiece of his glasses and brushed his finger along it. His color vision faded, replaced by a world traced out in black and silver. His hands, when he glanced down, glowed with the warmth of his life—the grass was radiant where the sun had been shining on it, gradually dulling beyond the edges of the active beams of light—



And both Draco and Amanda had an extra shimmer hanging about them, an aura which extended beyond the boundaries of their bodies.

*What in the world—*

Draco closed his eyes and bowed his head, exhaling a long breath. The nimbus surrounding him faded and shrank as he did so. By the time he looked up again, it was gone.

*All right. Even for us, this is getting weird.* Harry tapped his finger twice against his earpiece, returning his glasses to their usual task of correcting his vision, and started across the cavern once more, producing what he hoped was a normal-looking smile. "Afternoon, Amanda," he said when he was close enough to speak without shouting. "What did you think of the wedding?"

"Oh, it was lovely." Amanda glanced up at the Gryffindor crest, still glowing slightly, though the sun was now closer to illuminating her own House's blue and bronze instead. "I was just telling Draco how nice I thought it was that Sanctuary is close enough to finished that they could have it here—were you looking for him?"

"Yes, actually. Sorry to steal him."

"No, it's all right." Amanda curtsied gracefully to both of them. "I have somewhere else I need to be myself. Thank you for your time, Draco. I'll see both of you after holidays, I'm sure, to finish everything up here." She shook her head in wonder, gazing about her. "I never thought my little idea could turn into something so big."

Draco raised an eyebrow at Harry. *Her idea?* he mouthed.

*Hold on,* Harry signaled, watching Amanda walk away, headed back to the dining area. *Just let her get out of earshot...*

"Why? She knows it was her idea." Draco stepped in closer, looking narrowly at Harry. "Even if I didn't."

"You were still acting weird about her when we started this place," Harry defended himself.

"Then, by the time you got your head on straight, I forgot you didn't know. And while we're on the topic, what were you just doing out here?" He waved his hand towards the spot where he'd seen Draco and Amanda standing. "If it's going to mess with the year—"

"It isn't, and I wasn't finished with what *I* was saying." Draco's voice had gone very cold, into his most controlled tones. "On the subject of things you weren't bothering to tell me. When were you planning on letting me know what happened to me the day we found this place?"

*The day we—*

Harry swore under his breath as Draco's meaning hit home to him.

"I beg your pardon, shouldn't I be the one saying that?" Draco had his shoulders up, his eyes very

narrow. "After finding out you didn't consider it important to tell me that I was, however temporarily and benignly, damn well *possessed* the first time I walked in here?"

"I didn't—" Harry began angrily, then bit his tongue. Duty to Pride came before personal pride, and as much as he hated to admit it, in this case, Draco had the right of it.

"I'm sorry," he said instead. "You're right. We did ask Luna, and she said it wasn't anything to be worried about, but we still should have told you about it."

"Yes, you should," Draco agreed, but the tension was bleeding out of his shoulders. "I would have been a little more prepared in that case, when this voice popped into my head out of nowhere just a bit ago and asked if he could please borrow my body—*again* ."

Harry winced. "Oops."

"Oops, he says," remarked Draco to the pillar beside them. "The intelligent and incisive nature of the Chosen One who shall someday battle Lord Voldemort is beyond comprehension."

"Oh, piss off." Harry punched Draco in the shoulder. "Like you never 'forgot' to tell me anything. Let's see here, something about a vision?"

"Hey, if it was a vision of *your* grave, I would've told you about it," Draco shot back. "Seeing as it was *mine* , I didn't think you needed to know right off!"

"And you ended up sitting on it for nine months! Don't you think that's a little—" Harry stopped, frowning. "Are we really standing here and fighting about this?"

Draco glanced at the grass under their feet. "Would you prefer we be sitting down?"

"No thanks. Let's save that for den-night. Which, by the way, we're having tonight. Here."

"We are? Since when?"

"Since a few hours ago when Ginny and I went up to Dumbledore's office and heard a story."

"Ah, I see." Draco nodded. "And den is the only proper place for a really good story. What's yours about?"

"Treasures." Harry placed the tips of his fingers together again. "How they're guarded. And how they're not. You willing to try the impossible sometime next month?"

"Why not?" Draco's eyes lit momentarily with high glee. "Like father, like son. Fathers, plural, I should say."

Harry laughed, thinking of one of the most eagerly requested den-night stories when they'd both been young, that of a pair of canines out for a nighttime swim in a frigid ocean, the full moon beaming down from overhead. "What about yours?" he asked, starting towards the dining area,

Draco keeping pace with him. "Is it anything we should know about?"

"Maybe?" Draco shrugged. "I didn't catch much of it, to be honest with you. But I'll give you what I can."

"Sounds good."

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Once the Pride's den was underway, Neville lifted a hand in response to Ginny's call for stories. "Just a general warning," he said. "A couple of the girls from the artillery wanted me to know Romilda Vane's been seen hanging around with some of the nastier Slytherins."

"Vane?" Ron asked, frowning. "Oh, right, that girl you had to chuck out of the DA over that Love Potion deal. Who was she trying to get with that, anyway?"

"We caught her before she made it that far, so we really don't know," said Ginny. "But my guess would be either Draco or Harry. I can't fault her taste, but her methods..." She shuddered, hugging her arms tightly around herself.

"Did she really think she'd get away with it?" Hermione wondered. "As closely as we all stick together? One of us was bound to notice something wasn't right."

"Besides, forced love isn't really love at all," Meghan said with certainty. "It doesn't make you stronger or better or happier to have it, so it isn't real."

"Depends on how you define happiness, and reality." Draco tapped Meghan on the nose with half a biscuit, then yanked his hand back without his treat. "Brat."

Meghan grinned unrepentantly around her mouthful of crumbs.

"It's all to do with people and things," said Luna, tracing figure eights on the surface of her cocoa with a peppermint. "We know each other as people, so what makes us happy is to see each other happy. Romilda Vane doesn't really know Harry—and you were right, it was Harry," she added to Ginny. "But she doesn't know him any more than Cho Chang ever did. Less, really. Cho might have learned how to know him, she was starting to try, but she made a silly mistake because she thinks the wrong things about deep magic. And Romilda..."

Luna's hand stilled, and the peppermint slipped from her fingers to disappear into the depths of the cocoa. "What did she want, Miss Romilda Vane?" she murmured like a chant. "The envious glances, the glory and fame. She was caught at her game, and her catching brought shame. Now the new-wed nymph weeps in the month of her name..."

Harry felt a chill run down his spine. *New-wed has got to be Lee and Maya, and "nymph" has been Maya before, but what do they have to do with any of this? They're DA, yes, but they've got their own Pride, and they're nothing to do with us other than our being friendly and both part of the year. What would Romilda Vane be trying that would make Maya cry?*

"We'll warn them tomorrow there might be trouble coming," Ginny murmured into his ear, making him jump slightly. "Lee and Maya, that is."

"Here's hoping there's something they can do," Harry returned, then cleared his throat, bringing everyone's attention to him. "So I suppose you're wondering why I've called you all here tonight..."

Kunora's story was fairly simple to retell, though Harry set aside one or two of the pickier details for deeper discussion with Draco and Hermione later. Neville nearly sprayed crumbs across the Den when Ginny revealed her guess as to the identity of the vault they'd be plundering, and spent a great deal of the next several minutes exchanging sidelong, gleeful grins with Meghan. Clearly he was in favor of anything which would have unpleasant repercussions for the Lestranges.

"But that doesn't really make sense," Draco objected once the story had been told over in its entirety and the Pride was working its way back through the fine points. "Neenie and I are blood-bonded, yes, but it can't be the same kind of blood-bond the goblins have. Theirs is sure to have all sorts of little bits and pieces ours doesn't—hell, for all we know, *our* bond has a trapdoor clause in it somewhere! It could go off tomorrow and we'd never know until it happened!"

"Don't you think the Pack-parents would have checked it over for anything like that before letting us keep it, Fox?" Hermione held out her hand, palm down, regarding her skin and the fine scattering of brown hair along her wrist. "And I don't think Malfoy was planning that far ahead, not when he bonded us. He thought he would be able to keep hold of us long enough to do anything else he wanted, so the only flourish he put on the actual bond was the freezing of our appearances, because anything else would have interfered with your being able to 'take back your rightful magic'." She sneered the last few words with a scornful expression worthy of the man himself.

"This is true." Draco wove his fingers through a runic pattern in the air. "He'd have wanted that channel as open between us as possible, because he wasn't planning on letting the bond go on very long..." He trailed off, still sketching invisible signs. "Though some bonds go on a lot longer than intended," he said quietly. "Like Salazar Slytherin's curse on his younger son."

Luna tilted her head curiously, but her posture showed no signs of worry or fear, and the Warriors, taking their cues from their Seer, redispersed themselves to listen.

"He'd thought, Salazar had, that his curse would kill off the line of his unworthy child within a few generations." Apparently tiring of his unseen doodling, Draco drew his wand and began to draw in lines of flame instead. Harry discreetly twitched a finger of his own, stipulating that the fire remain under control. Every so often, Draco lost his concentration on his magic when he was doing something else, like telling a story, at the same time. "But Alexander and his wife, and their surviving child and her husband, were more clever than he had reckoned with, and passed along instructions and talismans to ensure the survival of their blood. So the line, even cursed as it was, continued naturally into the days of the first King James. Not a bad run, considering."

"Loyalty," Hermione murmured under her breath, watching the runes as they flowed from the tip

of her twin's wand. "Memory. Sorrow. Dedication..."

"But even there, the story of the younger line of Slytherin and the magical House of Beauvoi doesn't end." Draco twirled his wand three times, and the lines of the runes spun together, forming a line drawing Harry recognized. The life-size stone carving of the serpent's daughter lay in state atop her stone sarcophagus, exactly as he'd seen it the first day he and his Pridemates had discovered Sanctuary. "For one soul was torn by grief and guilt, and found an anchor in this world until such wrongs should be righted. And another soul knew what the first soul had done, and refused to leave such a beloved one here alone."

Harry sucked in a breath. *Torn by grief—found an anchor—*

"A Horcrux," Ginny said softly. "An accidental Horcrux, the sort that isn't evil. And someone who chose to stay behind as a revenant, until the person with the Horcrux healed their soul."

"But..." Meghan looked reluctant to speak up, which was unusual for her. "Salazar's curse on Alex killed people," she said when several heads turned in her direction. "That means it can't *be* fixed, because you can't transfer a fatal curse. Doesn't it?"

"You cannot transfer such a curse, no." Luna reached out her hand to the fiery drawing, making Harry glad he'd already safeguarded it. "Not as other curses may be transferred. But all curses can be changed. And for a fatal curse, that is done by *turning* it. Sending it back to its caster, in all the power with which it was originally laid." The golden firelight caught the blue tint of her eyes, making them appear momentarily as green as Harry's own. "When the way to so turn a curse was discovered, that was the most joyful day these two souls had ever known."

"What is it?" Neville asked quietly. "How is it done?"

"I...don't know." Luna blinked. "How very strange. I was sure I knew, and now, suddenly, I don't."

"The secret lies within your name," Draco murmured. "It lies within my name. And if you can find the truth in the names, you will help to bring about our name, the name we bore together." He shook himself slightly and vanished his lines of fire. "That's what he said, down in Sanctuary. The person who was borrowing my body, who called me 'little cousin' when he asked me for permission. And he was talking to the person he's been waiting for all this time. The person who made that accidental Horcrux. The serpent's daughter, who is not evil."

"Alex's daughter. Amanda." Ginny frowned. "Wait, doesn't that mean 'love'? From the Latin?"

"Yes, it does—" Hermione drew a sharp breath. "And so does Dafydd! It's the Welsh form of David, and that's from the Bible, from Hebrew, but it means the same thing, 'beloved one'! And the name they shared, Beauvoi, that comes from French, it means 'see the beauty' or 'see the good'..."

"So the secret and the truth in the names is love, and it can let us see beauty and goodness." Absently, Harry ran his fingers along his forehead. "Which is nice and all, but doesn't really tell us

how to turn a fatal curse."

"Maybe Amanda knows," Meghan suggested. "We probably don't have to, not unless she asks us for help."

Ron coughed diffidently. "All right, I know this is going to sound terrible," he said when most of the Pride turned to look at him. "But didn't their bloodline die out a few hundred years ago, Dafydd and Amanda's, I mean? Even if Amanda Smythe is something to do with Alex's daughter, friendly possession or what have you, her body's not the same. She's a Muggleborn, no Slytherin blood at all. The curse wouldn't be able to hurt her. Does it really matter what happens to it?"

"It might." Neville was sitting very still, but his eyes were bright. "Salazar Slytherin cast the curse, but he's dead now. So who would it be turned back to, if it were turned? Who do you give anything back to, if the person who gave it to you is dead?"

"To their heirs," said Hermione. "The ones who deserve it, anyway—"

An instant later, everyone was trying to talk at once.

---

"Told you so," said one of the inhabitants of the picture frame in the green bedroom to the other, smugly. "Pay up."

"No fair," Alex grumbled, reaching into his pocket. "You cheat."

Slender fingers accepted the gold coin and flicked it nimbly into the air before catching and pocketing it. "And still, you married me."

"Mostly to piss off my dad."

One red eyebrow arched. "Mostly?"

"Somewhat to piss off my dad," Alex qualified. "Mostly because I wanted to. And you wanted me to." He sighed, listening to the jubilant cacophony from the main room. "Going to be a rough few months for them, isn't it?"

"They'll survive it." Sorrow shadowed hazel eyes for a moment. "Most of them."

"Yeah." Alex slid an arm around his wife and held her gently against his side. "I know."

---

"So, Uncle Sirius." Aletha laughed as Sirius made a face in her direction. "I know, I know, it sounds odd. But you're going to have to face it sooner or later."

"I'm not having trouble facing it." Sirius glared at Aletha's raised eyebrow. "I'm not! It's just..."

"Strange to think that one of the students you taught, this boy who's been sleeping in the same room as our two for going on six years now, was your brother's son all along and you never knew it?" At Sirius's grudging nod, Aletha went on. "It is strange. But we know it now, and we can do what's right. Whatever that might be."

"Which is what's got me." Sirius shook his head, less in negation than in bafflement. "What is right in this case? I don't want to go dragging Dean into some big inheritance issue, that'd be stupid all around, but he deserves something from..." He waved his hand aimlessly in the air, conveying the sense of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, the various vaults at Gringotts which belonged to the Black family, and the rest of the possessions accumulated by a pureblood house and line over several centuries of inheritance. "All of this."

"Has he asked?" Aletha said delicately. "Because the feeling I get from him is that he's rather overwhelmed by all of this. That he'd be just as happy if it went away. It's not that he objects to knowing his father's identity, but I think he's worried about what people may now expect from him. People like us. Like you."

"Like me?" Sirius snorted. "Not likely. That's what I ran away from, thank you very much! I'm not about to shove some poor kid back into..." He stopped. "Except I am, aren't I? Talking about what he deserves, what he ought to have. What *I* think he ought to have, never bothering to consult him. I should be asking what *he* wants, or if he even wants anything. For all I know, he wants this to go away. How can I even be sure he wanted to know in the first place?"

"Maybe he didn't, but his mother did, and she deserved that knowledge." Aletha laid her hand atop her husband's, smiling when he looked up at her. "And I don't think Dean will take it quite as badly as all that. But I also doubt he'll want any kind of significant inheritance. He strikes me, from what Harry and Draco say about him, as a very self-reliant young man, the sort who'd want to make his own way in the world no matter whose son he was. Now, if there were some way that we could give him something which would make his mother's life easier, help the rest of his family, that I think he might accept." She sighed. "The only question is..."

"How do we do that without offending him just as badly, or making it look like we don't trust him?" Sirius finished for her. "How do we even do it at all? I mean, not to be rude, but she's a Muggle. Most of what we've got, she couldn't use. And anything she could, Dean can get her himself—"

"I know that look," said Aletha when several seconds had passed without Sirius completing his sentence. "You've thought of something."

"Haven't I just." Sirius grinned broadly. "And the best part is, for a change, it's going to make absolutely everyone happy. As long as we can pull it off, that is..."

---

*Since when did I get elected the one who talks to house-elves? Harry sat back on his heels, regarding the door behind which Kreacher denned. I know, I know, Kreacher doesn't consider me family because I'm not closely related to the Blacks—one of these days, we really have to look up*

*what kind of cousin my dad was to them, he has to have been something, all the purebloods are—but I'm also not a Muggleborn or, strictly speaking, a blood traitor, because you have to start out as a pureblood to be one.*

*The only other member of Pack or Pride who shakes out like that is Moony, and he's got his own problems. He hid a snicker. Like the furry little one Danger helps him with every month...*

All of which was a very long way to say that out of all the people who had some right to call number twelve, Grimmauld Place, their home, he, Harry Potter, was the most likely to be able to talk sensibly to Kreacher, and to receive sensible answers.

*Not to mention, I've got something up my sleeve that even Padfoot doesn't know about. I'm glad I thought to check it with Dumbledore before we left Hogwarts yesterday.*

But to use his special bargaining chip, he would have to get Kreacher to the table. And that required beginning.

Pressing his hand against his pendants for strength, he leaned forward and knocked on the door.

"Coming, yes, Kreacher is coming," came the mumbled response, and the door swung open, revealing the wrinkled, scowling house-elf in his tattered tea towel kilt. "Harry Potter," he said, narrowing his eyes in Harry's direction. "What does the godson of Kreacher's master want with Kreacher today?"

"I want to tell you about a boy I know," Harry said, being careful to keep his voice even. "One of my Housemates, at Hogwarts. His name's Dean, Dean Thomas, and he always thought he was a Muggleborn. His mum and stepfather are Muggles, and so are his sisters. With me so far?"

Kreacher nodded slowly, his eyes searching Harry's face as though he were waiting for the catch to the story.

*Smart of him. Here it comes.* "Only the other day, Dean found out he's not a Muggleborn after all. His father, his birth father, was a wizard. A pureblood wizard."

Harry paused, counting silently. He'd reached six when Kreacher sucked air between his teeth. "No," the old house-elf breathed. "No. Kreacher's Master Regulus would not—he did not—"

"He probably didn't mean to, but he did." Harry settled himself more comfortably on the floor. "And whether he meant to or not, Dean's his son. Blood to the Blacks. Regulus wanted you to protect the family, didn't he?"

"Protect the true family!" Kreacher hissed. "The proper family! Not—not—" His mouth worked venomously, as though his prohibitions against saying certain words aloud only caused him to think them more rudely than ever. Still, hidden under the floods of horror and disbelief in his scent, Harry was catching a whiff of interest.

"You'd have a fresh start, with Dean," he remarked when Kreacher had subsided into half-audible



muttering. "If you cleaned up a little, and learned to keep from insulting the rest of his family, I think he'd like you."

"Kreacher does not want to keep from insulting Muggles," grumbled Kreacher, but half-heartedly. "Kreacher's mistress always said—"

"Kreacher's mistress is dead now," Harry interrupted, suddenly very tired of this. "That's if you mean Mrs. Black, Walburga, and I think you do. Letha and Meghan are your mistresses now, and Tonks would be after that. And none of them are any more than half-blood."

Kreacher yowled, clapping his hands over his pointed ears. "Why must Harry Potter torment Kreacher so? Why must Harry Potter tell Kreacher such awful things—"

"Because they're true," Harry snapped back, "and hiding under the water tank and denying them won't make them go away! You can stay under there if you like, but it's not going to change anything. The world's different than it used to be, Kreacher, and you can either waste your time moaning over that or you can learn to live with it, come out of there, and do what your Master Regulus ordered you to do. Protect his family, take care of them. *All* his family, even the ones he never got to see."

"But..." Kreacher was wavering visibly, teetering back and forth on his feet. "But Kreacher failed his Master Regulus, Kreacher did not destroy the locket which took Master Regulus's life, Kreacher is a bad house-elf and does not deserve to meet his Master Regulus's son..."

Harry grinned to himself. *Got him.* "What if you got the chance to do that?" he suggested. "Destroy the locket, I mean. We're pretty sure we know how to get it open now."

He was treated to a wide-eyed, incredulous house-elf stare. "To...to destroy..." Kreacher faltered, his breath coming faster. Harry had to fight to keep from wincing at the multitude of rancid odors now reaching his nose. "Harry Potter knows how this can be done?"

"I think so. Not entirely positive, but it's worth having a go." Harry met Kreacher's eyes levelly. "And I thought you deserved first refusal on killing it if we do manage. Once that's done..." He shrugged, carefully casual. "Dean's kind of curious about his father. Padfoot knows a few stories, but you'd know more. And he and his family might be in a lot of danger if Voldemort ever gets to the Ministry. Dean's a strong fighter, but he'd have a hard time protecting all of them by himself. Doesn't mean he wouldn't try, though. They're his family. But he could well get killed trying, if he didn't have any help."

"Master Regulus's son, killed." Kreacher was rocking back and forth again, shaking his head in time with his body's movements. "Killed protecting the family...killed like his father...but no, not like his father, for Kreacher could help his Master's son, where Kreacher was ordered not to help his Master..."

Sliding one hand behind his back, Harry shot a thumbs-up in the direction of the door, where he knew Ginny was watching. The word would, he was sure, be passed back quickly along the Pride

relay. Operation Creature Comfort looked like it was going to be a success.

*Now if I'm just right about how to get the damned locket open!*

---

"I didn't think I'd miss him, but I might," Meghan said to Neville as they sat together in the music room, Meghan picking out a melody on the piano, Neville strumming chords on his guitar to fit. "Not the way you'd miss Tapper, if he went away. Tapper likes you, he likes your family. Kreacher's never liked me. But it'll still be strange not to have him here, if he ends up going to live with Dean's family."

"That's assuming this works," said Neville absently. "I know it looks like it will, but nothing's certain yet." He tightened one of his tuning pegs slightly. "And speaking of Tapper, did I tell you he's got a girlfriend?"

"No, you didn't!" Meghan bounced in place. "Neville, that's wonderful! Who is it?"

"Her name's Brilly. She works at the Pepper Pot." Neville looked up at Meghan. "Technically, she's a free elf, but if you asked her, she'd tell you she's just waiting for her little Master Theo to finish at Hogwarts..."

Then he had to catch Meghan's shoulder, to keep her from falling off the piano bench with laughter.

"We're...we're going to be..." she choked out when she could get her breath. "We're going to be *house-elf in-laws* with Nott!"

At this way of putting it, Neville had to laugh as well.

*Because if we forget how to enjoy something funny when it comes along, what are we even fighting for?*

*Not that I'll mind helping to kill the cup once Draco and Hermione steal it, or the snake or the brooch, once we find them. Or fighting Death Eaters if they try to get into Hogwarts. Or even figuring out how to help Amanda Smythe turn that curse back onto Voldemort, if she'll let us.*

*But that's business. This is pleasure.*

"Do you think we should ask them to name their first elflets after us?" he suggested with a smile, setting Meghan off again.

*There's room in life for both of them.*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 23: Plans and Possibilities (Year 6)

Ginny sighed, shutting her Transfiguration textbook with a bang. "I give up," she said. "How does anybody remember all these rules, *and* all their exceptions? Unless they've got a perfect memory like you," she added to Hermione, who was perched in her usual spot up the Hogwarts Den's reading tree, her own book nestled into the holder the trunk had obligingly sprouted. "Maybe I should just change forms in front of the examiners. That should get me a pass, don't you think?"

"What it would get you is arrested." Hermione turned her page. "Or maybe not you, you're still underage, but Moony and Padfoot and Letha, for teaching you."

"That's only if they found out who taught me." Ginny flopped down on one of the ottomans and sighed. "Don't mind me, I'm just brain-blasted from too much studying. I need to do something else for a while, clean my mind out, and then I can get back to it." She glanced up. "What are you reading?"

"One of the Horcrux books." Drawing her wand, Hermione Summoned the bag of pretzels she'd left on a lower branch and took a handful, then shook it in Ginny's direction. Ginny drew her own wand and Summoned it in her turn. "Looking for an answer to something that puzzled me."

"Like what?" Bag in hand, Ginny clambered up a branch or two on the reading tree and settled herself into a spot where she could see Hermione clearly.

"Like how accidental Horcruxes are even possible, if it takes so many spells, and such awful ones, to make the more usual sort." Hermione shuddered. "If there were ever things I wish I *didn't* remember clearly..."

"You're not joking." Ginny nibbled the salt off the curve of one of her pretzels. "Have you found anything?"

"I think so. It's to do with the ways the souls are torn, and what that means about the people who've torn them."

Ginny held up her free hand, halting Hermione. "Let me see if I can get it?" she requested, and went on at Hermione's nod. "A usual Horcrux, like Voldemort's, is made with a soul-bit torn off by murder. Which is one of the cruelest things you can do to another person, or to yourself. So that soul-bit would be..." She frowned, searching for the word. "Repellent. Pushing everything away, because of how it was made. Which means it wouldn't want to be bound to whatever's going to serve as the Horcrux, and that's why all the nasty spells are needed."

Hermione laughed. "That's it exactly! And here you were just complaining about not being able to remember things..."

"Rote memorization." Ginny held out one hand. "Figuring things out, piecing them together like a

mystery." The other hand, with the bag of pretzels resting on its palm. "I like one a lot better than the other. So then an accidental Horcrux would be possible because the soul-bit involved there was torn off with guilt and grief over a death. It *wants* to go home, but it can't, not until the person whose soul is torn can forgive herself. Or himself."

"And a lot of people find that very hard." Hermione nodded. "So instead it sticks itself to whatever is in that person's mind a lot, whatever that person is thinking about and obsessing over. Or, if they haven't got anything like that, it tags along with them until either they do have something, or they forgive themselves and heal, or..."

"Or they die," Ginny finished. "With their souls still hurt, still torn apart. Would they be able to go on like that, do you think? Or do you have to be healed to make that journey?"

"I don't know." Hermione shut her book. "And quite honestly, I hope I don't have to find out. Not on a personal level." Her face darkened. "Though if there were ever a death I was going to blame myself for..." She sighed. "No. I can't think like that. Not and be at my best for what we're doing in a few weeks."

"I'm jealous," said Ginny frankly. "I wish I could go with you. It's never been done, you know, not successfully—you hear about the unsuccessful ones and how far they got in History of Magic, or at least you do since Professor Jones took over, Professor Binns never did anything nearly that interesting—"

"No, it was all about goblin rebellions of this or that or the other year." Swinging her leg over her branch, Hermione started to climb down, the tree politely lowering her book-holder to keep pace with her. "Which, now that we know how goblins think about their work, don't seem as stupid as they used to. I'd like to think we'd rebel pretty regularly ourselves if there were people holding bits of our ancestors' souls prisoner."

"Something to work on, once we're the authorities," Ginny said lightly. "Or we have some pull with them. Which, the way Percy's working his way through the Ministry, might be any day now." She giggled. "They're looking for the Red Shepherds almost as hard as they are for the Death Eaters, did you know? Because they're 'dangerous vigilantes' who're 'wantonly destroying property'?"

"I'd heard a little about it." Hermione stepped down onto the floor, collected her book, and started for the door, Ginny behind her. "And as funny as it is, it's also worrying."

"I know." Ginny shook her head, her good mood dissipating. "Because if they're this confused about who their enemies are now, what's going to happen when Voldemort gets a few people, either secret Death Eaters or Imperiused officials, into the upper levels himself?"

"An attack." Setting her book on the stack of similar ones on a small shelf near the library door, Hermione tapped her wand twice against it. The shelf spun around three times and vanished, to stay hidden until the next time a member of the Pride should call for it. "One the Ministry will claim was beaten off, though at great loss of life. Tragically including the Minister himself. But

we must go on, we must reorganize, and since we're clearly at war, a Minister must be chosen immediately, no time for that silly thing called democracy..."

"And the new Minister will be whoever Voldemort's got highest up." Ginny scowled. "Because the attack won't have been beaten off at all, it'll have succeeded, but nobody's supposed to know that. It's just supposed to look like a harmless transfer of power. Except everything will suddenly start changing—well, sometimes it does when you get in a new Minister, he wants to fix everything he thought was wrong with the last one or two or three..."

"Only this time it won't be fixing." Hermione bared her teeth as her cat-form might. "This time it will be tearing down, destroying, ruining. And using good people to do it, people who think they're just doing their jobs, answering to lawful authority, business as usual."

"I wish I could say Ministry officials wouldn't be that stupid." Ginny arched her back. "But I've known too many Ministry officials. Though we do have a secret weapon or two. We have Dad, and we have Percy. People know Dad, they respect him, and they're coming to know and respect Percy. So if they both say there's a problem at the Ministry..."

Hermione looked over her shoulder at Ginny. "Have you been listening in on the Order meetings?" she asked suspiciously.

"Why would you think that?" Ginny batted her eyelashes innocently. Hermione made a rude noise, and both girls went into a gale of giggles.

"Actually, I haven't been," said Ginny when they both had their breath back. "What are they thinking about?"

"Setting up an underground Ministry if, or maybe I should say when, the real one falls." Hermione tightened her hands around one another. "Small, compact, but staffed with people we know we can trust. Possibly even run out of Sanctuary, or somewhere else that can be safeguarded. And they're thinking..." She glanced upwards, as though looking through the floors of the castle to the object on her mind. "They're thinking they'll try and reactivate the enchantment on Gryffindor's sword, the one that made it the Silver Sword. The Sword of Decision, which chooses the best possible leader for the wizarding world in moments of crisis."

Ginny stopped where she was. "That," she said after several seconds, "is either the worst or the best idea I've ever heard."

"What does it depend on?" Hermione inquired, starting for the red bedroom.

"Whether or not it works."

"True." Opening the door, Hermione glanced back. "But then, you could say that about everything we're doing."

"This is a little more all-encompassing, though." Ginny followed her friend into the bedroom. "If

it fails, we lose our credibility completely, people will go back to the puppet Ministry or set up to fight on their own or leave the country altogether—"

"But if it succeeds, we'll have a leader nobody can question," finished Hermione. "One who'll bring some of the undecided people in on our side, and worry the ones who're sticking with the puppet Ministry because they think it's proper. So isn't it worth the gamble?"

"Not my decision." Ginny blew out her breath, climbing up on the bed. "And am I horrible to be glad it's not?"

"No. You have enough to think about, with O.W.L.s and the first of May both coming up."

"Don't remind me!" Clutching her hair, Ginny groaned theatrically. "I still haven't finished working on my robes, I *know* I'm going to fail the Potions practical, and then there's the music to choose, and all my studying for Care of Magical Creatures yet, and the personal bit of the vows to write, and if I don't choke on the Transfiguration written it'll be a miracle—at least I should be all right on Herbology, and Neville's handling the flowers for us, and I'm sure I'll pass Charms, and Maya said she'd spearhead the reception since we did hers—" She broke off and looked down at Hermione. "Remind me why we're doing this again?"

"So we can win the war sooner and Draco can stand as Harry's best man?"

"I knew there was a reason." Ginny stretched her arms behind her, then jumped, once, twice. "Thank you, Godric," she said on the third jump, and shot upwards into the ceiling, which opened to receive her and closed again behind her.

"I'd almost say I'm going to miss the war when it's over," Hermione murmured to herself, the back corner of her mind tracing Ginny's journey upward through the slide towards the common room. "But I'm not, not really. I'm going to miss the feeling of working together to bring about something terribly important, and the strength, the camaraderie, that gives us. I'm not going to miss the killing and the dying and the pain. Not a bit."

Her hand rested briefly on her dagger, sheathed, as always, at her side, and her mind provided a vivid memory of how it had felt, how it had looked and sounded and smelled, to use its blade to kill a person, another human being.

*Because Fenrir Greyback may not have thought of himself as human, but he still was one.*

It was nothing she ever wanted to repeat. Occasionally, it still woke her in the night, though she'd learned to tame the nightmares enough that she only woke sweating and weeping, not howling or screaming. The werewolf curse she'd taken on that night, too, still had its moments when it took control of her, when it made her snap angrily at an innocuous remark or bristle up at one of her brothers' pranks that would usually have made her laugh, but the love and care of her Pack and Pride had eased it to a point where it was a nasty little nuisance, nothing more.

*Maybe someday, that's all lycanthropy will be. An unpleasant nuisance, an annoying condition,*

*but bearable. Treatable. Not the end of the road, just an unexpected detour.*

Climbing onto the bed herself, she jumped three times, speaking the password at the top of her third jump.

*Like it has been for Moony. For Maya. For Brian.*

*I wonder how he and Corona are doing, out on the road?*

---

Corona Gamp regarded the small potion vial nestled in the palm of her hand. Such a small thing, and yet it would have such a large impact on her life, on Brian's, on, she hoped, the werewolves they went out to contact.

The potion, once conceived of, had proved to be surprisingly easy to brew. It required only a day and a night of simmering, with no incredibly expensive or rare ingredients, and although it boiled down to quite a small amount in the final rendering, this even smaller amount would be sufficient to disguise her scent for the next two months. Aletha and her twins had come up with four doses after their original brewing, and had sent along two, with full enough instructions on the process that Corona was sure either she or Brian could manage.

The other two doses, she knew, had returned with Professor Black to Hogwarts. There, one of them would be available to the N.E.W.T. class for sampling as they attempted to discover the potion's purpose, while the other would serve as a visual aid for what it should look like when they finished reproducing it on their own. With a chuckle, Corona wondered how many of them would succeed. Her own recollections of seventh year Potions were neither pleasant nor productive.

*But then, I was studying under Severus Snape. He makes no secret of his refusal to suffer fools gladly. Perhaps he would do well teaching only advanced classes, where a challenge is what the students most need, with Aletha to guide the younger children through the worries and fears of beginning anything new...*

And while she was standing here woolgathering, Corona reminded herself, she was not drinking this potion which would make it possible for her to share in Brian's work as he already shared in hers. Removing the top from the vial, she swallowed its contents in one gulp.

A brief blast of cold shot through her body, followed by one of heat. She shivered and rubbed her free hand along her arm, settling the fine hairs back into place. *Strange, but not impossibly unpleasant. If there are no worse side effects than that, I would call this venture entirely successful—*

She blinked. She was sitting at the rickety desk in the small bedroom she'd claimed in this particular Order safe house, a quill in her hand, dripping ink onto the desk surface. When she tried to rise, her head spun, forcing her back into the chair.

*Perhaps I spoke too soon.* She pulled out a small scroll of parchment and noted down the reaction,



breathing deeply as she did so, and slowly the lightheadedness passed off. *Still, as long as that does not recur, I believe I can deal with it.*

Tucking the scroll into the drawer she used for completed reports, Corona got to her feet again, pleased that this time the room stayed in its proper orientation. She would go downstairs and tell Brian about what had happened—

*Only I see no reason to worry him by telling him about my little...episode. He will be glad to know that the potion does not harm me, he will be able to tell me if it works, and if so, we will have dinner to celebrate. Why should I encroach upon that with my own silly weaknesses?*

By the time she reached the top of the stairs, she had successfully put the moment out of her mind herself.

"Brian!" she called out, beginning to descend. "Good news!"

Outside, an owl flapped its way through the darkening sky, a letter in its talons.

---

**Are you sure you should be seen at Gringotts the day the Lestrangle vault is burgled?** Neenie asked worriedly through Harry's pendant chain as Harry, with the twins beside him under a strong Disillusionment, walked unhurriedly up Diagon Alley towards the towering marble building in the fading light of early evening. **Voldemort's not stupid, you know.**

**No, he's not, but what's he going to do about it? Decide he hates me more than he already does?** Harry shrugged. **He wants me, the Pack, the Pride, and everyone else I know either dead or enslaved to him forever. I don't think we can go too much beyond that.**

**And we're already here, so it's a moot point anyway.** Harry couldn't clearly see Draco, but a fresh whiff of Neenie's cat-scent made him sure his brother had rubbed his fingers against her furred jaw where she lay around his shoulders, mimicking the motion the cubs had used so many years ago to create the scent-touch. **Besides, how's Voldemort going to connect Harry to the Lestrangle vault? Harry's going down to his own vault and back up again, he'll be with one of the goblins the whole time, and then he's going to sit out at Florian Fortescue's eating ice cream and reading a book until we catch him up. The worst thing he could personally be accused of is sneaking out of school, and he's not even missing any classes.**

**Only because I said I wouldn't go if we did!** Neenie sighed mentally. **I still don't know how you two talked me into doing this, on a Wednesday no less ...**

**Possibly because we're not sure if it will work without both halves of the blood-bond present,** Draco suggested. **Since as we've already covered, it's not exactly the same type of bond the Gringotts goblins have.**

**It must be close enough to pass, or Kunora wouldn't have brought it up,** Harry interjected. **But the more careful we can be, the better. This is most likely the only try we'll get at this.**

**Though if you run into anything you can't handle down there, you two...**

**Abort, head for the exit, and we'll try again next month, Draco recited. Covered that already, haven't had a chance to forget about it quite yet. Though I'm trying.**

A soft smack and a muffled curse made Harry grin. The twins were in fine form today.

*Which usually bodes ill for anyone or anything which tries to get in their way.*

*That cup's as good as ours.*

*I hope.*

---

**You know, it's even possible that they'll never find out,** said Hermione mentally, sitting behind Draco on Harry's Firebolt with her arms around his waist. They'd flown out of the cart, Hermione still in cat form, before Harry and his guiding goblin had rounded their second bend, and getting back to the start of the cart-tracks, then following Kunora's directions from that point, had been simple. Once they'd left the area where carts were plentiful, Hermione had changed back to human, and Draco had removed the Disillusionments so they could see one another clearly. **The Lestranges, I mean, and Voldemort. If we get in and out cleanly, and finish the war fairly soon, before any of them have a reason to come here...**

**True enough, and yet another reason to get this right. As if we didn't have plenty already.** Draco pulled the broom to a halt as they rounded a corner and saw a waterfall ahead of them. **That's that Thief's Downfall thing, right? Washes away disguises, derails carts, and so on and so forth? Might even take the enchantment off the broomstick if we aren't careful?**

Hermione rotated her right hand, bringing her wand into it. **It might. But that's only if it ever gets a chance to touch us.**

Three neat wand-waves and one murmured "*Scindere aquae*" produced a broomstick-sized hole in the curtain of water, through which Draco shot the Firebolt without delay. **Great Merlin, but this thing moves,** he said affectionately, patting the side of the shaft as they continued along the tunnel. **Wish I'd had one. Not that my old Nimbus is all that shabby—they're still selling the 2001s, did you know? One of the best resale values on the market.** He cast a laughing glance over his shoulder. **And I could be speaking in Farsi right now for all you're listening to me.**

**I'm sorry, did you say something?** Hermione inquired loftily, winning a true laugh from her twin. **Go slow, now. I smell predator.**

Draco sniffed the air twice. **I smell it too. But recently fed predator, just like Kunora said. Still, no reason to take chances. Start looking for a place to set down, you think?**

**What about over there?** Hermione pointed. A small ledge jutted out from the wall near the corner around which the cart-track ran, leading to the corridor from which the scent of a large,

reptilian, meat-eating creature was wafting. **We may have to take it one at a time, but that shouldn't be too hard.**

**True enough** . Draco edged the Firebolt into position beside the ledge, and Hermione dismounted, leaning into the wall to maintain her balance and being careful to look only at Draco's half-frightened, half-worried face or the opposite wall of the tunnel rather than into the vast depths below her. She wasn't afraid of heights, exactly...

*No, just afraid of falling from them. Or rather, of hitting the ground afterwards!*

Still, she was down now, and Draco had set the broomstick to hover and was swinging his leg up to balance standing on the spot where shaft and twigs met. "Call it," he said softly, flexing his knees.

"On three." Hermione braced herself and brought her hands up to catching position. "One, two, three—"

The Firebolt floated untenanted before her, and her arms were full of Snow Fox. He chittered momentarily at her, then laid his muzzle against her collarbone. **Well, that worked.**

"Don't jinx it now." Hermione crouched to set him on the ledge beside her. "On three again, I go cat, you human. One, two, three—"

The world did its familiar growing-and-warping act around her, and then she stood on feline paws, watching the human Draco reach out to snag the Firebolt, work a Shrinking Charm on it, and tuck it into his pocket. A moment later, Fox dropped his jaw at her in a vulpine smile. **You ready for this?** he asked, pressing his paw against hers.

**As ready as I ever will be.** Neenie nipped the tip of his ear lightly. **Go ahead, I'm right behind you.**

Fox nodded and slipped past her, around the corner. Neenie took one deep breath to settle herself, then followed.

The dragon raised its scarred head, snuffling curiously, as the new scents entering its domain made themselves known. *We don't taste good*, Neenie thought in its direction, trotting quickly behind Fox towards the door of the vault. *We don't taste good, and we're too small in any case. You don't want to bother with us, we're neither threat nor food, just leave us alone...*

With a windy, brimstone-smelling sigh, the dragon lowered its head once more and was still.

*So far so good.*

Neenie leapt up to the low step of the vault and looked at Fox. He raised his left paw, she raised her right, and together they laid them against the wooden door. This, Neenie knew, was the make-or-break moment—if their twin-bond were too dissimilar to that which the Gringotts goblins used to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world, a dragon might be the least of their worries—

She almost fell forward as the door quietly evaporated.

Fox goggled, open-mouthed, an expression at which Neenie had to stifle a laugh. It was so unlike her level-headed twin to allow himself to be surprised by anything.

**Were you not expecting it to work?** she asked, nuzzling the side of his face, then leaping past him into the few square feet of clear space on the floor of the immense, crowded vault.

An exasperated snort was her only audible answer as Fox joined her inside. **I don't know what I was expecting,** he said, tilting his head to watch the door reconstitute behind them. **But I guess this is the way it was supposed to go. Human again?**

**Human again.** Neenie re-transformed, being careful to keep clear of the piles of gold and jewels all around her. "Like the Cave of Wonders," she said, drawing her wand. "Only it's not a lamp we're after, it's a cup. Do you see it anywhere?"

"No—wait, I lied, yes." Draco pointed. "Over there, top shelf, next to the helmet with the emeralds."

"Right." Hermione fixed the spot in her mind, then looked around for an item on which to run the diagnostic spell Moony had taught her. "Not exactly hurting for money, are they?" she said absently, noting the immense piles of gold Galleons, the precious stones which studded the bits of sculpture and the gleaming weapons, the intricately wrought chains and coronets which covered the shelves lining the walls and had spilled out onto most of the floor as well.

"I think they'll be able to pay the bills for a while yet," agreed Draco. "Looking for something like this?" He tapped one of his feet on the floor, where Hermione could now see a single Galleon had slid clear of its pile and sat on a flagstone by itself.

"Yes, I am. Step back." The incantation for the diagnostic spell had amused everyone intensely, being only two syllables different from something they'd all had good occasion to use. "*Specto patrona!*"

"I still say that sounds weird," Draco muttered as tiny, runic symbols floated upward from the surface of the Galleon.

"Don't knock it, it works," said Hermione absently, going to one knee to study the symbols. "All right, this isn't so bad, we can handle this. It looks like the standard Gringotts mix for part of it, nothing can be Summoned or Banished anywhere within the vaults, but here's the spell of duplication we'd heard about. The Gemino Curse. Laid on strong, too."

"That's the one that makes worthless copies of everything we touch, from everywhere we touch it, until we get crushed to death?" Draco was standing very still. "I've heard of swimming in gold, but that would be ridiculous."

"True enough, but we should be able to take it off again. It has a fairly simple counterspell, at least

if you only want to unspell one or two objects. If you wanted to do more than that, unless you were the person who cast the spell in the first place..." Hermione shrugged. "I suppose it's like Letha with the Body-Bind. Except this spell has it built in, where she just does that one very well."

"How's that work?" Draco asked curiously. "I mean, only if you know, but it's you. You'd have looked it up, or asked Moony about it, or something."

"Personal resonance, the book called it." Hermione sat back on her heels. "It's strongest in a place like this, closed in, self-contained, and belonging to the person who's casting the spell—assuming one of the Lestranges did it, I can't imagine they'd let anyone else into their precious vault—but it's also the sort of spell that gets stronger the more things you put under it. Imagine a roomful of tuning forks, or bells, all tuned to the same pitch. Now imagine you strike one. Won't they all start humming?"

"They will. And if you had a spell which relied on having only one, or two, of them vibrating..." Draco shook his head. "You might manage it, but any more than that and you'd have them all sounding off. So we may be able to pry that particular curse off one or two testers, but we'd better not try for any more than that if we want to get it off the cup when it's time. What about that other one?"

"The Flagrate Curse?" Hermione smiled. "Oh, it's active. But I don't think we really need to worry about it. Not given who we came here with."

"I never thought having a brother who handles fire on a daily basis would be so useful." Draco hunkered down beside his twin. "All right, so it sounds like the Gemino is the only thing we really need to worry about. Think you can handle it?"

"Just don't distract me."

Draco mimed zipping his lips and rose to his feet again with his usual grace, strolling a few steps away and settling down in a comfortable stand to gaze around the vault.

*How strange to think of what might have been.* Hermione seated herself on the flagstones tailor-fashion, letting her mind ramble. She would do a better job of removing the charm if she got all her extraneous thoughts out of the way now. *If there'd never been a Pack, if Draco had stayed a Malfoy, he might have come here with his dear Auntie Bella instead of with me, to pick out a reward for being such a good little Junior Death Eater...*

But things were the way they were, and the task in front of her still remained to be done.

Narrowing her focus until nothing remained in her world but herself and the single Galleon she was attempting to disenchant, Hermione bent over her work.

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Draco clasped his hands behind his back and swept his gaze slowly along one of the overstuffed shelves of the Lestrangle family vault. He'd already spotted ten items, at least, that were so

thoroughly ornamented as to tip into his personal definition of tacky, and he was barely getting warmed up.

*A great many of my relations had far too little taste and much too much bloody money. Whatever else you may say about the Malfoys, at least their vault doesn't look like a rat's nest!*

Of course, the Malfoy vault no longer looked like anything except an empty stone room.

*I signed the order to transfer the gold over to Moony's vault myself, back before my third year. Stopped Lucius from getting away with more than one enormous withdrawal, and probably limited him in what damage he did. Though he still managed to do a good bit.*

A shiver ran through Draco, as he had accepted it always would, at the thought of the cursed glass globe and what it had almost done to him.

*And it isn't even the final spell that I'm thinking of. Though that was bad enough, while it lasted!*

*No, what wakes me up in the middle of the night is what came before that. The part I fought when I saw Luna, that triggered off that final spell. If she hadn't come in just then, if I'd still been scared and angry enough to accept what it was saying—or if it had been just a little stronger, if Lucius had been casting it himself, say, instead of having to embed it in the globe the way he did—*

It was a truism of the Pack that part of real courage was knowing and facing what terrified one the most. Since that particular incident late in his third year, Draco had seldom had to think very hard.

*I could have lost myself. Everything I love, everything I want, everything I fight for and stand for could have been wiped out in that one moment. My body would still be living, my soul might even still be here—though isn't "soul" just another word for "self"?*

*Whether it is or not, though, the person who would have come out of that encounter with the globe...well, he would have looked like me, he might even have sounded like me, but he wouldn't have been me. I would've been...I don't know, erased, maybe. Or pushed out of the way, if I was lucky, to make room for him.*

He supposed, in the final analysis, that was part of the reason he'd been able to come to terms with Luna's vision. Death, as terrifying as it might be, was not truly destruction but simply change. He would be separated from those he loved, yes, but only temporarily. Soon or late, he would see them all again.

*But what Lucius wanted to do to me is different. He wanted to take away everything I am and replace it with everything he wants me to be. And I don't know, if he got the chance to try it again now, how long I could fight him.*

A tiny smile whisked across his lips. *He'd better hurry up if he still wants to give it a go, he's only got a bit over a month left...*

"Got it!" Hermione's voice rang exultantly around the vault. "Come and see!"

Draco hurried to his twin's side. She planted her finger firmly on the Galleon, which, true to her word, remained a single Galleon and did not shower copies in all directions. "Excellent," he said, laying his own finger on it and feeling a rush of heat but no sensation of burning. Harry's anti-fire precautions on both of them were obviously working. "Now, can you do it at a distance?"

"I'd better be able to." Choking up on her wand, Hermione performed several slow-motion run-throughs of the movement she wanted, a combination thrust and twist. "All right, here goes. Stand by me?"

"As always." Draco helped Hermione to her feet and took up a position on her left, so as not to impede her wand arm. "Magic's here if you need it," he told her, closing his left hand around hers and supporting her back with his right arm. "Whenever you're ready."

"*Finitum geminitum*," Hermione murmured, her eyes half-closed, her wand loose in her hand. "*Finitum geminitum*."

Abruptly she came to attention, snapped her wand up into casting position, and twisted and thrust with it simultaneously, aiming it squarely at the cup of Helga Hufflepuff, sitting on its far shelf. "*Finitum geminitum!*"

Draco felt a small tug on his own magic as a yellow beam of light streaked through the air and impacted the cup dead center. It trembled once, then was still.

"That's what the Galleon did too," said Hermione, lowering her wand. "I have to believe that means I did it right."

"Well, if we're still going with our original plan, you're going to be the one to find out." Draco drew his own wand. "And now that we're in here, it's looking more and more like a good idea. I don't have anywhere near the dexterity I'd need to climb along those shelves without touching things along the way."

"If you're trying to flatter me, it's working." Hermione tried for a smile, but her lips were trembling. "Merlin's beard, Draco, what are we even doing here?"

"Winning the war, last time I checked." Draco squeezed her hand. "Come on, Neenie, don't fold up on me now. We're warriors, remember? We fight evil?"

"I thought we had to grow up first." Hermione looked down at herself, then across at Draco, and laughed shakily. "Though I suppose we have. All right, let me transform, then you can do the spell on my paws and I'll go. The sooner we finish, the better."

"Truer words were never spoken." Going to one knee, Draco held out his left hand, and Neenie the cat delicately laid each of her paws in it in turn, to be enchanted with a particular charm which would help her grip slippery surfaces. When all four had been so treated, she nipped gently at Draco's thumb by way of thanks, then turned and leapt nimbly onto one of the cornerposts of the nearest shelf, climbing it as easily as she might a tree.

Draco watched his sister's careful progress, his heart in his mouth, his wand ready to cast a Shield Charm around her if she slipped, but Neenie's steps, though slow, were steady. Eighty-eight seconds after she had left his side (he saw no shame in admitting he'd been counting under his breath), she closed her teeth carefully around one of the handles of Hufflepuff's cup, and one hundred and twelve seconds after that (extra time was needed to avoid hitting anything with her prize on the return trip), she made her final leap into Draco's arms, exploding into her human shape almost before she'd made contact.

"We did it," she gasped, catching the cup in her hand as it started to fall. "Draco, oh, Draco, we did it—I did it—"

"I know you did. I saw you." Draco hoped his beaming smile, the tight clutch of his hands on her shoulders, could say what his foolish, meaningless words could not. "You were perfect, Neenie. Absolutely perfect."

*And I'll have to remember to ask her, or Harry, if there isn't some Arithmancy thing you can do with triangles and circles, when you have two of a thing that are enchanted alike and you want to find a third...*

He stored the thought carefully away, to be examined further once they were safely back at school. "Let's go," he said, scooping up the disenchanting Galleon and pocketing it. "Spoils of war," he explained at Hermione's quizzical look. "Once Harry or Moony gets the fire charm off it, there'll be nothing to say it isn't just any old Galleon. But I'll know where it came from, and so will you."

"And it will make us happy to think about it, every single time." Hermione tucked the cup carefully inside her robes, into the special pocket she'd sewn there for that precise purpose. "So out of here as Fox and Neenie to pass the dragon, around the corner and you'll turn human and enlarge the broom, I'll climb up and away we'll go?"

"Sounds like a plan. And possibly we can even stop for ice creams when we pick up Harry. I'm starving."

"Just like a boy, thinking with your stomach," Hermione mock-scolded, swatting his ear lightly. "We'll be back at Hogwarts soon enough, and the house-elves will be happy to bring you whatever you want."

"Not as soon as all that. We're taking the Red Roads back through Fred and George's two shops, remember, since we didn't think it would be a good idea to take even one of Voldemort's Horcruxes into Sanctuary? So we'll still have to get *out* of their Hogsmeade location, get *into* one of the secret passages, and walk *all the way* back along it to the castle..." Draco purposely loaded his tone with whining complaint, and won a laugh from Hermione.

Their mission, if he did say so himself, had been a resounding success.

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Harry leaned forward into the rush of wind that always surrounded riders on the Red Roads,



timing his steps carefully to match the pace at which the magic worked. As he pressed his hand against the solid lump under his robes which was the cup Horcrux, no longer hot since he'd deactivated the Flagrante Curse on both that and Draco's Galleon, he couldn't stop himself from grinning. They'd done it, they'd done what had been considered impossible throughout the whole of wizarding history—they'd stolen from the goblins and were getting away with it—

*Of course, the goblins helped. But that was just because they didn't like what Voldemort did to their things any more than we do!*

Though the wind was against him to pick up scents from his siblings, he could hear them behind him on the Road, Draco making some sort of comment, Hermione laughing aloud in answer, and contentment filled his heart. He'd taken another huge step towards defeating the evil wizard who wanted him dead, and tomorrow he would take another.

*Two more, if you count the year, but we did all the work on that already, this will just make it official. No, I'm thinking more about the Astronomy Tower at sunrise, and the most beautiful witch in the world...*

Before he could get too lost in such thoughts, a glowing archway appeared ahead of him, and the speed of the Road's movement under his feet began to slow. Harry followed its lead, letting it guide him like an air current in a Quidditch match, until he was stepping out of the wall in the dilapidated storage room of Fred and George's Hogsmeade branch (opened, with great ceremony, on their nineteenth birthday at the beginning of the month). Draco followed him, looking around as soon as he was clear of the red-painted boards. "Bit of a mess back here, isn't it?" he remarked.

"They've been busy with their Red Shepherd work," said Hermione as she emerged in her turn, "but they made sure the building was sound before they bought it. They'll get around to cleaning back here eventually—*what was that?* "

The last three words emerged in a breathless whisper, from flat on the floor, for which Harry couldn't blame his sister. He and Draco had also dropped to the ground at the sound of an angry shout and a distinctive hissing whistle from outside the shop.

"It sounded like—" Draco began, in the tone of someone hoping to be proven wrong, but was cut off by another, louder shout, followed closely by an explosion.

"It was," said Harry grimly. "Dueling spells. *Battle* spells. It's an attack, it's got to be."

"But on Hogsmeade? Tonight? Why?" Hermione looked baffled. "I don't—no, I do," she corrected herself mid-sentence, her face clearing as she sat up. "I know exactly why. It's for the same reason we started the year on May Day, the reason we're going to end it then. It's a day of good magic, light magic, driving back the darkness—"

"And the thirtieth of April is the exact opposite," Draco finished. "Walpurgis Night. When evil comes out to play." He glanced over at Harry. "And if evil finds us here, with *that*— "

"We're all dead," finished Harry in his turn, pulling the cup out of his robes, grateful beyond words that the storage room had no windows. "All right, anyone got a brilliant idea?"

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 24: The Battle of Hogsmeade (Year 6)

George knelt in the front entrance of Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop, sweeping his eyes back and forth across the street in front of it. Behind him he could hear the whispers of the half-dozen little witches who'd been enjoying an evening tea party to celebrate the birthday of one of the group when the explosions and screams had started in the street outside. He, Fred, and the girls had stopped only to engage the security charms on their own shop before spreading out to find businesses and homes less well-guarded.

*Voldemort's mad if he thinks this is going to get him and his Death Eaters any kind of popular support...but then, that might not be what he's after any longer, might never have been, not if he thinks he can take the Ministry. Which, if Percy's right, he may be awfully close to doing, and then what happens to the Muggleborns? More than that, what happens to the straight-up Muggles who live in our world, or who know about it? And what about the ones who don't know anything?*

The question hit home in a way it never had before, thanks to the person snuggled into a small alcove on the opposite wall from the one George was leaning against, occasionally peering with one eye around the corner, her potion piece ready in her hand.

*Crystal can defend herself, probably all the better because they won't expect it. Her parents can do the same. George had to stop himself from laughing aloud. Given what her dad's got in his back shed, he could've done that even if we'd never come along! But that's only if he could see the attack coming, and that's another place we can help, giving out things like Sneakoscopes, tuned to only go off if there's Dark magic in the vicinity...*

But only those Muggles who had magical friends or relations could be trusted with such things, or even to know that they existed, and the Death Eaters had an entire country from which to choose their targets. The Red Shepherds could take out any stronghold or warehouse that they could find, stop any attack about which they knew in advance, but the information which leaked out of Death Eater camps was frustratingly spotty and inconsistent, and Percy steadfastly refused to allow any missions on targets the Shepherds had not personally confirmed as being used by their enemies.

*Which is smart, as much as it burns me to sit and wait. George tracked his wand towards the sound of shouting near the end of the street. All it would take is one miss on our part for the Ministry to put some teeth in those accusations of "wild vigilantes" they like to throw our way, and there's our credibility blasted to bits. We can only help people if they're not trying to kill us.*

The source of the shouting rounded the corner—five robed forms, all but shapeless in the thick twilight over Hogsmeade, spells shooting thick and fast from wands, bouncing off shields and blocks, shattering glass and pockmarking wood as they ricocheted.

"Light," George breathed towards Crystal. "Get ready." Raising his wand, he aimed it at a point above the center of the street. "*Lumos libera!*"

The resulting silver ball of light lit up the scene beautifully. The three Death Eaters currently battling Roger Davies and Selena Moon yelled and shaded their eyes. Roger dived to the ground and fired a spell along the way, knocking one of his opponents to the ground, encased in rope. Selena's and Crystal's sprays of yellow potion overlapped, soaking the other two and dropping them to the street before they could articulate the spells they'd been starting to cast.

Tapping his hand to the butt of his potion piece, activating his antidote patch to be sure he wouldn't go down with the potion fumes himself, George checked both ways before ducking out of cover. "All right?" he asked, crossing to Roger and Selena at a trot.

"Good enough." Roger winced as he accepted George's hand up. "One of them got me a little, but it's under control." He pressed a hand to his upper arm, where a few spots of blood were growing on his sleeve. "Or it will be, in a moment," he added, wincing again as Selena briskly ripped the sleeve open and snapped her piece over to a white healing-potion cartridge. "You?"

"Holding the fort." George nodded to Madam Puddifoot's, where Crystal still stood in the doorway, scanning back and forth along the street. "Getting bits and pieces of news on the Galleon." He shook his head, baffled, as he swirled his wand around the Death Eaters, adding his own ropes to Roger's and stacking the resulting cocoons out of the way along a wall. "What are they hoping to accomplish here? What are they even after?"

"Power," said Selena briefly, holstering her piece and drawing her wand to conjure a bandage around Roger's arm. "The power of fear, of letting everyone know they can attack anywhere, anytime they please. That there's nothing we can do to predict them, to hold them back, to stop them." She grinned, her teeth very white in the silvery light from above. "Except we can, and we are." A bit of dust was brushed fastidiously from her embroidered Slytherin crest. "All of us."

"Power to the DA," George agreed, slapping hands with both of them. "Everyone's out here who's of age?"

"Plus possibly a few who aren't," said Roger. "Though I think they managed to get your sister to stay at the school this time. Something about not wanting Harry to come back and find her dead." He frowned. "Where's he gone? Aren't they getting—"

Crystal hissed, jerking her potion piece towards the end of the street, and Roger nodded. "Not the time," he said, drawing his wand again, Selena taking a moment to swap cartridges in her own piece before re-arming it with a quick jerk of her hands. "Catch you afterwards?"

"Party at our place." George nodded in the approximate direction of the Hogsmeade WWW branch, then sprinted back to Madam Puddifoot's, snapping his wand at the light to put it out once he was back in cover. "Thanks for the reminder," he murmured to Crystal.

"Somebody has to take care of you," she returned, tweaking a bit of his hair.

They returned to their watch of the street.

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Percy dodged right, threw a Shield Charm around Fred and Danielle, and ducked as a spell passed over his head close enough to singe his hair. He'd come through the Vanishing Cabinet from his rooms over the Pepper Pot as soon as Fred's hastily cast fox Patronus had panted out its message, stopping only long enough to fire off a few messenger-Patronuses of his own to the rest of the Red Shepherds, and rousing the Gryffindor leaders of the DA in the same manner on his way through Sanctuary.

*Not that the other Houses are any less, but the vast majority of the Gryffindors are DA themselves by now, and they know how to summon their own from the other dormitories without arousing too much suspicion.*

Since then, his memories were sketchy, but he rather thought he'd downed at least two Death Eaters with his own wand, not counting the ones he'd distracted or pulled out of hiding for his brothers and colleagues to take on. He'd never thought of himself as terribly capable with dueling spells, but fighting for both his own life and those he held dearer than his own seemed to have sparked unknown abilities in him.

*I couldn't save Penny that day at Diagon Alley. He dodged another spell and fired back, a yelp of pain letting him know he'd scored a hit. But I can fight in her name today, and every other day of this war. Two spells in quick succession, one flashy and low-powered, designed to do nothing but splash harmlessly off a shield, the other invisible, silent, and—*

"Awwwkkk!" complained the Death Eater who'd just become an oversized chicken.

Fred laughed aloud. "Percy, you're joking!" he shouted, setting the chicken's feathers momentarily aflame. It screeched and fled up the street, lighting its two compatriots' robes on fire as it passed. "I haven't seen you joke since—"

"Not now!" Danielle doused both burning, screaming Death Eaters with a blast of water so powerful that they sailed backwards and crashed into the building on the other side of the street, sliding down the wall to lie in a stunned heap. "Save it for afterwards!"

"Right, sorry." Fred saluted off-sidedly with his wand, twisted it briefly at the Death Eaters to conjure ropes around them, then jerked his head around at a fresh burst of yelling and spellfire. "Let's go!" He and Danielle took off running, Percy pausing for a moment before turning the corner to make sure they wouldn't be followed. The three Death Eaters they'd been battling were down or fled, that was true, but he thought he'd seen—

A spell crashed into the wall beside him, the shockwave knocking him down. He clutched desperately at his wand and managed to retain it, but his shoulder hit the pavement hard, half-winding him, and stars danced in front of his eyes. Fighting for consciousness, he managed to regain his hold on it just as a red spell struck him in the chest, driving what little breath he had out of him and sending his wand flying from his hand.

Two robed and masked figures, both hulking but one shorter than the other, stepped from the shadows around the side of the building by which Percy lay and advanced on him slowly. "Look

what we found all by itself," snickered the taller of the two, bringing his wand down to bear so deliberately as to be an insult in itself. "A spotty little red-haired rat!"

"We'd bring you home to play with, but you're a nasty beast," the shorter added, glancing up and down the darkened street as though to make sure no help was within call. "Look what you did to poor Antonin, and he was only trying to have a bit of fun."

Percy's instincts shrieked for him to scabble backwards, get some distance, anything to hold off death for one more instant, but the battle training the Red Shepherds had received overrode this, forcing him to lie still and work to get his breath back—there was still a chance, depending on how stupidly confident these two were—

"So we'll just have to finish it here." The taller Death Eater continued his advance, his wand now lining up with Percy's chest from a distance of about half a yard. "*Avada—*"

His recitation of the Killing Curse broke off in a panicked yelp as Percy swept his feet around, knocking his would-be murderer to the ground. A follow-on kick sent the Death Eater's wand spinning away, and Percy rolled twice, dodging a spell by the man's compatriot, feeling frantically for his own wand—

A red spell shot out of the darkness from across the street, slamming the still-standing Death Eater into the corner of the wall with a sound like a melon being dropped onto a kitchen floor. Percy fumbled his own wand back into his hand, started to bring it around, but it was too late, the fallen Death Eater was already up to his knees with his companion's dropped wand coming to bear, he'd never manage to block in time—

From another direction entirely came a flash of green, accompanied by a sound like a roaring wind. The kneeling Death Eater shuddered once and collapsed like a puppet with cut wires.

Percy sat in the center of the street, clutching his wand, trying to get his breath under control. One thought pulsed in his mind, in time with the frenetic drumbeat of his heart.

*Who do I owe my life to this time?*

"Percy!" The whispered shout was terrified—and familiar. Percy wrenched his head around towards the direction from which the Stunner had come in time to see—

"Ron?" He was on his feet without any memory of getting up, stumbling towards his younger brother, only to be met halfway there. "Ron, what are you *doing* here—"

"I'm of age," Ron shot back, looking straight into Percy's face—they were the same height now, Percy realized, and wondered dimly when that had happened. "Have been for nearly two months. And I saved *you*, didn't I—"

His voice cracked on the last word, and Percy cursed under his breath and hauled his brother into a hug. "We have to stop meeting like this," he said in as close an approximation of his usual dry

tones as he could manage, and felt Ron's shoulders quiver in what was probably a laugh. "But... thank you."

"Don't mention it." Ron shuddered once, all over, then pulled away. "I was aiming for the second one when you—" He stopped. "No, that wasn't you, was it? Wrong direction."

Percy shook his head. "I never got a spell off," he said. "So it was you, and someone else."

"Wonder who." Ron looked past Percy at the two downed Death Eaters. "I didn't think we had anyone on our side who—" He stiffened and breathed a word or two which made Percy just as happy their mother wasn't there. "But I didn't," he said almost plaintively, looking back at Percy. "It was just a Stunner I threw, you saw it—"

"What are you talking about?" Percy brought his wand around towards the Death Eaters, preparing to bind them.

"Don't bother." Ron's voice was flat, with a biting edge on it Percy identified after a moment's search through his memories. He'd heard it most often in his own voice, in the weeks during late summer and early autumn when even founding the Red Shepherds while maintaining his Ministry job hadn't been exhausting enough to keep away the nightly replay of Penny's death, of Ron's injuries, of his own failure to save them both.

*But what does he think he's done—*

Then the stillness of the Death Eaters, exactly similar, sank in.

"You did throw a Stunner," he said, kneeling to check for pulses but finding, as he'd expected, nothing, first on one thickly-muscled neck, then on the other. "But his head cracked the wall on the way down. You never intended that, did you?"

"No." Ron stood uncertainly in the street, looking at his wand, then at the Death Eater. "But that didn't stop it happening."

"No," Percy agreed. "It didn't."

Some part of him ached for his brother's lost innocence, the childlike belief that only the things one intended would ever happen. He swept that aside without compunction. Innocence, as he'd learned to his cost, was what got people killed in a war.

"I didn't think it would be like this." Ron weighed his wand in his hand, rolling it back and forth from palm to fingertips. "I didn't think..." He laughed once, without humor. "That's just it, isn't it? I didn't think. I never do."

"You fought," Percy corrected, standing up again. "You fought, and that means I'm alive. We both are." He squinted into the darkness, in the direction from which the Killing Curse had come. "But I wish I knew..."



Movement in the shadows of the alleyway brought both Weasleys' wands up for a heartbeat before Ron lowered his with a half-voiced oath. "Just an animal," he said, shaking his head. "Something small, a rabbit or a squirrel maybe..."

For one instant, as "something small" lingered at the edge of the light, Percy thought he saw a gleam of silver. Then it turned and scuttled away, breaking Percy's momentary trance.

"We should keep moving," he said, stepping away from the two dead Death Eaters. "They're not finished yet."

"They will be soon." Ron's voice held a new note of cold, sure promise.

"So they will." Percy traded one cool smile with his younger brother. Then they started down the street side by side, wands sweeping around and behind them, keeping constant watch for flares or shouts of battle.

Clearly, despite all the efforts of the Order and the Red Shepherds to the contrary, the Death Eaters still thought they could attack when and as they pleased, dealing out doom and destruction without any meaningful resistance from the people they targeted.

It was high time, in Percy's opinion, for them to fully learn the error of their ways.

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"Nothing brilliant coming to mind," said Hermione distractedly, looking around the room as though trying to place it, though as far as Harry knew she hadn't been back here before. "We've got a little time, though, I don't think they'll try to break in here right away. We *could* just sit it out..."

"Not with that along." Draco's eyes were half-shut, but his finger pointed unerringly at the cup in Harry's hand. "We already know Horcruxes can possess people. I don't want to find out too late they can also tell their maker they're being stolen if they're not under some kind of shield. But I don't think we should kill it right away, either. Not if we can help it."

"Why not?" Harry drew his dagger, looking consideringly from blade to Horcrux. "We've got the basilisk venom, and then we can Vanish the cup itself, or bury it in the junk in here, nobody would know what it was even if they did find it..."

"You two are the Arithmancers, so correct me if I'm wrong here." Draco was sitting against one of the inside walls, head tipped back and palms planted on the floor, in what might appear to anyone else to be a pose of relaxation but Harry knew as Fox in full-out think-fast mode. "But isn't there some way of finding things under certain enchantments, hidden things, if you have at least two of them? Some pulse spell, that you set it off at the same time from two locations, then track the bounce-backs you get on a map with circles—"

"Oh, oh!" Hermione's face lit up. "Harry, fourth year! When we went on that treasure hunt, that the Muggle Studies class set up for us because they were studying *Treasure Island*, and Hagrid lent us nifflers to do the digging once we had the spots pinpointed! Remember?"

"Vaguely. Most of that year's buried under the Tournament for me." But Harry could recall, now that Hermione had given him the pointers, dividing into teams with his classmates, checking their watches against each other to be sure they set off the spells at the same moment, doing the calculations to convert the time it had taken the spell to bounce back into the distance they should draw on the map as a circle around their location, finding the spots the two charted circles intersected and translating that into the corresponding places in the real world... "What about it?"

"We've got that." Draco indicated the cup once more. "And we've still got the locket, because Padfoot said he didn't want Kreacher getting a reward unless he could go a full week without insulting anybody, and he hasn't made it yet. Couldn't you use them that way, to find the other Horcruxes?"

"You know, I think we could." Harry considered that long-ago class assignment. "Brush up on that spell again, then take them to spots a certain distance apart, say fifty or a hundred miles, so we'll know which bounces are from them and which are from the ones we don't have yet. Synchronize with the Zippos to be sure we're doing it at the same time..."

"We'll get a lot more results than we did from the assignment, though," said Hermione doubtfully. "There's two Horcruxes out there still, the snake and the brooch, plus Voldemort himself, the spell would probably respond to him—if they're all in different places, that could be nearly twenty results we'd have to look through—"

"Still better than not having the first idea where to look," said Harry. "All right, it gets to live." He cast an unfriendly glance at the cup in his hand. "For now. But that still leaves us with the original problem. Getting out of here. The Red Roads need time to reset once they've been used in a certain direction at a certain spot, don't they?"

"Almost fifteen minutes." Hermione looked balefully at the red-painted boards. "It's one of the problems with the spell being so new, is Percy hasn't had time to work all the bugs out of it. Anybody could still come *in* on that Road. We just can't go *out*, not until the spell's recharged enough to let us change the way it's pointed." She switched her look to Harry. "I don't suppose you'd consider Apparating out of here. We know you're capable, and Fred and George won't have put any spells against it on this room..."

"But the Death Eaters will have, if they're smart." Harry circled a hand. "A general suppresser over this whole area. Stop people from getting away from them, or reinforcements from getting in easily."

"Are you honestly supposing Death Eaters are intelligent?" Draco inquired, still in his thinking pose. "Isn't that a contradiction in terms?"

"Some of them are," Harry shot back. "Maybe not many, but some. And I don't want to find out I was wrong about which ones are here tonight by splinching myself all over Scotland, thank you very much!"

"For heaven's sake don't start fighting right now," said Hermione irritably before Draco could

answer. "Just don't, all right?" She paused, biting her lip, looking somehow younger than she was. "Don't," she repeated in a half-voice. "Don't..."

"Which ones are here tonight." Draco opened his eyes, and Harry frowned. There was a bleak, bitter edge in his brother's expression he didn't like at all. "That's what it's all down to, isn't it? Who's here, and who's not. And what that means for us. For you."

Slowly, he drew his pendants out of his robes by the chain, then set them on his open palm. "I can get you out," he said, looking at Harry and Hermione over the small pile of gold. "It's the oldest trick in the book. A diversion. Pull their attention one way, set off a few explosions and make sure they see who did it. Keep as many of them as possible looking at me. The famous face, the kid who got away from them. And meanwhile, you two Disillusion, go Animagus, and haul arse over to the Shrieking Shack, or Honeydukes, or even that one fountain that lets out behind the mirror on the fourth floor. They won't know that's cleared, not unless someone from the year's broken their oath, and we'd have felt that, wouldn't we? Known about it?"

"Most likely," Harry said slowly. "But then how do you get away?"

"That's the beauty of it." Draco smiled, sharper than splinters of broken glass, and closed his fingers around his pendants. Blue light flashed, then settled into a steady, pulsing flicker. "I don't."

"*What?*" Harry hauled his voice back from a shout just in time, overlapping with Hermione's horrified "Draco, *no!*"

"It's your best chance." Draco spoke in a slow, measured tone, watching the light shine between his fingers. "They won't expect it, because we've never done anything like it before. We've always worked as a team, unless they did something to pull one of us out on our own, and even then we scrambled to get them help right away. So they'll think you're somewhere nearby, ready to back me up. They'll never believe I'd be willing to do this, because usually I wouldn't. But tonight isn't usual. It can't be. Tonight we have something at stake we literally can't afford to lose. And by the time they realize that, and how it changes the rules, you'll already be safe."

"And you won't be!" Hermione shook her head frantically, her eyes welling up. "No, don't do it, Fox, there has to be some other way—"

Harry held up his free hand, and almost to his surprise Hermione bit back her next word, though her face was still filled with pain. "You're sure about this," he said to Draco, obliquely proud of how steady his voice remained, despite the silent howls Wolf was voicing in the back of his mind.

"Positive." The blue light flickered once more and went out, and Draco tucked his pendants back inside his robes. "Thanks for the jewel," he said to Hermione, trying to keep his tone light. "I had it pull some of the memories out of my head. The ones that could be used against us. Things they don't know we know." His smile flashed and was gone. "Which means *I* don't know them anymore either. But I do know we've been awesome." He held out his hands to Hermione. "Because aren't we always?"

"Oh—" Hermione flung herself at her twin and latched on tightly, as though she could keep him safe if she just held him close enough to her heart. "Why do you have to be *right*?" she whispered brokenly. "I could *hate* you for that."

Draco said nothing aloud, but Harry could see his hand on Hermione's arm and knew they were probably speaking silently, exchanging the goodbyes they'd thought they would have another month and more to say.

*Nothing ever happens quite like you think it will in a war...*

He shoved the cup back inside his robes just in time as Draco lifted his head to meet Harry's eyes over the wild tangle of Hermione's hair. "Sorry about tomorrow," Draco said lightly. He could have been apologizing for having to miss a Quidditch practice, if not for his scent, mingled sorrow, fear, and resolution. "Here you went and hurried it up for me, and now I won't be there after all."

Harry shrugged. "Still makes a good way to...wind things up," he said, self-censoring about the year at the last second. "We'll miss you."

"You would've been missing me in a little over a month anyway. And..." Draco leaned down to Hermione, laying gentle fingers on her cheek until she lifted her face from his robes, tear-stained but determined. "This is what the vision was for," he told her, speaking with such quiet earnestness that Harry couldn't help but nod in agreement as he caught what his brother meant. "This is why it was sent to us. So I wouldn't be afraid to go, to do this. Because whatever happens to me, it won't last. It can't. But this..." He drew one of their conjoined hands to rest against his pendants, hidden under his robes, and turned to include Harry in the statement. "This lasts for always. As long as we stay faithful."

"Keeping faith by breaking faith." Hermione wiped the tears from her cheeks even as more spilled from her eyes to replace them. "Why does everything in our lives have to be so backwards?"

"I could tell you." Harry joined the twins in their little circle, taking each of their free hands in his own, feeling the wetness on Hermione's fingers, the tension under Draco's skin. "But then you'd hurt me."

"Not everything's about you, Potter," Draco drawled in his best imitation pureblood tone.

Hermione giggled, Harry snickered, and for one instant the fear was gone. They were the elder cubs of the Pack, strong enough together to handle anything the world could throw at them. This battle, like all the ones before it, would pass, and they would go home, hug their Pack-parents and their baby sister, laugh with their Pridemates in their Den...

*Only we won't. Not the way we used to.*

*Not ever again.*

Draco squeezed both their hands once, then gently withdrew his. "I'd better go," he said. "Give me a chance to pull them in before you start, all right?"

"What about your pendants?" Hermione drew one last shuddering breath, then steadied herself, changing visibly from a grieving sister into a hard-eyed Warrior. "Shouldn't you leave them behind, if they have your memories in them?"

"They can't be taken forcibly—" Draco began, looking reluctant.

"But they can be given," said Harry, feeling his own transformation settle over him as he willed it, not unlike the mental sensations that accompanied his Animagus change. "Think about the way you were when that globe had hold of you. You'd have handed them over in a second if Malfoy had told you to. And what he did once, he can do again."

"Hadn't thought of that." Draco winced. "Gold star for you. But..." He paused, a hand against his chest. "That's a complicated spell," he said slowly. "He won't want to start it in the middle of a battle, not with all the concentration it's bound to take. And he's not going to want me unconscious for it, either. Not when he's finally got me back after all these years. He'll need me awake, aware, knowing what's coming next, if it's going to satisfy him." He smiled one-sidedly. "And wouldn't it help you out to see what Voldemort and his favorite Death Munchers are planning on doing with their latest prize?"

"Thinking in corkscrews again, Fox?" Harry asked.

"Just following the logic. Such as it is." Draco ran a finger along his pendant chain. "Remember, they already know we wear these, and that they're magical. They might get suspicious if they capture me and I don't have mine. But once they've got me, once they're sure I'm secure, wandless, under anti-transformation, probably even tied up..." His voice quivered once before he pulled it back under control. "Merlin's blood, won't this be fun. Anyway. Once they're certain of me, they'll stop watching so hard. At which point I just trip and fall somewhere, and—" He demonstrated, going to one knee and catching the pendants as they slid through his body to jingle into his hands.

"Set them for me when you do it." Hermione wiggled her fingers in Draco's direction as he stood back up. "Tell them to only let me pick them up again. That way even if they see you and put you under Imperius, they can't do anything about it."

"Good thought." Draco held out the pendants. "Touch them for me? It'll fix the magic better."

Hermione twined her fingers into the chain, and Draco concentrated for one moment, then replaced the pendants in their usual spot. "Important papers in the pouch inside my trunk's lid," he told Harry, studiously casual. "Glad I got them done sooner rather than later, now. And tell everyone..." He swallowed once, but his eyes were dry. "Tell them I love them, and that I'm sorry. For not being able to say a proper goodbye."

"I think they'll understand." Harry moved towards the rear exit of the shop, Hermione beside him, then turned back. Draco was inspecting the door into the sales area, wand in his hand. "Fox."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

Draco smiled. "You'd do the same," he said, and slipped around the door, shutting it softly behind him.

Harry could feel Hermione quivering beside him, fighting back both human tears and a cat's yowl of pain, but they'd trained in the same school and he knew her control was up to the task. She wouldn't break down until they were safely under cover, their mission complete.

*Just like I won't.*

*No matter how much I want to.*

Double-checking the Horcrux to be sure it was secured inside his robes, he motioned for Hermione to Disillusion them both, then transformed into Wolf, Neenie tucking her semi-visible self neatly inside Wolf's front paw to wait. Her purr was ragged, but soothed him nonetheless, as he had no doubt it was meant to do. They'd need to stay calm and focused to make the most of what Draco was giving up for them tonight.

As if the thought had been a spark, a chain of three explosions went off in front of the shop. "Hello, Father," said Draco's coolest voice. "Looking for someone?"

Lucius Malfoy snarled a spell Harry didn't recognize, which rang like a gong as (he assumed) Draco blocked it. Neenie sniffed a brief cat-laugh and pointed her nose at the door. Wolf nodded, but paused for one instant to bow his head towards the street, where the hisses and shouts of a full-fledged duel were now resounding.

*We will not forget, he pledged silently. And we will win.*

Then he was out and moving, slipping from shadow to shadow, silent as the stars above, Neenie keeping pace behind him. People ran and shouted in the streets, some masked, others bare-faced, but no one had eyes to spare for the flickers of motion where no motion should be. No one had time to notice a pair of four-legged distortions in the air. No one gave it a second thought when an apparently solid stone panel on the side of a dry-basined fountain wavered, twice, as though it had been suddenly subject to a tiny bout of heat haze.

It was entirely possible, Wolf thought bitterly, running his fastest now that he was in the tunnel, that the chaos already boiling through Hogsmeade would have been sufficient. That three distortions would have gone as unnoticed as two. That three Packmates could still have arrived safely home tonight.

*But we couldn't take that chance. Not with so many Death Eaters. Not when we're carrying a Horcrux.*

*We just couldn't take that chance.*

He wondered how many times he'd have to tell himself that before he believed it.

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Remus sat in one of the chairs the Hogwarts Den had obligingly sprouted in the main room, sculpting idly in the air with flames. Dumbledore's current restrictions on him meant he couldn't take part in the fighting in Hogsmeade—*no matter how much I want to*— but there were other ways to help than by battling Death Eaters wand to wand.

*Like keeping the castle itself safe and sound. I don't care if it looks like all they want is the village, if they saw a weakness in Hogwarts's wards, they'd move on that in a heartbeat...*

So he and Danger had headed for Hogwarts when the call had come into Headquarters, while Sirius and Aletha had gone straight to the village, along with the other Order members who'd been in residence or within call. Meghan was cuddled against his legs even now, humming tunelessly to herself, eyes shut and one hand linked with Neville's where he sat with his back against the main room's wall, legs tucked neatly under, an expression of concentration on his face. Across the room, Danger, Ginny, and Luna held a quiet, urgent conversation, which could have involved either the progress of the battle or the plans for the morning. Either way, Remus wasn't inclined to interfere.

*As for the rest of the Pride...well, Ron is out with the older DA members, he was already gone when we got here and it's not as if we could have stopped him, but where in the world are our older three? Harry knows better than to go tearing off to a fight like this, at least I thought he did, and I'm positive Draco and Hermione do. There's nothing on the pendants, which doesn't necessarily mean they aren't out fighting, but it's a bit of reassurance at least.*

*Though all the ones who are still here seem to have something on their minds, but they either won't or can't tell us anything about it...*

He felt Danger's twinge of surprise and fear an instant before Ginny stiffened. "No," breathed the Pride's alpha female, fumbling at her neck. "No, please no—"

"What's wrong?" Meghan asked, opening her eyes.

"Can't you feel it?" Ginny had her pendants out now, and was flipping through them frantically. "It's *freezing*— someone's going to *die* —"

"Ginny," said Luna softly, laying her hand atop her friend's, bringing Ginny's white face up from her breathless search through the golden medallions. "They won't have it. It's not for them."

"It's not for—" Ginny blinked at Luna for an instant, baffled, then looked down again.

Remus shut his eyes, swearing silently to himself. He knew what that soft, all-over glow of Ginny's first pendant meant. Judging by the little, choked cry from the direction of his feet and the soft murmurs very nearby, Meghan and Neville had come to the same conclusion.

Ginny had wanted all her brothers to attend her wedding.

Bride or not, it didn't seem she'd be getting her wish.

**Not the sort of tears I was hoping to dry tonight**, murmured Danger in the back of his mind, cradling Ginny against her and wisely, to Remus's way of thinking, saying nothing at all as the youngest Weasley wept in silent, wracking sobs. Behind her, Luna sat very still, her gaze fixed on the far wall where the green banners hung. **Now I suppose we just sit and wait to find out which one it is?**

**Sit and wait**, Remus confirmed, opening his own eyes to slide to the floor and stroke Meghan's hair where she leaned against Neville. **And pray it isn't more than one of them. Or of us.**

Danger's mental wince included an acknowledgment both of the callous-sounding nature of the words and of the impossibility of using any others.

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A great scream of pain and fury and loss rose over Hogsmeade village, battering at the ears of all who heard, overriding lesser cries of fear and wails of anguish, wiping out what might have been a half-formed plea for mercy. No such quality lived, or could live, in the one whose heart was so tormented. No such favor was given.

The few Death Eaters who had been on the outskirts of the horror would speak, in hushed tones, of the scene of terror along that quiet street. Of the apparition which howled more terribly than any animal and dealt death, death impossibly fast and certain, from a tiny black object held between its hands, from which poured liquid red as blood.

They would call her, those who survived that night, the Mad Muggle of Hogsmeade.



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 25: No Greater Love (Year 6)

Fred leaned out of cover in the small alley to fire a spell that sent two masked figures tumbling end over end down the street. "Just like de-gnoming the garden!" he called cheerily. "Except Death Eaters don't holler 'Gerroff me!'"

"Are you saying we need an extra-large jarvey?" Danielle shielded the little group against spellfire from across the street. "Or maybe a supersized kneazle?"

"We could always feed Crookshanks Skele-Gro," suggested Ron, pitching his voice high and letting it slide down the scale. "Meow...meow...MEOW! "

The final sound, delivered in a booming bass, triggered a round of laughter, while Percy took over the Shield Charm from Danielle. As it faded, Fred looked around, his expression puzzled, as though someone had called his name in a voice no one else could hear. He opened his mouth, perhaps meaning to ask a question.

Then his eyes widened in shock and a rending, disbelieving sorrow, and he crumpled where he stood, just as the scream rose over Hogsmeade.

Percy was running before he was fully aware what he was doing. "Stay with him!" he shouted over his shoulder to Ron and Danielle. "Don't leave him alone!"

*Alone.*

The word beat into his brain as he dodged Death Eater spells, though there were fewer of them on the streets than there had been. Too, those who were still there seemed to be running either towards something to his right, or away from something in front of him...

He skidded to a halt around the corner from Madam Puddifoot's. The cry of grief he'd been following, as he'd already known on a level too deep for conscious thought, was centered here, on this street. From this, the Death Eaters had fled, those lucky enough to be able to do so.

*I have to do this alone. No one else would be safe.*

Casting a strong shield around himself and drawing a deep breath, Percy stepped around the corner.

A snarl, barely human, racked his ears as a splatter of crimson potion bounced off his shield. "Stay back," hissed the slender person crouched in the entranceway of the tea shop, her short blonde hair matted against her head with sweat, her teeth bared in a grimace which ought to have looked ridiculous and was instead terrifying. "Stay *back!* "

"Crystal." Percy kept his gaze focused on the contorted face, away from the motionless figure sprawled on the ground beside her with its shock of hair as red as his own, away from the

nameless substance covering the street in front of her. Away from the remnants of black and white cloth floating on the surface of that substance. "Crystal, it's Percy. You know me." Sparing one instant to hope his mother would have no more reasons to mourn tonight, he dropped his shield. "You helped me once, when I was frightened and confused. When I didn't know what to do." He took a single step forward, holding out his hand. "Let me help you now."

Crystal quivered once in place. Then, slowly, she lowered her potion piece until its muzzle was pointed at the stoop beneath her feet, her knees and shoulders both beginning to shake.

Percy whisked a walkway into existence with one sweep of his wand and was by Crystal's side before she could fall, drawing her against him, holding her to offer what comfort he could, though his own breath shuddered in his chest as he looked down at what he hadn't wanted to acknowledge he already knew.

Wand still gripped tightly in his right hand, an expression of fierce determination frozen on his face, George lay silent and still at Percy's feet.

A soft sound from the shop brought Percy's head around. A middle-aged witch was peering out the door, her eyes wide. "Are they gone?" she whispered. "I wanted to help, but great Merlin, these girls, they're frightened nearly out of their minds—I had to keep them calm, if they'd started screaming or even tried to run away—"

"It's all right," said Percy, drawing on his every bit of Ministry experience in telling believable lies. "You did what was best. Did you see what happened?"

"They were..." The witch fluttered one hand. "They were astonishing. So quick, so sure. The young man, he took down at least three of them before..." She glanced from George's body to Percy, noting the resemblance. "I'm so sorry. Is he—"

"My brother." The words seemed to tear at Percy's throat as he spoke them. He noted with mild, distant surprise that they emerged sounding vaguely normal. "And after he...fell?"

"The young lady started to scream." The witch gave Crystal a sidelong look which mingled fear and respect. "She changed something on...that," a darting finger indicated the potion piece still dangling from Crystal's hand, "and began to spray whatever was inside it all around. And then..." Her mouth worked a few times, but nothing came out. She settled for waving her hand in the direction of the street.

"I see." Percy turned to survey the viscous puddles left behind by the red cartridge of Crystal's potion piece. Clearly they had once been precisely delineated, each the remains of a single human body, but even the few moments between the end of Crystal's rampage and his own arrival had been enough to let them flow together at the edges until it was hard to tell where one ended and another began. Still, the divisions between the swathes of black topped with white were clear enough.

George Weasley and Crystal Huley, between them, had accounted for seven Death Eaters.

The witch had turned back towards the tea shop's interior, calling an answer to a question in a wavering little-girl voice. The street was, for the moment, deserted.

Percy made up his mind.

*The Death Eaters were frightened by the screaming of the young lady, he thought clearly, drawing his wand. And by the ferocity with which she and her companion had already defended this place. They snatched up their fallen ones and ran away like the cowards they are.*

Lining up his wand with the witch's head, he whispered a single word.

The witch jerked slightly, then turned to him with a small, dreamy smile. "Do you think it's over now?" she inquired. "It's gone so quiet."

"Yes," Percy said, directing the word mostly at the blonde head still buried against the shoulder of his robes. "Yes, I do think it's over."

Turning so as to block the witch's view of the street, he swept his wand in a careful circle. *Evanesco*, he intoned mentally, and released a silent breath as the gruesome scene disappeared.

The less direct evidence the Death Eaters, and certain parties in the Ministry, could obtain about the true capabilities of a potion piece in trained hands, the better.

Besides, nothing was more frightening than a mystery.

His momentary smile at the Death Eaters' discomfiture with their lack of knowledge about their companions' fates disappeared as he looked again at the body lying beside his feet.

*George was protecting others, he tried to remind himself, fighting for what he believed in. This is the way he would have wanted it.*

Someday, he thought, that knowledge might help. A little.

"May I use your Floo?" he asked quietly.

---

Harry shut the door on one of the small cubicles Dumbledore had charmed for Horcrux storage with a grateful sigh. The spells he'd used to hold off the usual discomfort he felt around the receptacles of Voldemort's soul-shards had been eroding badly within the last few minutes.

"Thanks for carrying it this last bit of the way," he said over his shoulder to Hermione.

"Don't mention it." Hermione's voice was chill. "Which is going to be our problem, isn't it?"

"What?" Harry turned to look at his sister. "I don't understand."

"We *can't* mention it, Harry." A circular motion of Hermione's fingers around her mouth signified

the Tongue-Tying Jinx. "Where we were, or what we were doing tonight. Which means we can't explain it. Not to anyone who doesn't already know."

"But everyone who needs to know already does," Harry began, though a trickle of worry at the back of his mind told him this might not be accurate.

"Do they?" Hermione glanced towards the fireplace of the Head's office, towards the carved sidepiece through which Harry had once escaped from Dolores Umbridge. "What about the Pack-parents?"

*The Pack-parents.*

Harry shut his eyes as trickle increased to flood. He'd rather have been back out in the streets of Hogsmeade, facing Death Eaters, than look at Padfoot, at Letha, at Danger and Moony, and explain to them as best he could where he and his siblings had been tonight, and where Draco was right now.

*At least, if I were dueling, I'd have a chance of bringing everyone home with me afterwards...*

"They know we don't lie about the war," he said into the darkness. "And we weren't just out there for the hell of it, we had something we had to do, and Dumbledore will back us up on that. They won't blame us for this."

*I hope.*

Even as the thought formed in his mind, his pendants heated against his chest, as though the news he bore had run before him through the silent connections of deep magic—and *why hasn't it?*

"I'd thought he would have told them not to activate for him," Hermione said distractedly, little jingles of chain and medallions punctuating her words. "He made his choice, there isn't anything we can—" She broke off with a little gasp. "He did, he must have, this isn't—Harry, oh, Harry, it's Ron! Ron and Ginny! Something's happened, something's wrong—"

Harry was three steps closer to the fireplace before his eyes had fully focused. "Thank you, Helga," he said under his breath, and flung himself into the slide as soon as he could squeeze through the opening.

Given the situation currently obtaining in Hogsmeade, he could think of exactly seven reasons why Ron and Ginny might be badly upset.

*Why does everything have to happen tonight?*

---

Danger looked around sharply as the door to the Den's bathroom popped open. One of the knots in her chest untied in a rush as Harry shot through, steam rising from his robes, and another released as Hermione followed, breathing hard, eyes already reddened—

A third knot pulled painfully tight. No other form, no sound or scent of a third person, had come with her cubs into their refuge.

**Calm**, Remus murmured, more to himself than to Danger, **we need to stay calm. Shouting at one another solves nothing.**

**Maybe not, but it would be damn cathartic**, Danger retorted, and felt her husband's brief, humorless laugh reverberate through their bond. Harry was by her side now, and nodded his head formally to her before laying his hand on Ginny's shoulder.

Ginny rounded on Harry with a throaty hiss like Lynx in battle rage, but relaxed as soon as she saw who it was. "Did you..." she began.

"Mission accomplished." Harry drew her towards him, and she went unresisting. "Who is it?" he asked, making the question a general one by the angle of his head.

"George Weasley has died," said Remus, his voice carefully set to neutral. Meghan, still sitting in the circle of Neville's arms, sniffled at the reiteration of the news, and Hermione, standing in the doorway to the bathroom, let out a single shuddering sigh but made no other outward sign.

"Mission, Harry?"

Harry's shoulders squared themselves, though he still held Ginny cradled against him. Danger swallowed against the import of his scent, a mingling of pain and bittersweet triumph. "Sir," he said, the single syllable evoking a young soldier reporting to his commander. "One month ago today, information was received..." He sighed. "We found out where something was," he said, abandoning the formal style. "Something Voldemort would kill to keep from being found. We—" A jerk of his hand indicated himself, Hermione, and the tangible emptiness where Draco should have stood. "—were the only ones who could get it from where it was hidden, and tonight was the only time we could do it."

"I see." Remus nodded, returning cool for cool. "And was this an official mission, or something you decided to do on your own?"

Though Harry's color rose and his scent spiked with fury, his voice maintained its steadiness. "It was official. Assigned to us by the head of the Order of the Phoenix."

"Very well," Remus said aloud. Internally, his thoughts whirled with an anger matching Harry's. **Who does Albus think he is—they may be his students but they're our cubs, damn it—he had no right to send them out without consulting us first—**

**Didn't he?** Danger called up an image from memory. Harry, still pale from the disastrous ending of the third Triwizard task, stood before Dumbledore with his Pride flanking him, wand and dagger laid flat on his palms, held out to the Headmaster in a silent offering of fealty. **We understood what he was doing, and we had our chance to stop him then, stop all of them. We didn't.**

Remus's only mental response was a wordless growl. "You said your mission was accomplished," he said to Harry, looking pointedly from him to Hermione. "Define your terms, please."

"We got what we went for." Harry's tight hold of Ginny was, Danger realized, as much to comfort himself as her. Luna was standing beside them now, a faint frown on her face as she regarded Hermione. "But one of our team members..." A small smile came to his lips, sad but unmistakably true. "He put the rules in the right order. One and two, then three."

"I beg your pardon?" Remus said aloud, echoing the question silently to Danger, who responded with the mental equivalent of a shrug. "Which rules are these?"

Neville coughed once, drawing everyone's attention. "It was my mum's first lesson with the DA," he said, holding up fingers to count them off. "Number one, keep your friends alive, number two, get what you came for, and number three." He looked from Hermione to Harry before returning his gaze to Remus. "Don't die."

"He might not have had to go," said Hermione, speaking for the first time in a hoarse whisper. Danger winced at the sound of her sister's voice, and at the pain which filled her scent. "It's possible we could have made it back safely without what he did. But we can't be sure—we can't be *sure* —"

"Yes, you can."

Pride and Pack-parents turned to look at Luna. She was gazing intently at Hermione, her eyes unfocused. "You did right to accept his sacrifice," she said softly. "He did right to make it. There is a spell on you. A locator spell. Placed by someone who wants to make you his. Who wants to own you. And he was coming to do exactly that tonight."

"A spell? On me?" Hermione's voice squeaked into its upper register. "But who would—"

"Malfoy." Harry ground the word out between his teeth. "I *thought* he was a little too quick."

"Just a moment, please," said Remus, holding up a hand. "Luna, let me be sure I have this correct. Lucius Malfoy had a spell placed on Hermione that would tell him where she was?"

"On both twins." Luna tilted her head slowly from side to side. "As long as nothing stronger interfered. While they were here at Hogwarts, or at Headquarters, the spell was blocked by the wards and charms that keep us safe, and in any in-between times they were always with other people who could help protect them. But when they arrived in Hogsmeade tonight with Harry, coming back from their mission..."

"We heard him," Hermione breathed, her arms wrapped around herself as though she might fly apart if she let go. "We heard him in the street in front of Fred and George's shop, dueling with Draco. I thought it was just luck—bad luck, good luck, who knows? But it wasn't luck at all. He *knew* we were there."

"And with him being that close already, they'd have caught us if we'd tried to make a run for it all together." Harry's eyes were bleak. "Have I mentioned lately how much I hate being right?"

"Harry." Danger astounded herself by pronouncing her Pack-son's name in a calm and reasonable tone. "What, exactly, were you right about tonight? *What happened?* "

Harry was taking a breath to answer this when Remus's pocket chimed.

---

Sirius let out a low whistle as he unmasked one of a pair of bodies which lay entangled on an otherwise empty street, Aletha standing behind him to provide light and keep watch for any lingering ambushers. "Great Merlin, it's Rabastan Lestrangle! What's he doing out here? I'd have sworn he thought sweat was poisonous!"

"He was more loyal to his Master than he was to his own comfort," Aletha pointed out. "Not by much, but he was. And he always preferred working alongside family when he could..."

"You think?" Sirius swiftly yanked off the other mask. "Well, well. So my dear cousin Bella's a widow." Tossing down the soiled white cloth onto the body of Rodolphus Lestrangle, he got to his feet. "Three guesses how long she'll grieve. And the first two don't count."

"Grieve? She'll probably throw a party." Aletha glanced towards another part of the village. "Someone else is going to be grieving today," she said softly. "Quite a lot of people." She sighed. "Including us."

"Yeah." Sirius swiped at his eyes with his off hand, thoughts of the Weasley twins invading his mind unasked. "Dammit, Letha, what's *wrong* with them?" he exploded, snapping his wand down towards the crumpled bodies to make his reference clear. "How do you get from 'we want to keep our bloodlines pure'—which makes a little bit of sense, I guess, if you're thinking in terms of not letting things get watered down, even if the strongest magic does keep showing up in Muggleborns, not that they'll ever admit that—but how do you go from there to 'kill everyone who doesn't agree with us'?"

"By not being too picky about whom you recruit." Aletha's voice was flat. "Or about their methods, once you have them." Her hand groped out to one side, and Sirius met it with his own and drew her into a half-hug. She sighed again and leaned against him, and even through his anger and sorrow he managed a smile for this most precious gift of his lifetime.

*Well. Except certain small people.* A tall, red-haired figure rounded the corner, and Sirius had to reconsider as his first tentative identification of Percy morphed into Ron. *Who aren't so very small anymore...*

"Are those—" Ron squinted as he got closer, frowning. "Are those the Lestranges?"

"They were." Aletha squeezed Sirius's hand once, then disengaged to sweep her wand in two graceful curves, laying out the bodies in more decorous lines and walking around them to peer at



them, free hand on her hip. "Rodolphus isn't marked," she said after a moment. "That probably means the Killing Curse, or some other spell strong enough that his heart was affected. But Rabastan seems to have had his skull bashed in. It's not quite a blunt instrument, there was an angle on whatever hit him, or more likely, whatever he hit—if I had to guess, I'd say it was something like—"

"Corner of a building?" Ron circled the two bodies, giving them a wide berth, and extended his arm, flexing his wrist to bring his wand into his hand. "Like that one?"

Sirius bent to inspect the indicated area. "Given the nasty smears on it, probably," he said, summoning his Auror's detachment, sliding his disgusted shudder into the back of his mind for later. "Have to have been a hell of a powerful hit that sent him into it, though..."

Three seconds too late, the implications of Ron's immediate knowledge sank in.

"Were you defending someone?" Aletha asked, looking levelly at Ron. "Or was it a running fight?"

"Percy." Ron stared at the wand in his hand, then released it, letting it slide back into its holster up his sleeve. "It was Percy, they had him down, two on one..."

Sirius got carefully to his feet, using the time to find the words he wanted and put them in the proper order. His godson's closest friend and soon-to-be brother-in-law deserved the best help Sirius could possibly give.

*Even though I know it won't be enough, because it never is.*

"You stood up tonight," he said, pulling Ron's attention to him. "You didn't run away, or try to hide, or make up reasons why it wasn't your problem. You stood up and you fought back. And sometimes, a lot of times, that means things happen that take bites out of your heart." His own ghosts, ever watchful, hovered in the back of his mind. "But not doing it takes bigger ones."

"You won't feel like that, today," Aletha added. "You may not feel like it tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that. Because for all you did, there was still loss. And that hurts, and it's going to go on hurting." Sirius could hear experience in her tone, and hoped Ron could as well. "But the only way they win this night is if you let it knock you down and keep you there."

Ron made a pithily profane suggestion about that particular outcome, making Sirius grin and Aletha laugh once. "I'm sure I ought to swat you for that, since your mother isn't here to do it," she said. "But as it happens, I think that's one of the best responses you can have."

"Thanks." Ron looked down at the two bodies. "I'm not sorry," he said after a long moment. "It shook me up, and I felt sort of sick for a while, but I'm not sorry I did it." He looked around at the Blacks uncertainly. "Should I be?"

"That one, you'll have to decide for yourself," said Aletha after a pause during which Sirius manfully repressed several profane responses of his own. "Are you assigned anywhere you need to

get back to? Or..."

"Mum's here." Ron looked away again. "But she's got Fleur and Tonks with her, I'd just be in the way. She saw me, she hugged me, she knows I'm alive, so..." He shrugged. "I wanted to keep busy. Help with things."

*Not have to sit still and listen to people cry and go over it again and again in my head, Sirius translated. Not have to wonder if I could have changed things if I'd been there too.*

"We could use some help clearing this sector," he said casually. "You were through here earlier, you might be able to tell if anything's out of place."

"I wasn't looking all that hard." Ron managed a small smile. "But I can try."

"That'll do just fine." Aletha drew her wand, and motioned for Ron to do the same. Sirius had his out already.

Several uneventful streets later, on the outskirts of the village, they found more evidence of the Death Eaters' passing.

"Shit," Sirius hissed under his breath at the sight of the slender female body in Hogwarts robes, crumpled on its side with one arm outflung and the long hair fallen across the face—the long *red* hair, as revealed by his hovering light— "*Shit* , not this, not now—"

"It's not Ginny," Aletha said quickly, forestalling Sirius's rush forward. "She's back at the castle with the other younger ones, Remus confirmed that when he got there. It's someone else."

Sirius exhaled a long sigh of guilty relief. The young witch lying in front of him was still someone's daughter, perhaps someone's sister or fiancée, and whoever they were, they had all his sympathies, but he hoped he could be forgiven for being grateful it wasn't his friends' only daughter, the sister of the boy standing next to him, the girl his godson planned to marry in a few short hours.

*But knowing who she isn't doesn't get us any further on finding out who she is.*

"Any other gingers in the DA?" he asked Ron. "Older ones, girls?"

"Couple. But I think I know her." Ron edged a few steps to the right, frowning. "She's lying on something," he muttered. "Looks familiar..."

"Who is she, Ron?" Aletha asked patiently.

"Oh. Sorry." Ron shook his head. "Her name's Amanda. Our year, Ravenclaw. She's Muggleborn, her mum got taken with Percy last summer." He glanced back at them. "And we think she might be something to do with Alex's daughter, and with that weird room down by Sanctuary. The one that's sort of like a tomb."

Sirius resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands.

*Why are we always the last to hear about everything?*

"Muggleborn," Aletha said on the end of a sigh. "God, her poor parents."

"She's got a brother, too," Ron added. "Slytherin. Meghan's year, I think."

"Let's not get ahead of things." Sirius pulled himself back to the moment. "Ron, you're sure that's who she is?"

"Pretty sure. Can't see her face too well, though." Ron grimaced, as though his next words tasted bad, but got them out nonetheless. "She's been dead a little while. She's...her body's cooling down. It's harder for me to see."

"Will it help if her hair is out of the way?" Aletha asked gently.

"Should." Ron shut his eyes and swallowed, but held his ground.

"Sirius?" Aletha slid her wand back and forth between her fingers. "Can I move her, lay her out a little more neatly? I don't think there's much doubt how she died."

"No, there's not." Sirius added a silent malediction on all Death Eaters, doubling it for their leader. "Go ahead."

Aletha's most delicate swish-and-flick levitated the body several inches, turning it until the tangled coppery hair tumbled away from the pale, peaceful face.

Two metallic gleams sparked on the ground thus exposed, one a slim tangle of gold, the other silver and sleekly dangerous.

Sirius swore viciously and yanked his Zippo clear of his pocket. "Remus Lupin," he demanded the instant the green flame appeared, and barely waited for Remus's acknowledgment before snapping out the question most on his mind.

"Moony, where the hell are the cubs?"

Three seconds of silence ensued. Aletha set Amanda Smythe's body on the ground once more, clear of the items she had surely recognized as quickly as Sirius had, and lowered her hands to her side, her face settling into the mask-like lines of utter calm Sirius knew meant his wife in her deepest distress. Ron's breathing had gone shaky, his knuckles were white around two handfuls of his robes, his lips were working as though he were trying not to be sick—

*Or not to say a certain few names, maybe? Because once you say it, once you admit it, that's the same as letting it be true...*

"Harry and Hermione are here with us," Remus said at last. "Sirius, where are you?"

"Outside Hogsmeade." Sirius weathered his momentary rush of thankfulness by reminding himself, harshly, that there was one name still unspoken, and the silver blade lying on the ground, now that he looked again, could belong only to that person. "There's a girl here, one of the DA. She's dead. And she was lying on top of Draco's pendants, and his dagger. So anytime you want to give me a hint what might be going on here, that'd be just dandy."

A moment of muffled colloquy, beyond the ability of the Zippo flame to pick up. "Stay there," Remus said clearly. "We'll come to you."

"No, wait," Sirius began, but the flame had already flickered and gone out. He swore again, snapping the Zippo shut and returning it to his pocket. "Alphas," he muttered in disgust. "Think they know everything."

Ron was pacing back and forth in short, jerky circuits, cursing under his breath in tones Sirius knew well. *You can't be gone. I won't let you be gone. I wasn't finished fighting with you yet...*

He could have told the younger wizard that was no guarantee, but refrained.

A surprisingly short time later, a low yowl brought three heads around as a tiny, fast-moving shape materialized out of the night. Hermione burst out of Neenie's form without breaking stride and caught Ron in a fierce, shuddering hug. "I'm so sorry," Sirius heard her whisper. "I wish we could have warned you."

Pearl the doe clattered to a halt and retransformed practically in Aletha's arms, her demiguise passenger sliding to the ground beside her to do the same. Harry and Danger shot upwards from their sleek wolf-selves, and Moony the lion rose onto his back paws to shrink into humanity. Starwing, silent in flight, soared past her Pridemates and landed beside Amanda's body, bending herself forward in what was clearly a respectful bow before twisting into Luna, seated neatly on the ground with her legs tucked in.

"Ginny's with your parents," Remus said in time to forestall the question Ron had been about to ask. "Draco..." Sirius saw the instant of anguish pass over his friend's features. "I believe the proper term is 'missing in action'." His eyes rested on the Pack-pendants. "Though those may be able to tell us more."

Kissing Ron on the cheek, Hermione released him and knelt, sliding her fingers under the pendants gently, then lifting them to cradle them to her chest. Her other hand went out and grasped the dagger, closing around the grip so professionally that Sirius had to force down a rush of memories of endless training sessions, devoted to making sure his cubs would be able to defend themselves and their comrades in the heat of battle.

*Except now one of them didn't. What was Draco even doing out here? He knows better than to come running out to a fight like that, or he bloody well ought to...*

Hermione weighed the dagger in her hand for a moment before turning it in her fingers and offering the green-stoned hilt to Luna. Without a word, Luna accepted, holding Draco's dagger in

that same light, competent grasp. Then she slid it into her pocket and got to her feet.

"We need to see what he saw," she said, nodding towards the pendants. "To know what went on here." She looked down once more at Amanda's body. "How she died, and why."

*The hell with her, what about him?* Sirius wanted to shout it aloud to the sky, wanted to shake the answers out of whoever might know them. *What happened to Draco? What's he doing that he would abandon his pendants and his dagger? He can't have been killed, we'd have known it—even if he wasn't wearing his pendants, they respond to death—unless someone tells them not to, I suppose, but Draco wouldn't do that—*

His thoughts circled and wound in on each other, tangling and crossing, but always returning to the same unanswerable question.

*Where is he right now?*

---

Draco stumbled forward through a doorway, propelled by a shove to the center of his back. An unlit fireplace to one side of him, a cobweb-covered bed on the other, registered only dimly to his senses. His focus was on keeping his feet, getting back on balance, keeping his face impassive and cool despite the terror and grief fighting for place in his head and the burning pain centered in his left forearm.

He might be caught in the middle of his worst and longest-standing nightmare, but that was no reason to fall apart.

"I trust you'll find your accommodations...comfortable," said Lucius from the corridor, as Draco turned to face him. The lined, minimally scarred face so like Draco's own wore a faint and possessive smirk. "The place has been sadly neglected of late, through no fault of my own, but this room seems sound enough. If somewhat dirty." His wand darted out to Draco's right and left, clearing away the thick layer of dust and detritus, then lighting the lamps mounted on the paneled walls. "There, that should do for the night." His smile broadened. "Sleep well, my son. In the morning, your new life begins. Though..." He glanced at Draco's arm. "In some regards, has it not already?"

The door, with its flaking paint showing a pair of intertwined snakes, shut firmly between father and son.

Draco sank onto the edge of the bed, fighting to get his breathing under control. Breath was the beginning, the foundational step, everything started with a breath—

*Letha taught me that.* His hand went automatically to the spot where his pendants should have hung, but there was nothing there. *When I was just a baby, when I'd first come to the Pack, when I wanted to learn how to sing, she taught me about controlling my breath, and I didn't understand until much later how her music lessons laid the groundwork for Padfoot and Moony to teach us how to fight—*

The memories rose up and threatened to swamp him, twelve years of joy and laughter and love, of work and play and learning and pranking, of Pack and Pride and everything they meant to him.

*Everything I can't ever have again. His arm throbbed once, winning a hiss from him. Everything he made sure I can't go back to. Because even if I managed to escape from here, wherever here may be, and find my way home or get a message off—*

He could remember being newly thirteen years old and climbing out the window of the Devon Den, convinced that his Pack would be safer if he were far away. That time, he'd been wrong. Tonight, he was tangibly, painfully right.

"Didn't waste any time, did you, Father?" he whispered, staring at the door. "You and your *Master*. You couldn't risk having me slip away from you again. Or be rescued."

The fear of that sat cold and jagged in his chest, jabbing at him with every breath. The Pack was strong, smart, and determined, and Lucius had reason to know full well their most probable response to one of their cubs being taken.

*Is he counting on that? Planning for it? And will they think of it in time? Draco pulled his legs up under him, shaking. Or will they only be thinking of me, of bringing me home?*

The word brought an almost sickening rush of longing to his throat. He forced it back in favor of more thinking. The shabby, decaying house through which Lucius had hauled him had the look of a newly-occupied outpost for the Dark side of the war, so its wards and shields might not be up to full strength yet.

*Which could be part of his calculations. Deliberately leaving me somewhere they can find me. His mind supplied a vivid image of Moony throwing open the door, Danger bursting in past him, both faces filled with relief and love. Will I be able to warn them in time? Will they even believe me? Not that they'd have a choice, not once I pulled my sleeve back...*

"Enough," he said aloud, shoving himself upright. "That's enough." A long, slow, cleansing breath, drawn through the nose, let out through softly pursed lips. "My body's here, and will be for a month. My mind doesn't have to be. Neither does my soul."

*And once that month's over...* He smiled coolly to himself. The blue jewel had taken the specifics of his plan with Luna from his mind, but he could remember the most important part of it.

"He won't hurt anyone else I love." The words emerged in the tone of a vow, as sacred as the ones Harry and Ginny would be speaking in a few hours atop the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts. "Not ever again."

*So, that being settled, why don't we get on to more important things. Walking in a slow spiral outwards from the corner of the bed, Draco took another look at his surroundings. Such as, why does this room feel so damn familiar? It doesn't look a thing like either of the Dens, or like anything at Hogwarts—I suppose I could be remembering the Notts' place, but I doubt it—*

His foot landed on something small and squashy.

He looked down.

Four little socks, knotted into the semblance of a ball, lay innocently on the polished wood of the floor.

*"You don't know catch?"* A little girl's incredulous voice echoed through the corridors of his mind.  
*"We'll show you..."*

"Neenie," Draco breathed, kneeling down where he stood to gather up the tiny relic. "Harry."

He tried as hard as he could to hold in his tears, but he was only sixteen.

"I want to go back to the Den," he whispered thickly, holding tightly to his first and last link with the Pack who had become so deeply his, and he theirs. "I want..."

His voice choked off. Weeping without a sound, bent over his close-clasped hands, he finished the sentence in the silence of his mind.

*I want to go home.*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***



# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 26: Father, Mother, Son and Daughter (Year 6)

The journey back towards Hogwarts should have felt, Hermione thought, like walking through a nightmare. But she'd grown used to having some control over her nightmares, being able to shift their circumstances or even end them altogether. This silent, slow-paced run with her Pack and Pride—*most* of her Pack and Pride—beside her could not be changed, nor could it be avoided.

*We have to know.* That fact, more than any other, kept her paws moving through the passage from village to castle, then her feet through the corridors and down to the Den. *We have to know what happened. Mysteries are worse than knowledge.*

*Usually.*

They'd stopped to see the Weasleys before stepping into the passage, and Ron had remained behind with his family, after taking a moment to hold Hermione tightly. She still wasn't sure which of them had been comforting the other.

*Most likely it was both of us.*

Even now, whenever she closed her eyes, the scene was there, waiting. The Weasley twins lay side by side along one wall of a hastily conjured tent, as identical as they had ever been, except for the seemingly minor detail that one of them was breathing and the other was not. Mr. Weasley sat beside Fred, holding his son's hand, talking quietly to him, his face appearing composed until one got near enough to see the tear-marks staining his cheeks.

*Because as bad as it is to lose one of them, it would be so much worse to lose them both.*

Lee Jordan leaned wearily against a tent pole, watching his wife and Danielle Reading doing their best to soothe a blank-eyed Crystal Huley. Clearly the Muggle girl was in deep shock, both from her boyfriend's death and from what she'd done immediately afterwards.

*Percy told us about it, and I'd say I don't know if I could do it myself, except haven't I already, with Greyback?*

A small huddle at the other side of the tent was resolvable, after a few moments' work, into Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, Fleur Delacour, and Tonks, mother and daughter weeping silently together with the two sisters-in-law providing what comfort was possible by the simple fact of their presence. In a far corner, the three oldest Weasley brothers talked in fierce murmurs, Percy's sharp gestures leaving no doubt that he was in control of the conversation. It was their group Ron had joined, after pausing to embrace his mother and briefly scent-touch his sister.

*We've changed him. We've changed all of them. But then, so have they changed us...*

Harry touched her arm. "We're here," he said.

Hermione looked up. They had come to the Den's Quidditch pitch, with its simulated nighttime sky overhead, the breezes blowing through it as though it truly were outdoors. Her eyes filled momentarily as she looked up at the near middle hoop, half-expecting to see a slim masculine figure seated there—

*No. I can't do that yet. Firmly, she set the tears aside. We have to see what happened, to Amanda as much as to Draco. We have to see if there's anything they need from us.*

*It would make their loss that much worse if we lost ourselves in grieving for them and let their sacrifices go for nothing.*

Stepping into the center of the loose Pack-and-Pride circle which had formed, she elongated Draco's pendant chain and tossed it out to everyone, then drew a deep breath and closed her hand around the strange-familiar medallions.

"Show me," she said softly. "Show me my brother."

Blackness swept her, and the minds linked to hers. Then she stood in the street outside the Hogsmeade WWW branch, watching her twin and their most loathed blood relative dueling furiously, spells shooting every which way, making the other Death Eaters who'd come to watch shield themselves almost constantly. And one of those shields—Hermione sucked in a breath—one just beside and behind Draco, where he wouldn't see it, was growing larger and brighter by the moment—

Lucius dodged to one side, out of the way of an Arm-Locker by Draco, and fired an Impediment Jinx, seemingly careless, but Hermione could see the calculation on his face—Draco blocked almost impatiently, sending the Jinx ricocheting off to one side—

Harry swore under his breath and Meghan muffled a cry with one hand as the Jinx bounced off the gleaming shield and slammed into Draco from behind, dropping him to the street.

"Intriguing." Moony had one arm around Danger's back, the other buried in her hair where she was pressing her face into his shoulder. His voice was cool, faintly amused, but tiny licks of heat haze rose from the conjoined outline of the Lupins. "Lucius isn't even pretending he can handle Draco on his own anymore. I wonder who—ahh." This as the mirror-shield dissipated, revealing the gloating features and black hair of Bellatrix Lestrange. "That makes sense, I suppose. Keeping things in the family."

Padfoot made a half-voiced remark or two about what his family could and should do to, for, with, and by themselves. Letha glanced sideways at him but made no other comment. Her hands rested on Neville and Meghan's shoulders where they stood in front of her, their fingers interlocked and trembling. Luna had taken a place beside Danger and was stroking the inside of her left arm absently as she watched the memory events unfold.

Lucius was now pulling Draco to his feet, having removed his wand from his hand and worked a nonverbal spell on him first, most likely binding him from changing forms. Bellatrix stood to one

side, clasping her hands under her chin as though sighing over a touching reunion between father and child. "Daddy's little boy, come home at last!" she crowed. "Won't our Master be happy for us! Finally come to your senses, have you, Draco dearie?" She sniffled theatrically, blinking back tears. "If only my darling Cissy had lived to see it..."

Draco met his aunt's eyes squarely. "My mother died ashamed of you," he said with a hint of a snarl in his voice. "Ashamed of what you, and she, had done and become in your precious *Master's* name."

"Tsk-tsk." Bellatrix shook her head chidingly. "Such terrible lies they've told you. But never fear, you'll see the truth soon." She giggled once. "Lucius has the arrangements all ready..."

"So I do." Lucius stroked a hand down his son's face, pulling it away just in time as Draco snapped his teeth towards it. "Now, now, is that any way to behave? Though I suppose I should expect nothing less, from one reared up by the *Pack* ." He pronounced the word delicately, as he might speak a word for filth in a foreign tongue. "Let your lessons commence—now."

The sharp crack of flesh against flesh drew a spontaneous snarl from four or five Marauders simultaneously. Draco kept his face angled away from Lucius for a moment, holding the position into which the slap had thrown him. Then, deliberately, he turned back to look into the eyes so like his own.

Hermione hummed deep in her throat, her human version of an exultant catly growl, and heard Harry's soft laugh and Padfoot's sharp bark mingled with it. Lucius Malfoy, for one instant, had quailed before the child he wished to claim.

*I know it won't change anything, not in the end, but it does matter. It matters to us. Draco may have gone to this willingly, but that doesn't mean he's giving up.*

A bubble of hope swelled in her chest. If they could see where Lucius meant to take her twin, if they could get there first, or even slip in afterwards—

*Don't get ahead of yourself, Neenie, she cautioned silently, envisioning her own hand on the scruff of her furry neck. Watch and learn. And be sure he isn't being used as bait. Fox would not be happy with you for getting yourself captured trying to bring him home!*

But she still spent a few moments, while the memory-figures of the Death Eaters and their captive hurried through the Hogsmeade streets, imagining the stunned joy on Draco's face as she mewed quietly from a window ledge or wiggled her way out of a crack in the wall. *If we can follow him. If we can get there in time. If, if, if...*

Then she saw the figure waiting in the open field beyond the last houses of Hogsmeade, and her heart chilled.

Harry swore under his breath. "Blood-bond may work too well," he murmured in Moony's direction, watching as Lucius escorted Draco triumphantly through the small gathering of Death

Eaters and shoved him to his knees in front of Lord Voldemort himself. "I didn't know he was here."

"Would it have changed anything if you knew?" Moony's voice was calm, but his eyes were bleak. "You made the right decision, Harry. Don't second-guess yourself."

"I know, it's just..." Harry windmilled one hand, as though trying to catch a thought.

Danger lifted her head from Moony's shoulder and caught Hermione's eye. *Stop this*, she mouthed, pointing towards the memory-figures, now jeering at Draco as he straightened his back. *Just for a moment*.

Only too happy to comply, Hermione reclaimed Draco's chain for herself, blanking out the memory. The field at the edge of Hogsmeade vanished, the Den's Quidditch pitch returned, with the Pack and Pride still standing as they had been, everyone's attention on Harry.

"It's just what?" Moony asked, moving slightly sideways as Danger released him and turned to face Harry as well. Padfoot and Letha closed in from behind, stationing themselves at the other two corners of an imaginary square with Harry at its center. "What is it, Harry?"

Hermione caught her Pridemates' eyes and made a single, simple sign, a closing of her right fist and a small downward jerk. *Brace yourselves. Explosion coming...*

"That should have been me!" Harry burst out, thrusting a hand at the spot where Draco's memory figure had knelt before the Darkest wizard in a hundred years. "I'm the alpha, I'm the bloody Chosen One, I'm supposed to be facing this stuff, not pawning it off onto somebody else—don't you understand? *That should have been me!* "

"So you'd deprive Ginny of a brother and a husband, all in one night?" Letha's tones dripped sarcasm as Harry spun to face her. "Such devotion you show her. It's no wonder she adores you."

Harry's fists balled up at his sides. Letha smiled coolly, her own hands rising into readiness, open and deceptively relaxed. "Try it," she invited, flexing her knees once. "Just try it."

For two Knuts, Hermione thought, Harry would have done exactly that, but even the vicious grief-fueled anger she could smell boiling off him wasn't quite enough to override his native intelligence. Their Pack-mother was not only a former Hogwarts Beater, she was a qualified Healer, which meant she knew precisely where and how hard to hit for maximum pain with minimum effort.

*Besides, she helped train him. She helped train all of us. She knows our strengths, she knows our weaknesses, and she knows how to counter the one and exploit the other...*

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Harry finally growled, when he had enough control back to speak in a somewhat normal tone. "We swore an oath—'my life for yours'—"

"And was that oath binding only on you?" asked Danger softly, bringing Harry whipping around

again. "Did you tell everyone who spoke those words with you that you would be the only one who could ever pay that price? Or did you swear in equal shares with those on your right and your left, and bind yourself both to give and to receive that sacrifice?"

"Stop turning it around like this!" Harry shouted, the force of the sound making Hermione's throat ache in sympathy. "I'm not four years old anymore! Stop treating me like I'm some little brat throwing a tantrum to get attention because his brother did something right—"

"Stop acting like it, then," Padfoot interrupted.

Harry snarled under his breath and lunged at his godfather. Padfoot stepped neatly aside, swept Harry's legs out from under him, caught him by the shoulders as he fell, and dropped to the ground with him, pinning him handily.

Hermione fought to keep her smile fully hidden. *And everything about Letha helping to train us? Double for Padfoot.*

"He who fights angry," Padfoot said in a thoughtful tone as Harry writhed fruitlessly against his grip, "loses." He looked down at his godson, his voice hardening, taking on an edge of command. "Haven't we all lost enough for one night?"

A half-audible hiss burst from Harry, making Luna lean back in surprise. "That's not a nice thing to say at all," she confided in Hermione. "Though I suppose that's why he said it in Parseltongue."

"In—" Hermione cut herself off. *Later, later, ask about that later...*

"Finished?" said Padfoot without a change of expression, meeting Harry's glare levelly. "We can sit here as long as you like, I'm good for another hour at least."

Harry spat a few more swear words, in English this time, then exhaled a reluctant breath and let the tension flow out of his muscles. "I hate it when you're right too," he grumbled as Padfoot released him.

"I'm not too fond of it myself. Not when it happens like this." Padfoot sighed, his shoulders slumped. Hermione swallowed as she saw the sheen across the silver-gray eyes, but the tears did not fall. Instead, her Pack-father waited until Harry was sitting upright, then began to speak again.

"There is no greater love," he quoted, his voice soft, almost abstracted, "than to lay down one's life for a friend." A tiny, breathy laugh broke through the last word. "Or so we've been told. And by and large, I'd tend to agree. But even if there's nothing greater, there's one love that's just about equal to that one." He held out a hand to Harry, and after a long moment Harry took it. "And that's being the friend. Accepting that sacrifice, whether or not you think you're worth it. Knowing, without a shadow of a doubt, that you should have been the one taking the hit. Wishing, with all your heart, that you had been." He squeezed Harry's hand gently. "And going on with your life anyway. Because you know that's what they wanted you to do."

Neville had turned away, his shoulders arched defensively. Meghan was huddled against Letha, the older witch gently rubbing her daughter's back. Danger glanced behind her and beckoned Hermione closer, and after what felt like a week's worth of trying, Hermione managed to make her feet move. Her eyes were burning with unshed tears, her throat felt like someone had squeezed it in a fist—

"I hate this," she whispered, stumbling into Danger's offered hug and wrapping her arms around her sister-mother, feeling Moony embrace them both and hold on tightly. "I hate this so *much*, it isn't *right*, it isn't *fair* —"

"Love and war, Kitten." Moony stroked her hair back before kissing the skin thus exposed at her temple. "This would seem to be both of them. And we need to go on watching. I'm sorry," he raised his voice to carry over the various cries of protest and dismay, "but if there's something we can do, some way we can help, isn't it better to know sooner rather than later?"

*And if there isn't, the sooner we know that, the better as well...*

But this thought Hermione kept strictly to herself, making sure it was buried deeply before she passed Draco's chain around the circle once more. A quick thought, and they were again in the field outside Hogsmeade, watching Lord Voldemort draw his wand unhurriedly from his pocket. Draco's eyes fastened onto it, but Hermione thought only she or another of their Pack would have been able to see the fear in the silvery depths. *Stay strong*, she willed him, *don't crumble, we'll come for you, you know we will*—

One long-fingered hand darted out and caught Draco's left arm, drawing it smoothly upward and forward. The wand flicked once, and the plain black cloth of Draco's sleeve parted, revealing his pale forearm underneath.

Harry's curse blended with Meghan's "No!" and Hermione's own gasp as they realized simultaneously what was about to happen. Draco himself tensed, his eyes momentarily flooding with sick despair, but made no move to fight.

A spell so dark green it was almost black burst from the tip of Voldemort's wand and slashed across Draco's left arm, drawing a collective exhalation from the gathered Death Eaters. Draco's lips had all but disappeared and his other hand was clenched impossibly tight, but he remained silent, even as the light of the spell faded to reveal its results.

Sleek, sinuous, and stomach-turningly real, the skull and snake of the Dark Mark lay ineradicably branded upon Draco Black's skin.

"In the usual way of things, I would not grant the Mark to one so young," said Voldemort contemplatively, letting his wand's tip rest upon the center of the skull. Draco's breath hitched once, and Hermione had to press her hands against her mouth to stifle her own cry of pain. "Or so...untried. But I reward those who are faithful to me, and your father's faithfulness has been great. When he asked this one small favor of me in return, I could not find it in my heart to refuse him." The Dark Lord smiled thinly. "You are safe now, Draco, safe in the place where you truly

belong. For what I have Marked, I can always find again." He tapped Draco's cheek, just below the twin-scar, with a chiding finger. "No matter what may stand in my way."

Hermione's throat squeezed shut. Further around the circle, Harry's teeth were bared. Padfoot was muttering a three-sentence riff on a particularly rude set of words, while Meghan's eyes had gone as cold as her mother's on one side and as hard as Neville's on the other. Luna, oddly, looked almost triumphant, but Hermione's confusion at this was offset by the deep and abiding sorrow in her friend's scent.

*Maybe this fits something she's Seen, and couldn't make sense of until now...*

Danger stood with her head bowed, her hand tightly clasped around Moony's. He was clearly watching the scene for both of them, and his eyes, whirling blue-brown-blue too fast to track, darted to the left an instant before Hermione noticed the commotion at that edge of the memory herself. Draco, still paler than usual and keeping his eyes averted from his arm despite the newly repaired sleeve which hid the Mark, turned with the rest of the crowd to see what was going on.

Regal as a queen, the smallest of smiles on her face, Amanda Smythe walked between two Death Eaters, her lips curving further upwards for a brief second when she spied Draco. Her fingers fluttered, and Hermione blinked. "Was that..." she murmured in Luna's direction.

"Pride-sign?" Luna nodded matter-of-factly. "We don't really hide it, you know. Professor Dumbledore learned it just by watching us, and by knowing how we think. Amanda probably did the same thing. Though she had an advantage."

About to open her mouth to ask what kind of advantage Amanda might have had, Hermione thought better of it. If Luna thought she needed to know, Luna would tell her, and this night was already approaching the outer limits of her tolerance for strangeness.

*Especially when you add in the girl who used to sort-of date my brother telling him not to be afraid, that everything will be all right. How can it, when he's been captured and she's about to be killed?*

"And what is this?" Voldemort asked one of the Death Eaters flanking Amanda, looking her over with his red eyes. Her green ones sized him up in return without a trace of fear. "A prize from the night?"

"She..." The broad-shouldered Death Eater faltered, and Hermione had the impression he might be reddening with embarrassment under his mask. "She wanted to speak with you, my lord. She... insisted."

"Did she." Voldemort motioned the Death Eaters back, into a rough circle around him and Amanda. Lucius drew Draco into place beside him, one hand gripping Draco's arm loosely but with the promise of real force if Draco struggled. "Well, then, by all means, my insistent young friend. Speak."

Amanda dipped a curtsey so shallow it could be nothing but an insult. "As you wish," she said with the same smile playing about her lips. "My lord."

She drew a long breath and spoke.

Meghan shrieked. Neville's potion piece appeared like magic in his hand. Harry took a step back, his eyes widening in shock. Padfoot and Letha swore in counterpoint, Danger's head snapped up, and Moony frowned in concentration. Hermione froze the memory where it was, then blanked it out, returning Pack and Pride to the Den's Quidditch pitch once more. Luna, she noted with the single remaining corner of her mind which worked, didn't look surprised.

*It might have been nice if she'd warned the rest of us!*

"You thought Amanda had something to do with Alex's daughter, Ron told us." Padfoot shook his head like someone had hit him with a spell from behind. "Just offhand, I'd have to say he was right!" He looked sideways at Harry. "Or wasn't that—"

"No, that was Parseltongue." Harry slid his hands under his glasses to rub at his closed eyelids. "She's using an older style, but I can understand it." A tired laugh bubbled under his next sentences. "Mind you, that's just the words. I've got no idea where or how she could have learned the language itself!"

"Maybe she'll tell us." Luna waved a hand at the place where the memory-figures had stood. "And there's someone else we can ask, if we need to. But I think we ought to hear what Amanda had to say first. Hermione?"

"Yes, all right." Settling her feet into place, centering her weight above them, Hermione steadied herself, drawing down her nerves. Danger released Moony's hand and came to stand beside Hermione, opening her arms slightly to indicate a hug was available if wanted. Hermione stepped into the offered embrace and laid her head momentarily against the shoulder thus provided, though it wasn't as easy as it once had been. She hadn't realized until this moment how close she'd grown to her sister's height.

**Always my little love,** Danger murmured silently, touching the back of Hermione's hand with one finger, and Hermione sent back a wordless pulse of thanks before straightening up and summoning the memory stored in Draco's pendants yet again.

*Though I think I'll take it back, just a bit...*

Moony snickered, Letha's lips twitched, and Meghan and Luna both laughed out loud as the scene came into focus around them. Hermione had elected to bring it up at the exact moment Amanda's choice of language dawned on Lord Voldemort, and the mingling of shock and baffled fear on the snake-like features was every bit as wonderful as she had hoped it would be.

*Now we just need to get him to look like that a lot more often.*



"Ready, Harry?" she asked.

Blowing out a breath, Harry rolled his shoulders once. "Ready."

Hermione braced herself for still more strange twists to this night and told the memory to begin.

Harry's eyes half-closed in concentration as the torrent of Parseltongue poured from Amanda's lips. "A thousand years I have waited for this moment, Tom Marvolo Riddle, little cousin of mine," he translated in a monotone. "Can you conceive of that, you who say you wish to live forever? A thousand years of waiting and watching, of holding to hope when there seemed none. And now, here we stand. Face to face at last."

"So she *is* Alex's daughter," Meghan breathed. "But then how..."

Neville pressed her hand, shushing her, as Amanda and Harry both went on. "I had almost despaired, after so very long," the red-haired girl spoke in the language of snakes, Harry's voice filling in the English after each sentence. "But then the miracle occurred, a miracle which you brought about yourself—or perhaps I should say, which you brought *upon* yourself. You cast a fatal curse, attempting to kill a certain small child...and instead of striking home, that curse was turned back to you in all its power, and tore you from your body, casting you adrift as a wandering soul."

Letha had her arms tucked across her chest, her right hand rubbing her left elbow as she watched events unfold. Padfoot's brow was furrowed, his fingers flicking back and forth as though he were already writing down the scene before him, finding words to convey the restless rustling of black robes and the shocked whispers from behind white masks, the quivering stillness into which Lord Voldemort's features had fallen as Amanda continued to speak, the mixture of worry and exultation which lit Draco's face where he stood beside Lucius in the surrounding circle.

"Look on me now, cousin." Amanda spread her arms wide. "Do I remind you of the woman you killed that night? I should. For she was the end of your beginning, and I am the beginning of your end. If only you could see into the future, to see how pitiful your ambitions appear to those who will come after you..." She shook her head, smiling. "But your line has long forsaken that gift, and even if it returned to you this moment, you could not accept what it would show you."

"The greater gift of the Slytherin line," murmured Danger. "Not Parseltongue, but prophecy."

"But a true Heir of Salazar Slytherin, that you are indeed, *my lord!*" Amanda laughed, her hissing speech and Harry's translation both acquiring a sneering tone, as she planted her hands on her hips and tossed her hair scornfully. "True Heir of an oathbreaker, a murderer and a fool! Ambition is a fine trait in and of itself, striving for greatness is a virtue and not a vice—but if such striving becomes the sole object of a life, that life turns inward and feeds upon itself, and then looks outward only to consume others in its fruitless quest for fulfillment! When ambition is all in all, cousin mine, it is empty and dead by its very nature. But when ambition is guided by a noble soul, a loyal heart, a thoughtful mind...then, and *only* then, is true greatness achieved."

"You speak in riddles," Voldemort returned, also in Parseltongue, beginning to circle towards Amanda's right. She countered, matching him step for step. "Foolish wordplay, the games of children. But I am no child, whatever you may call me."

"I call you only what you are." Amanda ran her hands down the sides of her Hogwarts robes, smiling. "Not that you will understand that, not until far too late. And not that you will ever understand what I have tried to tell you here. But others may. Others *will* ." She lifted her head proudly, sending a tiny smile to Draco. "And by my father's loyalty and love, the long-hidden wisdom of my mother, and the courage of my beloved and of one who is yet to come, the House of Slytherin *will* be restored to its rightful place before this war is done." Green eyes closed for a moment, then opened, clear and calm and triumphant. "So come, little cousin, lift up your wand and speak the words. Take my life and free my soul. Let us begin your ending together."

"The only ending tonight," said Voldemort coldly in English, "is yours."

Too fast to follow, his wand was in his hand, trained on Amanda. "*Avada Kedavra!* "

Draco's eyes widened in horror, his lips moved in what might have been a shout, but the sound of rushing wind which accompanied the Killing Curse drowned it out. The backwards jab of his elbow impacted with Lucius's side at the exact moment the green spell struck Amanda full in the chest.

"Nice hit," Padfoot commented, watching Lucius double over. "He'll feel that one in the morning."

"And he's not feeling it now?" Moony returned as Draco wrenched himself free from Lucius's lax grip and bolted to Amanda's side, dropping down beside her, lifting her limp form in his arms, holding her against him and bending low, his lips moving as if he spoke the secrets he had waited too long to divulge—

Hermione halted the memory, moved it back a few seconds, and wiped out all the extraneous people from its purview. Only the image of Draco remained, kneeling on the ground before them, cradling the lifeless body of a girl he'd loved, but the words he breathed were not meant for her.

*He knew we'd find Amanda's body. Maybe not the Pack, not immediately, but someone who knows us, who would recognize a set of pendants and a dagger for what they are. And he knew the Death Eaters wouldn't bother with her, not after their Master had killed her. So he left us his pendants in plain view of everyone who would have wanted what he hid in them, and he was able to give us this one last message as well...*

"I love you all," Draco whispered as Hermione began the memory playback for what would surely be the final time. "I'll miss you so much. But it won't be for that long—I should get where I'm going by the time Captain and Wolf come of age, shouldn't I?" A breathless laugh, as the tears brimming in his eyes threatened to overflow. "Take care of each other. And whatever you do, don't try to go after me, and don't let me come home if it looks like I've escaped. Because it won't..." A brief shudder swept him. "It won't be me. Not really. I'm begging you, don't let them do that to me. Don't let them use me to hurt you, to betray you. *Please.* " He glanced over his shoulder. "I

have to go. I'm sorry. Luna...don't do anything too crazy?"

He bent forward over Amanda, as though unable to hide his grief any longer.

On the sound of a quiet sob, the memory ended.

Only when Hermione's vision blurred did she realize Draco hadn't been the only one crying.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," she whispered hoarsely, as Moony drew her close and held her against him. "Why does it have to be like this? Why?"

"Because we dared to love, and love greatly." Moony rested his cheek against the top of her head. "And because the only other way is to never feel anything at all."

*I almost wish I didn't.* Hermione buried her face in Moony's robes. *I almost wish he'd never been ours. That he really did belong where he is now. Then no one would have to grieve for him. He'd be home, and we'd be happy...*

*Except we wouldn't, not the way we should.* Deliberately, she filled her mind with her Fox's wicked smile when he was about to make a bad joke, with his love of being watched while doing what he did best, with his gleeful laughter when someone had fallen for his pranks and with his rapt absorption as he played his music. *He was one of us. He belonged to us. We loved him. And not even missing him for the rest of my life will be enough to make me wish he'd never been there.*

*Though it may come close.*

And then there were only tears, and Moony's arms to hold her safely through them.

---

Draco had always considered the phrase "cried oneself to sleep" to be poetic overstatement, maudlin sentimentality, or some mixture of the two.

*And now I know better, don't I.*

Sitting up, he looked around. Long practice allowed him to pick out the small clues which told him the pretty, forest-surrounded meadow in which he sat was a dreamscape, but he'd still take it over his present reality.

*Especially because...* A testing finger brushed lightly across the surface of his left forearm. *Sure enough, no Mark.*

*Though I do seem to have brought something else with me.*

Amused, he tossed the sockball into the air once or twice, then tucked it into the pocket of his Hogwarts robes and got to his feet. He hadn't consciously decided to enter a dreamworld tonight, and though he could have done so unintentionally, he was leaning more towards one of the other possibilities.

*Like a certain pair of female relatives of mine, who share that particular power with me, and might just want to take a chance on seeing me again?*

He frowned. *Though just because I can't see the Mark, that doesn't mean it's not there. I hope they can't get any bleedover from it, if this really is them...*

Turning to survey his surroundings more thoroughly, he stopped.

The person standing behind him was neither female nor related to him, but did answer the question of "who" and "how".

*While raising a whole boatload of others in the process!*

"Evening, Alex," he said.

"Evening, Fox." Alex had his hands in his pockets of his own robes, a darker shade of green than the grassy color he most often wore. "I'd ask how you're doing, but even I'm not quite that dumb."

"Pity." With an effort, Draco kept his tone light. "And here I was in the mood to scream at somebody."

"We might still get to that, but later." Alex smiled slightly. "Actually, I'm here to make good on a promise. Back before Halloween, alley behind the Pepper Pot?"

"Back before—oh, right. Amanda." Draco exhaled between his teeth. "Since when does she speak Parseltongue? You told me she wasn't a ghost—"

"She wasn't." Alex swirled two fingers in a graceful curve, and a chair appeared behind Draco. Another swirl, backwards to the first, produced one for himself. "I can't explain too much, it touches on the things you pulled out of your head with that jewel, but my daughter never truly died. Her spirit was bound to the world, neither living nor dead, until she found the answer she was looking for. At which point she located a body which wasn't otherwise being used, and got her second chance." He shut his eyes, looking overwhelmed, as though a pain he'd never dared acknowledge had suddenly been healed. "And it worked. It *worked*. I never thought she'd really manage it..."

"Manage *what*?" Draco thought he was doing well not to shout the question, given how many others were lined up behind it, trying to shove their way out of his mouth. "What exactly did she accomplish by walking out there, spouting off her little oration, and then just letting him *kill* her?"

"Well, you see..." Alex broke off, looking very relieved, as another figure materialized at the edge of the woods. "Took you long enough," he said, standing up and conjuring another chair beside his own. "I thought I was going to have to start this thing off by myself!"

"Would I be that cruel to you?" asked the red-haired woman Draco had seen in Alex's portrait in the Den a few times, laughing through her words as she took her seat and arranged her dark blue robes neatly around her. "Hello, Draco, remember me?"

"It's Anne, isn't it?" Draco smiled a little. "You sang for me that one time, and said you didn't make a very good man."

"Which I don't." Anne folded her hands in her lap. "But I am a fairly passable storyteller, if I do say so myself. And Amanda's story is one I know very well." Her answering smile was soft, wistful, ancient with sorrow. "I was her mother."

"You were—" Draco looked from one to the other of his companions, suspicions rising in his mind. "But then you'd have to have been—"

"Alive a thousand years ago?" Anne finished. "I was. Not quite the first Muggleborn to study at Hogwarts, but certainly among the earliest of them. I saw it all happen, from perhaps a closer vantage point than I really wanted." She grinned briefly at Alex, who nudged his shoulder against hers in reply. "But that's a very long story indeed, and you wanted to hear about our daughter. About Amanda." Her grin turned wicked. "Though I see no reason you should have to suffer through it alone."

Draco was taking a breath to ask what this meant when he caught a new scent in the air, one which tightened his throat and made his heart stutter painfully. *Female—not too young—related to me—Merlin's blood, did they really—*

The chair on which he sat stretched into a loveseat just in time, as Danger tumbled around the edge of it and caught Draco into one of her patented mother hugs. He clung to her without shame, feeling the prickle of more tears in his eyes.

*I thought I was never going to get to say goodbye...*

"Why can't this be real?" he whispered.

"Silly Fox." Danger kissed the top of his ear. "It's as real as we make it."

"How did I know you were going to say that," Draco muttered, and felt his Pack-mother's answering laugh. "Did you find my pendants?"

"We did, and listened to Amanda's story, or the parts of it she was able to tell. Which, I'll admit, made me quite curious myself." Danger angled the last sentence away from Draco. "So I'm guessing I'm here to report back to everyone else, so you don't have to tell it twice?"

"That's one reason." Anne's tone was light, inconsequential. "Let me know when you're ready."

"How about it, love?" Danger bent low over Draco to murmur the words. "Do you need more time?"

*Oh, only about seventy years or so...* "No, I'm ready." Draco pushed himself upright and turned to face Alex and Anne, though Danger's arm was still around him and he did not try to remove it. "Whenever you are."

"Very well." Anne sat back in her chair, her eyes growing distant. "My father was born in a sunny southern land, a short-legged, short-sighted, short-tempered man with a lust for travel and a gift for healing. A trading ship it was that brought him first to the shores of England, but a dreamy-eyed storyteller maid was the one who kept him here, for he wanted her from the moment he first saw her, with her hair all wet from the lake where she'd just bathed..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 27: And He Almost Deserved It (Year 6)

(A/N: BYOT, and I disclaim one quoted line near the middle of the chapter. Also, please read the bottom author's note for exciting news!)

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### Chapter 27: And He Almost Deserved It

Harry leaned against the foot of one of the pillars of Sanctuary, watching his yearmates file past him from the harbor cavern entrance. The baffled, shocked looks on people's faces as they whispered together told him the news of the losses in Hogsmeade had already made the rounds.

*I only wish we had some way to send ungarbled messages as fast as gossip gets around this school...*

Behind him, Hermione sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes roving over the small crowd, ticking off names against the list Harry knew she had in her head. Luna was rubbing the base of her left ring finger, her face abstracted as she stared at a spot high on the wall to her right. Meghan's eyes still glistened, but she'd sniffled back her tears and come obediently out of Letha's arms when Neville's glance at his watch upstairs in the Den had reminded Harry this night wasn't, couldn't be, over yet.

*No matter how much we wish it was.*

Without being told, the yearmates had sorted themselves out by House as they'd done a year ago tonight, each group standing at a compass point, a few last whispers dying away into quiet. The night was clear and starry overhead, a waning crescent moon lending a feeble illumination to the Hogwarts crest over Harry's shoulder.

Across from him, under the darkened silhouette of the castle, a door in one of the pillars opened, and Ron and Ginny stepped out, hand in hand. They glanced around, exchanged a few words, then squeezed hands and let go, Ron starting along the edge of the cavern towards the somber group of Gryffindors, Ginny moving without hesitation towards its center. Harry pushed off the wall to join her there, and they met in the middle of Sanctuary, clasping hands for a moment, love, comfort, grief eddying in their shared scent.

"Let me?" Ginny mouthed, her eyes darting back and forth. Harry nodded and squeezed her hands once, then backed away a step or two, silently ceding the floor to his mate.

*If she's got an idea how to start this, so much the better.*

Ginny began to pace a small circle, bringing her around to face each House in turn. "We stand here tonight," she said when she had completed one circuit, "to honor the keeping of a promise."



The words, spoken quietly but with passion, resounded clearly off Sanctuary's walls, dropping one by one into the thick silence as she continued to walk. "That promise was made a year ago, in this place, by those of us who are here tonight, and by others."

She swallowed once, her eyes gleamed bright, but her voice, though hoarse, was steady. "By others who are not here tonight, who cannot be here—but that is not because they broke their given word. They are not here because they *kept* the promise they had made, and kept it beyond anything we could have asked of them."

She paused in her walk, facing the northwest corner of the cavern, looking between Ravenclaws and Slytherins. "Amanda Smythe died tonight because she spoke the truth to *Lord* Voldemort," she said, infusing the title with scorn. "She refused to pander to his absurd fantasy that because he is the Heir of Salazar Slytherin, he has a right to claim all Slytherins as part of his twisted cause." She swept her hand around to indicate Blaise, Graham, Selena, and Artemis. "You, our yearmates, who have used your desire for greatness to bring this Sanctuary from an idea to a reality, *you* are the truth of Slytherin House. We claim you as our own, and what is ours, we defend. As Amanda did, tonight." She lifted her face to the stars. "We will not forget."

"We will not forget," rumbled the response from the yearmates, soft, tentative, overlapping, but gaining paradoxical strength for all its uncertainty.

"George Weasley, my brother, died tonight." Ginny returned to her walk, though her voice had thickened and her eyes half-shut against tears. "He was fighting for the same reason this Sanctuary was built. To defend the innocent against senseless destruction and death. We will not forget."

"We will not forget," echoed the yearmates, more strongly, more together. Harry felt Wolf's soft growl of approval in the back of his mind.

"Draco Black, my Pridemate. My friend." Ginny stopped facing the Gryffindors this time, sweeping her eyes slowly across them. "He was on a mission tonight with two other members of this year, a mission which will help us win the war. And when they returned to Hogsmeade and discovered the battle in progress there, he made the choice that the successful completion of that mission mattered more than his life, more than his freedom. He deliberately allowed himself to be captured, so that his teammates could reach safety with their objective." Her hands, at her sides, clenched into fists. "We will not forget."

"We will not forget." The response rang off the walls, fierce, clipped, together.

"No, we will not forget." Ginny lifted her fists, squaring her shoulders, turning in place to include the whole year in her final words. "What we will do instead is *fight*. In their names, and in our own. In the names of everyone ever killed, ever wounded, ever left behind to grieve. In their names we will fight this war, and in their names we will *win* !"

The wordless shout of approval shook the very ceiling with its power.

Harry stepped up beside Ginny, trading quick smiles with her as she took the place he'd vacated.

"Please raise your right hand," he said, leading by example. "Have you, students of Hogwarts gathered here, kept your sworn oath to show good fellowship in word and deed to each other since a year ago today, the first of May?"

"We have," came the answer, sure and fast.

"Have you kept your oath to work with the other members of this fellowship on the task we began that night, the task of creating this Sanctuary?"

"We have."

"Have you kept your oath to never knowingly betray this fellowship to anyone who intends it harm, and to guard with all your might against doing so unknowingly?"

"We have."

"So we spoke, so we intended." Harry glanced up at the stars and wondered which of the Founders might be listening now. "And so we have now done." He lowered his hand. "The year is over."

"Is that it, then?" asked Susan Bones after a few moments of murmuring among the yearmates. "The spell's broken?"

"Should be." Harry moved a few paces closer to her. "Why not try it?"

Susan drew her wand and pointed it at him. "*Aperio sanguinis!*"

A half-hearted little tingle ran down Harry's arms, but no light appeared around him, purple, blue, or red. "That would seem to be a yes," he said, and against all odds, found a smile coming to his face. "Looks like we did something right. Thank you, everyone."

The sudden round of applause made him jump, which movement added laughter to the mix of noise echoing and reechoing inside the main cavern of Sanctuary.

The quiet sound of rock grating against rock went unnoticed.

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Sirius looked up at the ceiling of the Hogwarts Den's main room. "Correct me if I'm wrong," he said to Aletha, pointing at the large hole in its center, "but that wasn't there before."

"You're not wrong." Aletha half-closed her eyes, concentrating. "Sanctuary," she said after a few moments, opening her eyes again. "It goes to Sanctuary. Which probably means somebody spoke the password there without realizing it."

"Hmm." Sirius walked over to stand under the hole and peered up into it. "Think I should give it a go?"

Aletha chuckled a little. "Are you just asking because you think it will be fun to ride the big fast

slide?"

"Hey, the importance of fun should never be underrated. But I've actually got a reason this time." Sirius glanced towards the red bedroom, into which Remus had carried Danger when it became apparent her unexpected nap was going to last a while. "We took a hard hit tonight, Letha. Harder on the cubs, I think, especially the older ones. They were *there*. And I'm about as proud of them as I could possibly be, given how well they stood up to it, but once it really hits home what happened tonight, it's going to be bad."

"And you want to be sure someone's nearby for them when it starts." Aletha got to her feet. "I'll start getting the place ready, then, shall I?"

---

Harry heaved a sigh as Blaise and Colleen, the last two yearmates who were not also Pride, disappeared into the passage leading up to the fourth floor mirror. "Splitting the difference between their dorms, I guess," he said. "Or maybe they know a couple passages that start near there."

"Does it matter?" Hermione had her eyes shut, her fingers twisted tightly in her lap. "I don't want to stay here right now. I want...I don't know what I want. Except for this whole night to have been a bad dream, maybe."

Ron touched her shoulder. "Come on," he said when she opened her eyes, holding out his hand. "I'll walk you back to the Den."

"Short walk." Neville pointed across Sanctuary. "Look who's here."

"Dadfoot!" Meghan bolted across the cavern towards her father. "Dadfoot, we did it, the spell's broken, nobody can ever use it again—"

"Can't keep that girl down," Harry murmured to himself as Ron and Hermione followed where Meghan had led. Luna had slipped out with the rest of the year, bound on some errand of her own, about which Harry was sure he ought to be more curious than he was, but all his curiosity, like his energy, seemed to have been sapped away by the competing emotions of the night.

*We did it. We finished the year, we built Sanctuary, we broke the spell. And it only cost us two lives—three, Draco might as well be dead as captured, I'm pretty sure he'd prefer it—and I'm supposed to get married in a few hours, but how are we supposed to go on with it when—*

"Don't you even *think* about it, Harry Potter."

"Bwuh?" said Harry intelligently, yanked out of his thoughts by Ginny's furious voice. She was standing nose to nose with him, staring him down, and a back corner of his mind noted that her freckles almost glowed when she was angry.

"Don't you even *think* about postponing the wedding, or canceling it. I am not going to let the

Death Eaters win that way. You know perfectly well what Draco would say about it, or George—" Ginny gulped once, but temper won out over tears. "We're fighting this war so that people like us can have their lives, aren't we? And what are we if we're *not* 'people like us'? Our enemies don't get to dictate what I do, not even this much of it, and I *am* going to be your wife before this day is over, Harry James Potter, or else!"

"Yes, ma'am." Harry had intended the words to come out jokingly, jauntily, but instead they just sounded weary and worn. "Ginny, I'm sorry, I don't mean—"

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be pushing." Ginny closed the half-step distance between them, sliding her arms around him. "Harry, if you can't go through with it today, if you don't want to, tell me so. I just thought—"

"You thought right." Harry held her against him, breathing her scent, treasuring her shape and her strength. "And you are right. We shouldn't let them mess with us that way. I just... I'm tired, Gin, I'm so tired right now, but I can't sleep, if I sleep, I'll dream, and you know what that's going to be like..."

"Nothing says you can't rest, though. And you need rest." Ginny tipped her head back and kissed him on the cheek. "Go on with Mr. Padfoot, he's waiting for you. We'll take care of things until you're back up and running."

"Are you sure?" Harry looked down at her, guilt niggling around the edges of his vast relief. "You didn't exactly get off free on the night—"

Ginny's eyes sheened over, but she shook her head. "I had my time falling apart already," she said, managing a little, sad smile. "So did Mum. We'll both have more, that's how it works, but this needs doing now. So we'll do it." She tightened her arms around him once, then released him and pushed him gently in Padfoot's direction, near the other end of Sanctuary. "You've been the strong one long enough tonight, Harry. Go get what you need. We'll manage until you get back."

Harry thought for a moment about objecting again, but his feet seemed to have minds of their own, as they were already carrying him towards Padfoot, and it was less bother just to let the rest of his body go along for the ride. He was rounding the side of one of the undecorated pillars of Sanctuary, seeing the unlit fireplace which had materialized there, with a hole in the carvings to its right—he was sliding through a tunnel he'd never seen before, but one which bore a striking resemblance to several others he used on a regular basis—he was tumbling out of the ceiling of the main room of the Hogwarts Den, even with a padded floor, this was going to hurt—

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," said Letha's calm voice, and Harry felt himself caught by her spell and wafted to one side of the spot where he would have landed, the magic setting him gently down atop a pile of cushions. "Who's after you?"

"Hermione, I think Hermione. Could be Pearl." Harry glanced around at the mounds of pillows and blankets which had appeared since he'd left for Sanctuary, the familiar-looking pajamas piled near the door to the red bedroom, the small stack of books sitting outside the library, and felt a wash of

mingled thankfulness and pain so strong his throat closed on it.

*It's a den-night. We're going to have a den-night. Because we're Pack, and that's what we do, what we need, when we're hurt.*

*Even when having it hurts a little itself, because one of the people who should be here, won't.*

Setting these thoughts aside, he got to his feet and started across the room to collect his pajamas, skirting the floor below the hole, where Letha was just levitating Hermione to the same soft landing spot she'd used a few moments before for Harry himself. "Where's Danger and Moony?" he asked, picking up his own nightwear and draping it over his arm, then scooping up Hermione's as well. "Did they get called out for something?"

"Not exactly." Letha still had her eyes on the hole in the ceiling, but the tone in her voice made Harry look at her sharply. His Pack-mum didn't play pranks as often as Padfoot or Moony, or even Danger, but when she did, she went all-out.

*What's she planning—or did she already do it?*

Tossing Hermione's nightgown at her, he ducked into the bathroom to change. By the time he came out, buttoning his pajama top, Meghan and Padfoot had both arrived, and the hole in the Den's ceiling had sealed itself again.

"The password from Sanctuary is the same as the one from the Room of Requirement," Meghan told him, spreading out her armful of books in front of Padfoot. "'Thank you, everyone.' Because it leads to the main room, where everyone can be."

"Thank you, First Mate Obvious." Harry grinned at Meghan's baffled look. "Well, you're not the Captain, are you? You just hang around him a lot."

"Ooooohhh—" Meghan stuck out her tongue at him, making Hermione stifle a giggle in her hand, and for one instant the world was the way it ought to be.

*I know it won't last, but that's all the more reason we need it now.*

The door to the red bedroom opened, and Moony came in, already dressed in his own pajamas. "Is everyone ready out here?" he inquired, leaving the door ajar. Past him, Harry could see Danger curled up on the bed, one of her hands outstretched as though she were holding onto something.

*Or is that someone?*

"Ready for what?" Harry asked out loud, sitting down beside Padfoot, who had selected a book with a painting of a ship on its front cover. "Starting den, or something else?"

"There is that." Moony took a seat by the wall, a small, satisfied smile on his face. "But we thought, since it's such a special night, that we ought to have a special sort of den. Go back to our beginnings, as it were, before we move on."

Under her breath, Letha began to hum. Harry tried to listen, to catch the tune, but found himself yawning too hard to hear it.

*But I know I know it. It's something important, something that's ours, something that matters to us*

---

The walls of the Hogwarts Den blurred around him as he recognized the song. It was his own lullaby, the one Letha had written for him just after he'd been born, before there had ever been such a thing as a Pack or a Pride, or a Den, any of the Dens.

*But they're not taking us that far back, I don't think.* He might not be a dreamsculptor himself, but Harry recognized the feeling of a dreamscape being built around him. *Unless I'm wrong—*

Walls, ceiling, floor solidified around him. He was sitting in a room he hadn't seen with his waking eyes for nearly ten years.

*I'm not wrong.*

Nor was he alone. Even as Harry watched, his Packmates materialized around him, sounds of surprise and pleasure filling the air as one by one they recognized the setting of this dream.

"It's the den room." Hermione looked around in awe, her eyes shining. "The very first den room we ever had, the one at the London Den. The only thing missing is—"

She broke off with a gasp as she saw the person standing in the small hallway which led from the kitchen and front room.

"Am I late?" asked Draco, smiling at his twin.

Harry dropped back a step or two, simultaneously clearing a path for Hermione and Meghan to charge at Draco and bringing himself closer to Moony. "Is this safe?" he murmured, sitting down. "I know Fox didn't *want* the Mark, but he's still got it, and if Voldemort can trace it—"

"Into a dream filled with, and powered by, the very thing he understands least in the world?" Moony returned in the same soft tone, watching his daughter and goddaughter clinging tightly to their brother, who returned the favor unabashed. "I find it unlikely. But even should he try, we're covered." He flicked his eyes upwards. "By someone who, shall we say, outranks Mr. Riddle in a certain area in which he takes great pride."

*Takes great pride—but what Voldemort's proudest of is being the Heir of Slytherin, so that must mean—*

"He owes us, Draco in particular, something of a debt at the moment, and giving us this night is how he's chosen to pay it," Moony added. "But we'll cover that when it comes time for stories. Meanwhile..." He caught Padfoot's eye and nodded, as the girls and Draco found themselves a nook near the fireplace. Harry made his way across the floor to join them, squeezing Draco's hand tight in passing.

"Be welcome, all, to this den-night," said Padfoot formally, as Danger slipped in through the archway hidden in the wall and sat down beside Moony. "We are Pack now. Pack together."

"Pack forever," answered seven voices in chorus.

"Who will tell a story?" Danger took up her words. "Who will remind us of what it means to be Pack?"

"I think you have the most important one," said Letha, looking pointedly from Danger to Draco and back again. "Care to explain how you're pulling *this* one off?"

Draco sighed. "It's complicated," he began.

"When isn't it?" Padfoot chuckled. "You know the drill, Fox. Words of one syllable wherever possible."

"Right." Draco twisted a bit of his pajama top between his fingers. "Well, I suppose it starts with Amanda, and who and what she really was..."

---

Luna stepped out of the fire just in time to stop her father from stepping into it.

"Sweetheart!" Gerald caught his daughter into a tight hug. "I'd only just heard, I was on my way to Hogwarts to find you—oh, love, I'm so sorry, Draco and George and your friend Amanda, all in one night—"

"It's going to be all right, Daddy." Luna held onto her father for a moment, then released him and looked earnestly into his face. "At least I think it is. But I need your help."

"Anything I can do, love. You know that."

"Can we go up on the roof?" Luna looked around at the comfortable clutter with which she'd grown up. "I want to see the sky."

"Of course."

"I understand Amanda much better now," Luna began when father and daughter were settled together on the small, weatherproof loveseat Gerald kept on the flat roof of the Landing Zone. "She really was Alex Slytherin's daughter, you know. Salazar Slytherin's granddaughter."

Gerald frowned. "Wouldn't that have made her nearly a thousand years old?"

"It did, and it didn't." Luna tucked her legs up under her. "You see, she lived her life back then, and it looked as if she died normally. Only she didn't. She couldn't, because her family was cursed when she was a little girl, and when she was about my age, the curse forced her to make a terrible choice. She could save her brother, or she could save the boy she was going to marry. Or she could have saved them both, but doing that would have killed her. And she only had a split second to

decide."

"What did she choose?" Gerald asked quietly.

"She saved herself and her love. Which meant her brother died." Luna rubbed a hand along the crescent moon scar on the inside of her left arm. "And that tore her soul apart, so even when her body died, she couldn't go on. But she wasn't quite a ghost either. She still had another chance, a chance to try again and make things right. All she needed was a body, a living body without any soul inside it." Her hands sketched a human outline in the air. "She found one around the time I was a baby, from a little Muggle girl who'd died but had her heart started again. Muggles can do that when people have accidents, you know, and sometimes they're quick enough that the soul hasn't left the body when they do it, so the person can live again. But this little girl's soul had already gone on."

"So Amanda could have the body for her own without anyone being harmed by it." Gerald nodded. "Was she attracted to Draco because he was like the boy she'd loved when she lived the first time, then? I think you told me they're related somehow."

"Yes, that's exactly why." Luna leaned her head against her father's shoulder. "And that boy, Dafydd, he stayed near the world as well, and he was able to use Draco to speak to Amanda. To tell her what she needed to know, how to turn the curse and heal her soul after all this time. But it couldn't have happened if Draco hadn't been who he is. If it weren't for the Pack."

"They do seem to help people a great deal," Gerald agreed. "But it's sounding to me like Amanda's story is over now, love. What is it you need my help with?"

"Amanda's story is over." Luna looked up at the waning moon. "But someone else's isn't. Her Heir, now that it's safe for her to have one again, with the curse turned away from her line." She glanced back at her father, smiling at the mingled shock and delight on his face. "I know who her Heir's going to be, Daddy, and that's the person who'll need your help. But we have to set it up just right, so nobody finds out about it too soon..."

---

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Sirius made a time-out gesture in the air. "Artifacts that can pass on a bloodline? Since when?"

Harry coughed, drawing people's eyes. "Look familiar?" he said, dangling his pendants in the air, a tiny gold locket hanging outside the four medallions.

"All right, point," Sirius conceded. "But you and Moony made that thing to order, right there and then. Consent on both sides, blood freely given—"

"Amanda would have consented to give her blood, if she was the one making the artifact," said Meghan, curled against Draco's hip. "And didn't you say," she craned her neck to look up at Draco, "that there had to be consent from the person who takes the artifact, or it won't work?"



Draco nodded. "They have to fully understand what they're doing, and consciously consent to it," he said. "And they can't have any strong reservations. Little doubts and worries are fine, but if they don't actually want to be adopted into the bloodline, it won't take on them."

"So that's why Alex said we'd find an Heir of his, even though his line died out." Hermione shook her head in wonder. "Because his Heir doesn't exist yet—not as the Heir, I mean," she added. "The person who *will* be the Heir exists, whoever they are. But they haven't found Amanda's artifacts, or used them." She frowned doubtfully. "Have they?"

"No," said Danger and Draco in chorus, then grinned at each other. Draco inclined his head, yielding the floor, and Danger continued. "There are a lot of things about this whole situation Alex and Anne weren't allowed to tell us, but that was one they could. The artifacts haven't been used, and a good thing, too. If they had been, before tonight, the curse would have gone active on the new bloodline just like it was on the old one. But because they hadn't been, Amanda was able to use the traces of the curse that lingered on her soul to make her the willing sacrifice that turned it away. And, just for a bonus, she was finally able to forgive herself for her brother's death and heal the damage it did to her soul."

"So she'll be able to go on." Remus nodded. "I'm glad of that, for her sake and for her parents'." He glanced across at Draco. "Her story cuts a bit close to home just now."

"It...might not be as bad as we're all thinking," Draco said slowly. "Still nothing I'm looking forward to, mind, but one of the other things they were able to tell us, Alex and Anne, was that there's still some lingering protective magic around me. Not enough to keep this from happening in the first place, obviously, but I'll take whatever I can get." He squeezed Hermione's hand, smiling at her. "Very much including tonight."

"And on that note, all in favor of setting aside business for the time being?" said Letha, and ceremoniously counted raised hands. "Eight for, none against. Motion carried. Sirius, if you would?"

"Right." Sirius opened up the book he'd selected in the Hogwarts Den, which Danger had faithfully reproduced in her dreamworld, and leaned back against the wall while the rest of the Pack disposed themselves for listening, letting the familiar sights and sounds lull him for a few precious moments into believing this night was entirely ordinary.

*Because we never prize the ordinary enough, not until it's gone.*

Taking a deep breath, he began to read.

"There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb..."

---

Harry stood outside one of the rooms on the lower level of the Astronomy Tower, already in his dress robes, his hair as tidy as it ever got. Through the window on the opposite wall of the landing, he could see the sky just starting to brighten.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered, and knocked.

Luna answered the door, her simple gown and the small bunch of roses she held both matching the dark red beads in the triangle of silver links she wore across the back of her right hand. "Come in, Harry," she said, stepping aside.

"What, no argument?" Harry slipped past her into the room, nodding to Professor Dumbledore, who was standing to his left, watching the two people by the window on the Tower's other side. "I thought you'd quote me that old thing about not seeing the bride before the ceremony on the wedding day..."

He stopped in place as the full effect of what Dumbledore was looking at finally got through to his brain. "I. Er. Wow."

"That's Harry for 'you look fantastic'," Neville informed Ginny, brushing a finger along the outer curve of a rose. "There. Now they'll stay just like they are through the ceremony."

"Thanks, Captain." Ginny kissed her fingertips and tapped Neville on the cheek with them, then faced Harry, lifting the bouquet she held in her hands to chest level. "What do you think?" she asked softly, as Neville stepped past Luna and started up the stairs towards the Tower's top.

Harry wasn't sure he could complete a coherent thought, much less a sentence. A crown of roses lay atop Ginny's hair, which flowed sleek and shining over her shoulders, robed in some rich, smooth fabric the color of cream. The dress was caught in at the waist by a belt of twisted gold and silver, matching both her pendants, which lay above the gently curving neckline, and the earrings he'd given her himself. The bouquet in her hand, like the crown on her head, was the warm golden pink of the roses Neville had bred especially for this day.

"How am I supposed to remember what to say?" he finally managed to ask.

Ginny frowned. "Why wouldn't you?"

"Because." Harry moved a little to one side, getting a new angle on the vision, as Luna shut the door at the sound of voices from outside. "The only thing I can think of is how beautiful you are."

"I. Er." Ginny blushed, the color starting just above the neckline of her dress and flowing upwards to her face. "Wow."

Luna was regarding the door with a thoughtful expression. "I'd thought Muggles needed special spells to come to Hogwarts," she remarked.

"They do," said Professor Dumbledore, smiling faintly. "In this circumstance, a spell I was happy to provide. The bride, after all, should rule on her wedding day." He inclined his head to Ginny.

"Who—" Harry cut himself off. "Crystal," he said with certainty. "You asked Crystal to come."

"Yes, I did." Ginny began to bristle. "And if you're going to make a fuss about it—"

"I was going to say I'm glad you thought of it," Harry interrupted her. "If anyone deserves to be here today, she does."

Ginny subsided. "I need to calm down, don't I?" she asked, shaking her head. "I'm sorry. I guess I've just got last-minute nerves."

"Last-minute nerves? You?" Harry loaded his tone with incredulity. "You're only getting married. Before you're even sixteen, mind you. What could there possibly be to get nervous about in that?"

"Nothing," said Ginny with a smile, tucking her bouquet into the crook of one arm. "Because every time I start getting nervous, I think about who I'm getting married to . And that takes all the nerves away." She snapped her fingers. "Just like that."

Harry felt himself flush in his turn. "You asked to see me, Professor?" he said, turning a little desperately to Dumbledore. "Here, before the ceremony?"

"I did, Harry, for two reasons. Firstly, to congratulate you on your success last night, and to give you my deepest sympathies for what it cost." Dumbledore's eyes were unusually grave behind his half-moon spectacles. "I will not insult you by saying I understand what you feel, but I thank you for being able to make that choice."

Not trusting himself to speak, Harry only nodded. *Getting thanked for leaving my brother behind...can this day get any more messed up?*

"Secondly, I wished to give you my gifts a bit early." Dumbledore dipped his hand into his pocket and came out with two small items, gleaming gold twined around matte black. "One for each of you, to be worn on the chain with your pendants. If you will."

"Of course, Professor." Ginny held out her bouquet to Luna, who came to collect it, and joined Harry in front of Dumbledore, each of them accepting a tiny, heart-shaped cage made of twisted gold wire, in which resided—

"A rock?" Harry said doubtfully, peering through the wire. "Or, no." He looked over at Ginny's. "It's half a rock. Half for each of us. Because...we're putting our lives together? We won't be whole without each other?"

"Half a rock is still a rock." Ginny traced the jagged surface of her stone with a finger, inserted through the twists of wire. "But there's a design on it. And *that* won't be whole unless we put ours together."

Harry turned his little cage over to see the markings Ginny meant. "It looks like it would be a circle inside a triangle," he said, trying to visualize the two halves placed side by side. "And the whole stone would be circular too, but flat."

"Indeed it would," said Dumbledore with another of his faint smiles. "The circle, as you know, symbolizes both eternity and completion. In this context, the length of the love I wish you may

hold for one another, and what I hope you will bring to each other's lives. The triangle, by contrast, is to remind you not to become too caught up in one another, for two lines, no matter how they are joined, will collapse onto one another without the bracing of a third."

"Thank you, sir." Harry extracted his pendants from under his robes and slid the loop at the top of his wire cage onto the chain, on the other side of the medallions from his blood-bond locket. "We'll remember."

"Though with the Pride, the Pack, and my family around, I don't think we'll have too much time to get obsessed with each other," Ginny added, slipping her own cage onto her chain. "Not to mention that little thing called a war."

"True enough, true enough. I merely found it an appropriate wish to give one of the best-suited couples it has ever been my pleasure to join in wedlock." Dumbledore smiled at them both, and at Luna, who was gazing at his gifts in open fascination. "Shall we proceed upstairs, then, and begin the ceremony?"

Harry glanced at Ginny. "Last chance to back out," he murmured.

"Not for all the gold in Gringotts." Ginny lifted her nose. "I saw you first. That means you're mine."

"I saw him nearly as soon," Luna pointed out, opening the door for them. "But you always did like him better. Except when you didn't."

"That was just because I knew he was lying to me." Ginny treated Harry to a cold brown glare. "You're not allowed to do that anymore. You know that, right? It's against the marriage rules."

Harry fought with himself for several seconds and lost. "Yes, dear," he said in the most submissive voice he could muster.

---

The guests at the top of the Astronomy Tower turned towards the stairs in confusion as loud peals of laughter echoed out onto the roof.

Standing near the back of the bride's side, Crystal smiled wanly. "I'm glad they can still be happy," she said, almost to herself. "Everybody ought to be happy on their wedding day."

Percy, standing beside her, opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Some things were better left unsaid.

---

In a manor house far from Hogwarts School, a pale-blond young wizard lay atop the covers of a broad bed, curled up around four small, knotted socks. His eyes darted back and forth under their closed lids.

He'd promised his brother to stand as best man for his wedding, and captured by Death Eaters or not, that was exactly what he intended to do.

---

The words, Harry discovered, weren't too hard to remember after all.

"Today," he said, holding Ginny's hand in his, "I promise you everything. Everything I have, everything I am, and everything I will be, because everything I have is better when you share it with me. Today, I promise you love and faith, hope and joy, because you deserve a lifetime filled with those things. Today, I promise not to hide it from you when I am sad or troubled, angry or upset, because I know you will help me work it out. Today, Ginevra Molly Weasley, I, Harry James Potter, take you to be my wedded wife." Carefully, he slid the slender gold band onto her finger. "For as long as we both shall live."

Ginny drew a long breath, her eyes shifting for one instant off Harry's face to the empty space behind him where Draco should have stood, where, Harry had a strong suspicion, his brother's dream-form *was* standing. Certainly Luna, holding both Ginny's bouquet and her own, kept glancing at the spot with one of her serene little Seer smiles, and Hermione, standing beside Moony and Danger on the groom's side, was dabbing at her eyes every time she looked that way.

*Maybe he couldn't hand me the ring, but he's here. It'll do.*

*It'll have to do.*

"Today, I promise you all of me," Ginny began. "All that I own, all that I do, and all that I am planning, because all that I do is better when you do it with me. Today, I promise you happiness and hope, fidelity and love, because that is what you always ought to have. Today, I promise to bring you my problems while they are still small, because I know you can help me stop them from growing any larger. Today, Harry James Potter, I, Ginevra Molly Weasley, take you to be my wedded husband." Her fingers were cool, but steady, as she guided the ring to its proper place on Harry's hand. "For as long as we both shall live."

"Very good," said Dumbledore softly beside them. "Your wands, then."

Harry drew his wand and touched its tip to Ginny's, Dumbledore placing his own perpendicular to their two. "As you have spoken, as you intend it, so let it be done," said the Headmaster formally. "From this day forth, where once there were two, let now there be one."

A bright flash of light burst from the conjunction of the three wands, sending a wave of gasps and exclamations through the small crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Dumbledore, lowering his wand. "I give you Mr. and Mrs. Harry and Ginny Potter." He glanced at Harry, his eyes twinkling, as Pack, Pride, and Weasleys began to cheer. "Do you need further instruction?" he inquired under the cover of the noise.

"No, sir." Harry released his wand, returning it to its place up his sleeve, and looked at Ginny—at

*his wife .*

"Mrs. Ginny Potter," he said under his breath, seeing her eyes start to glisten, feeling an answering heat in his own. "Has anybody told you you're beautiful lately?"

"No one's ever told Mrs. Ginny Potter she's beautiful." Ginny smiled, even as her eyes threatened to overflow. "I guess that makes you the first."

"I'll take that." Harry drew Ginny close and lowered his lips to hers as the cheering redoubled.

Professor Dumbledore discreetly turned away as a single tear flowed down the conjoined line of the newlyweds' faces.

Behind Ginny, Luna blew a kiss of her own to the place beyond Harry.

---

Draco startled awake as the door of his room creaked open, and hastily shoved the sockball into his pocket, hoping his movement was covered by the act of sitting up. "Yes?" he said, as politely as he could manage, which wasn't much.

"Good morning, my son," said Lucius coolly, surveying him from the doorway. "I trust you slept well, here in your proper home at last."

"Tolerably." Draco glanced around the long-deserted room. "Though I can't say I love what you've done with the place."

"Ah, but you will." Lucius smiled, and a chill ran down Draco's spine. "After what I have planned for this morning, my son, you will. And in a few weeks' time, when I am entirely sure that my work has taken full effect, you will be the means of bringing under my Master's control every last member of your beloved *Pack* ." His smile broadened as Draco stared at him in confusion. "Come, walk with me, and I shall explain..."

---

(A/N: Dun dun dun.

If you're a bit confused about Amanda's plotline still, you may want to read the one-shot called "Anne's Story". And yes, Anne is something of a self-insert, but this is pretty much the extent of her involvement with the main storyline. She'll be around a couple more times, but only as an observer. The plot remains where it always has, with the Pack and Pride.

Now, to good news for anyone who wants more Anne originals: my short story collection, *Cat Tales* , is complete and will be available on Amazon and Smashwords for \$3.99 within 24 hours of this chapter going live! Other e-book retailers may take up to a month, for which I do apologize, but that's out of my control, and it will get there eventually, I promise.

If you prefer paper books to e-books, you can buy straight from the source at CreateSpace for

\$8.99, or you can order a signed copy at my Etsy site for \$7.50—and in an Anne B. Walsh first, there's a code in the back matter of both the paper and e-book versions of *Cat Tales* that will get you 30% off any future purchase of \$10 or more from my Etsy store!

Thank you, as always, for reading, and I'm going to try to get back on the weekly schedule for DV chapters. Send me lots of nice reviews, and buy *Cat Tales* if you can, and that's more likely to happen!)

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***



# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 28: Foresight and Hindsight (Arc 7)

The days have come, so long foretold,  
When settled is the fight of old;  
In half a year, or less, you'll see  
Defeat or glorious victory.  
Though mourn you have and mourn you will,  
Hold tight to good instead of ill,  
For Champions, Heirs, and Consorts all  
Shall gather ere the darkness fall.  
A long-awaited night of pain  
Brings dreadful loss, yet also gain;  
Despite the words, the theft, the flight,  
A secret hope hides in the light.  
Through months of heat, fight brave and bold,  
But some things, do not seek to hold;  
There is no shame in planned retreat,  
To twine and trap your foeman's feet.  
The castle's yours, no matter who  
May seek to lord it over you,  
So let them think they've conquered, yet  
Await the night your path was set,  
O Man Who'd Win: when you shall hear  
Your strangest gift with friendly ear,  
Go unto those whose Oath you swore  
And bargain well to win the war.  
As part of this, two Heirs must choose:  
Their powers, or their cause, to lose?  
One, as his forebear, wields a blade;  
The raven shall the other aid.  
If all is done as all should be,  
Your loved ones' faces you shall see;  
The blood of wolves will change the game,  
As will the things that night does name;  
The queens shall ride the lion bold;  
Glad hope, bright peace, you shall behold;  
And black to red and red to brown  
Shall surely bring the darkness down.

"Well, that didn't take long," commented Remus, reading through Danger's eyes. "Though it certainly *is* long. One of the longest you've had, I think."

"There's going to be a lot happening in the next six months." Danger set the scroll down on the

green bedcovers. "As if there hasn't already been."

Remus laid his hand over hers, the shared sorrow/fear for their missing cub reverberating across their bond. **He'll be protected**, he reminded her silently. **They told you so specifically.**

**Yes, but they never said protected from *what*. Or how it would be done.** Danger's frustration, tinged with her annoyed understanding of the rules by which the Guardians had to work, hummed in the back of Remus's mind. **Though for some of it, I'd bet I could make a decent guess. His mother wanted him to grow up free of the Death Eater philosophies, of everything they stand for.**

"Which he did," said Remus lightly. "Courtesy of the Pack."

"Yes, but now he's been pulled right back into the middle of it all. And yes, I know he went willingly, protecting Harry and Hermione and their mysterious mission—about which I *am* getting more information from Albus, given the restrictions he's got us under, if the Death Eaters ever get at us, keeping secrets will be the least of our worries—but that still puts our Fox front and center of what his mother literally *died* to get him away from. Don't you think—"

"As a rule, no, I don't." Remus winked at his wife. "It's why I keep you around."

Danger groaned under her breath. "Walked into that one."

"But to answer what you really were asking, yes. I do think his mother's love, her sacrifice, may help to shield Fox from some of his blood father's worst excesses." Remus sighed. "Until it's no longer needed. And isn't *that* a cheerful subject. Would you mind if I changed it?"

"Please." Danger let the scroll roll back into its small coil. "What do you want to talk about? The wedding?" She smiled, her eyes glistening slightly. "They did a beautiful job with it, really they did. Though there's still a good bit of my brain insisting Harry can't possibly be old enough to get married. Wasn't it yesterday we were stealing him out of that godforsaken cupboard?"

"Try more than fifteen years ago." Remus shut his eyes momentarily to remember that night, the rush of gleeful anticipation as Danger slipped into number four, Privet Drive, then the shock, the horror and fury, which had flooded through her and shattered several streetlights as she saw how the Dursleys had neglected the little boy she'd minded alongside her own baby sister, and learned very quickly to love. "And by himself he's not old enough, nor is Ginny, but with parental consent, marriageable age drops to fifteen for wizards and—get ready for this one—twelve for witches."

"Twelve? You can't be—" Danger caught herself just in time. "No, of course you can't. You're Remus. Sirius is..." She frowned. "You know, that's a good question. Where did he and Letha get to? Down at the reception?"

"Very possibly. Which, in a roundabout sort of way, brings us to what I did want to pick your brain about." Remus shaped the air with his hands as he spoke. "The reception is in Sanctuary. Sanctuary was the idea of one Amanda Smythe. Whom, we have now learned, was actually

Amanda Slytherin, granddaughter of Salazar, using the body of a girl who was born a Muggle."

Movement on the wall of the green bedroom caught Remus's eye. Alexander Slytherin had stepped into his portrait frame and was leaning on the back of his green leather chair, listening.

"It strikes me as just a touch too coincidental that the name of that little girl should be Amanda," Remus went on, splitting his words between his wife and the portrait-figure of Salazar Slytherin's "unfaithful" son. "Since she did exist independently of Amanda Slytherin until the swimming pool incident when she was about three. And also the resemblance—it was only surface, I grant you, similar coloring and build, but still, it was there. And that she should have a younger brother named Matt, which Amanda Slytherin also had—"

"That one's not my fault," Alex put in, bringing Danger's head whipping around to focus on him. "Larger forces came into play at that point. As for the coloring, and the name..." He shrugged. "I wanted my little girl to have the best possible chance of winning, if she was going to have one at all. So I tweaked a couple babies' appearances, and sent their parents suggestions about what they should name them. Beat me with a stick. I had nothing to do with the damn swimming pool—I mean, yes, I saw it coming, but I sure as hell didn't cause it. I tried to *stop* it. And in two out of three cases, it worked. The parents checked the latches and gates leading to the pool, kept a closer eye on their daughters, and those two little girls survived. But the third one..."

"I'd suppose it would be like having a child who needed an organ transplant," said Danger when Alex had been silent for several seconds. "Wanting, so very much, for the one you love to have her opportunity, but hating with all your heart what else that has to mean."

"That's not a bad analogy." Alex sat down, tracing one of the seams on his chair with a finger. "And now you know why I was able to borrow Ezra Smythe's body last summer, to come talk to you, Danger."

"Because Amanda was already in place as his daughter, so you could slide in on that similarity, as long as you kept it brief." Remus nodded. "It all comes back to those relationships, doesn't it? Father, mother, son, and daughter. Like that little prophecy you were able to give us over Christmas."

"That's exactly what it comes back to. What it's been circling around for a thousand years or so." Alex spun his fingers around each other. "And then you add in brother, sister, cousin, friend, to bring the darkness to an end..." He laughed once. "Listen to me. I've been doing doggerel rhyme for so long it happens without my even thinking of it anymore."

"Doggerel it may be, but I like darkness coming to an end. Especially when you give us a nice clear timetable like this one." Danger unrolled the scroll a short way and tapped a finger on the first few lines of the prophecy. "Six months, hmm?"

"Thereabouts. Look a little further down, at the bit addressed to Harry, if you want a more exact date." Alex fidgeted for a moment, then glanced left, right, left quickly before leaning forward. "I won't be able to talk to you very much until after it's over," he said softly. "But I just wanted to..."

God, apologize is the wrong word, but it's all I can think of. About that damn vision of Luna's, and everything going on around it. It was necessary, it *had* to happen—it's going to have at least three major impacts on getting the war over with sooner and cleaner, and that's just off the top of my head—but that doesn't make it fair to you, to any of you." He grimaced. "Though if life was fair, I'd be out of a job, wouldn't I?"

"Wouldn't we all," Remus returned.

"You said a mouthful." Alex glanced to one side again and jumped to his feet. "I have to go. Best to everyone, and keep your eyes open. Sometimes the biggest threats are the ones you never imagined—"

His grass-green robes whisked out of one side of the frame.

Danger blew out her breath. "And how," she demanded rhetorically, "are we supposed to keep our eyes open for what we can't imagine?"

"Broaden our imaginations, perhaps." Remus rolled the scroll back up and tucked it into a pocket. "But for right now, why don't we go down to Sanctuary for a little while. Be with our Pack, those of them who're here, and send as much love and comfort as we can to the one who isn't..."

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A pair of wizards walked through the corridors of a dusty, ill-kept manor house, the elder leaning occasionally on a black-and-silver cane, the younger with his hands tucked into the pockets of his Hogwarts robes. An observer, had there been one, could have been forgiven for taking a second, or even a third, look, for the only visible difference between the two was twenty-five years of age and such cosmetic differences as clothing choice and length of hair—the elder wore his silver-blond mane long and sweeping, while the younger's sleek cap lay closely clipped against his skull.

"You, my son," said Lucius Malfoy, breaking the silence, "have a very great deal to answer for."

Draco considered possible responses to this, including two or three which would have had his mothers *Scourgify* -ing his mouth out. In the end, the most politic reply seemed simply, "Oh?"

"Oh, he says." Lucius glared at him. "Let us start at the very beginning."

"A very good place to start," Draco murmured, unable to stop himself. A soft noise from the direction of his feet made him look down, but the corridor was dim enough that he couldn't tell if the slight distortion he thought he could see near his ankles was really there or just a trick of his eyes.

"Yes, isn't it?" agreed Lucius, oblivious to the quotation. "It began, as you well know, more than twelve years ago in this very house, when I was *arrested* ." The word came out in a low, breathy snarl. "Our family name dragged through the dirt, held up to public ridicule, shame and derision—my wand snapped in half like that of a common criminal—"

"Because it was?" Draco cut in smoothly. "Because it'd been used to cast all three Unforgivables, along with plenty of other Dark spells?"

"Against animals, nothing more." Lucius drew himself up to his full height, which would have been more impressive if he weren't slightly shorter than his son. "And if our government had enough spine to call a wand a wand, as they once did, protection for those who enjoy such sports would be enshrined in law as it ought to be—"

"You know, I've heard about this attitude of yours all my life, but it's fascinating to finally see it up close." Draco settled his shoulders into a pose of comfortable relaxation. "You really *believe* this shite, right down to Muggles being animals. Oh, sure, they walk upright and speak in simple sentences and use a few basic tools, but they don't have magic, and that's your make-or-break, isn't it? That's what you use to decide who's human and who's not." He smirked once. "Do you know who you're named after, Father? Do you know who was the first man to bear the name Lucius Malfoy—and why?"

"Of course." Lucius looked down his nose at Draco, as best as he could manage this feat. "I am named after the founder of our line, an innocent man who came under attack from vicious enemies, determined to make a murder out of his cousin's accidental death, which happened to benefit him. He took the ridiculous nickname with which those same enemies tried to smear him and made it his own, a badge of honor, and thus we carry it proudly to this day."

"*You* carry it," Draco corrected. "It's nothing to do with me anymore. And you've got your facts a trifle backwards, Father. Your namesake was every inch a murderer—granted, he had some help from a nasty little curse, but I have it on good authority that Lucius Beauvoi, as he was originally named, definitely killed his cousin William. And William, I might add, was an Heir of Slytherin in his own right. Cadet branch, but that doesn't change the blood."

Lucius raised one pale eyebrow. "I see your *Pack* has taught you to aim your flights of fantasy high."

"Hey, anything worth doing." Draco shrugged. "But I doubt it really bothers you too much, being descended from a killer, I mean. Given the amount of blood on your hands. Even if you don't count Muggles, which I know you don't, we could bring up, oh, my *mother* ."

"You dare—" Lucius spluttered for an instant. "You *dare* blame *me* for her death! If she had never been exposed to such filthy, unnatural ideas—"

"As those of the people you kidnapped out of their home and dragged back here, and waited impatiently for them to wake up so you could gloat over the various unpleasant fates you'd planned for them and their children?" Draco faced his father fully, gray eyes locked with gray. "The same children you yourself dumped on my bed, and told me the boy was going to be my brother from now on." He grinned briefly. "One thing out of that whole mess you got right. In any case, if you hadn't brought them here, Mother would never have seen the difference in the way we acted. Never wanted me to be more like them." His grin broadened. "Never taken advantage of you being knocked cold by a pair of preschoolers—"

He'd been expecting the slap for a while, and turned his head as it landed, robbing it of some of its energy. It still stung, but he'd had worse playing Quidditch. "Truth hurts, doesn't it, Father?" he said, leaning back on one heel, scuffing the toe of his other shoe into the dusty carpet. "So here's another one you'll like even less. Lucius Beauvoi, later called Mal Foi, 'bad faith', for that same murder you claim he never committed? He was a Muggleborn." He smirked at the open-mouthed look of utter shock on Lucius's features. "Came from a family where the other two branches had turned magical long ago, but somehow his never caught up until then."

Lucius shook his head, recovering. "I see that we have a great deal more work to do than I thought," he said. "Which, until this moment, I had not believed possible. To think that you, my son, could have been brought so tragically low—you ought to have been preparing for your gala seventeenth birthday by now, training to prove yourself worthy to bear the Malfoy wand. Eighteen inches of elm with a dragon heartstring core, passed down through the generations without fail..."

"Whoa, hold up a second." Draco blinked several times, trying to envision this. "Did you say eighteen inches? As in, a foot and a half?"

"That is another way to say eighteen inches," Lucius agreed, looking sidelong at Draco. "Why?"

"And it's passed down in the family. Father to son, no doubt."

"If it were not, it could hardly be the *Malfoy* wand." Lucius scowled. "Or perhaps I should say, it *could not have been*. If it still existed, in any form other than that of useless splinters of wood."

"Useless splinters. Right." Draco tucked his hands back into his pockets, weaving his fingers through the item found in one of them. "Tell me, Father, are you familiar with the term 'compensation'?"

It was Lucius's turn to blink. "In the context of providing fair value for an item destroyed? I hardly think you could give me anything which would make up for the loss of so much history and magic as that wand represented—though if you cared to sign the papers which would allow me access to our family monies again, that might begin to do the trick."

"Not likely, and what makes you think I've got any authority over Moony's vault anyway?" Draco shook his head. "No, I'm talking about something else. It's a Muggle concept, granted, but a useful one." He allowed a small portion of his high glee to surface. "Has to do with men who're, shall we say, deficient in a certain area. They tend to want to own large and glamorous things. Especially ones with a particular shape." He made a demonstrative gesture. "And if that deficiency's inherited, it'd certainly explain the long line of only children back up the Malfoy family tree. Add on it's an heirloom, so you don't get it until your daddy says you do..." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Explains a lot, doesn't it?"

A muffled snort exploded near Draco's left foot, as Lucius turned a surprisingly fetching shade of fuchsia, sliding quickly down into a crimson similar to the background of the House patch over Draco's heart. Draco stayed poised on the balls of his feet, ready to dodge should it be necessary.

"You do realize," said Lucius with careful precision after several seconds, "that by perpetrating these ridiculous slanders against the House of Malfoy, you are also insulting yourself?"

"Man just can't get a clue," Draco remarked to the patch of air on his left. "Been what, almost thirteen years now, and he's still hanging onto the past?" He lifted his head again and sent Lucius an insouciant smile. "Just to refresh your memory, Father, my surname's Black nowadays. And the House of Black has plenty of problems of its own, but satisfying women generally isn't one of them. I mean, Sirius snagged himself a Healer, who was also his Beating partner at Hogwarts. That says to me she's a strong, physical woman with a full and complete knowledge of the workings of a healthy human male. You really think she'd settle for anything less than the best?"

"How can I know what a Mudblood would or would not do?" Lucius pretended to examine his fingernails. "Any wizard would surely be an improvement on what she had grown up to expect."

"Any wizard," Draco repeated thoughtfully. "So I suppose it's just a coincidence Aletha started sharing a bedroom with her husband on a regular basis in September of '82, and Meghan was born in June of '83. Whereas you and Mother had to try for, what, four *years* before I came along."

Lucius opened his mouth, but Draco wasn't finished. "And then there's my namesake. Regulus. Fathered a son, a *wizard* son, on his Muggle girlfriend—and just how often do you figure he managed to slip past his mother's surveillance and go see her? And no, I'm not making this up," he added as Lucius's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I remember perfectly well the lineage spells came back positive, even if I can't give you a name for him."

"Can't, or won't?" inquired Lucius, stroking a finger along the carvings on the head of his cane. "If you were sufficiently *persuaded* —"

Draco surprised himself with a laugh. "Merlin's blood, you really do think I'm an idiot, don't you? I said 'can't' and I meant 'can't'. Why would you think I'd let myself be captured with a head full of secrets?" He smiled as Lucius stared at him. "Oh, hadn't you worked that part out yet? The reason I was standing there in plain sight in Hogsmeade, all ready to duel with you, and the reason, apart from *this* —" He swiped a finger across his left arm. "—why I haven't tried to run away from you?"

"I see that it was not any desire to make amends for your past sins, as I admit I had hoped was possible." Lucius crossed his arms. "Very well, then, Draco, what was it?"

"You really don't remember, do you?" Draco twisted knitted fabric between his fingers. "After the last time we met in person, when you told me you'd take me back someday. I laid it out for you then and there, the only thing I'd ever consider worth my life and my freedom. The only possible explanation for why we're standing here now. Coming to you at all?"

"It begins to," said Lucius coolly. "You said to me that night that you would return to me only if you knew, without a doubt, that doing so would bring benefits to someone you *loved*. I fail to see how—"

"What didn't you do, because you were busy with me?" Draco interrupted, letting his smirk grow in time with the dawning comprehension and horror on Lucius's face as he spoke. "Where didn't you go, who didn't you look for? *That's* why I'm here, Father. Because while I was standing in front of that shop, getting all your attention, my brother and my twin sister were sneaking out the back and making a run for it."

"You dare to call that little Mudblood such a thing," hissed Lucius. "She is *nothing* to you—"

"She's exactly what you made her, and well you know it!" Draco's fists clenched at his sides as his temper strained against its boundaries. "That's your entire problem, isn't it? You do these things, these vicious, *stupid* things, and then you're surprised when they come back and bite you on the arse. We could even trace it all the way back to before your precious Master ever fell. If we wanted to."

"Do enlighten me," drawled Lucius. "What have you decided to blame upon me now?"

"Only what you did." Draco exhaled a long breath, assembling his ragged remnants of calm, drawing them together with the aid of the story he was about to relate, a long-time staple of den nights. "17 August, 1981. You and a bunch of your cronies went out to Surrey to get your sick little kicks playing with Muggles. I'll never know how you picked the ones you did, you probably don't remember it yourself, but you ended up on a street called Privet Drive, at number seventeen. A man and a woman were home, a married couple. You tortured them, probably one at a time so they could hear each other scream. And then you killed the man, and Igor Karkaroff killed the woman, and you left them dead in their living room and buggered out. Am I right?"

"You could be." Lucius's eyes were far away, as though he were sorting through his memories. "We entertained ourselves thus a great many times. Was something significant about this particular day?"

"I don't know what would give you that idea," Draco returned in a conscious imitation of his father's bored tone. "Those were only Dr. David and Dr. Rose Granger. Danger and Hermione's parents." He dropped the manner, lifting his chin. "And finding them dead was what woke up Danger's magic. What started her dreaming the truth about Padfoot and Wormtail. What got her to volunteer to mind Harry alongside Neenie, and talk to Moony when she met him in the park. And from there..." He spun his fingers through the air. "Ripples, Father. Spreading out and changing everything they touch. You killed a Muggle when I was about a year old. Three years later, his daughter helped to take me away from you. And twelve-odd years past *that* ..."

"You have returned to me." Lucius was beginning to smile. "Unwillingly, yes, and with your own interests in mind, but still you have returned. And I have taken precautions to ensure you will not stray again, at least not bodily. So my challenge now is how best to reclaim my son for his proper place in life. How best to bring him into line with my own beliefs and cause." His smile was full and gloating now, and Draco had to press his hands hard against his legs to keep them from trembling. "I had thought about tried and true methods such as deprivation and reward, but you are far too stubborn for that to work as quickly as I would like, and besides, we are not Muggles. We are wizards. What good is magic if it is not used?"



Musingly, he drew his wand from the head of his cane and regarded it, swirling his wrist once to light a flame at the wand's tip while he continued to speak. "So my Master has helped me to develop a variant on the spell I embedded in the glass globe I once sent you. I am sure you recall it." Shooting a glance at Draco, he chuckled briefly at the flash of fear Draco hadn't quite been able to conceal. "Yes, I can see you do. But instead of working slowly to turn your inclinations towards me and mine, this spell shall simply—" He blew sharply across the tip of his wand, and the flame flared and went out. "Extinguish all other loyalties in you. You shall love and revere me, my son, and through me, my Master. And together, we will be truly great."

"How exactly are you planning on getting me to do that?" Draco found new strength in the firmness of his voice, the steadiness of his hands as he clasped them together behind his back. "Wipe my mind clean and reanimate me like some living Inferius? That's the only way I could possibly imagine you could do what you keep threatening, get me to infiltrate the Pack and the Order for you, even let you into Hogwarts. When you've got the experiences of my entire lifetime working against you—"

Lucius chuckled again, more deeply. "Working *for* me," he corrected, wagging a finger at Draco. "Once my Master and I are finished with you. Our work, you see, my dear son, revolves around a very specific spell indeed, for which the incantation begins: *Oblivians torquere...* "

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He awakened slowly, bracing himself for a bellow or a box on the ear, confused when nothing of the sort happened. Surely it must be far past the time when he was normally bullied out of sleep to get the morning chores underway!

*And... Keeping his eyes shut, he felt cautiously around himself. I'm lying in a bed. A real bed, with pillows and everything. When was the last time that happened?*

The answer to that, of course, was never, unless he counted the naps he'd once been able to steal while upstairs supposedly cleaning the bedrooms of his "betters".

*Or unless I go back. A long time back. Back to before I was even four years old.*

Well-worn bitterness filled his mouth, his throat, his belly. He'd always known the forces of chaos and anarchy hated his family for their undying loyalty to the proper order of things, but had he been an unbiased observer, he might have thought it beneath even them to time their attack to correspond with a child's birthday.

*Only I'm not unbiased, and I know it's not beneath them. Because they did it, and they caught us off guard, celebrating. Almost thirteen years of practice kept his fury purely internal, but it was no less potent for that. And we paid for it, all of us—my mother, my father, and I, each in our different ways—with our lives...*

He'd sometimes wished, through the intervening years, that his mother had been just a fraction of a degree less eloquent, that she had not persuaded the interlopers to kill her rather than her child. In his heart, he knew she had hoped his father would escape the attackers, that there might still be

a chance for some fragment of their family. But his father had instead been ambushed by six of the enemy's best fighters, and had still managed to account for four of them before he was treacherously struck down from behind by one of those remaining.

*And they let us see each other, just once, to make sure we both knew there was no hope left. To watch his face as I struggled against their arms and screamed for him to help me, and have an excuse to beat him senseless again when he tried to reach me, and laugh themselves sick over our pain while they dragged him off to rot in a prison built from his worst nightmares and chained me into slavery with my own blood.*

He hadn't understood at first what it meant that a bleeding cut on his hand had been pressed to that of a fat-faced, repulsive little girl while a sly-eyed woman and a bestial man chanted strange words over them. But when the ritual was finished, and the girl ordered him to kneel down and fasten up her shoes—

*I did it without even thinking about it, without having a chance to ask why, and when I tried to stop myself, I couldn't.*

*That was when I started to realize what my new life was going to be.*

The months and years since were an endless blur in his memories, filled with exhaustion from doing work beyond his strength, with learning to compensate for the moods of his little mistress, with ducking the bullying of her arrogant boy cousin and his spoiled baby sister and the adults of the household, all of whom seemed to take a positive pleasure in making his life miserable. Though he'd always suspected he ought to have magic of his own, it made no difference to him, as it, like the rest of him, was under the control of his mistress at all times.

*I have no idea why I didn't break a long time ago. Certainly they tried hard enough to break me. Maybe it was just that I didn't know I should...*

His only way to track time had been the changing of the seasons beyond the kitchen window and how much of the thin pallet in an out-of-the-way corner he took up when he collapsed onto it to sleep, but he thought he'd been about eleven when he'd first found a reason to hope.

In a dream one wintry night, he'd seen his father again.

*We didn't have time to say very much before their magic recognized what was happening and separated us, but it was real, we both knew it was. I was able to tell him about my life, where I was and who I was with, and to let him know I hadn't given up. And in return, he made me a promise. No matter how long it took, he would come back for me.*

Two years later, that promise suddenly became a true possibility.

He hadn't been meant to know about his father's escape from prison, but he'd learned over the years how to glean bits of knowledge from his mistress, especially when she was distraught over something. If he hadn't found out about it then, though, the three tries his father had made at

rescuing him through the year probably would have given him an inkling.

*You'd think, since I'm their enemy, they'd be glad to get rid of me, but no, they hate my family so much that they'll go to any lengths to keep us from being happy. Or maybe they just like having a human house-elf to do their chores, and give their little princess her extra magic, to make sure she's always the teachers' pet...*

His father's first stab at reclaiming him, a kidnap attempt on the atrociously stuck-up youngest child of his captors' family with the intent of exchanging the two of them, had never gone anywhere, probably because his father had been forced to let an incompetent underling handle it. The second, smuggling an artifact charmed to free him past the family's guard by using the name of a trusted friend of theirs, had almost worked, but his mistress had spotted the charms at the last second and broken through them, dashing his hopes to pieces as she reestablished her control over him ruthlessly. But the third—

*The third was so close. So close. He took us both, snatched us from under their very noses, and he'd found the right method to reverse the link between us, to give me the power for once. He could still recall the blazing triumph he'd felt when he awakened to discover in whose hands he was, the whimpering terror he'd been able to sense from his mistress as she shrank away from his father like a frightened animal. I would have had it all back, everything she stole from me and more, and I could have chosen whether I would rather keep her as my slave or simply rip away her magic and break the bond between us forever.*

*But then Father had to leave us alone for a few minutes, to finish one last piece of work, and everything went wrong...*

He still didn't know what the spell was called that his mistress had worked as soon as she was sure his father was out of reach. He only knew that it was illegal, that it ought to have been beyond her capabilities for years yet, and that it had felt to him as though she had wrenched both his arms out of their sockets and smashed him face-first into a wall, all at once.

*I tried to fight her, but I blacked out from the pain before I could get anywhere. And by the time I woke up, it was over.*

Rousing from a dazed slumber to his mistress's simpering giggle, his exhaustion so profound he could barely open his eyes, and watching her studious examination of her fingernails as she explained what had happened while he had lain unconscious from the pain she'd inflicted on him, might well, he thought, rank as the worst memory of his life.

*Because she used me. She used the magic she drained from me to break my father's wards, to call to her own people for rescue, and to keep Father from ever knowing that anything was wrong. So when her parents came to fetch us back, they caught him off-guard, unprepared. Even then, he might still have been able to get away if he'd been willing to abandon me.*

*I wish he had.*

But his father, whether from gallantry or desperation, had fought to the last ditch for himself and his son, until his enemies grew weary of the battle and unleashed one of their most terrible weapons, the sort they claimed to use only in the direst of necessity. Even now, his fists clenched and a snarl trembled in his throat as he heard in memory the studied whine of his mistress's voice explaining gleefully what was going to happen to his father.

*They cursed him to become a monster. An animal, but an animal which can sometimes remember that it was once human. But when the fit comes on it, when the time is right—or rather when the time is wrong—it loses all humanity in the beast. Its only purpose in life is hatred, and it tries to kill anything it can find. Even itself.*

*Or its own child.*

The next year's worth of memories were lost to him in a spiral of black despair, punctuated here and there by pinpoints of light as whispers about the state of affairs in the greater world made their way limpingly into his limited purview. He'd always known that his father had not been the foremost advocate of order in their world—that there had been another and a greater whom his parents, and all who thought like them, called master—but he had been under the impression that this master, this great one, was dead.

*How wrong I was. How wrong we all were.*

The news of the great one's return had gone through his captors' household like a thunderbolt. There was a connection, he knew vaguely, between his father's master and his mistress's self-absorbed boy cousin, but it didn't affect him personally.

*Except that it added to the internal chaos of the household, and meant I could slip through the cracks more easily. Break myself out of my little pity party, keep learning, keep training. Because if anyone could lighten my father's curse or even lift it altogether, make it possible for us to be reunited at last, it would be his master, the one he served so faithfully and so long. I wanted to be ready, to be a credit to my name and my family, in case we got that second chance.*

*And I didn't want to be used against my father and his cause. Not ever again.*

But it had been nearly two years since his father's master had risen, a year and a half since the great one had rescued his faithful from their unjust imprisonment, and not even a hint had come his way that his father remembered him. He tried his best to keep his spirits up, to continue his secret studies and hold himself in readiness, but after so long, was there really any reason left to hope? Perhaps his father had died, and the news had been suppressed for reasons of morale; perhaps the curse had taken firmer hold than anyone knew, and although his father's body lived on, the human mind within it had been destroyed; perhaps...

He rolled onto his side with a sigh, trying to dismiss the possibilities which plagued him.

As he rested his weight on it, his left arm stabbed with pain.

His eyes flew open in shock.

A design in black and deepest green covered the inside of his left forearm, where the night before had shown him nothing but smooth, pale skin. A human skull dropped its jaw wide to allow a thick-bodied serpent to emerge, winding its sinuous way about the skull's contours.

Breathless excitement rose in him as he stared at the marking on his arm. He had never seen such a mark before, but he had heard of it, heard it described, heard the punishments to be meted out to anyone found bearing it. There was no way any member of his captors' household would have allowed their servant boy to wear their enemies' proudest decoration. Yet here it was, emblazoned on his flesh.

*But that must mean—*

Pushing himself upright in the bed, he looked around, the tide of incredulous joy in his chest rising higher every second. The room around him was no tiny, squalid kitchen but a comfortable, gracious bedchamber lined in carved wooden paneling, a stone-framed fireplace set into the wall to his right and a balcony visible through a glass door ahead of him.

*The kind of room you give a good friend of the family, or an honored guest. Or—*

He hardly dared to think the final "or", but certain deeply buried memories were starting to float to the surface of his mind, and he trembled as they lined up with what he could see from his current vantage point. The wooden planks of the floor ran horizontal to his line of sight, and would be perfectly smooth underfoot but only slippery when one wanted them to be; the balcony looked out over a lush green lawn, sloping down to a grove of trees surrounding a gurgling stream; the corner of the room across from the fireplace held a small table, with three chairs set invitingly around it, and a bookshelf, empty just now but easy enough to fill with anything he wanted—

*If I'm right. If I'm not just making things up because it's what I want so much. How can I test it?*

Another memory surfaced. If his impossible idea were in fact the truth, one of the panels in the wall beside the fireplace ought to be a hidden door, which would lead to a full washroom. Breathing deeply to try to contain himself, he slid out of the bed, padded across the floor, and laid his hand on the spot he could vaguely recall stretching upward to reach when he'd been very small—

The panel slid back with the speed and silence of magic, and he caught sight of his familiar pale, pointed features in the mirror which hung over the sink thus revealed. He looked happy, happier than he'd ever seen himself before—small wonder, if what he was now suspecting were true—but a ghostly second image of himself hovered over his shoulder, aged and careworn—

"My son." The voice was hoarse, but nonetheless familiar. "At last."

He spun, only to be embraced in a man's strong arms, and his vision blurred with unashamed tears, for the eyes so like his own were also welling up.

"You are mine now," his father murmured to him, holding him close. "No one will ever part us again."

After almost thirteen years, Draco Malfoy had finally come home.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 29: The Gryffindor May Day Fete (Arc 7)

Neville was in the DA storage room when he heard the door open and shut. He closed his eyes and concentrated. His Animagus form might not give him all the advantages someone like Harry or Ginny got from theirs, but at least at Hogwarts, being an Heir made up for it.

"Back here, Mum," he called out when he'd had a moment to think about the way the magic of the castle was reacting to the person who'd come in. "Did you want me?"

"When don't I?" Alice Longbottom came around the end of one of the shelves and gave her son a brief hug. "But as it happens, yes. We've had a request for a few of your potion pieces, for some of Brian and Corona's people."

"So the potion's working for her, then?" Neville reached up without looking to pull down one of the Muggle-ready pieces (manufacturing these and ensuring none of the magic on them showed to a casual observer had netted those members of the DA who took Muggle Studies enough extra credit to average two hundred sixty-eight percent in the class). "Masking her human scent, making them believe she's another werewolf?"

"So it would seem. And far more of the werewolves living by themselves, or in the small colonies, started out as Muggles than we'd previously thought."

"That makes sense. They've got no defenses." Neville turned the three-chamber cylinder through one full rotation, verifying that it moved easily and snapped cleanly into place each time. "When they don't even *believe* in werewolves, how are they supposed to know what to do when one comes through their window? Armed piece." Pointing the piece at the floor, well away from his own and Alice's feet, he armed it, nodded satisfaction with the vibrating hum which resulted, and disarmed it again, handing it to his mother. "That one's good. How many did you need?"

"Five—no, I tell a lie, six. Professor Dumbledore asked me for one as well."

"Oh?" Neville scooped down three more, set two on the empty bit of shelf beside him, and started the testing process with the third. "Who's that for?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask." Alice frowned slightly. "Odd, though. He had Danger in his office when I stopped up, and she looked upset by something. More so than last night would account for, I mean." She looked closely at Neville as he finished checking the piece in his hands and moved on to the second one. "How are you holding up, love?"

Neville considered the question. "I'm all right," he said finally. "Not *good*, but no one's going to be, not for a while. It isn't like last summer. Like...Dad." The word, and its accompanying memories, tightened his throat, but that was to be expected. "There's magic woven through the Pride—you knew that, we all knew that, but it wasn't something we ever thought about. Until now. Until a part of it's gone."



He paused, thinking about this, and invoked again the sense he'd used to tell him who had entered the room. "Except that it's not, quite," he said slowly. "It's missing, he's missing, Draco is, but he's not gone. Not all the way. The magic disappears, but it's not broken off, it's barely even twisted..." He shook his head, impatient with himself. "Am I making any sense at all?"

"More than I think you know." Alice set the two pieces Neville had already cleared into the canvas bag she had over her arm. "Finish up with those, and then I think we'll take Professor Dumbledore's piece upstairs to him personally. Danger may want to hear what you just told me. Unless you need to be in class?"

"No, I have the morning free. And then everyone gets the afternoon, for the Gryffindor May Day Fete out on the lawns." Neville grinned momentarily. "I understand Professor Snape tried to say his classes were too important to set aside for 'some silly outdoor romp', and the rest of the teachers overruled him."

Alice laughed aloud. "I can just hear him saying that, too. In that voice of his which sounds like he's sucked a bagful of lemons. Which is horribly rude and nasty of me, I know, and I do respect him for everything he does for the Order and the war, but *must* he allow that particular part of his life to warp the entirety of his personality the way he does?"

"Perhaps it helps keep him safe, when he's spying," Neville suggested, handing over the fourth cleared piece and taking down the last two. "Because Voldemort and the Death Eaters think they know what he's like, so they never bother looking past the surface because they think he can't possibly have anything else underneath."

"Here now, we can't have this." Alice pointed her finger at her son. "You, sir, are a teenage wizard. I am a fully adult witch. More than that, I am your mother. *You* are meant to see the worst in everyone and never look past the tip of your own nose, and *I* am meant to take the longer view and help you develop your tolerance for the oddities of others. Do you understand?"

Neville came to attention and saluted with the disarmed piece in his hand. "Ma'am, yes, *ma'am* !"

Alice slumped. "I knew letting him keep hanging around with Sirius Black's children was a mistake," she told the cornerpost of the shelf. "Not that I actually had a choice in the matter, of course, but sometimes a mother must delude herself into believing she has some say in the direction of her son's life."

Picking up the last piece to test it, Neville hid his smile. "Are you staying for the Fete, or do you have to get back?" he asked.

"I may stay a few minutes, just to see what you've done, but then I'll need to go. I have an appointment this afternoon, at the Landing Zone, actually—Gerald wants an experienced eye to go over his security with him, just in case one of the Death Eaters decides to follow the line from Draco to Luna..."

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"I can't believe we're actually going ahead with this," muttered Maya Jordan as she waved her wand in two broad swoops, erecting one of the open-fronted tents which would house the festival-style games the Gryffindors had chosen for their May Day celebration.

"Why shouldn't we?" asked the person working behind her, whose cheerful smile and nonchalant tone would have seemed entirely commonplace were it not for the lack of their customary duplication. Fred Weasley, who had awakened in time to attend his sister's wedding at dawn atop the Astronomy Tower, was busily stocking another tent with prizes he and his twin had pulled out of their stock at their Hogsmeade location only yesterday, apparently not at all bothered by the fact that said twin was not with him, would never be with him again. "It hasn't stopped being May Day, and we succeeded with the year. What's there not to celebrate?"

Maya made a noise she hoped could be taken as casual agreement and ducked into the tent, supposedly to see that everything behind its counter was in place for the noisy water-shooting game it was meant to host, in reality to try to regain her composure. She hadn't been this close to anyone who'd lost a family member before, but she was fairly sure this wasn't the way they were meant to act, and certainly this wasn't the way they were meant to *smell*. In fact, she'd never caught this particular overtone in anyone's scent before, and wasn't sure what it might mean, though she knew for a fact she didn't like it.

Sliding out the back of the tent, she went in search of someone else who might have a better perspective.

"It's not that he doesn't remember," said Danielle Reading, discovered after a brief search at the long, canvas-roofed refreshments booth, checking off various containers of picnic-style food and drink from her list as house-elves stacked them in neat rows and renewed the freshness spells keeping them cool or warm, as the case might be. "He's perfectly clear on what happened last night. It's more that he doesn't seem to *care*. I'm hoping it's just that it hasn't quite sunk in yet—though how could it not have? He *felt* it." She set her list aside, sitting down limply on a discarded crate. "Maya, I'm frightened. I don't want this to mean what I think it does."

"What you—" Maya stopped as her wolf side and her newly awakening cougar senses (her Animagus studies had come to fruition quietly some time ago, though her work with the Red Shepherds had kept her busy enough that she seldom had a chance to try out her form) came to a rare agreement on what they'd scented from Fred. Animals didn't have words for everything the way humans did, but they usually knew which things they could safely approach and which they ought to stay well away from.

Fred's scent fell handily into the latter category, and was headed quickly for its outer edges.

*And this is because—* Maya prompted her two non-human advisors.

"Oh," she said quietly when the answer came back.

"Worked it out, have you?" Danielle smiled, or at least her lips curved upward. No happiness and no hope lived in her face. "He gets today. If anything's going to change, if he's going to be able to

change it, then it would be today."

"I hope it happens." Maya squeezed her friend's hand. "I really do hope so."

"Thanks. Me too." Danielle squeezed back, then let go in favor of checking her watch. "Come on, let's see how much more we can get done before that fifth-year Charms class lets out and we get deluged with inexpert help..."

---

Aletha led the men of the Pack up the stairs of the Headmaster's office, resisting the urge to look over her shoulder. She knew what she would see. Remus had been unusually twitchy for the last half-hour, in the way she had come to associate with Danger closing herself off from their bond, and Sirius's eyes were abstracted, as though he were trying to work out a knotty plot twist or think through a difficult problem in his everyday life.

*Neither of them is at critical point yet. If they want help, they'll ask.*

"Come in," Dumbledore called as she set foot on the upper landing.

Sirius and Remus exchanged a brief glance, for one second shedding their years until they were Padfoot and Moony the Marauders once more. "How *does* he do that?" they chorused *sotto voce* .

It had always seemed obvious to Aletha that there must be telltale spells somewhere in the revolving staircase, but she held her peace. Boys would, after all, be boys.

Danger rose from one of the visitors' chairs as they entered and went directly into Remus's arms, closing her eyes and pressing her face against his chest as he kissed her temple and held her tightly. "All right," Aletha heard her murmur, "I'm all right now."

*As all right as any of us can be.*

"You wanted to see us, Albus?" said Remus in his politest tone, pulling up a chair beside the one Danger had vacated.

"I did." Dumbledore swirled his wand once, enlarging the remaining chair into a loveseat, which suited Aletha perfectly. After the emotional broomstick ride of the past twenty-four hours, having her husband within touching distance was an immense comfort. Judging by the alacrity with which Sirius took the other half of the small sofa and wrapped his hand around hers, he felt the same.

"Forgive my bluntness, but if it's anything immediate, you'll probably need to call in somebody else." Remus tapped his own wand against the adjoining sides of his chair and Danger's, melting them away and merging the two seats into one. Danger immediately slid over and fit herself into the curl of his arm. "We're none of us at our best."

"I know that, and do apologize for drawing you away from your rest. But I believe what I have to say may help you with some of your troubles." Dumbledore glanced at the door. "Severus will be

arriving shortly, as this also concerns him, and I may ask Minerva to join us as well. But I wished to begin with you, as some of the things I have to say are not to be repeated."

"A little more information on just what our cubs were doing out in Hogsmeade at that hour, perhaps?" Sirius injected a fair bit of pureblood drawl into the words, telling Aletha just how strongly this was affecting him. In the normal way of things, her love made a conscious effort to avoid or subvert the mannerisms of his childhood.

"A little," Dumbledore agreed gravely. "They were, as I am sure Harry has told you, on a mission. That mission involved items belonging to Voldemort, items which are incredibly precious to him and which he safeguards with extreme care. Care which was, in at least one case of which we know, entirely useless, due to Voldemort's disregard for the abilities of those he sees as weak and inferior." His eyes were fixed directly on Sirius. "Such disregard will, I believe, be his eventual downfall."

Sirius made a small, noncommittal noise. "Did it *have* to be them?" he asked, his tone under better control this time, but with strain and anger still audible under its calm veneer. "I know there are things Harry's got to do by himself, eventually, but Merlin's blood, Albus, I didn't think eventually was now!" He laughed once, a brief bark, and sat back a bit further on the loveseat, stroking a finger along the back of Aletha's hand. "But then, you never do, do you. Not when it's *your* cubs out there facing the fire."

"It did have to be them." Dumbledore's pronouncement was delivered quietly, but with the careful finality which left no room for argument. "Draco and Hermione were required for magical reasons, and Harry because entrance into the place where this particular item was kept is... limited. He and Ginny Weasley—I beg your pardon, *Ginny Potter*—were likely the only two who could request that admittance with any hope of success."

"This is to do with that meeting my aunt set up for them at the end of January, isn't it?" Aletha asked, several pieces falling into place for her. *Precious items—where would you keep something precious in the wizarding world except Gringotts? And stealing from Gringotts has always been considered impossible, so pulling it off would require either a ridiculous level of magic and cunning, or the connivance, if not the active help, of the goblins...*

"It is." Dumbledore's smile warmed his eyes, if only briefly. "And I do hope you will convey her my thanks, though I have done so already in my own person. Without her assistance, it would have been exponentially more difficult to retrieve this object."

Remus began to ask another question, but Aletha wasn't listening. Something about Dumbledore's voice had her Healing senses on edge.

*He sounds tired. And not just normally tired—no, this is something else, something more. It reminds me of—*

She shut her eyes and carefully formed the mental incantation for a diagnostic spell, then opened them.

Several phrases she'd once used routinely on the Quidditch pitch came to mind, but none seemed quite bad enough.

Dumbledore's right hand blazed an eye-searing, unnatural green to her Healer's Sight, overwhelming the bandage-like strips of entwined lavender and gold magic that Aletha realized with a start belonged to her daughter and Neville Longbottom.

*That burn, the one they healed him of two summers ago, by transferring the curse that was causing it to the weeds around the Den—they did their best, I can see where it's still helping, but the damage was just too severe for them to get it all—*

The rest of the Headmaster's body, by contrast, was colored a dusky gray, softer and somehow dimmer than the silvery color Aletha associated with the bite of a werewolf. It was nothing she had seen before, but she thought she could make a fair guess.

*Age. He's growing old. And we tend to forget that or overlook it, because he's still so powerful, so strong and vital, that we push it out of our minds, we think he'll live forever. But how much of that vitality is an act by now, I wonder?*

Blinking her eyes three times to return them to normal sight, Aletha sat back, letting her ears catch the drift of the conversation, which seemed to have moved on from the mysterious "precious items" to the effect of having Draco under Death Eater control on the protective spells around Headquarters and the various secondary bases the Order maintained around the country.

"—doesn't remember, he *was* told the secret," Danger was saying now. "And I know that someone who knows how to find Headquarters can lead another person there, even if they can't *tell* them where it is. Doesn't that mean the spell should be recast?"

Dumbledore nodded. "In the technical sense, it does," he said, "but that may not be immediately necessary. My sources lead me to believe the Death Eaters' plans for Draco are aimed towards a different target—"

A toy to one side of the Headmaster's desk, shaped like a blue box with a pointed top, emitted a distinctive sound, and Dumbledore glanced down at it. "And the other necessary party to this discussion has just arrived. Come in, Severus."

Sirius pressed Aletha's hand once, then released it and got to his feet as Severus Snape opened the door. Their eyes met, and instead of the usual feeling of snapping tension between them, Aletha sensed a moment of what she supposed she'd have to call understanding.

*Though that's hardly a word I ever expected to use for those two!*

"Have a seat," Sirius said, conjuring a chair between the two loveseats. Snape nodded brusquely and did so, Sirius resuming his own seat beside Aletha once the Defense Professor had taken his.

"What we discuss here must not leave this room, unless it is for another suitably safeguarded

environment," said Dumbledore, drawing all eyes to himself as he began to sketch runes in the air with his wand. The door, already shut, sealed itself with an audible squelch, and the window, though open to the comfortable May breeze, developed a distinct sheen over its expanse. "For I believe that I have found a way, if Voldemort and his Death Eaters behave as they have done to this point, to restore your Pack's missing cub to his proper place with no effort on our part."

Aletha heard Danger's muffled squeal, Remus's soft hiss of breath, felt Sirius's hand contract around hers. She could hardly blame them, not when her own heart had leapt at the Headmaster's words. Even if Draco's death were inevitable and scarcely more than a month away, her every instinct rebelled against their separation in troubled times.

*But—with no effort? What are we going to do, write them a letter of complaint? "Pardon me, but you seem to have stolen our cub, and we'd like him back now"?*

"More than that, we will gain for the Order an agent within the Death Eaters' midst, one whose loyalty they will believe unquestionable." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled for an instant. "In which belief, of course, they will be correct. If entirely mistaken about its direction."

Danger covered a cough with one hand as Remus nodded gravely. Aletha felt a shudder of suppressed laughter go through Sirius and elbowed him. *Behave*, she signed with her free hand where he could see it.

"So, I ask that you first hear me out, and then poke as many holes as possible in my plans, so that our enemies have fewer chances to do the same." Dumbledore flicked his wand to one side, bringing a blackboard, with a sketch of a familiar building already drawn on it, into existence. "Let us begin with what I am advised they hope to accomplish..."

---

The Gryffindor May Day Fete got underway with a picnic lunch on the grounds for all students, the bright blankets resembling a patchwork quilt from afar. Certain of the older Gryffindors hurried through their sandwiches, crisps, sliced fruits and vegetables, and chilled pumpkin juice to get to their assigned game booths, featuring such delights as "Beat the Bludger" (if you could use a miniature Beater's bat to fight off a half-sized Bludger for sixty seconds, you won), "Niffler Dig" (whatever prize your chosen niffler dug up from the treasure box was yours to keep), and "Bucking Broomstick" (one of the school brooms had been re-enchanted to fly erratically, never a difficult feat, and the longer you stayed on, the bigger your prize).

Though the news of the Battle of Hogsmeade and the losses incurred there kept the mood more quiet than would usually have been expected, the overall feeling seemed to be one of defiant enjoyment, and no one led the charge more on this than the Gryffindors themselves. Their smiles as they called out the names of winners or coaxed passers-by to try their games might have been a bit fierce, slightly strained, but they were real.

Voldemort, they knew, wanted everyone cowering in their homes, wondering fearfully when he might decide to come for them, frantically obeying whatever commands he or his favored few saw fit to give in a desperate attempt to avoid his wrath. Gryffindors, as every enormous purple teddy

bear, Weasley's Wizarding Wheeze, and handful of leprechaun gold being given out at the Fete could testify, didn't cower worth a damn. Nor were they terribly interested in fearful wondering or frantic obedience. Even the loss of two of their own had become more of a rallying point than a knockout blow.

"George wouldn't want us all weeping and wailing for him," Fred told a gaggle of girls who'd gathered at his Death Eater Dunk Tank booth. "It always sets his back up, being fussed over, and I'd rather not get him angry with me now. Here we are, one ball for each of you lovely ladies, and if you can knock our Death Eater here into the water, you can choose anything you see on the stall..."

"Draco chose what would happen to him," said Hermione firmly to a number of skeptical-looking Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. "If he hadn't, I wouldn't be here now. And we honor him best by doing what he wanted. That is, going on with our lives. Being happy. Will you excuse me?"

Slipping away from the group, she caught Seamus Finnegan by the sleeve. "Had some good luck?" she asked, indicating the massive cuddly thestral he was toting.

"Just a freak throw, really. Took out the bottom corner of the pyramid with my first shot and the whole rest of it came crashing down." Seamus flicked one of the thestral's wings. "Wish these worked, I might be able to enter the flying races then. Nothing says it *has* to be on broomsticks, and my old Comet finally gave out back in March..."

"That's...actually what I wanted to talk to you about." Hermione nodded towards the rear of the tents. "Come aside with me?"

"Sure. Something wrong?" Seamus ducked around the corner of the tents and set down his thestral, looking closely at Hermione's face. "Well, I mean, apart from the obvious. I'm so sorry to hear about Draco."

"Thank you." Hermione smiled wanly. "And there you go again, bringing it up yourself."

"Pardon?"

"Do you remember the beginning of our third year?" said Hermione rather than answering this directly. "When we had the dementors all around the school, and even coming onto the train?"

"Who could forget?" Seamus hugged himself once, shivering. "Nasty buggers, those."

"No argument." Hermione reached into her pocket and withdrew a small, sealed letter. "But you said something at the Opening Feast that year that Draco never forgot. I don't know what it is myself, but I know he wanted you to have this." She passed across the letter, then smiled more truly. "Oh. And this."

Drawing her wand, she performed a Summoning Charm.

Seamus's mouth dropped open. "What—no! Hermione, I can't—"

"He wanted you to have it," Hermione repeated, laying her hand gently on the item she'd summoned where it hovered between them. "I'm only doing what he asked. Please, Seamus?"

"I..." Seamus drew one or two shaky breaths. "Oh, Merlin's bloody bollocks," he muttered under his breath. "You're sure about this?"

"He was." Hermione slid her fingers along silky wood once more, then lifted them away. "That's good enough for me."

"And I don't even remember what I could've said..." With a reluctant laugh, Seamus closed his hand around the shaft of Draco's Nimbus Two Thousand and One. "All right. Fine. You win. *He* wins. But what did I say—"

"Maybe he told you?" Hermione suggested, pointing to the letter.

"Yeah. Maybe." Sitting down on the hovering broomstick, Seamus unsealed the parchment in his hand and began to read.

*Hi Seamus,*

*You're probably reading this after I'm gone, so if you're going to blubber, get it over with now. I don't want you messing this up.*

*There, that's settled. I just wanted to say thank you for something you might not even remember. It happened years ago, but I think you'll understand why it mattered to me.*

*We'd come back to school for our third year, and I was all on edge because of the escapes from Azkaban and the dementors. You'd asked Harry how his summer was, and then you said it. "Why are they here?" you asked him. "What would Lucius Malfoy want at Hogwarts?"*

*Thank you for being the first one I can remember who could forget who I used to be.*

*Take care of the broom or I'll haunt you.*

*DRB*

Hermione laid a small pile of folded tissues on the broom beside Seamus and quietly slipped away.

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Sirius lingered in the hallway outside the entrance to Dumbledore's office. Aletha was upstairs with the Headmaster, doing Merlin only knew what, but he knew what she was likely to ask when she came down.

*Why I was being nice to Snape. Because for me, that was nice to Snape. And for him, that was nice to me.*



*Now if she'll only believe it...*

Shutting his eyes, he let memory take over.

*I was on my way to the kitchens, to be sure the house-elves had that food order right for the reception, we got it read back in house-elf and that's always a bit shaky on the difference between singular and plural...*

---

"Do you know who I am?"

The voice, harsh, guttural, got Sirius's full attention, as did the answering tones of dark menace. "I know who you *used to be*, yes. That gives you no power here and now."

*Snape? And—* Ducking quickly into an empty classroom, Sirius nipped behind the door and peered through the hinges.

*Sure enough. Thought I couldn't have forgot that voice so soon.*

The Bloody Baron, ghost of Slytherin House, in all his gory glory, was attempting to stare down a singularly unimpressed Severus Snape. "I will not be mocked!" the ghost snarled. "I will not be ridiculed! I will not—"

"You have no need of mockery or ridicule from others," Snape interrupted. "You embody the principles. Inasmuch as you embody anything." Deliberately, he passed a hand through the ghost's midsection. "And *I* will not permit you to intrude upon the grief of one of *my* students. Nor upon that of his parents, whether or not they have magic. They lost their child last night and you *will* respect that. Or I will speak with the Headmaster, and with...certain others of my acquaintance. And you will be *made* to respect it." He laid his hand on the stones of the wall beside him. "The castle remembers, my lord. The castle remembers."

The Baron hissed, reminding Sirius of one or two of the things which had come out of Harry's mouth the night before, then spun once in midair and vanished. Snape shrugged his shoulders and turned to walk away.

Obeying impulse, Sirius stepped out from behind his door and cleared his throat.

Snape did not jump, nor did he spin around. He went very still, and turned around once more with great deliberation. "Black," he said precisely.

"Snape," Sirius acknowledged in answer, and squelched several possible continuations in favor of the one both true and unlikely to get him hexed. "Nicely done."

One dark eyebrow ascended. "Thank you," said Snape after a moment.

Nods were exchanged, and the two men went on their way.

Percy was in the back room of the Pepper Pot, doing the month's accounts, when the entrance to the Red Roads lit up. He got to his feet politely as Danielle emerged from the archway. "How was the Fete?" he asked. "Did everything go well?"

"The Fete—oh, yes, fine, just fine. It..." Danielle shook her head, stepping off the red-painted boards. "Percy, I'm sorry. I've come to say goodbye."

Nonplussed, Percy followed Danielle into the main body of the restaurant, empty today thanks to the simple 'Closed: Death in Family' sign he'd posted on the front door. "I'm sorry you've come to say goodbye too. What on earth—"

"I'm leaving. Leaving Fred, leaving the Red Shepherds. I've talked to Professor Dumbledore, he's got work for me elsewhere, through the Order." Danielle spoke rapidly, in spurts, as though trying to keep Percy from getting a word in edgewise. "Fred already knows, he wasn't expecting anything else—please, tell your mother I'm sorry, and I do love him, I'll probably never stop loving him, but that's why I have to go—"

"What—" Percy began, but was cut off by the bang of the door behind Danielle. "What was that?" he finished anyway, more quietly, to himself. "If she loves him, why is she leaving?"

"She's leaving because she loves him," said a voice from behind him. He turned to see Crystal, heavy-eyed, leaning against the wall of the Pepper Pot beside the painting which hid the access to his rooms upstairs. "Isn't that what she said?"

"Yes, but it makes no sense." Percy drew his wand and pulled out a chair from the table nearest Crystal, waving her into it, then sitting down himself once she was seated. "I would think, if she loves him, the proper thing to do would be to stay and help him through these next few months—it's going to be hard enough on him, adjusting to life without his twin, but losing his girlfriend as well—"

"She wouldn't make any difference."

The statement, so bald, had Percy frowning in confusion. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"How much did you know about them, Percy?" Crystal countered, twisting her hands in her lap. "How much did you *really* know about your brothers? You saw them almost every day for most of your life. The terrible twins, Fred and George the jokesters. Identical, interchangeable, impossible to tell apart. Right?"

About to say yes, Percy stopped. "You," he said slowly, "never seemed to have any trouble with that."

Crystal shrugged. "I got to know George well all by himself, apart from Fred," she said. "I saw them together, of course, I knew they were twins, but George was the one who'd come down to the paper shop, or out to a couple other places we both knew. We'd talk together, swap stories, tell

jokes. He'd do tricks for me, and I'd gawk and try to figure out where the gimmick was." She smiled a little. "I was a little annoyed when he finally told me he had real magic. I'd been so sure I'd spotted where he was palming his cards from. But you never had that, did you? A place, a time, a way when you could be around one of them and not the other one. And that's why you never realized what George told me, last New Year's Eve."

"And what's that?" Percy realized as the words formed that they could sound accusatory, and managed to hold his tone to merely curious with a struggle.

A sad little laugh escaped Crystal. "Sorry, love," she murmured, looking upwards, then turned her gaze back to Percy. "I promised him I wouldn't tell. But I don't think it can hurt anything now." She lifted her arms, as though cradling a large ball. "What do you see?"

"You. Your hands." Percy shook his head. "What does that have to do with my brothers?"

"How about now?" Crystal brought her hands together, palm to palm. "They're the same, aren't they? Identical."

"No, they're not," Percy objected. "They're—"

He stopped as understanding broke over him.

"Mirrored," Crystal finished for him, interlacing her fingers and laying her hands back in her lap. "Two halves of a whole. Day and night. Action and reaction. Beginning and ending." Her smile flickered again. "Fred and George weren't identical twins at all. They were *mirror* twins. It wasn't easy to see, because they did look a great deal alike, and they figured out very young the kind of havoc they could cause if people thought they were identical, so they trained themselves into doing things the same. But if you surprised them, if you caught them off guard, you could still spot the biggest difference between them." Untwining her fingers, she lifted first one hand, then the other. "Fred is left-handed. George was right."

"That...makes a great deal of sense." Percy replayed several incidents from his childhood in the light of this new knowledge, smiling at the sense they now made to him. "I can see that. But what does Fred being left-handed have to do with Danielle leaving?"

"Nothing at all. It's another part of them entirely." Crystal circled her hands in the air. "Beginning and ending, Percy. You need them both, don't you, for the story to be complete?"

"You do." Percy nodded. "But—"

"Hear me out?" At his second, almost reluctant nod, Crystal went on. "If it had been the other way around. If Fred had died, and George survived. I would have stayed with him, not just through this time but forever. Walked beside him all the days of his life. Been as much as I could to him, loved him with all my heart."

*I know*, Percy almost blurted out. *I know you would. And I wish—*

But even in the silence of his mind, such things could not be spoken.

"For him, for George," Crystal went on, unaware of Percy's traitorous thoughts, "I think that would have been—not enough, not really enough, but sufficient." She twitched one shoulder, clearly dissatisfied with her word but unable to find a better one. "He would have been able to go on, to live out his life and find a measure of contentment. Because an ending without a beginning is tragic, but not disastrous. It's slow, and sad, and even a little bittersweet. But Danielle can't do that for Fred." Her lips pressed tightly together. "A beginning without an ending isn't slow, and it isn't sad. It's fast, and furious, and out of control. She does love him, Percy, but she can't change what he is, or what that means he'll do. And that's why she can't stay."

"What that means he'll do?" Percy repeated carefully. "Out of control? You're not saying—"

"He'd never hurt you," Crystal cut in, holding up a finger. "Or your family, or your friends. He'll find some way to do it that means you can't be hurt or blamed. And if it's soon, if the war's still going on, I think he'll probably set it up to take as many Death Eaters with him as he can." A tiny, sick smile flickered onto her face. "Seven's the mark to beat, isn't it now?"

"Mark to beat—take with him—" Percy shook his head. "Crystal, don't talk like this. You sound as if you think we're going to lose Fred too!"

"Do I? I didn't mean to." Crystal walked carefully to the Vanishing Cabinet, opening the door and stepping inside. "We're not *going* to lose Fred, Percy," she said quietly, her hand on the latch. "We already have."

The door clicked shut behind her, punctuating her simple, impossible words.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 30: Music and Memorabilia (Arc 7)

Draco Malfoy sat back in his chair, listening with half an ear as his father and the other Death Eaters seated around the table made their reports to the Dark Lord. As fascinating as he would usually have found this process, he had something else on his mind.

*Whether or not it really is my mind, even now.*

He found it hard to believe his father could have made such a glaring mistake as leaving any of the "Pack's" spells active on him—mentally, he spat the word for his captors' unnatural family—but he couldn't ignore the facts.

*There are these weird little moments, usually just as I'm falling asleep or waking up, when I feel the way I did when their precious Hermione had her blood-hold over me. Like there's someone else inside my head, listening, watching, waiting. Someone who wants to control me. Maybe even destroy me.*

Absently, he stroked the small scar on his cheek, letting his eyes rest on the matching one on his father's. *We may still carry the marks of the pain they've put us through, Father with his lycanthropy, me with my blood-borne slaving, but we've beaten them at last. We're together again. I'm back where I belong, and I'm not about to let anyone take that away from me.*

"—will speak with you again at the end of the week," the Dark Lord concluded, and vanished silently in the act of rising from his chair. Draco let out a breath of admiration at such a marvelous command of Apparition, then obediently followed his father from the room by the more mundane means of the door.

As Wormtail scuttled past the Malfoys in his usual half-hunch, Draco caught sight of a tube of polished wood clutched tightly in the silver hand, too thick to be a wand and decorated with an odd pattern of holes. "What's that?" he demanded, catching the corner of Wormtail's cloak and bringing the shorter wizard to a halt. "Where did you get it?"

"Oh, this?" Wormtail looked as though he wished he could stuff the whatever-it-was inside his robes, but Draco's voice, carrying and clear, had halted every Death Eater in the corridor and brought all their heads around to stare. "I...found it. In one of the older rooms near mine. I had hoped to show it to our Master, to see if it might be magical, but he was too busy, so I'll just—"

"Give it here." Draco stuck out his hand imperiously, sensing his father stepping up on his right, adding his own authority to his son's command. "I want it."

Wormtail opened his mouth, then closed it again at Lucius's soft cough. His shoulders slumped, and he laid the tube of wood in Draco's palm reluctantly.

"Thank you," said Draco magnanimously, curling his fingers around his acquisition. "I do

appreciate your generosity."

"Don't mention it," mumbled Wormtail, then immediately transformed into his alternate shape and scurried away around the corner. The other Death Eaters present shared a good laugh before dispersing, each towards their own set of rooms, Draco accepting his father's proud squeeze of a shoulder with a grateful smile and tucking his prize away inside his robes before they resumed their own upward trek.

*I wonder what it is, and what it's used for. It's hollow, I can tell that just by the weight, and the holes along the side meet up with the one down the middle. The one end of it flares out some, and it looks like the other end is made to blow into...*

---

After triple-locking his door, Peter Pettigrew grinned broadly at his wife. "He took it," he reported, coming across the sitting room to kiss her so that she wouldn't need to get up. Her ever-increasing girth made that a trickier proposition by the day. "Snatched it the instant he saw it, like a jarvey at a gnomehole."

"The letter did say he probably would." Evanie placed her hand momentarily over her husband's on the curve of her belly, smiling fondly up at him, then returned to the work she'd been doing when he arrived, the careful disassembly and examination of the other small item which had arrived with said letter. "Did they say anything useful at the meeting today?"

"No, not really, except that Our Dear Master will likely be out of the country until the end of the week." Peter frowned, stacking the breakfast dishes together and moving them to the small tray which sat atop a shelf in the corner of the room. "I wonder what he's doing on the Continent so much these days? Maybe I can find out."

"Don't take chances you don't need to, please?" Snapping two pieces back together, Evanie peered along the line thus created. "Even with this, I don't think I could fight my way out of here."

"You shouldn't need to. It's only a precaution. Though that's less necessary than it once was." Smirking, Peter rapped his wand twice against the tray, sending the dishes on their way to the kitchen for the house-elves' attention. "I wonder what Bellatrix would do if she ever found out who made her a widow?"

"Most likely she'd send you a bouquet and a thank-you card," said Evanie absently, her attention on making sure the cylinders she was replacing lined up properly with the barrel of her newly-acquired potion piece. "And you might not even have to check the flowers for poison..."

Peter laughed aloud, savoring the sound and the feelings it evoked. He'd spent quite enough of his life being miserable, and didn't intend to go back.

*We'll find a way out of this. Somehow. Now that I've finally got my head on straight, and I'm standing up for the ones I love. He cast a thoughtful glance at the door, thinking of the boy he'd confronted in the corridor. And even, a little bit, for the ones I might have loved, if things had*

*fallen out differently than they have.*

*I'm just as glad my offer of a few days ago wasn't taken—he's terribly charming in his rightful person, and his taunting Lucius was a thing of beauty...*

---

Draco leaned against the railing of his bedroom's balcony, enjoying the warm sunlight of early May and turning the mysterious object over in his hands. He had been practicing with his newly acquired wand (hawthorn and unicorn hair, reasonably springy, ten inches long exactly), but had grown weary of the simple spells his father had set him to master. They came so easily to him that he might almost have been studying with his proper cohort at Hogwarts since the very beginning.

*I suppose that's the other side of the bond between me and little Miss Granger-Lupin. What she learned, so did I.* He shuddered slightly at the name and the memories it evoked, both of his "mistress" herself and of the bizarre couple who served as her surrogate parents—*though it only makes sense that a werewolf would marry a Muggle. Who else would have him? And magic does sometimes transfer along a marriage bond, the same way it can along lines of blood...*

But none of his musings were getting him any further towards figuring out what the thing in his hands might be.

"I thought earlier this bit looked like a mouthpiece," he murmured aloud, raising the item toward his face. "Let's see what happens..."

As the wood touched his lips, his hands briskly rearranged themselves, thumbs under, fingers on top, each covering a single hole. His stance altered, becoming more upright and squarer-shouldered, and he drew a long breath in.

*What—*

The thought never completed itself, as the breath flowed from him through what he was holding and created, to his shock, a clear, distinct *sound*, both musical and lovely. His fingers moved with certainty in a pattern unknown to him, yet compelling and familiar, and a sweet, wandering melody filled the air around him.

*Do-re-mi-sol-mi-re-do, mi-sol-la, do-ti-sol-mi, fa-mi-re...*

"Weird," Draco breathed, taking the—*pipe*, he supposed it ought to be called, though it might have a more specific name, he'd need to look it up—away from his lips. "I didn't know I could do that."

*Though I know Sirius Black held onto enough of his raising that he wanted all his darling cubs to gain a few basic accomplishments. Probably they tried to get Hermione to learn to play, and even though she never kept up with it, it bled over to me as something she didn't feel she needed...*

Wherever this ability had come from, though, Draco knew he wasn't about to give it up. A proper



pureblood gentleman, after all, should be master of at least one of the fine arts, to ensure that he and his wife, whoever she might eventually be, might have *some* commonality of interest.

*Besides, I like it. And what's my new life about, if it isn't doing what I like, when I like, and as I like? Stroking a loving finger around the broad end of his pipe, he tucked it away inside his robes again. I don't think I'll show it to Father just yet, not until he's got less on his mind. Maybe once the war's over, and we're thinking about whose blood might be best to bring into the Malfoy line. He smirked. Or possibly I'll get the chance to spread the love a little more widely—there's plenty to go around, after all, and the more purebloods we can breed up for our Master's cause, the better...*

Leaning on the railing again, Draco lost himself in pleasurable thoughts of the future as envisioned by the Dark Lord, and never noticed his fingers drumming out a complicated rhythm on the wood beside him.

---

"And you've been doing this since Christmas?" Hermione stared around at the potions laboratory her twin and his beloved had created in the safe haven which was Moaning Myrtle's perpetually out-of-order toilet. "Without anyone knowing about it?"

"Anyone except you, now." Luna held out a small scroll, covered in Draco's best handwriting. "If you look at what the Imprimatus Potion is meant to do, I think you'll understand why we weren't telling anyone."

Hermione accepted the scroll and scanned the first few lines, then looked up at Luna searchingly. "You're thinking of the vision," she said. "Because if it's true, and all yours have been so far, then you *know* Lucius Malfoy will be there, in that place, at that time. And you *know* he'll believe that you're joining his side. For whatever reason, whatever he might think that..."

"It's possible that I'll have enchanted myself to believe it, until the vision is over." Luna smiled at Myrtle, who floated above her cubicle, engrossed in a ghostly book and weaving her translucent hand absently through the blue steam rising from the bubbling cauldron. "That would certainly account for why I didn't see my usual telltales for lies. Though..." She trailed off, as though thinking, but then shook her head. "Never mind. The point is, yes, I *know* he will be there. And that he'll let me get close to him. The potion should be ready in another month, by the fifth of June." Dipping her hand into her pocket, she emerged with Draco's green-stoned dagger, her fingers wrapped expertly around the hilt. "And I'll dip this into it before I go."

"Because goblin-wrought silver absorbs whatever makes it stronger." Hermione let her hand rest for a moment on the hilt of her own dagger, belted around her waist as always. "But will it kill him instead, if you stab him with it? He is a werewolf, and it is silver..."

"I don't know. It might, or the Imprimatus might coat the blade and get into his blood first. Destroy his human mind, except for just enough to talk a little and do magic when he's told, and fixate his wolf side into obedience to the first person he sees. Which will be me. She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Defied." Luna's smile turned thin and cold. "Whichever way it happens, I can live with it."

"You know," said Hermione slowly, "I think I can too." She unrolled the scroll once more. "Which point had you got to?"

"Step fifteen, wasn't it?" Luna came around to look over Hermione's shoulder. "Whichever was the one that needed three weeks of simmering afterwards. The time's up tomorrow, which is why I asked you to come today, I'm almost certain I understand the next part but it looks like it needs two pairs of hands to get it done..."

---

Draco slept, and dreamed, fragments of images and feelings that made no sense to him. How could he run on four legs, hear in impossibly high frequencies, catch the scent of prey on the wind? He was a human, not an animal, no matter how badly the *Pack* had treated him...

But no, he remembered it now, a short episode when he'd been about ten years old. The Muggle woman, Danger as they called her, giddy with the magic her werewolf husband foolishly let her use, had decided to try her hand at high-level transfiguration, and thus the Pack's kitchen boy had been changed for the space of a day into the shape of a gray-furred fox.

*I almost enjoyed it, or would have if I'd really understood what was going on. Nobody expects foxes to do chores, or stand still and get taunted and abused. If I could have had a fox's body, but my human mind still, that would have been the best...*

And in this dream, he realized as a huge form loomed ahead of him, that was precisely what he did have. Slipping to one side of the path he'd been following, concealing himself among the vaguely-delineated underbrush (with a brief, wrinkled-nose grimace for the sloppiness of the work), he sampled the air, nose high, mouth open.

*Female. Adult. Predator.* Under his breath, he growled, and began to back slowly away, moving with extra care due to the slight flexibility of the ground. *I don't know how you got into my dreams, but I don't want to see you, I don't want to come near you, I don't want to deal with you ever again...*

The scent eddied, then resumed, this time with a tinge of baking bread and a sharp floral tone added to it. "I know you're there, Draco," said a woman's voice. "You can run if you like, but you already know this isn't real, so I can't hurt you. And I think there might be some things you want to say to me."

Emboldened, Draco reared back and shot upwards as a human, brushing bits of leaf off his palms. "You think so, do you?" he said coolly, stalking forward into the small clearing where the woman he'd just been thinking about, the woman called Danger, sat at the base of a tree, her legs folded under her, watching him with her face calm and expressionless. "And what might give you the idea you're worth a single moment of my time, real or not?"

"I'm here." Danger gestured, palm up, at the woods all around them. "Whether you meant to or not, you opened your dream to me. And whether you believe it or not, I'm not about to hurt you."

"Not *about* to?" sneered Draco, concealing his quivering fear beneath a thick layer of scorn. "Pity you didn't have that attitude all along. Now why don't you leave me alone and let me get on with my life? It's *over*. I'm where I ought to be, and there's nothing your people can do to me any longer."

"That may be true. But if you should ever come across something in your life you can't explain, something that seems too strange to believe, try talking to me, or to another of my Pack." Danger smiled softly. "You might be surprised by what you'd find out."

"I'd be surprised by how fast you'd snap your damned shackles back on me, you mean," Draco retorted. "Honestly, I'm amazed you let me go at all! You've been dogs in the manger over me every day that I can remember, if you can't have me, no one can—rather than see me free and happy, back with my father where I belong, I'd have thought you'd want me *dead* —"

"I considered it."

The words, spoken not in any histrionic tone but with the same flat simplicity with which Danger would have announced that broomsticks were for flying, stunned Draco momentarily into silence. "You—*what*?" he got out when he could speak again.

"We have our spies among the Death Eaters, as I'm sure the Death Eaters have theirs among us. One of those spies contacted me, through an intermediary, to offer his services on our behalf." Danger's smile flickered once and died, like a candle flame burning too quickly through its wick. "If we wished you to meet with some terrible accident, he said, or even suffer a more obvious mischief by person or persons unknown, he would oblige us quickly and quietly, without fear, without suffering. As he would prefer it done for a child of his own, in a similar situation, were there no other hope to be had."

"But..." Draco pressed his fingers against his forehead, trying to will away the headache he could feel building. "You said no."

"I did say no." Now the smile returned, and built into something worthy of the name. "Think about that, the next time you're meditating on how badly you've been wronged."

"I don't believe you," snapped Draco, but even to himself the words sounded petty and childish. "You could tell me anything you like, here and now," he said in a more reasonable tone. "Say there's a secret hideout for Muggles under Hogwarts, or you can walk through walls any time you please, or the Heir of Slytherin delivers your mail. I've got no way to prove or disprove any of it."

"No, you don't," agreed Danger, getting to her feet. "But tell me this." She stroked two fingers along her cheek, then kissed them and blew gently across them in Draco's direction. "Why would I lie?"

Draco was still trying to formulate an answer to this when the ground tore apart under his feet.

One choked scream escaped him before his eyes popped open.

He was lying in his own bed, breathing in short, panting gasps, his pajamas dampened with sweat.

"Why would you lie?" he muttered, sitting up, pressing a hand to his heart to calm himself down. "Because you want me grateful to you, that's why. You want me thinking of you as some kind of heroine. Well, break a leg with that one, *Gertrude*. It's not happening, not so long as my name is Draco Malfoy."

After fanning his sheets a few times to cool himself down, then flipping his pillow and punching it into shape, he lay down and closed his eyes once more.

On the edge of sleep, he felt his fingers brush against the spot on his cheek where Danger's kiss had landed.

---

Matt Smythe waved Meghan over to his table at the end of Potions on the Friday of that week, Natalie and Graham joining the small conclave as a matter of course. "Mum found this in Amanda's things, that Professor Flitwick sent home with her and Dad after they were here to see... you know," he said uncomfortably, extending a parchment envelope. "She thought I ought to give it to somebody, even if it can't go to the person it's meant for."

Meghan took the envelope, glanced at the address, and nodded. "We'll keep it until we see him again," she said, tucking it into her pocket. "Thank you."

"Until you see him again?" asked Natalie as the friends walked in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, Graham headed ultimately for the library where he needed to do some research for a History of Magic essay. "But I thought..."

"We know people who know things." Meghan looked around at the expanse of the castle, letting her fingers trail along the stone wall beside her. "Those people told us not to stop hoping, and not to let ourselves get all twisted up with hate and anger. So I'm trying to think good thoughts. And one of those thoughts is that we *will* see him again."

"All right."

"Are you going to open it?" Graham asked, looking curiously at Meghan's pocket. "Or your parents?"

"Well, *I* won't. I don't know what they'll do, but I think they'll leave it alone too. Amanda was..." Meghan hesitated. "Different," she said finally. "She'd touched deep magic, the kind that's old and very strong. It isn't done with wands or potions, and it can't be undone with them either."

"Like the spell our year broke." Natalie giggled. "I wonder if any of the Death Eaters have noticed it's gone yet."

"Probably not. But if they do what my Dadfoot thinks they might, and Mr. Weasley and Percy..." Meghan trailed off, shaking her head. "George's funeral is tomorrow," she said quietly. "Is it bad

that I don't want to go?"

"No one ever wants to go to funerals." Graham shifted his bag on his shoulder. "But isn't that why we're fighting the war? So not as many people will *have* to go to funerals?"

"I guess so." Meghan sniffled once. "I just...I wish..." She pushed away from the two and stalked to the end of the hallway, past the tapestry of pink-clad trolls which hung on one wall, then back again, her eyes shining brighter than usual, her hands opening and closing. "I just wish there was someplace I could hide from it all," she said restlessly, turning away to pace along the corridor once more. "Someplace I could go that nobody would ever, ever find me, not until I was ready to be found—"

Natalie gasped, hands against her mouth. Graham bit off a swearword in the middle.

Meghan turned to see what had surprised her friends. "Oh, that," she said dismissively, waving a hand at the door which had formed in the opposite wall. "That's just the Room of Requirement, where we used to meet for DA, remember? With the passage down to the Den where my Pride has our den-nights, that we used to keep from being caught by *Professor Umbridge* that one time?"

"But you weren't requiring a room for anything." Natalie lowered her hands. "Except a hiding place, and it could just have made a little alcove for that."

"Or maybe a broom closet," suggested Graham with a smile. "Didn't the Weasley twins say that's what it was when they hid here from Mr. Filch?"

"As long as it doesn't turn into what Draco and Luna used to do that, back in the fall." Meghan laid her hand on the doorknob. "Want to see?"

"Yes, please," said Graham promptly as Natalie swallowed once, but nodded.

Twisting the knob boldly, Meghan threw the door open.

Three breaths sucked in together.

---

Lucius awakened from a pleasant afternoon nap to an odd feeling of compression on his chest. Cautiously, prepared for anything from a fellow Death Eater's cat to a magical creature sent by his Master to summon him, he opened one eye.

The enormous green eyes staring back at him from a distance of about six inches did indeed belong to a magical creature, but just as surely it had nothing to do with his Master. As Lucius had good and painful reasons to know, this particular creature could no longer be sent anywhere, by anyone.

*Not since Draco caught that blasted ball made out of socks, at any rate...*

"Lucius Malfoy thinks he is so very clever, taking back his son," said a voice which managed despite its squeakiness to be decidedly chilling. "But Lucius Malfoy should know how easy it is for big, clumsy wizards to have...*accidents* ." A pair of enormous, batlike ears flipped back and forth once. "If Lucius Malfoy is not very kind to his son, accidents will start to happen. Many, *many* accidents." A grin revealed a mouthful of worryingly pointed teeth. "You shall not harm Dobby's master."

With a snap of his long fingers, the clothed house-elf vanished.

Lucius growled under his breath, rolling off the sofa he'd used for his nap and choosing a pillow to shred to pieces. It did nothing productive, he knew, but it would use up his temper without causing any true harm.

*Accidents indeed. And because the Manor is mine, all blame for inimical magic within its walls must ultimately fall to me, whether or not I was truly involved! How am I now to discipline the boy if he begins to misbehave, as surely he will?*

He flung a handful of feathers savagely aside. "I had hoped that some of the restraint and dignity he displayed before I cast my spells would carry over," he said aloud, denuding the pillow of another handful. "Give the *Pack* their due, they raised a surprisingly admirable young man in many ways, despite his rather vulgar mode of expressing himself and his absolutely unacceptable views on life. But no, the Draco I have restored to his proper way of thinking seems to have lost every scrap of maturity and dedication. He plays at the lessons I give him while they amuse him, then tosses them aside in favor of something he likes better—"

Doing the same to the now deflated pillow, Lucius turned and met his reflected eyes in the mirror across the room. "Perhaps I can use that to my advantage," he mused aloud, drawing his wand and absently twirling it to send the feathers back to their proper place and restore the pillow to its un mutilated state. "If I can persuade him that nothing could be more enjoyable than the way in which my Master intends to use him, that the frightful parts of it are instead exciting and thrilling, and most of all, that there will be a great reward awaiting him at the end of it..."

The more he thought about this idea, the better Lucius liked it.

"Draco may have the demeanor of a child, but he has the desires and urges of a man," he said, bending to rummage in one of his desk's drawers for parchment, quill, and ink. "And in his former life, he was much enamored of Miss Luna Lovegood. Perhaps we can take advantage of a certain petty plot to bring her into our control here, or perhaps we shall simply make her a secondary goal of the larger plan which already centers around my son." He smiled. "After all, the House of Malfoy must continue, must it not? And the blood of the Lovegoods is acceptably pure, even if their ways of thinking are...peculiar." The smile surged upwards into a grin. "Thinking is not precisely a necessity for what we shall require the girl to do."

*I should research suitable potions, perhaps, to render her as docile and pliable as may be, or even mindless altogether, save for basic animal instinct. It would never do to have a scrap of pillow talk begin unraveling all my careful work, now would it?*

Chuckling to himself, Lucius set to work noting down the elements needed for these new elaborations on his Master's current plan.

*Poor blind fools. They think they are hemming me in, keeping me from harming their loved ones any further, when in fact, they are merely opening new horizons before my eyes...*

---

"All right, we're here," said Harry, stepping inside the unused classroom and allowing Ginny to lock the door behind him. "Now what is so important that you couldn't tell anybody about it until the whole Pride was together?"

With a flourish, Meghan whipped away the cloth which covered one of the desks.

Harry looked at the item thus revealed, feeling his fellow Warriors doing the same. "It's a snow globe," he said after a moment. "What about it?"

"Magic snow globe," Ron corrected, shading his eyes. "Still, not that special. Though I'd love to know what it does, it's awfully bright..."

"What it does isn't the point," said Meghan impatiently. "Touch it. Not everyone," she added quickly as most of the Pride started forward. "Just Harry and Neville."

Glancing over at Neville, Harry got a shrug in return. *So he doesn't know what's up either—that's odd, I didn't think Pearl did much of anything without her Captain...*

Side by side, the two boys laid their hands on the smooth, cool curve of glass.

Neville frowned, shifting his feet. "It's colder than it ought to be," he said. "And I'm getting something..."

Harry nodded absently in agreement with this, trying to track down his own "something", an almost indefinable shiver along his magical nerves. He'd felt it before, and recently, though very seldom before that, and it was associated with something definitely unpleasant—

So faint that he nearly missed it, his scar twinged with pain.

"What—" Harry snatched his hand away, taking a rapid step back from the desk and snapping his wand out of its holster. "Tell me your godmother's Animagus form name," he demanded, pointing the wand at Meghan as the rest of the Pride came to alert around him.

"She...doesn't have one. We just call her Danger, no matter what she looks like. Mama called her Princess once, but that was back when she didn't remember anything." Meghan blinked in confusion. "Harry, why—"

"Voldemort?" said Hermione from the back of the room. "Harry, did your scar just hurt?"

"Yes, but not like it does when something's a Horcrux." Harry laughed shakily, releasing his wand

to return it to its place. "That would be way too easy, don't you think? Just finding it in some random room at Hogwarts?"

"But what is it, then?" Ginny asked, the rest of the Pride coming forward to examine the globe as well. "And that wasn't funny, Meghan," she added, stepping around Harry to confront the younger witch. "Haven't we had enough problems—"

"I wasn't trying to be funny, I was trying to find out if I was making things up!" Meghan glared at Ginny. "Because I found it with Graham and Natalie in the same place as the Room of Requirement, only it's different, it's *huge* and it's full of broken and stolen and hidden *everything*, and I *thought* I felt just the tiniest bit of the same feeling I get when I hold a Horcrux but I wasn't *sure!*" She planted her hands on her hips. "So I was *trying* to—oh." Distracted by the crackle of parchment, she pulled a letter from her pocket and handed it across to Hermione. "I think you should have this," she said. "You or Luna."

Hermione glanced at the name written across the letter's back. "I see." Tucking it into her own pocket, she stepped up beside Ron. "I don't suppose you can tell what kind of magic is on it?" she asked him.

"Only thing it's bringing to mind—and this is going to sound stupid, so don't laugh at me—but it reminds me a little of Dad's car." Ron shook his head, his expression baffled. "But Dad would never use Dark magic, especially not on something the family's around all the time..."

"So this must not be a Dark spell, then," said Ginny. "Luna? Can you See anything?"

"Not clearly." Luna tilted her head first one way, then another, frowning in concentration. "You're right, though, it isn't a Dark spell. It is a complicated one, something that none of us know how to cast yet. I'd recognize anything I knew how to do, or that I'd seen one of you doing. Should we ask Professor Dumbledore?"

"Probably." Harry checked his watch. "But not right now, it's getting late. This thing won't explode or possess anybody or something like that, Luna? I mean spontaneously, if nobody's meddling with it or trying spells on it?"

"It shouldn't." Luna walked a slow circle around the snow globe, viewing it from every angle. "None of the magic on it is active at all. It needs to be triggered somehow. I just can't spot the trigger point..."

"We can figure it out later." Neville pulled a bag from his pocket, removed a number of oddly-shaped green pods from it, and held it open for Hermione to levitate the globe into it. "Going to put it somewhere safe for the night, Harry?"

"Safest place I know." Harry accepted the bag and waited for Ginny to remove her Imperturbable Charm from the door. "Up in our dorm, in one of the drawers in my wardrobe. Even if the Death Eaters have a Gryffindor or two on their side, who'd think to go looking for anything valuable underneath my socks?"



Draco lay curled up on his side, shivering. Almost seventeen he might be, but it had been a stormy night when the Pack had first stolen him away from his home, and some things never stopped being frightening.

*Think about something else. Anything else. Music, maybe—all the different songs I'm finding with my pipe, and some of them I can even think up words for—what Father and his Master want me to do, wouldn't that be amazing, actually getting to see Hogwarts and go inside, not to mention keeping the stupid Pack looking at me instead of at Father and his friends while they creep inside—and Father was even hinting there might be something very important that only I could do while I was there, something that would really help our side of the war—*

Outside the window, lightning washed the night with fire. An instant later, thunder pounded through the skies, reverberating painfully through Draco's chest. He pressed his face into his pillow, unable to stop the whimper from escaping.

*I hate this. I hate it. I should be too old for this, I should be able to be strong and get through it, but I'm not. I can't. I want somebody to come, but then at the same time I don't, because the only one who'd come would be Father, and he wouldn't understand, he'd only get angry—*

The bed dipped on one side, as though someone had sat down on it.

"Will I do?" said a voice.

*It's a man, but not Father—he sounds young, almost my age—*

Draco sat up, squinting in confusion at the stranger in his bedroom. "Who are you?" he asked warily, and somehow felt no surprise when his words came out in the treble of a young child rather than his own mid-range tenor. "How did you get in here?"

"Call me Fox." A wand a couple inches longer than Draco's own flicked towards the fireplace, bringing up the flames to dance merrily along the logs. "I'm a relation of yours. Not one you'd have heard of, but that's how I got in. The house knows who does and doesn't belong here."

"That's what Father told me." Draco gathered his knees to his chest, still unsure of what he should do. Fox, seen in the brightening firelight, did indeed bear some resemblance to Draco's father, or to Draco himself at his proper age, but his hair was several tones darker, his features broader and plainer, and his eyes were a bright and definite blue. "What do you want?"

Fox shrugged. "You seemed kind of scared. I thought *you* might want some company." He smiled, a warm, friendly, understanding expression. "I remember what it's like to be scared of storms. They used to get to me pretty badly when I was your age."

A low growl of thunder sounded outside, making Draco shiver. "How did you stop being scared?" he asked, still hugging his knees. "Can you teach me?"

"I can start, sure." Fox patted the bed beside him. "Come on over here."

"Why?"

"Because it's a lot harder to fight your fears on your own than it is if you have help." Fox patted the spot again. "I don't bite. Promise."

Draco hesitated for another second. "Who helped you?"

"My dad." The answer was immediate, as a wistful look came across Fox's face. "He used to come get me on stormy nights, and we'd go downstairs—I shared a bedroom when I was little, we didn't have nearly as big a house as this one—but we'd go downstairs, so we wouldn't wake anybody up, and then he'd talk to me and tell me stories. You like stories?"

"Sometimes." Draco swallowed once, then, gathering his courage, scooted across the bed to Fox's side. "What stories would he tell you?"

"Oh, all kinds. Usually he'd start by getting me to understand what was happening outside." Fox held out his hands, about six inches apart. "See, the lightning makes the air get really, really hot, and it comes apart a little ways. But it doesn't want to be apart, so it comes slamming back together, and that's what makes the thunder." He brought his hands together in a clap, though not a hard one. "Dad used to say it was the clouds applauding for the great show the lightning was putting on out there."

Draco grinned at this image, and couldn't see any point in objecting when one of Fox's arms looped around him and settled there, tucking him in comfortably against Fox's side. "The lightning's putting on a really big show tonight," he said, peering around Fox at the rain lashing across the balcony. "Does it have a story to go with it?"

"I don't know. It might." Fox glanced down at him. "Was that your very subtle way of letting me know you'd like a story too?"

"I'm supposed to be too old for bedtime stories, though," Draco objected.

Fox laughed. "Trust me, no one's ever too old for a bedtime story. How about 'Cinderella'? I used to love that one when I was your age."

"All right." Laying his head against Fox's chest, Draco let his eyes close, the better to find the pictures that ought to go with the words. This was, to be certain, a dream, but for once it was a good one.

"Well, then," Fox began, "once upon a time there was a lovely witch named Ella, who had a wicked stepmother and two ugly stepsisters. They took away her wand and made her do all the housework without magic, and sleep near the kitchen fireplace so that she got covered in ashes and cinders, and that's how she came to be called Cinderella..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 31: Soul-Searching (Arc 7)

"So how is this going to work again?" asked Sirius, watching Neville and Meghan carefully settling pre-enchanted talismans into the outer edges of a board engraved with a number of concentric circles and angled lines. "And use little words. I'm an Auror, not an Arithmancer."

"You see this?" Harry dangled a fat gold locket engraved with a serpentine S by its chain. "This is a bad thing. Can you say bad thing?"

Sirius groaned and aimed a swat at the side of Harry's head. "Not *that* little."

Harry dodged, laughing. "Sorry, couldn't resist. But it is. A bad thing, I mean. So is the cup the other group's got. And there's other ones like them out there, ones we need to find. We've got most of them, but not all, so this is going to help us home in on the ones we haven't got. There's a spell we can tune to exactly the enchantment that's on this—" He set the locket in the central spot on the board and snapped a clasp around its chain, still talking. "—and then when we send it out seeking, it'll tell us how far away from us are all the other things with that same enchantment on them."

"That'd only give you a distance, though." Sirius paused, thinking. "Or is that what the other site is for, where Moony and Danger are with Hermione and the others? Because if you have two sets of distances, from two different points..."

"You can put them on a map as circles around your starting points," Harry finished. "And then search the places where the circles cross. Some of them, probably most of them, are going to be dead ends, but I'd rather have a list of fifteen or twenty spots we can check and eliminate than just run around the country poking aimlessly at things and hope we get lucky."

"Oh, I don't know. Poking aimlessly at things always sounded like fun to me. Especially if you've got to live close to your work, and you're trying to stay off the map because somebody's looking for you." Sirius leaned back on one heel, considering this. "Fit up a caravan or even just a tent, move around a lot, keep a nice low profile. I'd need to ask Danger along, though, given how I am in the kitchen—you'd be fine, master chef that you are..."

"But we want the war to end sooner, not later," said Meghan, straightening up. "And just running around without any real idea where to look wouldn't do that."

"This is true. How about we compromise?" Sirius sketched a tent in the air with his wand. "If we can get the war over with in that six months Alex told Danger about, I'll do the grunt work for a big, extended camping trip, all next summer. Leave notes for everybody who'd care, let them know we'll see them in September, and poof!" With a flick, the tent was gone. "Spend a few months doing what we *like*, instead of what we *have* to."

"That does sound nice." Neville dusted off his hands. "Am I invited?"

"Wouldn't dare leave you out. Not with my Pearl over there glaring Stunners at me." Sirius frowned. "Not the right color, though, those are red...let me think, what *is* that sort of silvery-gray...is it a Hair-Thickening Jinx? No, that's more bluish, so that'd be Luna..."

"*Dadfoot!*"

Laughing, Sirius scooped Meghan off her feet and slung her over his shoulder. "That's my name, and who might you be?"

"Put me down put me down put me down *right now!*" Meghan pounded her fists against her father's back.

"Putmedownrightnow? That's a funny name." Sirius grinned at the boys, both of whom were snickering. "What do people call you for short? Putme, or Rightnow, or what?"

"Ooooooohhhh—" Meghan's entire body tensed in fury.

"Don't even think about it, young lady," said Aletha sharply, coming around the bend of the trail they'd followed to get to this lonely, forested spot, her Zippo open in her hand (certain locations interfered with the magic needed to connect one Zippo to another, so she'd dropped back to get in contact with the other group of spellcasters while the rest of their group set up the board). "Your magic is for healing, and for emergencies. *Not* for dealing with your father in one of his moods." She paused, and her sly grin crept across her face. "Mine, on the other hand..."

Sirius hastily set his daughter back on her feet. She stuck out her tongue at him, then flounced over to her mother, who halted her with a hand laid gently against the base of her throat. "Behave," Aletha murmured, and Meghan sighed but nodded. "Now, where are we?"

"Everything's set on our end," said Neville, indicating the board at his feet. "How's the other group coming?"

"Ready when we are. Remus should be along in just—" A loud *crack* cut off Aletha's words. "Speak of the alpha."

"I'm not sure I like the connotations of that." Remus walked around the board, seemingly seeking for one particular vantage point, his eyes focusing and unfocusing as he shared his vision with Danger. "Ah, here we are...and yes. Both sites are ready." He glanced over at Harry. "Whenever you are."

"Right." Harry rolled his shoulders once, then drew his wand. "Count down from three, please?" he requested.

"Certainly." Remus's eyes swirled brown, indicating the fullest extent of his bond with Danger, and the slightest echo of her voice came along with his, as Sirius was sure a touch of Remus's voice was audible in Danger's countdown for Hermione. "On my mark. In three, two, one—*mark!*"

Harry snapped his wand down to point at the locket. "*Revelare alii!*"

Almost instantly, a talisman along the edge of the board let out a musical ping, one of the runes engraved on it lighting up. Meghan snatched up a preloaded quill and a bit of parchment, scribbling down the shape of the rune and the color it had turned. Another talisman pinged, and Neville quickly marked its indications on his own parchment—another, louder this time, as both quills moved in unison—

Silence, for five seconds, ten, fifteen. Harry exhaled and slid his wand back into its holster. "That should be all of them," he said. "One double-strength bounce, it sounded like, which probably means we've got two in the same place or very close by."

"Which matches what we already suspected." Neville was comparing lists with Meghan. "If the other site got answers nearly this clear, we'll be able to get this down to a radius of ten or fifteen yards every time."

"And if there are any places we shouldn't go in person, I can scope them out 'walking'." Harry waved his fingers in the air to indicate what he meant. "We really owe Fox for this one." His face shut down momentarily, but the anger/guilt scent on the air was impossible to disguise. "As if we didn't for everything else."

"Neville had something he might want to tell you about that," said Remus, shooting a glance at the broad-shouldered boy, who reddened slightly. "Though if we're finished here—"

"We are." Harry bent down and unclasped the locket from the board, grimacing as he slid it over his head. "Let's get back and put everything away, and then we can find somewhere we won't be overheard. Something good, Captain, I hope?"

"Confusing." Neville removed two of the little talismans and tucked them into his pockets. "Which may be the same as good at this point. I really don't know."

"If it's confusing, then it will make us think," said Meghan reasonably. "And if we're thinking, then we aren't giving up. So yes, confusing is the same as good. Right now, anyway."

"This is all your fault, you know," Sirius muttered to Aletha, waving his wand to scatter branches and leaf litter across the place where the board had lain, disguising the fact that human beings had ever been here. "No daughter of mine should be this...this..."

"Smart?" Aletha chuckled. "And who was it that decided to marry me, exactly?"

"I'd just got out of Azkaban, I wasn't thinking clearly—and besides, you set that whole scene up, don't try to deny it. Wearing that dress when you know how much I love seeing you in red, sitting at the piano singing 'As Time Goes By' to make me think about going to see *Casablanca* with you..."

"I don't recall hearing you object."

"Like I said. Not thinking clearly. Because if I had been..." Sirius grinned. "*I would have asked you , instead of you asking me .*"

Aletha regarded him levelly. "And the difference would be?"

"To the outcome? None." Sirius shrugged. "But that'd be one less thing you'd have to tease me about."

"One less? Out of a lifetime's worth?" Aletha chuckled. "You really are desperate, aren't you?"

"Only to keep hold of you, my love." Twining an arm around his wife's shoulders, Sirius drew her close to him. "Only to keep hold of you."

"Why don't we give them a minute alone?" Remus suggested to the cubs and Neville, herding them back along the path.

---

Safely back at Hogwarts, the lists of runic results set aside for analysis later, Neville explained his earlier revelation to the assembled Pack and Pride, Luna sitting back a bit from the larger circle, doodling idly with her favorite set of colored pencils.

"I was talking to Mum, down in the DA storage room—the one that's in the castle proper, I mean, not the stuff we keep down in Hagrid's Place—and she asked me how I was handling things." Neville spread his fingers, as though to indicate the lines of a spiderweb. "I'd just been thinking magically, so I looked, or sensed, whichever you want to say, along the Pride-magic, without really intending to." He shrugged. "I've actually been trying *not* to look that way, because..."

"As long as you don't see it, it's not there?" suggested Danger, her tone understanding rather than accusing.

"Pretty much. But by the time I realized what I was doing, it was too late to stop, and a good thing, too." Neville squeezed Meghan's hand gently, smiling at her as she quivered with excitement.

"What I saw there wasn't what I thought I was going to see."

"Like this?" Luna passed her drawing up through the ranks until it reached Neville, who laid it down on the floor for everyone to peer at. Seven small globes of color wove a circle among themselves, interlaced by lines of light, with a spot for an eighth globe clearly visible but the eighth itself missing.

"Yes, very much like this." Neville covered the place where the missing globe ought to be with his hand, then took it away. "You've caught it really well, Luna. The way the lines sort of trail off instead of breaking, without even being twisted very much...it's almost like Draco's had to go into hiding, like he's under a block or shield, to keep unfriendly magic from finding him. And while it's going to stop us from finding him too, it isn't strong enough to out-and-out cut him off from us, so if we really wanted to..."

"We could find him." Hermione laced her fingers together, as though trying to keep herself from leaping up to perform this action on the instant. "But that doesn't make sense—we *know* what's happened to him, and it isn't anything nearly as nice as going into hiding—"

"We know what it *looks like* has happened to him," corrected Remus when Hermione paused for breath. "It *looks like* Lucius has been able to follow through on his every threat, and alter Draco's thoughts and memories to reflect what he, Lucius, prefers rather than what Draco wants himself. But tell me this. Of the two of them, Lucius and Draco, in a fair fight, which one would you place your money on?"

Sirius snorted. "Since when did Lucius know how to fight fair? But I take your point, Moony. Draco's stronger-minded than old Lucky ever was."

"Besides being a trained dreamsculptor, and thus used to treating the inside of his own head as a vast and shapeable space," added Aletha. "And let's not forget that we were assured he would have some protection. Obviously that didn't extend to his body—but what about his mind and soul?"

Ron was frowning, tapping two fingers against the back of his hand like his drumsticks. "But then who's running the body?" he asked, looking up. "If Fox pulled himself out somehow, jumped ship like you going walking," he angled his head towards Harry, who nodded in understanding, "or even just tucked himself in some little corner up there and barricaded the door—which, if anybody could do it, he could—that'd just leave his body with the candles lit and nobody home, wouldn't it? Or am I off?"

"No, you're right on," said Ginny. "Breathing and blinking and all of that, maybe swallowing if something goes in the mouth, a body does that on its own, as long as it's alive. But if Fox's mind and soul weren't there, that's *all* it would do. A spell can't create a *person* ." She turned to Meghan and Aletha. "Can it?"

"Offhand, I would say no." Aletha twined her pendant chain around her own fingers. "Though, of course, it's not the same as what happened to me. My memories weren't altered, they were wiped away. And then when I got them back, I had to let them settle in on their own time. But my soul, my mind, neither ever left their proper place. I was always me, whoever I defined that as."

"Even if you could 'create' the illusion of a person with a spell, it would be blindingly obvious outside a very limited set of boundaries." Danger held up two fingers. "A simple gesture, but what does it mean? I could be telling you there are two of something I can see, or claiming my side will win a contest, or beating paper but being beaten by rock." She grinned suddenly. "And if I turn them around—"

"You could have warned me about the sense of humor before I married her," Remus remarked to Aletha.

"Would you have listened?"

"Probably not." Remus intercepted Danger's hand and kissed it. "But I see what you're saying.



Being human is such an immensely complicated, context-specific task that it's hard to imagine any spell, no matter how intricate, could even begin to replicate it. And when you take into account what they're hoping to do with Draco, which will bring him into close contact with us, his own family and friends..."

"So there must be a person there," said Ginny. "But how?"

"And even more important than how." Hermione shivered a little, and leaned into Ron when he put an arm around her. "Who? "

---

Draco lounged in front of the fireplace in his room, watching the flames with his chin resting on his hands. *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Three* lay disregarded beside him.

*Father only said to study them. He didn't say for how long. And none of them were hard at all—one or two tries and I had them down. He grinned to himself. Blood will tell, I suppose.*

*Wonder if I'll go into the history books? "Draco Malfoy, despite the tragedy which shadowed the formative years of his life, nonetheless became one of the foremost wizards of his day, playing an active role in the establishment of Our Dear Master in his proper place as ruler of the wizarding world..."*

His eyelids started to droop. With a yawn, he let them.

*Of course, it'd be even nicer if I was there to see those entries for myself. Wonder if the Dark Lord would be willing to share that immortality he's after? Father seems to think he's going to get a bit of it, and it shouldn't be too hard to find something that would include me on that. Possibly even this plan they've got for me now, if I can pull it off properly...*

"Dreaming big dreams again?" said a laughing voice from across the room.

"Fox!" Draco sprang up, noting in the same breath the slight give of the floor and his own reduced stature. His nightly regression to a much younger age should, he was certain, have bothered him far more than it did, but somehow his gladness at seeing his mysterious relation overshadowed any annoyance he might have felt.

*Or maybe that's just because I know this is a dream. And in dreams, you can be anything you want. Bouncing over to hug Fox around the legs, he spared a brief smile. Even when that anything is "four years old".*

"Hello to you too." Fox leaned down and scooped him up, then casually flipped him and dangled him over the bed. "What's been going on? More homework?"

"Mm-hmm." Draco squirmed until he could see Fox's face from his upside-down perspective. "But it's boring . I don't even have to work hard to get it right. How come anybody has to go to Hogwarts, if all the spells are that easy to learn?"

"Well, maybe other people aren't as smart as you are." Fox grinned at him. "Or maybe they just want an excuse to hang out at Hogwarts. I understand the castle's pretty awesome. How're the plans for getting you there coming along?"

"Okay, I guess." Draco wiggled, and Fox obligingly spun him upright once more and set him on his feet. "But I don't really like them much. It's sort of scary, what they want me to do. And dangerous. What if things go wrong and I get stuck there?"

"Your father would come get you if anything happened, wouldn't he?" Fox squeezed Draco's hand comfortingly. "Or one of his friends, or even his Master if he had to. That's what being on the same side means. You back each other up when it's needed."

"Yeah, but I don't think a lot of them like Father very much." Draco sat down on the floor again, Fox following suit. "They whisper together and look at him all nasty after meetings, or when we go by in the hallways. I think they're just jealous because he's done so much to help the Dark Lord, like getting me back safe from the Pack, and letting everyone live in our house."

"People always get jealous when someone else does well," said Fox in a tone of vast experience. "Don't let it worry you too much. So, what did you want to do tonight?"

Draco gave this some serious thought. Almost everything Fox did with him was fun, whether it was going out flying (Father had been pleasantly surprised by his prowess on a broom in his waking life), working through the tricky bits of his magic lessons (Transfiguration, with all its fiddly bits and exceptions to rules, annoyed him intensely), or even practicing his music (the dream version of Malfoy Manor, to his surprise and joy, contained a room with a piano, and he kept intending to find out if that translated into the real world). But something about tonight, about where he'd been and what he'd been doing when he fell asleep, had made him feel itchy and discontented, and he knew just what he wanted to counteract that.

"Story," he said with certainty, then quickly rephrased at Fox's lifted eyebrow. "I mean, *please* will you tell me a story? One with music, and families, and adventures, and scary bits in the middle but a happy ending?"

"Don't want much, do you?" Fox chuckled. "But as it happens, I know the perfect one. Shall we go down to the music room for it?"

"Yes, please." Draco clambered to his feet, taking Fox's hand when it was offered. He wasn't allowed to accept help while he was awake, since he had to be the hope of the House of Malfoy and Malfoys never needed assistance, but his dreams belonged solely to him and to Fox, which meant they could have things just the way they liked them.

*I only wish I could meet him while I'm awake too. Then we'd be the same age, and we could have even more fun. Surreptitiously, he cast a glance up at Fox's face. I wonder where he stays during the day? Does it have to be nearby here, or does distance not matter in dreams?*

"You keep looking at me sideways and your eyes are going to stick like that," said Fox with a

straight face. "Mind, it'd make you a great duelist—nobody would ever know which way you were going to cast next—but I think your father would object if you couldn't look him straight in the eye the way he expects."

Draco snickered at his relation's silliness and bounced a few times on his toes.

*Dreams are good enough for now, he decided. I can worry about finding out where Fox really is after I'm finished with what Father wants me to do. After I've gone to Hogwarts and distracted the Pack by pretending I want to come back to them. After Father and his friends use that distraction to get into the castle and set up the talismans that will let them come and go whenever they want. And most of all, after I've taken out one of the Pack's biggest supporters, struck a proper blow for the proper side of the war...*

"Why do you think Father wants me to act the way he does, around the Pack, I mean?" he asked as they turned the corner into the music room. "It can't be to fool them. They already know how awful they always were to me. And there won't be anybody else around to fool. It doesn't make sense."

"Not if you're thinking about it all straight." Fox released Draco's hand to wave his own hands in rigidly parallel lines in front of his face. "You have to learn to bend your mind a little." His fingers waggled back and forth in illustration. "To think like somebody who isn't you. And one of the things most people learn how to do while they're growing up is called 'rationalization'. Which means telling yourself little stories about how the bad things you're doing really aren't that bad at all."

"So..." Draco sucked his breath through his teeth, trying to follow the logic. "You mean the Pack might *believe* all those things Father was telling me? About how nice they always were to me, and how they never treated me any different than Hermione or Harry or Meghan, except when they had to?"

"Probably they do." Fox nodded solemnly. "Nobody ever wants to think they're the bad guy, Draco. And people will swallow almost anything if you put enough sugarcoating on it. I'd bet you ten Galleons if we had the grownups of the Pack here right now, they'd tell us they'd never been anything but sweetness and light to you."

Draco shivered at the thought, and huddled closer to Fox, who put an arm around him. "It's going to be okay," his relation told him firmly. "I won't let anybody hurt you, not if I can help it." The older boy hesitated. "Only..."

"What?" Draco looked up. "What's wrong?"

"It's complicated," Fox said slowly, sitting down to bring himself more to Draco's level. "But there might come a time..." He chewed on one side of his lip for a moment, his eyes distracted. "Draco, do you trust me?"

"Yes." The answer came immediately and without hesitation. Even Draco's waking mind, with its

constant watchfulness to keep him safe from attempted counterstrikes by the Pack against him or his father, had never found fault with Fox.

"That's good. Because there might come a time when something scary starts happening to you. Something that might hurt." Fox grimaced. "I'm not trying to frighten you, I promise, and if I knew more about it, I'd tell you. It's all cloudy and hard to understand, even for me. But I don't want you to get taken by surprise. If that starts happening—*when* it starts, really, I don't think there's much question that it will, one of these days—I'll help you as much as I can, but you have to try your best not to fight me. Or the people I tell you are okay, if I can't get there."

Confused, Draco frowned. "Why would I fight you, or your friends?"

"Because you have magic on you." Fox shaped an outline around Draco with his hands. "From your father, and from other people. It's meant to keep you safe, but there are bits of it I don't like. Bits that somebody who didn't care about you might be able to use the wrong way and hurt you." He shrugged. "Or maybe I'm just being paranoid, seeing problems that aren't there. I mean, Lucius *is* your father. He's done what he thinks is best for you."

"But you don't think so." Draco watched Fox's face and saw the slight contraction of annoyance on it. "You don't like what he's done. Why?"

"Now that," said Fox lightly, "is a *very* long story. And somewhat of a boring one, at that. I'll tell it to you if you really want me to, but that would mean we wouldn't have time for the story you actually asked for, the one we came down here to have in the first place..."

Draco shook his head hard, and Fox chuckled. "All right, then. One story with music, families, and adventures, coming right up."

Opening his right hand, he blew across its palm, forming a cloud of darkness beside the two boys, which cleared to reveal a landscape dotted with castles and cottages. Draco settled back against Fox's legs as the older boy began the tale, speaking slowly and clearly over the instrumental music, piano and violin and flute, which had wound its way out of the silence.

"In ancient times there lived a great and evil wizard, so great that most feared even to speak his name..."

The tale of the warrior-boy who defeated the evil one even though he was only a baby, and the brave and clever wizards and witches who built a family for him after his own parents had died, unfolded piece by piece. Draco watched the dream-figures in their long, elaborate gowns and fancifully cut suits in fascination, though certain parts of the story puzzled him more than others.

"What does that mean?" he asked a few minutes into the tale, causing Fox to halt the scene on an image of the four adults accepting a bundle from a beautiful witch with blonde hair, a tear gliding down her pale face as she released it. "How did they take the evil wizard's most precious treasure? That doesn't look like a treasure. It's a baby."

"What do you think your father values most in the entire world?" Fox countered.

"Me," said Draco promptly. "But—" Sudden understanding rushed over him. "Ohhhh."

"Exactly." Fox smiled and reanimated the scene, continuing his narration. "For a time, they traveled, and came back to their homeland to settle anew..."

When Fox started to describe the young warrior and his siblings and friends, Draco almost interrupted again, but managed to get his voice under control in time. Still, his thoughts whirled.

*Known for his cunning, called the fox—but no, that can't be meant for him, this story happened hundreds of years ago. It's just a coincidence.*

As he watched the story-family assembling, though, he couldn't help but notice that the wolf-warrior's brother, green-stoned dagger belted at his waist and a lazy smile hovering on his face, did look a great deal like Fox.

*So maybe that's one of his ancestors. Or maybe he just uses his own face because of the names. It could be almost anything. And while I'm busy thinking, I'm not listening to the story!*

Shaking his head to clear it, he set his thoughts aside and turned his ears back on, just in time to hear the description of the wolf's final friend, "small but a mighty warrior. It is she whom the warrior chooses, she out of all the world, to stand at his right hand and fight by his side."

Draco made a face. "Is that like love stuff?" he demanded, looking unfavorably at the smiling figure of the red-haired girl called Lynx where she stood, as advertised, directly beside Wolf, her hand twined with his.

"Yes, that's like love stuff." Fox's eyebrows went up again. "Not in the mood for romance, I take it?"

"It's more boring than practicing spells. And it's stupid." Draco folded his arms across his chest. "Why would anybody want to do all of that anyway? Get goopy about somebody and sing songs to them and sit in trees with them? I don't get it."

"It's one of those things that's hard to explain until it happens to you." Fox glanced up at the picture, where the twelve story-people had formed a small dancing square and were moving through a complicated pattern. "But I can tell you this much. It should almost always start with being friends, because if it doesn't, it's not going to last. You think you could be friends with a girl?"

"Maybe." Draco eyed the gowned figures dubiously, finding his attention drawn more and more to the one Fox had called the owl, her dark-blond hair tumbling about her pretty face, with its wide blue-gray eyes lending it a perpetual expression of mild surprise. "If she was nice, and we liked some of the same things. But I don't know what girls like."

Fox shrugged. "The same things boys like, most of them. Music, Quidditch, books, animals,

cooking, fighting...we aren't *that* different. Should I keep telling, or do you want to talk about girls some more?"

"Keep telling. Please," Draco added quickly, before Fox could prompt him.

"All right, then." Fox cleared his throat, and the story-figures whirled out of their dance and began to outfit themselves for war, faces grim and set. "These friends, along with his parents, stood with the wolf at his last great battle with the Dark One, who had returned to threaten the world again..."

When the story was over, Draco let out a long sigh, watching the family spin one another in circles, hug and kiss, laugh and cry, celebrating their victory and their survival. "They look so happy," he said quietly. "And I'm—"

He snapped his teeth shut over the word, but his treacherous mind finished the sentence anyway.

*Not.*

*Which doesn't make any sense, because I have everything I ever wanted, I'm going to have more and more, as long as I can do a couple little things that ought to be easy, especially as strong as my magic is turning out to be—how can I not be happy?*

"Life's harder than it looks, isn't it?" remarked Fox, apparently for no reason at all.

"Yeah." Draco leaned back against Fox's legs again. "It really is."

Fox's hand came down to rest against Draco's head, his fingers stroking absently through Draco's hair. Within the story-picture, the fairer of the adult wizards blew across his hands to paint fiery streaks of color through the sky, making the rest of the family clap and cheer in celebration. From somewhere, far away or very nearby, a gentle line of piano music began to play, rising and falling in the same rhythm as Fox's strokes.

Draco's eyes drifted shut as Fox began to sing softly, a song about rainbows and what they might be hiding. His last thought was to wonder, hazily, how he could be falling asleep when he was already asleep and dreaming.

And then there was nothing more, until he awakened in the faint light of dawn, curled up on the floor in front of his cold fireplace.

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Luna blew on the surface of the potion as it rippled gently in the cauldron, shattering the image she'd called onto it. "I knew I would find you doing something like that," she whispered, smiling. "Now we need to find a way to tell the others, without telling them too much..."

Scooping up a quill and parchment, she began to write, bits and snatches of words, murmuring the occasional phrase aloud, but not so loudly that Hermione, across the room working a tricky little spell on a pile of iron filings, would have a reason to look her way.

It was frightening, sometimes, thinking she finally understood what she'd seen two summers before, because what if she were wrong? What if her hopes, her dreams, were just that, insubstantial as an unsummoned vision, and all her desires turned out to be fruitless?

*But then, what if I'm right?* Pursing her lips, Luna rearranged three words for a better effect. *That will be very difficult too, making sure that everything stays on the right course. Not letting any of it happen too soon, or worse, too late.*

She wondered sometimes how the Founders, or whoever had been the Guardians before them, managed it all.

*But then, that's why they live in that lovely castle, and have the sort of magic which means they never need anything physical. So they can put all their attention on making stories turn out right.* She sighed. *Even if, to the people in the stories, they don't seem to be coming out right at all.*

Pausing in her literary efforts for a moment, she sketched a pair of scenes in the margin of her parchment. One depicted simply a starry night with a crescent moon, five of the twinkling spots of light forming a larger, five-pointed figure. The other showed two people, one tall and slim and pale-blond, the other more petite and better-curved with darker blonde hair puddled under her head, lying side by side on a hilltop, hands intertwined, taking turns pointing out shooting stars to one another.

*There are some things the rest of the Pride doesn't need to know. And one of them is how many worlds are out there, with some relation to us and ours. Mrs. Danger might want to hear about it sometime—though with her dreams, maybe she already knows—or Mr. Padfoot, to put it into his stories, but I don't think anybody else should.*

She smiled to herself. *Though maybe, if my understanding is right, some of the better ones can be the bride's gift to the bridegroom.* Her eyes fell upon Amanda's letter, tucked under the flask into which she and Hermione planned to decant the Imprimatus Potion when it was finished, and her smile broadened. *One of them, anyway.*

Dipping her quill again, she returned to her writing.

---

Hermione swept the last of her enchanted iron filings into their vial and capped them securely, allowing herself a full breath for the first time in nearly ten minutes. "I don't know *how* you'd planned to do *that* bit by yourself," she said in Luna's general direction.

"I wasn't." Luna never looked up from her parchment. "Either Draco would have done it or we would have asked you together. What is the poetry called again, that Alex likes to use to talk to us in?"

"Iambic tetrameter. Four beats per line, each beat with an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. Why?"

"Because." Luna blew on the writing which occupied the center of her page. "I think that's what I have here."

"You think—" Hermione clamped her lips shut and hurried across the room to look over Luna's shoulder.

*Abhor the spell from first to last,  
But spare the one on whom it's cast;  
Be wise to know a lie from truth,  
And help the long-imprisoned youth.*

"Odd." Hermione frowned, accepting the parchment as Luna extended it to her. "I'd thought Alex said he couldn't talk to us much between now and the end of the war. But four lines, I don't suppose that counts as much, so he got it smuggled through. I wonder what it means?"

Luna was smiling, Hermione saw from the corner of her eye as she read the little verse over again, but that didn't mean much. Luna liked to smile. Though why she should be smiling in the direction of Amanda's letter, Hermione couldn't fathom.

*And it doesn't really matter anyway.*

"We should show this to the others," she said, setting the parchment down. "Let me just make sure today's step is fully finished, and that we're all set for tomorrow's, and then we'll go see where they've got to—Harry's probably doing his own set of calculations on those Horcrux results to compare to mine, Ginny and Meghan both had Herbology projects and Neville said he'd give them a hand, and if I know Ron he's making a shopping list for Hogsmeade tomorrow..."



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 32: Of Families and Friendships (Arc 7)

Loud growling and shrieks of laughter echoed through the hallways of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, as Bernadette Pritchard and Cissus the house-elflet darted in and out of the rooms on the ground floor, fleeing for their metaphorical lives from the velvet-pawed swipes of a fully grown male lion. Cissus's twin Echo, now the equivalent of a human fifteen-year-old while her brother remained closer to Bernie's seven years of age, sat on the edge of one of the stairs, swinging her legs and watching the game. She might not, strictly speaking, be needed here—one of the participants *was* a grown-up, after all—but neither were there any pressing chores with her name on them, and it was fun to observe even if she didn't want to play.

A soft (for a human) footstep warned her of a presence behind her a moment before a voice, feminine, warm, thoughtful, spoke up. "Having second thoughts about that decision last year, Echo?"

"To stay growing up fast, instead of slowing down like Cissus did?" Echo craned her neck back and around, smiling up at Mrs. Danger. "No, ma'am."

"So formal?" The witch sat down on one of the steps herself, scooting close to the banister so as to leave enough space for a walker to pass her by. "You used to call me Aunty, you know."

"I know." Echo ducked her head momentarily, willing away her shyness. "But I was just a baby then. Now I'm almost grown up, and I have to get ready to be Harry Potter and Miss Ginny's house-elf. To take care of *their* baby, whenever she happens."

"She?" Mrs. Danger frowned, momentarily diverted. "You sound so sure."

Echo shrugged. "House-elves are meant to know things about their families," she said, her hand rising half-consciously to shape a line in the air, drawn outwards from the vicinity of her heart. "And Mummy belongs to Miss Ginny's family. It's a very strong belonging, even if it hasn't been a long time, and I happened after that belonging started, so they're my family too." She glanced up at Mrs. Danger again. "And on Daddy's side, even if he doesn't belong by the magic anymore, he still cares about his 'little master', who's a part of *your* family..."

"And so is Harry," Mrs. Danger finished. "So you get the awareness from both sides. That's amazing, I'd never realized it before—or is it one of those things that only works when all's as it should be, when the family is being respectful of the house-elf instead of abusive?"

"No, it always works." Echo grinned. "But the house-elf doesn't always have to tell the family about it."

Mrs. Danger laughed aloud.

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Ginny surfaced from an intense session of Transfiguration studying with a feeling that she might, at long last, have enough of an understanding of the concept under discussion (the differing permanence of a transfiguration depending on whether one, both, or neither of the objects involved was living) to win a passing grade on an O.W.L. question about it. Yawning widely to clear the submerged sensation out of her ears, she had a look around.

The common room was about half-full, many of the absent older Gryffindors likely out on nocturnal prowls, the younger ones probably in bed. Hermione and Ron sat side by side on a sofa across from her, Neville leaning against its back and Meghan and Luna each perched on an arm, their heads together over the latest snippet of prophecy Luna had received earlier that afternoon. To her left, Harry sprawled in an armchair, absently shooting smoke rings out the end of his wand.

*Or is he?*

Looking a little more closely, Ginny grinned to herself. Harry might have his wand in his hand, but the smoke was actually emanating from his thumb.

*But he's sending it so closely along the line of his wand that no one would see it who didn't know it might happen. He's good at that.*

Setting her book aside, she got to her feet, stretched, and headed for Harry's chair. "Bored?" she asked, nodding towards the rings.

"Maybe a little." Harry smiled to see her, but the expression looked strained, and his scent held traces of annoyance and frustration—though, Ginny told her rising sense of petulance firmly, those emotions were *not* directed at her. They had spiked when Harry noticed her, true, but so had the far more familiar overtones of desire, wonder, satisfaction, joy.

*And I promised to help him with his problems. Let's see if I can't start now.*

"What's wrong?" she asked, drawing another armchair closer to Harry's with her own wand and dropping into it. "And just so we're clear, if you try and tell me 'nothing', I'm using one of Luna's extra copies of *The Quibbler* to smack you on the nose. 'Nothing you can help with right now' is fine, so is 'I don't know', but you're not getting away with a flat 'nothing'. Not to me."

"Yes, but..." Harry shook his head, vanishing the smoke rings with a quick swipe of his wand and sliding it away. "Ginny, I *don't* know. And that's the whole problem, is that I don't know. I don't know what I should be doing, or feeling, or thinking, now that we're..." He trailed off, turning his wedding band on his finger, and Ginny wondered if it felt as heavy, as strange, as her own ring still did to her some mornings.

"I don't know what I was expecting out of being married, but this wasn't it," said Harry finally. "It's supposed to be this huge thing, life-changing, and in a lot of ways it was—and in a lot of other ways, it wasn't!" He groaned, pressing his fingers against his forehead with just enough of a theatrical flourish that Ginny knew he was playing it up for her benefit. "Everything and nothing changed at the same time, and I can't figure out which one I should be paying attention to!"

About to suggest he might consider paying attention to *her*, Ginny stopped as the truth of Harry's words, and the underlying meaning in what he'd done, shed a surprisingly revealing light on one another. "Stick with the nothing for right now," she advised, waiting to continue until he looked up at her in surprise. "And no, that's not because we're nothing to each other. It's the exact opposite. Don't you know why my mum and dad said yes to this, Harry? Why they agreed we could make this big a decision, as young as we both are?"

Harry frowned, clearly running back over her words inside his head. Then his face cleared, worry sliding away in favor of relief and understanding. "It's because of what we are to each other already, isn't it?" he said, his scent calming as he spoke. "Pridemates. Teammates. Friends." He extended his hand towards her, and she took it, feeling the strength and the control in the clasp of his fingers around hers. "We know each other, and we care. And we've promised to *take* care. To pay attention, and think about what's best for the other one before we think about ourselves."

"Yes, to all of it. And even more than that." Ginny stroked a finger along the side of Harry's hand, enjoying the little quiver through his muscles that resulted from even so small a contact. "You know how to make me laugh, and what to do when I cry. I know when you need me to listen, or fight with you, or just leave you alone for a while. Our lives are already intertwined, Harry, and from what Mum's told me, that's one of the hardest parts of being married. Making an 'us' without completely losing the 'you' or the 'me'. Because if we do..."

"Then we drive each other mad trying to be one person instead of two, the way Professor Dumbledore warned us about." Harry pressed his free hand against his pendants. "So it sounds like we're doing all right, to begin with. Though there's some things we still have to wait for."

"Like August?" Ginny suggested, squeezing Harry's hand gently and withdrawing her own. As much as she liked the contact, she had a feeling Harry was going to need a bit more distance to discuss this particular topic. "My birthday, when I turn sixteen?"

"Yeah." Harry's face, interestingly, was showing no signs of a flush, but Ginny caught the faintest whiff of suppressed smoke from his direction and had to hide a smile. Her love—her husband, now, though they'd have to wait until the date she'd just mentioned to make certain parts of that relationship official—was cheating shamelessly, using his fire magic to draw heat away from his face.

*I think I'll take pity on him and cut this short. He doesn't need to overstrain while he's studying for final exams, even if this is his in-between year. Besides, the shorter we keep things now, the bigger the surprise will be when we actually get to that night...*

"Do you want to talk about that when we get closer to it?" she asked, and had to work very hard indeed to keep her giggles from showing at Harry's fervent nod. Her scent, she knew, would give away her amusement, but the love and understanding permeating it ought to soften the embarrassment Harry was bound to feel.

*It's a shame more people can't smell the way we can. Though of course, it does have its downsides.*

A vivid memory of the morning her mother had been too busy scolding the twins to notice that the toast was burning intruded on Ginny. Her lips quivered as the thought of the sneezing fit which had sent her fleeing from the Burrow's kitchen, annoying at the time but hilarious in retrospect, intersected with the painful knowledge that such a simple, everyday thing could never again occur.

*But there will be other mornings. Other kitchens. My kitchen—or I should say ours, Harry likes to cook too...*

She breathed deeply, drawing down her tears, centering herself in the reality of this quiet moment with her Wolf. To anyone without her advantages, he would have appeared to be focused on the piece of string he'd drawn from his pocket to knot and unknot in one of the simpler Muggle magic tricks in his repertoire. Even if spending time as Lynx hadn't sharpened her human eyes and ears and nose correspondingly, Ginny thought the years-long friendship which had finally blossomed into love would have taught her to sense the strength and understanding and *readiness* which surrounded Harry like one of the auras Luna saw so easily.

*He knows how much I hate people petting and "there-there"-ing me when I'm upset. I either want to get myself under control, and do it by myself, or I want to go somewhere I can fall apart without being stared at or cooed over. And he's ready to help me with whichever one it turns out to be.*

Was it any wonder, Ginny thought a little mistily, that she'd fallen out of infatuation straight into love?

As if he'd heard her thoughts, or more likely caught the change in her scent, Harry looked up and gave her one of the smiles which still caused fluttering in the back of the room (and the occasional death glare directed at herself) at DA meetings. "Need a brain break?" he inquired.

"Yes, please." Tucking her legs up underneath herself, Ginny settled more comfortably into the armchair. "I'll let Virginia sort out all the Transfiguration rules I just read. She has to earn her keep if she wants to keep on being my evil house-elf twin. Sock-stealing, boy-snogging, trick-doing, and banister-sliding just aren't enough by themselves."

Harry frowned a little at the first of Virginia's described exploits, as though trying to track down a stray thought, but then shook his head. "All right. Past, present, or future?"

"Past," Ginny decided.

"Past it is." Harry raised his voice slightly and angled it towards the Warriors on the sofa, drawing their attention. "Remember after our last History of Magic lesson this week, Neenie?"

"You mean when Professor Kettleburn happened by just when we were asking Professor Jones about that one piece of the story we got from Alex's wife?" Hermione handed Luna back the prophecy scroll to be placed in safekeeping. "Yes, that was very strange..."

---

"The cornerstone of Hogwarts." Professor Jones sat down slowly in the chair behind her desk, her

eyes abstracted. "In the name of—all that's holy. Where did you ever hear of it?"

"From a family friend," said Hermione promptly, making Harry nearly choke. Still, he had to admit, it was accurate.

*For given values of "family" and "friend", at any rate!*

"I see." Professor Jones twirled her wand between her fingers. "Well, you may tell this friend from me that they're quite right. The cornerstone of Hogwarts did, and does, exist."

"Indeed it does," chimed in a thin voice from outside the door, "though only the current or former Head of the school, and only one whom the castle accepts as such, may call it forth."

Harry, Hermione, and Professor Jones all spun. Professor Kettleburn, standing in the doorway, flushed. "I do hope I'm not intruding," he said, glancing at the two students before nodding to Professor Jones, "but I'd had something to ask you, Hestia, and you'd said you might be free now—and then I'm afraid I couldn't help but overhear what you were discussing, the history of Hogwarts has always been something of a private passion of mine—"

Hermione made a small noise of understanding and set aside her copy of *Hogwarts: A History* on one of the desks in favor of *The Lives of the Hogwarts Founders*, which she'd borrowed from Moony. "There's an F. Kettleburn listed as contributor here, Professor," she said, flipping to the title page. "Any relation?"

"Yes, actually." Professor Kettleburn nodded, his smile oddly shy. "My mother."

"Well, then." Professor Jones waved him into the room. "You may actually know more than I do, Sylvanus. It's been a very long time since I studied the cornerstone in any detail. Would you care to share what you recall?"

"I, er..." Professor Kettleburn fumbled. "If you're sure you don't mind?" he addressed Harry and Hermione, looking oddly timid, though Harry recalled from Ginny's recountings of classes with the older wizard that he was fearless when confronting the various animals he wanted to show his students.

*Animals don't judge you, though. Except on whether you're food or threat. Humans see a lot more shadings and divisions than that.*

"Fine with me, Professor," he said aloud, accompanying Hermione's nod.

Professor Kettleburn nodded and drew his wand, beginning to sketch in the air, creating first the outline of a short, square pillar, then adding human figures standing on each side of it, as well as at its corners. "The cornerstone of Hogwarts," he said thoughtfully, regarding his creation. "Left by the Founders as a way for the school to draw upon its stored magic and repair itself, which it does naturally when time and weather work away at the stones of the walls—but should a battle or some other great disaster overtake us, the Heirs of the Founders can invoke the cornerstone to set

all to rights once more. But." He raised a finger in warning. "It will work only partially, or even not at all, if the wrong people take the wrong places."

"You mean if one of the Heirs stands on the wrong side, touches the wrong plaque?" Hermione frowned. "But how could someone mistake what line they were descended from?"

"Not only the Heirs are responsible for the flow of the deep magic here, Miss Granger-Lupin." Professor Kettleburn waved his wand once back and forth, causing the four people standing at the center of each wall to vanish. "The cornerstone might as well be called the *key stone*. It requires balance to work at its best. Thus, for the strongest and best effect, each Heir, whether wizard or witch..." He blushed, but continued speaking determinedly. "Must be joined in the working by a magical person of the opposite sex, whose heart is unopposed to the qualities of the Heir's House and whose strength is devoted to the restoration of the castle. And this witch or wizard, as it may be, is known as the Heir's Consort."

"Though if I understand my own research correctly, that doesn't necessarily have the physical component to it that the word might indicate," Professor Jones added from her own seat, imparting a slight upward tone to her sentence, as though she were unsure and asking for clarification. "Because it's always possible an Heir might be too young for that sort of thing when called upon to use the cornerstone, or they might be uninterested for some other reason."

"True, true." Professor Kettleburn nodded. "A Consort can be appointed in a ceremonial fashion, forming a purely magical bond between the two. But such an appointment will never be quite as effective as a Consort who takes his or her place at the Heir's side out of true devotion."

Harry directed a sideways glare at Hermione, who wasn't trying very hard to hide her smile. "Could two Heirs be each other's Consorts, sir?" he asked. "Or does it always have to be separate people?"

"I..." Professor Kettleburn frowned, considering this. "Honestly, Potter, I couldn't say. Hestia?"

"It might work," said Professor Jones, tapping her fingers against the desktop. "And then again, it might not. These are treacherous waters, Potter. I wouldn't recommend improvising any more than necessary. Though of course it's all speculation in any case, since I somehow doubt we're likely to find an Heir of Slytherin who'd satisfy the castle any time soon!"

Professor Kettleburn laughed at this, a trifle squeakily, and Harry managed a fairly natural chuckle as Hermione shook her head, smiling.

*And if we're not all laughing at the same thing, what does it matter?*

"But then what about these people, Professor?" asked Hermione, using her own wand to point out the four figures who stood at the pillar's corners. "They're not the Heirs or the Consorts, but you put them into the illustration, so they have to be important somehow..."

"They are, Miss Granger-Lupin, very important." Professor Kettleburn nodded earnestly. "The

Heirs carry the strength of the past within them, the knowledge of the way the castle was. The Consorts hold the strength of the future, the way the castle ought to be. But these are the Champions, the chosen defenders of each House, and their strength lies in the present. They act as shields, as safeguards, and as channels, carrying the power of the cornerstone outwards to all the corners of the castle. So you can see that their presence is quite vital to its successful use."

"Yes, I can." Hermione nodded, walking around Professor Kettleburn's illustration. "Four Heirs, four Consorts, and four Champions. Is that how the Founders used the cornerstone, when they put it into place? Did they have their husbands and wives with them, and their children, or some of their best students, standing as Champions?"

"So we're told," said Professor Jones, smiling faintly as Professor Kettleburn placed the human figures back into place around the pictured cornerstone. "And you're more right the second time than the first, Miss Granger-Lupin. If legend has it right, none of the Founders' blood children stood as their Champions when the cornerstone was emplaced. Though there was indeed a blood-link between two of those whose magic first flowed there." Her wand darted out, highlighting Gryffindor's Consort, with her hand resting on her husband's right arm and her auburn hair tumbling down her back, and a tall young man with similar coloring standing at the left corner of Slytherin's side of the stone. "Between Lady Hestia, after whom I was named, and the Champion of Slytherin."

"Her son, by her first marriage." Harry peered around the side of the illustration to get a better look. "Emrys, who grew up to become Merlin."

"Precisely." Professor Jones frowned. "I can't quite remember who stood as Helga's Champion, though..."

"Gabriela was her name," supplied Professor Kettleburn, turning the figure at the left corner of Hufflepuff's side to display a rain of dark hair around a serenely smiling, golden-skinned face. "A daughter of the *Strega* of Italy, as the story goes. And her dearest friend Helena, who stood as first Champion of Ravenclaw, and who died so tragically in the Battle of Hogwarts." He shook his head, looking at the image of the laughing witch in gray robes, her ash-brown hair drawn back in an intricate knot, who stood at Rowena Ravenclaw's left. "Defending—or should I say, trying to defend—a cluster of Muggleborn students."

"She didn't succeed," said Harry, making the words a statement rather than a question. He hadn't grown up in a Marauder-run household without learning how to hear the nuances in people's choice of words.

"No, she didn't." Professor Jones's hands had tightened into fists, her voice cold and hard as she spoke. "Salazar Slytherin, Bloody Baron Slytherin, killed her where she stood, and Brenna Ravenclaw's intended husband beside her, and his followers kicked their bodies aside like garbage in their hurry to kill the children the two had been trying to defend. All in the name of their precious *purity*—and it got them nothing in the end, for Gabriela and William, who was Godric's first Champion, killed them in their turn. The Baron made it the farthest from that place, and still William caught up with him before he could quite escape, and avenged his friends and his own



family with his mentor's sword."

"So much death, and pain, and sadness." Hermione sat down in one of the chairs, watching the image of the cornerstone and its attendant humans rotate slowly. "And now it's our turn, isn't it? Our turn to fight, and hurt, and bleed, and wish it wasn't us. Wish it could be somebody else, anybody else."

"But really, we wouldn't want it to." Harry studied the erect back, the slightly narrowed hazel eyes, the mussed black hair of the Champion of Gryffindor where he stood on his mentor's left. Professor Kettleburn had obviously paid attention to his mother's research, as Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw all looked very like the people Harry knew from the Founders' Hogwarts. Slytherin, too, was recognizable as the original of the monkey-like statue in the Chamber of Secrets, though he was clearly younger here. Alex, Harry decided, must have got his looks more from his proud-faced mother, whose coloring made him think of Snow White at the same time as her expression recalled the wicked Queen from the same story...

The silence in the room brought him out of his thoughts. His sister and both Professors were looking at him quizzically.

"We wouldn't want it to what?" Professor Jones prompted after a moment or two.

"Wouldn't—oh." Harry regathered his scattered thoughts. "We wouldn't want this happening to anybody else. Because that would be just as unfair to them as it is to us. I may not like that I have to go up against an evil wizard three times my age, but wishing it on somebody else isn't the right answer. Now if there were some way to wish it onto nobody—to undo all the prophecy nonsense and just *stop* him, and everyone who's using him as an excuse to satisfy their own twisted little desires—"

"But the prophecy works for us as well as against us," said Hermione, a grimace flickering across her face but her words reluctantly sure. "It tells us how we can be *sure* of beating him, once we get everything else out of the way. And it also focuses Voldemort's attention—" She ignored the slight squeak from Professor Kettleburn and the small, admiring smile from Professor Jones. "—on you, Harry. Which means he isn't looking at all the other directions we're setting things up. And that's what will defeat him, in the end."

"From your mouth to the Lion's ears," murmured Professor Jones, then slid her wand away and got to her feet. "Now, I think we should all be starting downstairs, or we'll miss lunch altogether, and that would never do. Sylvanus, if you'll walk with me, we can discuss that question of yours along the way..."

---

Ron frowned as the story ended. "Is it just me," he asked, "or did they both sound awfully certain about some of that stuff? Things like how the Battle of Hogwarts happened, and who the Champions were and what they did?"

"They are both interested in history," Meghan pointed out. "Professor Kettleburn through his

mum, and Professor Jones because it's her area. Why wouldn't they be certain?"

"Because it's been a thousand years, and the only reason we even remember the Founders' names from that long ago is because they named the Houses after themselves." Ginny waved her hand in a circle around her, denoting the Gryffindor common room, her voice managing to combine firmness with a reasonable degree of quiet. "If we'd never formed the Pride and gone 'upstairs' to meet them, we wouldn't even know the names of their children, much less their favorite students. And yes, all right, it's possible a professor of History of Magic would have access to some rare manuscript that had their names in it, and maybe it even makes sense that Professor Kettleburn would remember it from his mother..."

"But maybe it doesn't," Neville finished. "Maybe there's some other explanation."

Everyone looked at Luna.

Luna shrugged her shoulders. "They aren't evil," she said simply. "I would have told you a long time ago if they were. They are a little different, though, and Professor Jones is different in a different way than Professor Kettleburn. A stronger difference, a brighter one. More like Amanda used to be. Professor Kettleburn has...the *shadow* of a difference over him. Like he *will* be different, but he isn't quite yet."

"Have you ever seen that shadow of a difference on anybody else?" Harry asked curiously. "Anybody who *will* be different in that same way?"

"Yes." Luna stroked the crescent-moon scar on the inside of her left arm, clearly deep in thought. "Percy," she said at last. "He has it more strongly every time I see him now. It's almost as bright as Professor Jones's. And Madam Pomfrey, though hers is still very faint." She frowned. "Someone famous had a hint of it, I thought, the one time I saw him, but I can't remember who..." Shaking her head, she dismissed this. "And one other person we know, possibly. Though it's harder to see on her, because of who she is."

"What do you mean?" Hermione seemed equal parts worried and fascinated by the turn the conversation had taken. "Is it something about her that makes her bad, whoever she is? Something that means we should be worried?"

"Oh, no, no. Nothing like that." Luna shook her head again. "It's only that I'm not even sure it is the same thing. And I'd rather not name names if I'm not sure. I *am* sure that it's only a good thing, if it's there at all, so we don't need to worry. And I'll tell you if it grows strong enough for me to see it clearly."

"Good enough for me," said Ginny briskly, bringing her hands together in a clap to signify the end of the discussion for the moment. "All in favor?"

"Aye," chorused the Pride, and talk turned to the Hogsmeade expedition planned for tomorrow and the final Quidditch match, Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw, to be played a week from that day.

---

Graham Pritchard was not terribly surprised when he awakened that Saturday morning to discover the unmistakable signs, on the spells he used to hold his bedcurtains shut, of a rather clumsy attempt at sabotage during the night. Those of his Housemates who followed the precepts of their Founder's later life, rather than the ideals with which Salazar had begun his career, had never much cared for Graham, and the feeling was mutual.

*Of course, it doesn't help that I do well in all my classes, that I have friends in other Houses, that I'm one of the top-ranked medics in the DA and cross-training with the skirmishers to boot. Smiling to himself, he dressed swiftly, not forgetting the belt which held his potion piece, and headed out to the common room. They're jealous, and they can't admit it, not even to themselves, because what I have isn't supposed to be worth wanting. But they can't simply dismiss me, either, because I also happen to have what they do think is worth wanting. Pure magical blood, six generations on Father's side, four on Mother's...*

After he had come safely home from his kidnapping two years ago, and again after the werewolf attack on Maya the previous winter, his parents had sat down with him to be sure he understood as much of what the war was about as he was able to comprehend. The second time, though not without some grave misgivings if he'd read the looks on their faces right, they'd also explained what some of Lord Voldemort's followers might want to do with the children of pureblood families if they got the chance.

*And if it's true, and I believe it is, it almost makes me happy Maya was bitten. He snorted a quiet, ironic laugh. Which is an awful thing to think, I know, it's terrible that she has to be a werewolf, to go through all the pain of transforming every month, to drink the Wolfsbane Potion so that she can keep her mind on the full moon, but it does mean they can never do that to her.*

Graham's fists clenched as he stepped out of the corridor from the boys' dorms and saw Artemis Moon sitting with Elayne Kreger, their heads together over one of Elayne's textbooks, Artemis patiently explaining a tricky passage to the younger witch. *They could do it to other girls, though. Lock them up in little rooms, the way I was locked up. Make sure the only people they ever see hate them—but no, that's not quite right.*

Leaning against the wall, he considered his memories. *You have to care about someone to hate them, and the Death Eaters who saw me there didn't care about me at all, except for what I meant. What I could do for them.* Another laugh, more bitter than the first, tried to escape him. *At least I didn't have to really do anything, just stay quiet and out of the way. The girls won't get that option. Not with what the Death Eaters want from them. And the boys won't really have it any better, not unless they cooperate...*

The thought of his friends, his Pridemates, even his own sister, robbed of their choices and trapped in an imprisonment worse than his own had ever been, drew a half-voiced growl from him.

*You can't have them, he vowed silently in the direction of Voldemort and the Death Eaters, as he had every time he stepped into a DA meeting, every time he worked a spell to help build Sanctuary, every time he attended one of the time-marking events of the spell-breaking year. You can't have them, and you can't have me. Not for that—great Merlin, not ever for that—but not for*

*anything else, either. Not with the sort of things you think are right. You can't have them.*

*I won't let you have them.*

He grinned toothily, stroking a finger along the embroidered serpent of his crest. *And I don't particularly care what I have to do to stop you, either. I won't make innocent people do my fighting for me, or hide behind them and use them as shields, and I'll try my best not to hurt them when you drag them into the middle of the fighting, but destroying you where you think you're safe? From behind, or far away? Especially using Muggle things, the way the Red Shepherds do?* His eyes glowed for an instant with pure unholy glee as he thought about some of the stories Maya liked to recount. *Proving you wrong about Muggles, and taking you out of the war for good, all at the same time?*

*It doesn't get much better than that.*

---

Natalie Macdonald found it hard to keep herself from skipping in place as she waited in line for the official word that third years and up were free to depart for Hogsmeade. What had happened there a little over two weeks ago hadn't stopped being dreadful, but she was doing her best to take to heart the admonition that those who had died wouldn't want their deaths destroying all their friends' happiness. Besides, an unexpectedly giddy mood had come over her in the toilet earlier. Meghan was looking at her oddly, but she couldn't find it in her heart to mind.

*How am I supposed to be unhappy when I'm going to pass all my exams, even Potions and Defense? Professor Black is amazing, and Professor Snape isn't so bad now that it's my wandwork or my essays I have to justify to him rather than every little thing I've done with my cauldron. And we have a whole day free to walk around the village, because no one thinks the Death Eaters will be back so soon after being defeated, and Maya said Selena said Roger said he's going to bring the baby to see us—*

At the front of the line, with a grunt of disappointment that he hadn't caught anyone in wrongdoing so far today, Filch flung the doors open wide. Natalie pressed her hands against her mouth and bounced once or twice on her toes, her unusual energy fizzing higher than ever now that they were really on their way.

*I'm going to get to hold little Zachary Cedric Davies, she crooned to herself. I'm going to hug him, and cuddle him, and play with him, and never let him go. Never, ever, ever let him go...*

---

Finding Roger and Zach during a Hogsmeade weekend was never hard, as Graham knew from experience. All he had to do was follow the sound of squealing girls.

*Though it's not as if there aren't boys there too. We just don't make quite as high-pitched of noises.*

If the crowd around him got too thick, though, Zach was liable to object at the top of his considerable lungs, and most of the students who wanted to see him knew that already, so the

scene along one of Hogsmeade's main streets wasn't as chaotic as it could have been. Artemis was just walking away with Adrian as Graham came trotting up, the former Slytherin Chaser tossing a casual salute to Graham over his shoulder before catching his girlfriend's hand in his and continuing on his way. Selena had already claimed her son and was bouncing him at arm's length, making him shriek with laughter, while Roger and Lee had Maya, Dean, and Lindz in a quiet, urgent huddle a few feet away.

*I wonder what that's about.*

Graham considered trying to sidle closer and listen, but dismissed the thought. Maya had already proved herself perfectly able to hear (and smell) him coming, even through the noise of a crowd, and neither Pridemates nor cousins spied on one another.

*If she needs my help, she'll ask for it. Unless I violate her trust first, in which case she'd be perfectly justified in not telling me anything at all. Besides...* He allowed his smile to show as he slipped behind Selena, ducking below one of her shoulders. *Five gets you ten I can start her talking about whatever it is before our next den-night!*

He popped up over Selena's shoulder, grinning broadly into Zach's astonished face. "Boo," he said, and Zach crowed and pumped his legs enthusiastically in appreciation of the joke.

Selena laughed herself, pulling Zach in to settle him on her hip. "He really likes you," she said, turning to face Graham. "Probably because you're not afraid of him, the way Nott always was..."

"I don't like it when he screams, so I try and keep him happy instead." Graham covered his face with his hands, then dropped them, making Zach gurgle cheerfully once again. "It isn't that hard to understand."

"You would be surprised," said Selena darkly. Glancing to one side, she let out a small sigh. "And now he *will* talk shop. Which is fine for the first hour or two, it's not as if I don't appreciate the time with Zach, I do, but I was also hoping to have some time with *Roger* today, to pick his brain about N.E.W.T.s...among other things," she added with a small, sly smile.

"I could come back in a couple of hours and take him for a walk, if you like," Graham suggested, as two familiar girls' voices caught his ear. "Natalie and I together, maybe, and Meghan if she isn't doing anything else. We know enough among us to handle him for an hour or two, don't we?"

Selena's smile turned to one of pure happiness, and Graham knew he'd made the right decision.

*And if it just happens to leave me and Natalie walking by ourselves for a little while...well, not completely by ourselves, but I don't think Zach is going to blab about whatever we might say!*

---

From her place of concealment in a stand of trees near the village, the watcher lay in wait. Her juniors approached at a leisurely walk, the one who carried the child wearing the same House badge as her own, the other branded with the mark of their rival.

*But I've been working with them. Doing whatever they tell me. And it's too late to back out now, too late to change anything...*

Firmly she forced down all such thoughts. She didn't *want* to change anything. The DA was going to pay for what they'd done to her, what they'd made everybody think of her.

*I got the first part done this morning without a hitch. Now for the second.*

Carefully aiming her wand, she gathered up the hatred and loathing of a year and a half of ostracism, letting them flow through her mind in a few seconds of purest misery.

Then she spoke a single word.

---

Graham nearly walked into Natalie as she stopped abruptly. "Whoops," he said, regaining his footing. "Here, let me take Zach for a moment—you must be tired—"

"No." The word was abrupt, almost curt, and Natalie clutched Zach tightly to her chest as she stepped swiftly out of his reach. "No. I'm not. Tired, I mean, I'm not tired."

"Are you feeling all right, then?" Graham stepped back, looking closely at his friend. "Maybe we should go back to the village, go to the Three Broomsticks for a butterbeer or a snack—"

"No!" Natalie shook her head, a swift, jerky movement, her eyes fixed on Graham's with a strange, pleading look in them. "No, I need to—I need to be alone. Just for a moment. I'll be right back. Wait for me. Don't follow—I'll be right back—"

She hurried off the path, towards the small grove of trees to their left, as Zach began to fret at how tightly he was being held.

*This isn't like her. Graham hovered on the balls of his feet, uncertain as to his next move. Is she feeling ill? Sick to her stomach? But why wouldn't she just say so, or at least give me the baby? And what was the matter with her eyes—*

He sucked in a breath as Mad-Eye Moody's gravelly voice echoed through his mind, straight out of his first year Defense classes.

*"Watch the eyes...you can always see it first in their eyes..."*

From beyond the trees, a blue light flashed, and Zach wailed loudly.

Graham's feet were already running before his brain had a chance to be consulted.

Thoughts came in flashes as he tore through the trees towards the kneeling figure beyond. *I have to stop her—she's under Imperius, that was a Portkey—have to stop her—can't use magic, I could hurt them—have to stop her—*

Lunging forward, he tried to knock the trembling, blue-glowing pebble from Natalie's outstretched hand.

He almost made it.

---

Selena—

We've been kidnapped by Death Eaters, you need to help us...just joking. Meghan and her Pride wanted to play with Zach too, so we've all gone off to this little meadow they know right outside the village. We'll either bring Zach up to the castle with us when we go back so you can take him home by Floo or wait for Roger at the Three Broomsticks. Either way, enjoy your day together!

—Graham

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***



# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 33: Rules of Combat (Arc 7)

Harry's Galleon heated in his pocket just as he was reaching the critical point of his stalk. With an effort, he kept himself from jerking around, swearing loudly, or yelping in surprise. Still, he was going to ream out whoever had decided to send a DA message *now*, that wasn't the sort of thing one did lightly—

*But we have good people in the DA. Not perfect, but good. And most of them have seen enough by now to realize this isn't a game.*

*So what's going on?*

Moving with the same slow, endless care he'd used to get himself to this point, hidden in the underbrush on the hillside above the spot where Hermione was coaching Ginny and Luna through the most likely spells to appear on their Charms O.W.L.s, he extracted his Galleon from his pocket and looked at the message.

Then he did swear.

The shrieks and indignant shouts of his name from below him would, in other circumstances, have gratified him extremely, as confirmation he'd made it to this point undetected. At this moment, he didn't much care.

"Trouble," he said shortly, dropping down among his Pridemates. Meghan set aside her copy of Padfoot's latest literary effort, a book of short stories featuring dogs, as Ron and Neville came trotting over from the rough shape of Hogwarts's boundaries they'd sketched into a bare patch of ground across the meadow. "Missing DA members. And they were the last ones seen with little Zach."

Meghan's hands flew to her mouth, muffling what might equally have been a wail or a whimper. Her complexion was ash-gray, but in moments she was on her feet, shoving her book into the pocket of her robes, her expression modulating out of terrified into furiously determined. Clearly she knew what Harry hadn't said, the identities of the people who'd offered to take care of Zachary Davies this afternoon.

"You go back," said Ginny immediately, over Neville's "Start back now, Harry."

"We'll catch you up." Ron arched his back, extending his arms and rotating them in what Harry recognized as his warming-up-for-flight movements. "Luna, coming? We can spy around for any magic that shouldn't be there, if we've got Death Eaters they'll have to disguise themselves somehow..."

"Yes, I think I will." Luna set her book next to Hermione and slid out of the small, cozy nest the Pride-ladies had constructed for more comfortable studying. "And the rest of you should get

started right away," she added over her shoulder. "It's slower walking, or running, than it is flying."

"Go without me." Hermione was digging into her pocket, and Harry recognized the rectangular shape of her Zippophone as she brought it out. "I'll tell Professor Black what's happened, they might not have thought of her yet—"

Harry stepped to one side of the nest to catch Ginny in the moment between her lithe vault over its rim and her transformation into Lynx. "Love you," he said under his breath. "Just in case."

"Love you too. And no in case about it." Ginny kissed him briefly, squeezed his hand, and was furred and four-legged almost as soon as she'd let go, streaking off towards Hogsmeade with Pearl galloping beside her, Captain clinging half-visibly to his lady's back. Overhead, Redwing and Starwing circled for height. Hermione was speaking into her Zippo's green flame in brief, urgent sentences, Letha's voice answering in its clipped Healer tones.

Closing his eyes and gathering his concentration, Harry summed up his body and its surrounding necessities, imagined the alley behind Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes (Hogsmeade branch), and stepped forward, into an instant of utter blackness and compression. Then he was there, Lee spinning around in front of him, his wand rising onto target—

"You married Maya on Easter, underneath the castle," Harry said, displaying his hands empty and unthreatening. "Everything red and royal blue, and the Gryffindor crest lit up."

Lee lowered his wand. "It's bad," he said shortly. "Selena and Roger are nearly out of their minds, and Maya's not much better—but how were we supposed to guard against something like *this* ? We can't think of everything—"

"No, but we can fix it now it's happened," interrupted Harry without a qualm. "What do we know?"

"Graham and Natalie were going for a walk out near the forested side of the village." Lee dropped back towards the end of the alley and motioned to someone out of Harry's line of sight, who proved, when she came around the corner, to be Susan Bones. She flicked a hand in greeting to both Gryffindors and took up the post Lee had been holding, as Lee himself headed for the door Harry was holding open into WWW's back room.

"Selena had a note delivered," he said as he ducked past Harry. "It said they'd taken Zach to play with your Pride for a while—" He nodded grimly at Harry's muttered curse. "But that's not all. The note was soaked in something, some kind of Confundus potion, to make whoever held it believe what they were reading. If it hadn't been, it never would have convinced them it was from Graham, because—well, I'll let you see it."

The huddle of fur at the center of the room, tense tan cougar curled around shuddering silver fox, uncoiled briefly at Harry and Lee's arrival, both predator noses rising just long enough to identify the new scents before returning to their former positions. Roger, sitting beside them with one hand resting against fox-Selena's back, extended a piece of parchment to Lee wordlessly. The wave of

mingled fear, anger, and shame wafting from the senior members of the second Pride hit Harry like an unexpected Bludger to the middle of the back, and he had to turn away for a second to try and catch his breath from it. Once he had, he took the note from Lee and read it over with care.

The first sentence almost leapt off the page at him. *That's not a joke Graham would make, being kidnapped by Death Eaters. Not when it happened to him, and not when he's fought so hard to keep it from happening to anyone else. I can see how someone who doesn't know him well might make the mistake, we have plenty of people in the DA who do use that kind of humor to combat their fears, but Graham isn't one of them...*

*And talking about the Three Broomsticks means the Floo, but most babies hate to Floo, so Roger wouldn't have used it with Zach when he could come here by the Red Roads. Which Graham would also know. Harry swallowed another curse and a rueful smile together. I suppose we should tell Percy whatever security he's been using about the Roads, it's still holding.*

*Small mercies.*

"When were they last seen?" he asked, handing the note back.

"Eleven-thirty." Roger's voice was hoarse, but clear, and Selena shook free of her Animagus form to nod in agreement. "We got the note at noon, they were probably already gone by then, and the potion on the parchment took three hours to wear off—" He grimaced, but held himself under control. "Which means they could be just about anywhere by now, doesn't it?"

"That's not your fault, not anybody's fault," Harry returned, loading his voice with all the certainty and firmness he could muster. "Except for the bastards who took them, and we're going to find out who that was. They have to have had someone here, a plant in the village."

Cougar-Maya growled under her breath, then sat up to take her human shape once more. "Not necessarily," she said, her voice vibrating with barely suppressed rage. "They could have had one at the school. Someone who hates us, who'd want to see us hurt."

"And more than hurt, discredited." Selena's fingers twisted at the edge of her robe, her eyes were distracted and her breathing quick, but her scent told Harry she'd found a moment of clarity in the midst of her terror for her child and her Pridemates. "Because if we can't protect our own, especially the ones who need it most, how can we ask Muggleborns and their families to trust us to protect *them*?"

"By pointing out," said a woman's calm voice from the door into the front of the shop, making everyone whirl, "that this didn't happen within a protected space like Sanctuary, or even within the castle itself." Letha stepped into the room, Padfoot behind her, his eyes abstracted as he sketched or wrote with his wand on a piece of parchment floating beside him. "And by getting them back, as quickly as we can. To which end, we're rounding up the students—everyone's to return to the castle immediately, no exceptions—and finding out who was with whom, and where, within the times it could have happened."

*Thank you* , Harry signed to his Pack-mother amid the bustle of the rest of the room getting up to leave.

*My job* , she signed back with a half-smile. *You're not a grown-up quite yet.* The smile widened. *Married or not.*

Harry didn't bother to hide his grimace, the elder members of the second Pride having already vacated the premises. "Who's done what?" he asked, coming to stand beside his godfather and see, as he'd suspected, that the parchment held a rough map of Hogsmeade with several spots marked.

"Order, Shepherds, and teachers locating students and getting statements," said Padfoot abstractedly, most of his attention on the green Zippo flame near his ear, from which Harry could hear Danger's voice. "They know not to hamper your lot or the rest of the older DA, though most of those volunteered to help with making sure everyone was accounted for."

"Because once we work out who couldn't have done it, we're on our way to finding out who did." Harry stepped a little further away from Padfoot, glancing across at Letha (he hardly had to look up to her face at all anymore, and still wasn't sure if that bothered him or not). "This isn't just about hurting us, is it?" he asked quietly. "Or even about discrediting us. There's something else."

"However did you guess?" Letha laughed briefly. "No, don't tell me. It's because there's *always* something else."

"Seems like it." Harry turned to regard the door by which Roger, Selena, Lee, and Maya had left. "Also because of who we're fighting, and what they want. I'm a little surprised they haven't tried snatching babies before this—"

"They have," said Padfoot without looking up from his busy scribbling on the map. "We stopped them. Extra guards at St. Mungo's, one of the few things we *have* been able to do." He dotted a final I with a flourish and stepped back, flicking the edge of the parchment so that it rotated to face Harry and Letha. "Got something here. Ron reported in via Galleon, says he and Luna found a spot with enough spell traces they think it was probably the grab site."

"Not much out there." Harry studied the indicated area, translating the markings on the map into images from his weekend wanderings of Hogsmeade and its environs. "Damn. I was hoping someone might have seen it happen."

"Even Death Eaters have to get smart sometime, Greeneyes." Padfoot smiled a little in memory, then allowed it to grow into a grin. "But they probably weren't *that* smart. Unless they used broomsticks for their getaway, there'll be traces we can follow."

"Assuming those lead anywhere useful," Letha murmured. "All they'd have to do is Portkey to one spot, walk half a mile, and then Apparate elsewhere, and we could be stuck casting about in their first location for days before we find their Apparition point. Or if they decided to fly from that first Portkeyed location, then we're dead in the water there instead of here."

"Thank you for that vote of confidence," said Padfoot dryly. "What happened to thinking positive?"

"Overridden by realism." Letha sighed. "If only there were some way we could zero in on Graham and Natalie themselves, on where they are right now, rather than fumbling around following whatever trail their kidnappers may have left..."

---

He was sitting in darkness, his back pressed against a stone wall. Nearby, somebody was screaming.

*I hope it's not me.*

After a moment of remembering how, he sucked in a long, deliberate breath, feeling it scrape against his throat and rattle in his chest. The screaming continued unabated.

*Not me, then. Good to know.*

At the midpoint of his second breath, it occurred to him that the darkness might be due to his having his eyes closed. With care, he opened them.

"Graham?"

He blinked at the girl across the small cavern, the girl who seemed to be addressing *him*, her eyes enormous in her pale face, strawberry-blond hair streaked with dirt, the black cloak clutched about her ornamented with the crest of a rampant lion—

"Natalie," he said with a rush of relief, feeling his thoughts snap back into place.

Half a breath behind thought came panic.

*We've been taken. We've been taken by Death Eaters. It's happening again, I didn't stop it, and this time it's not just me—*

The screaming rose in volume, and Graham turned his head to try to track it, clinging to that need as to a lifeline. Natalie pointed at the wall beside him, then held her arms out like a cradle, her eyes beginning to well up with tears. "It's Zach," she whispered. "They took him away from me, I couldn't stop them—I tried, I tried to fight, but there were so *many* of them—"

"He might have been hurt if you'd fought too hard." Graham scrubbed the palms of his hands against his robed knees, drying them, and hitched himself across the cavern to Natalie's side. "Besides, it sounds like he's fighting just fine on his own."

He could hear the hitches and snags in his voice, and prayed Natalie couldn't hear them as well. His own fear was shoved back for the moment, obedient to his need, but it might not stay that way for long.

*I'm not alone.* In that thought he anchored himself, and laid his hand gently across Natalie's, finding hers chilled and shaking but still able to grasp his firmly. *We'll keep each other from falling too far, and fight side by side, until we're found. And we will be found. It isn't like last time, no one has any reason to keep this quiet, we won't be trapped here for days and weeks and months and—*

Natalie squeezed his hand once, almost to the point of pain, breaking into his thoughts. "You were hurting me," she whispered.

"Sorry." Graham released her immediately, feeling his face heat. *How pathetic can I get? I can't even handle this without hurting the one person in the whole world I wish wasn't here ...*

"No, please." Natalie snatched his hand back. "Don't do that, don't let me go—just...stay with me, Graham. Please. Stay with me. Don't get lost in remembering. When you do, you're not here and now, you're there and then, and I'm alone, and—"

"And the worst part of any of this is being alone." Carefully, with his free hand, Graham unhooked his cloak and pulled it off his shoulders. "Here. If we sit on this, yours should be wide enough to go around us both."

*She's more right than she knows.* He found a moment, during the awkward gymnastics of adjusting the two cloaks without letting go of one another, to summon up a smile for her, and was rewarded with one recognizably her own, if a bit more wan than usual. *If I fall back into my memories, that's giving them power over both of us, because that means we're both alone.*

*I lived through it once already. I won't let them put me back there now.*

*And I absolutely won't do that to Natalie.*

Casting about for something they could talk about, something that would keep them calm and collected and ready to take advantage of anything which came their way, he found it in another area of his memories.

"Always remember," he began in a conversational tone once they were comfortably situated with the Gryffindor cloak around their shoulders and the Slytherin one folded up beneath them, "to look at the world for a little while through your enemy's eyes."

Natalie made a soft, questioning noise, then let her breath out in a little 'ha!' as she recognized the opening line of one of the lectures Professor Alice Longbottom had given the DA the year before. "Children," she said, drawing up her shoulders and assuming what she probably thought was a haughty, disdainful look.

*I don't think I'll tell her what it makes me want to do.*

*Or maybe I will, but only after we're out of here and safe.*

"Foolish children," Graham agreed aloud, forming his own face into his best impression of his

uncle Magnus in one of the older wizard's most scornful moments. "Far too young to fight with any effectiveness whatsoever. But will they believe that? Of course not. And with what, pray tell, will they do this fighting? We've removed their wands—" His movement in Natalie's direction had already revealed to him that his arm holster was empty, and he didn't think they'd have neglected such a basic precaution with Natalie either. "—and with what else would a proper witch or wizard fight?"

"With..." Natalie went very stiff for an instant as her free hand dove into her pocket. "Oh, Graham," she breathed, her eyes lighting up. "They didn't take them—they didn't take them!"

"No, they didn't," Graham agreed, lowering the hand holding Natalie's to his side, so they could both feel the holstered shape of his potion piece, riding in its usual place beside his hip. "Their mistake."

In the other room, Zach was still crying, but his original howls of protest had modulated down into the weary weeping of a baby who has accepted, for the time being, that nobody is coming. Natalie cocked her head, listening. "He won't stay like that," she predicted. "He'll start crying even harder as soon as he hears or sees something he wants. And once he is, once he's so upset that none of them can do anything with him..."

Graham nodded. "He's our objective," he said, holding up two fingers. "And we need to keep him alive." One finger folded down. "So that makes him numbers one *and* two on the list."

"Which means we have to get him out of here." Natalie shivered. "No matter what else happens."

Releasing her hand, Graham slid his arm around her shoulders and drew her against him. She leaned into his hold with a little sigh, pulling the cloak more tightly around them. "It's not just cold here," she murmured. "It's wet. Damp. We're somewhere near water."

"Are you sure?" Graham asked doubtfully. "It just feels normal to me."

Natalie opened one eye and looked up at him. "And the Slytherin dorms are—?"

Against the odds, Graham found himself smiling again. "Under the lake," he finished. "So that *would* feel normal to me."

*Even when nothing else does.*

The fear welled up in him again. He held it off with the warmth of his friend against his side, with the sniffling hiccups of the baby in the next room—or *cave, it certainly looks like we're in a cave, and that would make sense of being by water, that's how most caves come to be*—and with the knowledge that both of them needed him awake, alive, and fighting.

*And this time, I have a weapon of my own.*

He closed his eyes, the better to remember the feeling of the potion piece as it fit snugly in his hand, the swift contrary motion that armed it, the instant of total concentration required to sight

down the barrel and squeeze the trigger. His scores, in the every-other-week war games the DA held in various parts of the castle, were consistently among the highest, not just in his age group but overall, and he knew Natalie's were seldom far behind.

*Still, that only takes care of the ones we can see at any one time. If there are more of them in another cave, and they suddenly hear their friends falling over...and that doesn't even take care of how we get out of this cave to begin with...*

Impatient with himself, he shook his head. *Worry about that in its own time. Run the simplest scenario first. Natalie's right, Zach will start screaming again just as soon as anything reminds him of home, and if they don't think of giving him to us, we'll remind them.*

"And after that, escaping enemy territory," he mumbled under his breath, trying to call up the DA lessons on that subject. "What comes after secure your objective?"

"Determine your location," Natalie answered promptly in the same tones, turning herself a little more towards him and angling her face upward, coquettishly.

For an instant, Graham blinked down at her, totally nonplussed. Only when she flicked her gaze towards the blocked-off door and back did he understand.

*If any of them come in while we're planning, they'll think we're no threat. That we're not even trying to fight back. That the only thing we're interested in is each other.* He adjusted his own pose to compensate for hers. *And part of that might even be true.*

*But first we have to live to find it out.*

"Determine your location," he repeated, as though it were an endearment, and saw her eyes warm in appreciation. "If we can't do that, we sit tight and wait for help to come, unless—"

"There's immediate risk where we are," Natalie finished. "And if we *can* work out our location, we make the decision whether to stop here or try to run for it based on how close to a safe place we are, what we're carrying, and whether or not we're hurt—"

"Which we're not. Or I'm not. I don't think." Graham took a moment to assess his body's state of readiness and was gratified to discover no actual points of pain, though a few muscles protested the way in which he'd been sitting. "You?"

Natalie shifted, rolling her shoulders, flexing her hands and arms. "A little stiff is all," she said. "And I can use my cloak, or yours, to make a sling if we lose Zach's, so I'll have my hands free to fight."

"Good." Graham ran down the list in his head until he found the point where they'd stopped. "All right, so either way, it's stop or go, and if we decide to stop, then we just have to stay quiet and keep our heads down. If we have to run for it, what would be the safest way to go, and the fastest?"

"The Knight Bus, I'd think." Natalie tapped her fingers against her palm. "But they could stop that



if they know we got on it, so maybe not. Same goes for Floo. If we can find an entry point for the Roads, though..."

Graham nodded, feeling each possibility settle into his mind as another layer on the shields he'd built against his fear.

*Things are going to be different this time, he told it firmly. I'm not alone, and I'm not helpless, and I'm not going to lie down and let you beat me before I even start.*

*This time, I'm going to fight back.*

*And this time, I'm going to win.*

---

"Have you ever wondered if we did the right thing for them?"

"Sorry?" Aletha turned to look at Danger. They were standing in one corner of Minerva McGonagall's office, chosen as the temporary headquarters in the search for the three missing children, momentarily separate from the furious, if quiet, activity in the rest of the room. Sirius had gone to the Ministry to see what he could find out through his contacts there, while Remus was bent over a map of Hogsmeade with the majority of both Prides grouped around him, generating a visual track of Graham and Natalie's movements around the village while they awaited the results of the Portkey trace.

"Them." Danger's little swirl of hand indicated the Pack's own cubs, Meghan twisting one of her braids between her fingers, Harry frowning as he sidled a few steps for a better vantage point, Hermione lifting her head to listen to something Ron murmured into her ear. "Think about it, Letha. They've lived their entire lives under the expectation they'd grow up to fight a war. We taught them that, taught them how to hide and sneak, or how to fight back. How to think in ways a lot of adults never even imagine. And how to take orders. We were surprised when they swore as the Pride, but should we have been? They'd never seen anything else, never known it was possible to live without that kind of hierarchy and discipline—"

"Were we wrong?" Aletha broke in smoothly, recognizing the slowly lifting tone in Danger's voice as the product of nerves. Her friend needed to be brought back to earth before she worked herself into a frenzy, and simple truth was usually the best ballast available. "We taught them how to fight a war, and look at that. We're in a war. We gave them discipline, yes, which they in turn taught to their friends. And how many times has it saved their lives by now?"

"But we never gave them a *choice* ." Danger paced a short distance forward, then back, working her fingers restlessly through her hair. "We never taught them anything about living their own lives, plotting their own paths, they think as a group before they think as individuals, and that's not the way I want them to live their lives—"

"Ah-ah." Aletha caught Danger's shoulder as Danger turned for a third round of pacing. "Deep breath and settle. Remus has you blocked out, doesn't he?"

"None of your—" Danger cut herself off, inhaled deeply as instructed, and nodded on the exhale. "Not on purpose," she said, extracting her hands and smoothing her hair, as much as possible. "He's just concentrating so hard, and on spells I'm not very familiar with." She chuckled under her breath. "I suppose this is how he feels when I get into one of my cooking trances. But that doesn't make anything I said wrong, Letha. Are the cubs, the Pride, both Prides, are they going to live their entire lives looking up to authority for permission to do everything?"

"If they do, is that so bad?" Aletha let her eyes rove from one to another of her own cubs' Pride, then to the members of the second one. "No one forced them into this, Danger. They chose it for themselves. And yes, maybe we did only teach our cubs this one way, but I repeat—we *weren't wrong*. They *are* fighting a war, and that *does* require discipline. And maybe the way they act now, the coherency of the Pride, maybe that won't survive the war. Maybe they'll have to find new patterns to walk in, new ways to live. But do you know what that means?"

"No, why don't you tell me what that means?"

"It means they will have *lived* ." Aletha accented the word carefully to give it the meaning she intended, and saw it strike home in Danger's eyes, tinted with only the faintest touch of blue. "I want them to have choices as much as you do, but that requires that they be alive to make them!"

Danger blinked once or twice, then laughed again, this time loudly enough to have a few heads turning, including Remus's. "All right, point taken," she said, flicking her fingers to send the observers back to what they'd been doing. "We gave them the tools to survive the hard times, and they can work the rest out for themselves, the way people have been doing since there *were* people. And who knows. Maybe they'll be able to make that transition without too much trouble. Maybe Packs and Prides and everything that goes with them, all those traditions we invented as we needed them, are actually going to be the wave of the future."

"Maybe so." Aletha shot an unfriendly glance towards the map of Hogsmeade. "Though I'd take almost anything that didn't sound like some variant on the pureblood ways. What were they *thinking*, kidnapping these three? Or—" She stopped, seeing the swirls begin in Danger's eyes. "What is it?"

"*Were* they thinking?" Danger's voice was slightly dreamy, as though she were watching Remus run through a line of thought, or helping him do so. "This doesn't feel like something the Death Eaters would do. Not yet, and not on this small a scale. Snatching children, yes, but if they were going to do it at all, they'd try for a lot more scope. At least they ought to, because..."

"Because they know by now, or they should know, that they'd only get the one shot at it." Aletha felt her fists tighten, and consciously relaxed her hands. "Once we know that they're targeting children, we can help families improve their security, tighten up our watch on the vulnerable moments around coming and going to Hogwarts, possibly even trigger the move into Sanctuary earlier than we'd planned—you're right, Danger. This *doesn't* make sense. Unless—"

"Unless this wasn't Death Eaters at all," Danger finished. "Not the main body of them, anyway, not the ones Voldemort has under his full control. This has the feel of somebody's side operation,

someone moonlighting for a reason of their own. Something personal." Her eyes lingered on Selena. "And who'd have more personal onus against our side's Slytherins, more reason to try to shut them down or punish them for the stance they've taken, than their Housemates of a more traditional bent?"

"Not to mention what they get out of it." This time Aletha didn't try to open her fists, but simply let them clench. "A pureblood wizard, not even a year old yet—young enough to be trained into almost anything, as long as they can keep hold of him—and a boy and girl who are, at least biologically, capable of creating more witches and wizards between them. And what do you get when you cross a Muggleborn with a pureblood?"

Danger paled. "Dear God in heaven, Letha. You're not saying—"

"And why not?" Aletha snorted a bitter laugh, remembering some of the remarks whispered behind her back in her own years at Hogwarts (her prowess as a Beater and her proposed life-path as a Healer had combined to mean very few of her schoolmates ever dared say such things to her face). "It makes perfect sense, if you can bring yourself to think like they do. Muggleborns don't even rate as high as animals in their books, you know. Animals don't try to rise above their destined places. So why, still using their wretched excuse for logic, shouldn't they use time-tested methods for putting Muggleborns back *into* the places they deign to grant us—and get half-blood children out of the deal, children who'll have the health and the strength of their Muggleborn parents, to raise as princes and princesses of their own twisted little beliefs?"

Maya growled under her breath, her hands crooking into claws. Remus touched her on the shoulder, and looked her directly in the eye when she whipped around to face him. They stared one another down for a long moment, Maya trembling with the force of her suppressed anger, Remus as still and cool as any statue. At last Maya lowered her eyes, and Lee moved quickly to her side, pulling her into his arms.

"They won't do that to him," he murmured into her ear. "They won't get the chance. You'll see. We'll find him, we'll find all of them, and we'll get them back." Shifting Maya slightly to one side, he looked over her shoulder at Remus. "We will get them back," he repeated, the words a clear demand.

"If you can control yourselves well enough to stay within the rules of combat, you will." Remus rose to his feet, his wand held loosely in his hand, his voice soft but filled with the quiet power which had held the Pack together through everything the world could throw at them for fifteen years. "But if you have any doubts, any fears, that you might not be able to do so—that your desire for revenge will pull you out of formation and expose your fellow fighters to injury or capture, or that some garbled story about murder and mayhem committed in the name of the Order of the Phoenix or the Red Shepherds might begin from what you do tonight—then you will be a hindrance instead of a help, and you will stay here. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." Selena stood very tall, her eyes glittering coolly as she met Remus's gaze without fear. "We will leave no one behind. And there will be no stories."

Danger inhaled sharply through her teeth, but Remus only inclined his head, a motion of respect between equals. "Very well," he said. "As soon as we have information, you will be the first team assigned to this matter. If you will excuse us? We should check on the progress being made."

*Now we just have to hope 'as soon as we have information' is soon enough.* Aletha held the door for Remus and Danger, then followed them out of the room, waiting until she was around the corner and out of hearing to voice her weary sigh. *And that I wasn't hearing what I thought I heard, in the undertones of what Selena was just saying there...*

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Harry looked around as the door of Professor McGonagall's office opened once more. Neville was on its other side, Hannah Abbott beside him, both of them carrying armfuls of scrolls. "What're those?" he asked, hurrying over to catch a few as they fell from the end of Neville's load. "DA records?"

"Yes. Ones that might help. Roger," Neville called, catching the Ravenclaw's eye. "Can you do a search spell through these? Find Graham and Natalie's names?"

"Put them on the desk?" Roger requested, rolling up the map of Hogsmeade with one brisk flick of his wand and tucking it onto one of Professor McGonagall's bookshelves, freeing the center of her desk for the scrolls. "All right, let me remember how this works... *Revelio Graham Pritchard!* " A flicker of red light darted from the end of his wand and began to race through the scrolls. "*Revelio Natalie Macdonald!* " Another flicker, this time in blue. Up and down, back and forth, flitted the lights, until a burst of red, followed an instant later by a flash of blue, announced that both Seeking Spells had found their destination.

"Here we are." Roger reached out and picked up the scroll with the red light clinging to it. "Graham Pritchard," he read aloud, frowning. "Number eighty-four, white, yellow, and blue?"

"Natalie Macdonald," Lee read from the other scroll. "Number eighty-three, white, yellow, and pink. What are these supposed to be?"

Harry glanced back at Neville and Hannah. "Potion pieces," he said as the answer came to him. "It's the records of which potion pieces everyone in the DA has, and what load they carry. White for healing, because they're medics, and yellow for knockout because everyone carries that—how'd you think of it, Captain?"

"I didn't. She did." Neville pointed to Hannah. "I'd mentioned that I wished they were carrying something magical we could track down, and Hannah said, 'What about their potion pieces?'"

Hannah flushed as everyone looked at her, but managed a smile. "We don't think of them as anything special, since we've been training with them for so long," she said diffidently. "But they *are* magical, and they're all different, even if it's only by what second or third potion people carry in them ..."

"And you've kept track of which ones all the DA members, or the Red Shepherds, like best to

carry," Ginny finished, grinning at Hannah. "Trust the Hufflepuffs! So Graham carries the Shrinking Solution, then?"

Maya's laugh was shaky, but real. "He thought it was funny," she said. "Because of how you helped him a couple years ago. And Natalie has the Love Potion—"

Hermione gasped. "Love Potion, DA—Romilda Vane! Luna, that prophecy you spoke to us on Easter, the one about the new-wed nymph, this must be it! Romilda Vane, who's been hanging around with—"

"Slytherins. The wrong sort of Slytherins." Harry looked around at his own Pride, at the second Pride, seeing the same fear, the same purpose, in all their eyes. "Find her," he said harshly. "Ask questions, work spells, do what you have to do, but find me Romilda Vane." His eyes met Hermione's. "Except you, Neenie. And Neville, you and Pearl. And Hannah, if you'll give us a hand?"

"With what?" Hannah asked, stepping quickly aside as the rest of the conjoined Prides made for the door all at once. "I'll help if I can, but I'm not the very best at fighting..."

"We don't need someone who's good at fighting." Harry smiled, hooking his hands together in two interlocked circles. "We need someone who's good at spotting details." His smile widened as Meghan squealed under her breath, bouncing in place and clapping her hands. "Can you get me four other pieces out of storage, two with the same load Graham carries and two with Natalie's? If this goes the way we want it to, we might have it narrowed down to two places they could be by the time the rest of the Prides get back with Romilda..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 34: No Time At All (Arc 7)

"There's something I've been meaning to ask," said Hannah hesitantly as she and Hermione set up the rune-labeled board on which Hermione would cast her half of the locating spell. "Only I've never been sure that I ought to, because it seems almost rude, especially with all the work everyone went to, with the Sanctuary and the spell-breaking year..."

"I promise I won't bite." Hermione bared her teeth. "See? Not sharp. Or not as sharp as they can be, at any rate."

Hannah laughed a little. "It comes out of all the things that you told us about... Voldemort," she said, pronouncing the name with only the briefest of shudders. "About where he came from, and who he was before he took that name, and what he wants. If he's actually a half-blood, wouldn't he be glad, instead of sorry, that no one could find that out with just a spell anymore? And if the only thing he wants is power, why would it matter to him if people can easily find out what blood status someone is, with just a spell, instead of having to look up family trees and do the research to find out if they've been faked?"

"That's not rude. That means you're thinking." Hermione tapped her wand against one of the runes twice, and was rewarded with a brief red glow and a musical chime. "Only you haven't thought quite far enough, and that's only a small problem, not a large one like not thinking at all would be." She let her jaw hang loose and crossed her eyes, getting another giggle from Hannah. "You see, the spell-breaking year wasn't just meant to break the spell. And breaking the spell wasn't really an attack against Voldemort. Not exactly, at any rate."

"Not exactly?" Hannah frowned. "I thought something either was an attack or it wasn't..."

"Well, that's true enough. But Voldemort is only one person, isn't he?" Hermione waited for Hannah's nod before continuing. "A powerful person, certainly, and dangerous even if he was all alone. But he's not all alone. He has the Death Eaters to help him, and that makes him much, much more dangerous, because they can be in many places and do many things, and we have to defend against all of them. And who are the Death Eaters, mostly?"

"They're mostly the—" Hannah broke off, her eyes wide. "Of course, of course, now I see! The Death Eaters are mostly purebloods, the ones who believe that only purebloods are worth anything! So the breaking of the spell wasn't aimed against Voldemort—it was aimed against the *Death Eaters*, to make them worried and frightened, to make them wonder if they should stay where they are and keep doing what they're doing!"

"Yes, it was." Hermione activated another of the runes before looking up with a wicked grin. "Because wouldn't it be nice if the next time we had to fight against Death Eaters, some of them decided they'd rather stay home?"

"I wish all of them would stay home," said Hannah in heartfelt tones. "And you said the spell-

breaking year wasn't just meant to break the spell...well, it does mean we have the Sanctuary. Even if—" She broke off, turning her face away.

"Oh, Hannah." Hermione pulled a clean handkerchief from her pocket and handed it over. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to remind you—"

"You didn't," said Hannah into the folds of cloth. "I reminded myself. And just because the Sanctuary wasn't done in time for my mum, doesn't mean it isn't done now. And that will be in time for a lot of other people's mums and dads, and brothers and sisters, and everybody else." She blew her nose decisively, then folded over the kerchief and blotted her eyes. "Besides, I made up my mind about this months ago. I miss Mum terribly, and I will for the rest of my life—but I can curl up in a ball and cry about that, or I can stand on my feet and go fight the people who made me miss her." Squaring her shoulders, she grinned back at Hermione, truly if still a bit tremulously. "And one of those is going to get a lot more done than the other one."

"Whoever forms the next Pride, I hope it includes some Hufflepuffs." Hermione dusted off her hands and picked up the two potion pieces which mimicked the ones carried by Graham and Natalie, setting them in the center of the board. "You'd fit right in, we already seem to think a lot alike..."

"Are you sure you're all really Gryffindors, then?" Hannah walked once around the board, looking closely at each of the runes, as if to memorize them. "I remember it took the Hat a very long time to sort Neville, back in our first year."

Hermione shrugged. "At this point, does it matter? We're all fighting for the same thing."

"It really doesn't." Hannah glanced down at her House badge. "Except that maybe we shouldn't be Sorted so soon. Or there should be something else, something besides Houses. Something that lets us get to know each other without having to get into a war first."

"Yes, there should..." Hermione shook her head, impatient with herself. "But we are in a war, and some of our friends are in trouble out there, so we need to get on with what we were doing. Don't let me forget what we were talking about, though? I have a feeling it could be important."

"Noted and logged." Hannah tapped her temple with a finger. "Now how does this spell work again? It goes looking for something that's like the thing you've given it to compare with, and when it finds what it's looking for, one of the runes will light up?"

"Yes, exactly, and that will tell us how far away is the other thing it's found. Now from this spell, we're expecting two sets of results, one from the other board that Harry's setting up and one from the place where Graham and Natalie are. But we'll know which one is from Harry's board, because it will be exactly the same as the one he gets from our board, so we'll be able to put that one aside and concentrate on the other one."

"But that will only tell you how far away they are," objected Hannah, frowning. "Not in what direction."



"True, but that's why we have two boards." Hermione held up her hands, interlocked as Harry's had been earlier. "We put our location on a map, and draw a circle around it at the distance our spell gave us. And then we do the same thing with Harry's board, and the two circles will touch in two places—"

Hannah's eyes lit up with understanding. "And one of those is the place where Graham and Natalie are!" She sketched for a moment on her palm with one finger. "Couldn't we even eliminate one of those two, if we had a third board set up somewhere?"

"We could, but we have enough Order members and Red Shepherds on call to check out both locations that we find, so it's quicker just to set up two boards. Besides, Harry and I have done this spell together before, and we don't have anyone else who has."

"And it's better to get two locations that you're sure about, than one you can't be." Hannah nodded. "I understand that. Are we ready here, then?"

"I think so." Hermione waved her wand in a careful S-curve above the board. All the runes lit at once, sounding off in a dissonant, yet strangely compelling chord. "Yes, we are. Now we just wait for Harry to tell us he's ready too—"

Her pocket chimed. Hannah jumped.

"And that's probably what this is," Hermione finished with a laugh, digging out her Zippophone and flipping it open. "Hermione speaking."

"Ready when you are, Neenie," said Harry's voice from the green flame. "Do you want to call it or should I?"

About to answer this, Hermione noticed an uncertain look on Hannah's face. "Just a moment, Harry," she said into the flame, and lowered the Zippo, casting a quick Silencing Spell around it with her other hand. "What is it?" she asked her yearmate.

"Should either of you be counting down to it, if you have to do the spell?" Hannah mimed casting with her free hand. "Won't that throw off your timing?"

"Yes, it will—thank you for catching that, Hannah." Hermione shook her head, annoyed with herself. "What were we thinking? Last time, we had Moony and Danger count it off for us, because they weren't otherwise involved with the spellcasting..."

"Your sister's friends are the ones in trouble this time." Hannah's eyes glistened for a moment, but her voice remained steady. "It's always harder to think clearly when someone you love is involved."

"Isn't it just." Hermione removed the Silencer. "Why don't we let someone else do it, Harry, and leave the connection open, so we can concentrate on doing the spell exactly when we hear the word," she said into the Zippo flame.

"Makes sense." Though she couldn't see her brother, Hermione got the sense that Harry was nodding in agreement. "Captain, care to do the honors?"

---

Graham startled out of a half-doze as rock grated against rock. Beside him, Natalie stiffened.

"Well, well," said the squat witch standing in the doorway of their cave. "What *do* we have here?"

She swaggered inside with two strides and flicked a stubby wand at the boulder which had been blocking the arched entrance, which obediently ground its way back into place. Graham sat up straighter, squaring his shoulders and giving himself a clearer draw for his piece, feeling Natalie doing the same at his side.

"Why, I do believe it's a pair of babies who think they can play with the grown-ups," the witch answered herself, and cackled in a wheezy voice, rubbing her hands together. "What fun, what fun! And the boy, at least, I've seen before—miss us, did you, little Pritchard? Come back for more?"

*"If someone's trying to taunt you, that's a sign of insecurity,"* Draco's voice murmured in Graham's head, from one of the early DA lessons on basic negotiating tactics. *"They're poking you to see how you'll react. Not reacting at all will throw them off, and you'll get a better read on them than they will on you."*

Tilting his head at the angle which would give the impression he was looking down his nose at the witch, despite his seated position to her standing, Graham turned a gaze on her which borrowed from both the intensely irritating wide-eyed stares Bernie and her elflet friends had perfected and the cool, knowing regard his mother tended to use on him when she wanted a confession about his latest wrongdoing right away.

The witch's face went first red, then blotchy purple, and she hissed at him like an angry cat. "Don't you know it's rude not to speak when you're spoken to?" she snapped.

"Don't you know it's rude to call people babies when they're not?" Natalie fired back.

"Ah, the girl's got your tongue, then!" The witch crowed another laugh and leaned against one of the walls of the cave, running her wand through her similarly foreshortened fingers. "And you I *don't* know, girly, and I know everyone who's anyone in the wizarding world..."

"Natalie Macdonald," said that young lady shortly. "Third year. Gryffindor."

"Macdonald?" The witch raised her eyebrows, in patently false astonishment. "I know McGonagalls, I know MacLaggens, but Macdonald? That's no wizarding name."

"You're right." Natalie smiled sweetly. "It's a witch's name instead."

The purple blotches on the witch's cheeks reappeared, forcing Graham to hold in a laugh. "I mean your *blood*, girly," the older woman got out with an effort. "Your background, your family, your

lines of descent—your parents and grandparents—"

"Two of one, four of the other." Natalie's smile beamed even brighter. "Just like everybody else."

*"Taunting bad guys works much better in fiction than it does in real life."* This time it was Hermione's voice speaking inside Graham's head, and he wished he had a way to transfer the memory to Natalie without the older witch noticing. *"Fictional bad guys love to tell the heroes everything they're planning. Real bad guys will probably just torture you if you get too annoying. Don't take the chance."*

"Why, you little—" The witch raised her wand above her head, and Natalie gasped—Graham prepared to shove her aside should the first syllables of the spell be those of the Cruciatus, the Imperius, or even the Killing Curse—

*"Aperio sanguinis!"* shouted the witch, and swung her wand down into line with Natalie.

Nothing happened.

The witch blinked, shook her wand, flicked it with a finger while holding it up to her ear as if testing it for ripeness. Graham and Natalie took advantage of the moment to exchange smug looks.

*"A-per-i-o san-guin-is,"* the witch enunciated more clearly this time, making her wave of the wand more broad and sweeping, as though she were demonstrating it for a classful of students.

Once again, nothing happened.

"Merlin's pinstriped bollocks," grumbled the witch, shoving the boulder out of the way again with a spell. "Here, Amycus! Amycus!"

"What d'you want, Alecto?" a wizard's voice shouted back from the space beyond the boulder.

"The blood spell's not working!"

"What bloody spell?"

"Not *bloody* spell, you imbecile!" Alecto stamped her foot in rage. "*Blood* spell! The *blood* spell!"

"Since when d'you call your own brother an imbecile?"

"Since you act like one, that's when!"

Graham tugged a corner of Natalie's cloak. "Carrow," he breathed into her ear when she leaned against him. "Their name is Carrow, they're brother and sister—there's another brother, I don't know his name but he has kids in Slytherin, twin girls in Selena's year—they've been some of the ones nastiest to her because of the DA and the Pride, they were probably part of this all along..."

Natalie nodded hard. "And they're acting just like we hoped they would with the spell being

broken," she whispered back, as Alecto shouted and stormed at her brother, receiving an equal tirade of abuse in return. "They're confused and a little scared, they don't know what to think, because they never knew that spell depended on another one to work. They thought it was just a plain ordinary spell like levitation, and now they can't be sure what spell might decide to stop working next—"

"Rude to whisper in front of others, girly." Alecto's spell slashed down between Graham and Natalie, flinging them to opposite sides of the cave. "I'd take ten points from Gryffindor if I were your teacher, and one of these days I might be." She cackled again, replacing the boulder. "Oh yes, I very well might be! Once the Dark Lord has the right people suborned at the Ministry, people who'll ask questions in just the right ears, we'll get Albus Dumbledore sacked at last and put in the one man who's already in place and who's got proper ideas about discipline and training for young wizards and witches—Head of Hogwarts, Severus Snape!"

"I don't know that Professor Snape would want to be Headmaster," said Graham, pushing himself back up to sitting from where Alecto's spell had dropped him. His arm and side were sore, and his vision had grayed for a moment when he'd hit his head, but the longer they could keep Alecto talking instead of throwing more spells at them, the better. Not only would it minimize the damage she could do to them, but it might earn them some of that information which taunting her would not.

*And if she talks so long that she forgets she has her wand out—and especially now that she's separated us, if we can get her to face just one of us and not look at the other one—*

He was well aware that this was a stupid idea. Even if Alecto could be enticed into looking at and speaking to him exclusively, his own expression would be almost certain to give away what Natalie was up to behind the older witch's back, and the same went for Natalie. The chances of their pulling it off ranged from slim to none.

Its only saving grace lay in the fact that it was the best chance they had.

"Oh, you think so, do you, little Pritchard?" Alecto frowned at him, turning to face him. "Why?"

"Because he hates dealing with stupid people, and he thinks anyone who doesn't understand what he says the first time is stupid." Graham called up all his memories of almost three years as Snape's student and a member of the House the older wizard headed. "It's why he hates the elementary classes he has to teach, because the younger students are just learning to brew and can't understand why he makes such a fuss over which way to stir the potion, or when to take it off the fire." He smiled a little. "At least, not until they melt their first cauldron, or blow one up..."

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Hermione bent over her sheet of calculations, her mind racing through the steps for converting the runic results of the locating spell into useable numbers for distance. *Carry that...put that there... and done.*

"Check me," she said, shoving her parchment towards Harry, who only grunted and wrote down a

final number of his own before returning the favor. Hermione scooped up his sheet and ran her finger down his blotted lines of numbers, scowling at his familiarly awful handwriting before focusing her attention on what was important—his process and his results. She would know in just...a moment...

"Check," she announced, laying the parchment down. "We've got it."

"Yes, we do." Harry was on his feet, moving to Professor McGonagall's desk, where a large map of Hogwarts and its environs had been laid out, specifically bespelled to counteract the usual Unplottable Charm around the school. "So you were *there* , and we were *here* ..." His wand stabbed down twice, marking the spots where the rune boards had been set up, his own with a tiny lightning bolt, Hermione's with a miniature book. "My distance was *this* ..." A twirling loop, and a perfect circle appeared around the lightning bolt. "And yours was *that*..." Another circle surrounding the book.

"And there they are!" Meghan had her own wand out, and highlighted the two places where the circles crossed. "And I don't think we have to search that far one at all, it's in the middle of a river —"

"The Slytherin dormitories are underwater," Hermione pointed out, looking up. "Magic could dig a hiding place under a river and keep it entirely dry, and people would walk right past it because they'd never believe it could be there."

"Oh." Meghan deflated. "Who should go where, then?"

"That," said Harry, holding out the map for Neville to fix the marks on it with a Finalizing Spell, then rolling it up and starting for the door, "is not our problem."

Meghan started to bristle. Neville coughed. "He means the second Pride will handle it," he said when Meghan glared at him. "And the Red Shepherds."

"That's not fair!" Meghan scowled. "Graham and Natalie were my friends first! I should be allowed—"

"To go straight to bed, if you keep acting like you're almost four, instead of almost fourteen," Hermione interrupted, ignoring Meghan's indignant squeal. "What is the first law of war?"

With a much-put-upon sigh, Meghan began to recite. "As soon as the enemy arrives, every battle plan gets f—"

"*Meghan!* "

"—*fully* messed up," Meghan finished with a grin.

Harry snickered and joined her in the latter half of the recitation. "That's why they're called—"

"*The enemy* ," Hermione couldn't resist chorusing with her siblings.

Neville applauded them.

"All right," said Hermione when she had her breath back. "That's true. But what I meant was the one that goes, *War is like life, only more so. It's not nice, it's not pretty, and most of all—*"

"*It's not fair,*" Meghan finished dutifully, as Harry slipped out the door with the map. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just..." She held out a hand to Neville, who took it and drew her gently into a half-hug. "I'm so *scared* for them, and there isn't *anything* I can do now that we've worked the spell, except stand here and get *more* scared, and it wasn't so bad when we had things that we could *do* but now it's—"

Hermione's Zippo chimed again. "Hold that thought," she said, and flicked it open. "Hermione here."

"Neenie, it's Ron," said her boyfriend's voice, a bit more hushed than she was used to hearing it over a Zippo link. "Are you alone?"

"I'm with Pearl and Captain—why?"

"That'll do." A pause, as though Ron were checking behind him for possible listeners. "We're out in Hogsmeade, we haven't found Romilda Vane yet, but we did find Blaise, and he's got a couple of other Slytherins with him. Turns out Vane's just the tip of the Erumpent horn..."

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"Excuse me?" said a small voice behind Ginny.

"Yes?" Ginny turned, and found herself face to face with a small, mousy girl in a Gryffindor cloak, worrying a bit of the hem back and forth. Quickly, she summoned her mental inventory of DA members and flipped through it (only Luna, who was understanding about such things, knew that she paired names and faces best when she visualized them as Chocolate Frog cards). "Cassandra?" she added as the particular card she'd been looking for glowed a pale red in her mind's eye.

Cassandra Aubrey flushed with pleasure at being remembered. "I thought I heard you say that you were looking for someone," she said in a rush, her eyes darting past Ginny to indicate Ron, Luna, Dean, and Lindz, along with several other DA and Order members, who had peeled off from this central location near the Three Broomsticks the better to scour Hogsmeade when the Marauder's Map had indicated that Romilda Vane had not returned with the rest of the student body to Hogwarts. "I think I may know where she is. But there's something you ought to know first."

Ginny angled herself so that her back was more squarely to the wall and made sure she had a clean draw for her wand, just in case. The only scent she was catching from Cassandra was nervousness, no deceit or betrayal at all, but that would also be the case if someone had placed the fourth year under Imperius. "I'm listening."

"I was waiting in the bathrooms this morning for one of the showers to be free when I saw Natalie

Macdonald come in." Cassandra gestured to indicate one of the partial walls which separated the toilet and bathing areas of the girls' bathrooms within Gryffindor Tower. "I don't think she saw me, she just needed to..." One shoulder shrugged. "What people do in toilets. But something strange happened." She licked her lips. "When she came in, she looked happy, but normally happy. The way you are, on a Hogsmeade morning. When she went out..." A shiver, and she pulled her cloak tighter around herself, despite the warmth of the day. "She looked *too* happy. Singing and dancing happy, when she hadn't been before. And then a moment later, I saw someone else walk out of the bathroom as well."

"Who was that?" Ginny asked, although the sick, sinking feeling in her stomach told her she already knew.

"It was her." Cassandra nodded firmly. "It was Romilda Vane."

"And you're sure? Not that I doubt you," Ginny added quickly as Cassandra started to draw back in affront. "But this is going to have to go a lot higher than me. Professor McGonagall, at the very least—Professor Dumbledore will most likely be involved before we're through—possibly even some people from the Ministry, if this turns out to be more than just some silly student prank. Which we already know it is, it has to be, but they'll have to find that out for themselves."

"Because Merlin forbid they should actually *listen* to the people who *know* something," muttered Cassandra, and Ginny snorted a laugh. "But yes, I'm sure. We're the same year, you know, we share a dorm, and I was right there, nearly as close to her as I am to you. I'm very sure of who I saw. And of where she is right now."

"Yes, that's right." Ginny smiled, digging in her pocket for her Galleon, as Lynx, in the back of her mind, bared her teeth and extended her claws to sharpen them for the hunt. "How close can you get us without tipping her off that she's been spotted?"

---

"...so Ron says it sounds like pretty much an anti-DA, sir," Harry summed up for Professor Dumbledore, doing his best to ignore the glare being leveled at his left ear by Professor Snape. "They aren't junior Death Eaters exactly, but most of them have relations or friends who're connected on that side, or know somebody who is. And a lot of them are Slytherins, but not nearly all. The girls Blaise found knew about at least three Ravenclaws who sympathized with them, a couple of Hufflepuffs—Romilda Vane was the only Gryffindor they knew about, but that doesn't mean she *was* the only one."

"True." Dumbledore sat back in his chair, stroking the head of Fawkes, who had fluttered to his armrest about the same time Harry had arrived in the office. Harry found his eyes drawn, as they seldom were, to the signs of age written on his Headmaster's face, the lines of weariness etched into Dumbledore's skin, the dullness of his eyes behind the half-moon spectacles. "I assume teams have already been dispatched to the two possible locations you discovered for the missing students?"

"Yes, sir." Harry waited for the follow-up questions he would have asked himself in Dumbledore's

place, or that he would have expected from Moony, from Percy, from any other leader on their side of the war—the whereabouts of those locations, the composition of the teams, when they had left, what arrangements they had made for back-up, at what time word could be expected from them—but nothing was forthcoming.

*Either he's slipping badly, or he trusts us to know what we're doing without him having his fingers in every last pie.* Harry dug one foot in the pile of the carpet as an alternative to a nervous swallow. *I'm not sure which one makes me more nervous...*

The blue police box on Dumbledore's desk let out a melodic ping a moment before the door swung open. "Here I am, finally," said Professor McGonagall, brushing a few last ashes from her shoulders as she entered. "Miss Macdonald's parents were *not* pleased with what I had to say, as one might well imagine—it required some time to calm them down enough to hear me out, and then quite a bit more to convince them that kidnapping or not, she *must* continue her education or she will become a greater danger to herself than the Death Eaters are to her." She glanced over at Snape. "The Pritchards?"

"Likewise, less than pleased, but not at the moment seeking a target for blame." Snape's voice was laconic, but the scent Harry was catching from him consisted of equal parts fury and frustration. "They remain at Headquarters for their daughter's sake, and have asked that any news be brought to Parvus first, so that he and Favonia can decide how best to explain it to her."

"A wise plan," said Dumbledore, looking up at last. "Severus, will you do me the favor of having Filius and Pomona located, and asking them to join us here as soon as they may?"

Snape nodded shortly and strode across the office, closing firmly behind him the door which Professor McGonagall had left ajar.

"I know that look," McGonagall said, frowning at Dumbledore. "Albus, what are you about to do?"

"Something which perhaps I should have done two years ago, Minerva, but convinced myself to refrain." Dumbledore stroked Fawkes's head once more, then gently shooed the phoenix back to his perch. "It will be mightily unpopular, and may even bring protests from the Ministry that I am overstepping my bounds. But I am no longer willing to allow those students to remain in my school who are willing to perpetrate such acts as this against one another." He interlaced his fingers, watching McGonagall steadily. "Beginning tomorrow, I will be asking you and the other Heads of House to administer a potion to each and every student, a potion which will make the telling of an untruth clearly apparent, and while that potion is in force request them to state the following, and only the following:

"That they will cause no harm to any other student, staff member, or visitor to Hogwarts, nor by their inaction allow such people to come to harm, unless their own safety or the safety of another would be placed in peril by failing to do so."

"A loyalty test?" McGonagall shook her head, her face openly bewildered. "That such a thing could be necessary...but no." She sighed. "No, as usual you've made every effort to be fair.



Perhaps a little *too* much effort? Any student who sympathizes with Voldemort, with the purity-minded purebloods, but who is willing to refrain from open acts of violence while at Hogwarts could pass such a test with ease. Which was exactly what you had in mind, wasn't it?" Suddenly seeming to realize that Harry was still in the room, she looked over at him sharply. "This goes no further, Potter," she warned him. "Not until the official announcement is made."

"Yes, Professor." Harry glanced at Dumbledore, who waved one hand in a polite gesture of dismissal. He obeyed as quickly as possible, passing Snape on his own way out and Snape's way back in, and Professors Sprout and Flitwick on the revolving staircase, which had obligingly split itself in half to accommodate the two-way traffic.

*That's not anything I'd want to tell people. Half of them will be shocked it's happening at all, and the other half will think Dumbledore's right that he should have done it as soon as the war started back up. And I think I'm with the second half—if we'd made it a condition of coming back to Hogwarts that you weren't going to hurt anyone you're here with, we might have stopped this from happening...*

*But then, we might not have.* He stepped off the staircase into the corridor beyond and stared blindly out the nearest window. *And there isn't any way to know about it now.*

In his pocket, his Galleon warmed. He yanked it out and located the beginning of the message.

*RV found. GP and NM in caves behind waterfall. GW*

"Caves behind—" Harry blinked, recalling Meghan's objection to one of the two locations they'd found with the spell.

*And that's the one the second Pride decided to take...*

This day was either going to end very well, or very badly.

---

Alecto's ranting would have been frightening, Graham thought, if he'd been able to pay attention to it. As it was, he was so focused on *appearing* to pay attention, on keeping his eyes fixed on her unpleasantly lumpy face and never looking away from her for an instant, that he was barely registering anything she said. He hoped he would be able to remember it later, since it was probably all things the Order of the Phoenix and the Red Shepherds would love to know about, but —

A small splashing sound cut through Alecto's voice, and her eyes went wide. "What—" she began, whirling around with her hand clapped to the back of her neck.

In mid-turn, she sagged like an empty sack, then collapsed to the floor of the cave, eyes already dropping shut.

Graham thrust his hand hastily through the slit in his robes and pressed it against the antidote

patch on his potion piece as he felt the fumes begin to work on him. Natalie, with her piece in firing position, was already protected, and indeed seemed to be feeling a bit of the euphoria the DA had noted as one of the side effects from long-term use of their antidotes. "That's *her* sorted," she said, grinning broadly for an instant, before her expression wavered. "But we still don't know how many more of them are out there, or if they're watching..."

"I bet I can find out." Graham pried Alecto's fingers loose from her wand and waved it a few times, experimentally. It felt a bit heavier in his hand than his own, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Beckoning Natalie to his side, he crossed to the boulder-blocked entrance, hoping he remembered the incantation for this spell correctly—if not, this, their one chance, would end before it had truly begun.

"*Fenestra exappareo* ," he said carefully and clearly, outlining a square on the boulder with the tip of the wand.

The stone within the square writhed, contorted, and vanished, leaving the inside of the square as clear as glass. Natalie stifled a gasp with her shoulder, staring at it. "I didn't know you knew the Peephole Charm!" she breathed. "That's supposed to be above O.W.L. level—"

"And a Patronus is above N.E.W.T., but you can do one of those already," Graham reminded her. "Look now, talk later. Who's out there?"

They applied themselves to Graham's Peephole (rendered, by the second word of his spell, invisible to anyone but them), and shortly had three other Death Eaters spotted, in what did indeed appear to be a much larger cave connected to their own. More importantly, Natalie pointed out, was the unmistakable shape of a cradle, shoved into a far corner and surrounded by the shimmer which meant an area-effect spell, probably a Silencer.

"If you moved the boulder out of the way, I think I could get them all with one spray before they yell," she said doubtfully. "But then the potion fumes will knock Zach out too..."

"We'd have to do that anyway, to get him out of here without him crying and telling everyone where we are." Graham hitched his own potion piece to the other side of his waist and pulled out his robes, slicing along them with a quick "*Diffindo* " to allow for a left-handed draw. "Selena and Roger will forgive us for using almost any kind of potion on him if we bring him home alive." He winked, touching his thumb to his chest and motioning something large becoming something small, then back again. "Trust me on this one."

Natalie smiled and took her best shooting stance, raising her piece to eye level and sighting along it. "Ready when you are," she said softly.

Graham waited until all three Death Eaters in the cavern beyond were facing away from them (gathered around something he couldn't see, but which seemed to fascinate them), then mentally flipped through the most common variations on one of the charms they'd learned a few months before.

"*Mobililapis*," he said finally, almost under his breath, waving Alecto's wand in a carefully controlled semicircle.

The boulder wobbled once, then obediently rose into the air, following his movement.

Natalie fired as soon as her line of sight was clear.

The Death Eaters went down in an untidy heap, whatever they'd been looking at dropping noiselessly to the floor underneath them.

Graham set the boulder down carefully and followed Natalie into the main cavern, scanning quickly for any signs of movement, any hints that their escape had been noted. Curious, he edged over to their fallen enemies, and picked up the thing which had distracted them for just long enough.

Then he had to stifle a laugh of his own.

"Look at this," he called quietly in Natalie's direction as she emerged from the area covered by the Silencer, Zach cradled once again in her arms. "It's a map! It shows this whole cave system, it's *huge*, but we're near the entrance—it's that way, I think, if I'm reading it right—"

"Let me see?" Natalie held out one hand, and Graham passed over the map, using the time that she spent deciphering the markings on the parchment to Summon his cloak from their small cave and wrap it around her, then pin it at her shoulder, making an impromptu baby sling. "Yes, that way," she agreed at last, nodding towards the same tunnel Graham had indicated. "And there aren't any other inhabited caverns noted along the way, just a straight run to the surface—if we hurry, we might even be back in time for dinner!"

A rush of giddiness ran through Graham, and before he knew what he was doing, he'd caught Natalie's hand in his and pulled her close, turning so as not to squash Zach between them—her arm was around his neck, his hand was in her hair, and their lips were touching—

"No more," Natalie breathed when they broke away. "Not now. But—" Her smile was back, and more dazzling than ever. "Once we're safe—yes. Please."

Graham snapped her a salute, making her giggle, and took up his position at her flank as she started for the tunnel, turning his head from side to side to keep as much of the room as possible under his eyes. A flicker of movement made him whirl, his plundered wand coming up to target, but it was only one of the Death Eaters shifting in his stupor, the one Alecto had addressed as her brother, his hand sliding down from a precarious perch along his side to the floor.

*Nothing to worry about*, he assured himself, starting to turn back to his original heading, noting that Natalie had moved several yards closer to the tunnel entrance while he'd been staring behind them. *We'll be out of here in no—*

Before he could complete his turn, or his thought, a far more definite movement caught his eye.

From behind the heap of fallen enemies rose Alecto, her eyes filmed over with fury, a wand in her hand—her brother's wand, Graham realized with horror—rising to take aim at Natalie's unprotected back, green light gathering at its tip—

He flung himself at Natalie, as he had already done once today.

His hurtling body crashed into hers a bare second before the spell arrived.

Graham had time to see the girl he loved and the child they'd sworn to protect go tumbling together through the entrance to the tunnel, time to hear shouts and cries of shock in voices he knew and trusted rising over the sound of a great rushing wind, time to see his own shape outlined on the floor of the cave before him in green.

And then—there was no time at all.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 35: Truths and Desires (Arc 7)

Draco crept down the corridor, setting his feet down with exaggerated care on the boards nearest the wall, which would be least likely to creak and betray his presence. He doubted he'd have been heard even if he'd done a step-dance along the length of the hallway, what with the shouting in the entrance hall below, but it was never a bad idea to keep in practice with one's sneaking.

*Solo sneaking's easier some ways than the team sport, Fox remarked from a spot in the back of his mind. With a team, you're only as good as your weakest link, and my little sister was always ours. But she was light and quick, and good at distracting the grownups, so she pulled her own weight even if she didn't know all the tricks we older ones did, not right away.*

Biting his lip to suppress a laugh at the image of a tiny child with braided hair chattering at top speed to a pair of frowning adults, keeping their attention away from the three other figures scuttling out of a room in which they should never have been in the first place, Draco paused near the top of the stairs and leaned forward. The shouting voice, though rough-edged, was distinctly female, and equally distinctly *not* that of his Aunt Bellatrix.

*Which doesn't leave a lot of people it could be—most of the upper ranks are male...*

"—telling you, they were busting in the door!" the unknown witch repeated over the protestations of at least two wizards. "Anybody who didn't get out of those damn caves on their own likely got caught, I had enough to do hauling Amycus out with me—"

*Amycus. Draco ran down the list of pureblood surnames until he found the one which matched. Carrow, right. And Alecto, that must be who's talking. What were they assigned to again? Some crazy side operation, that's right, not anything we'd planned at all. Keeping an eye on a bunch of wanna-bes who were trying to prove they were good enough to join our side. He smiled smugly, catching his own eye in a wall-hung mirror and smoothing down his hair. Hard lines on those who weren't born to it.*

"—fixed the little Pritchard brat, though." Alecto ended this sentence with a snort. "I was aiming for the Mudblood girl, but he got in the way. Still, no real harm done, there's a sister out of the same bloodline, younger and easier to handle, and what with the stuff he was saying, he was already too far gone for anything except pure breeding stock..."

Draco felt his breath catch in his throat—except, he realized with a shiver, it wasn't his own shock and grief he was feeling, but Fox's. *What's wrong?* he thought hesitantly towards his dream-friend. *Did you know whoever it is she's talking about?*

*His name was Graham. The words fell on Draco's mental ears clipped and flat, shorn of all emotion. Graham Pritchard. I'm not sure if he was thirteen or fourteen, but he can't have been any older than that. He was my sister's friend, and his parents' only son, and what he wanted most out of life was to make people think well of Slytherin House again.*

A flash behind Draco's eyelids showed him a black-haired boy in Hogwarts robes with a green and silver crest, his quiet smile full of confidence as he sprayed paint from his wand onto a stone wall, flicking it skillfully back and forth to shape the illusion of a grassy plain under a broad blue sky. A moment's extra work added a pair of tiny red flowers to the grass, which made the girl working beside him, her strawberry-blonde hair nicely complementing her gold and scarlet lion, point and smile, and supply a yellow blossom between them with her own wand.

*That's Graham, Fox said, still in that deadly quiet, reasonable tone. And the girl is Natalie. One of his best friends, who just happens to be Muggleborn. Care to lay money on her being the 'Mudblood' Alecto killed him in place of?*

"But—" The word came out in a harsh whisper, and Draco clamped down on his reactions, hurrying back up the hall to his own bedroom and making sure to lock the door. Talking to Fox might not be precisely the same as talking to himself, but it would look the same to anyone who walked in on him, and this close to his great undertaking, he couldn't afford to have his fitness questioned in any way.

"Why would he even notice—someone like her?" he was finally able to say once his safeguards were in place and he was seated on the edge of the bed, fighting a case of the shakes. Even without Fox's reactions affecting him, the thought of a boy three years younger than himself being killed had him on edge. "Let alone be friends with her? All right, maybe Alecto shouldn't have been trying to *kill* her, but still—"

*Hold it right there. Fox's tone went sharp and cold. Did you just say maybe she shouldn't have been targeted for death because of who her parents were? Maybe she shouldn't have been put in a situation where one of her friends had to sacrifice his own life to save hers, because of an aspect of her being over which she has absolutely no control whatsoever? If your father were my worst enemy in the world, would that give me a right to come after you, kidnap you and threaten to kill you, use you as some kind of sick leverage over him?*

"Somebody already did that," Draco muttered, but conceded the point with a sigh. "No. That's not right. And you wouldn't, anyway, that's not a thing you'd do in a million years—"

*You're right, it isn't. But it is something your friends downstairs would do. Have done, are doing. Every single day, never mind a million years.*

Draco bristled. "Why are they suddenly *my* friends?"

*I beg your pardon?* Fox laughed, the sound between Draco's ears as brittle as an ancient, heirloom wand. *Who was that out in the corridor priding himself on being born into "the upper ranks"? Who's going along with this mad little plan of theirs to get Portkey targets into Hogwarts, so they can sneak past the wards and kidnap any other students they decide they want, or take over the school by force if their scheme to get their own man appointed Head doesn't work? And let's not forget the other bit of that plan, the part you're supposed to do all by yourself—*

"Yes, but that's *different* ." Draco heard the sulky tone in his own voice and made himself recite

the twelve uses of dragon's blood before he went on. "He's not a little kid—about the farthest thing from it. And he's so completely doctrinaire on his own ridiculous line that there's no other way to deal with him. Once he's gone, whoever takes over from him ought to be easier to handle."

*Right, Fox said after several moments of silence. You just go on believing that. Go on training, getting yourself ready for this mission you're so keen about. But every so often, stop for a second or two and think. Think about a kid younger than you, who died because he was trying to stop his friend being killed for something she couldn't help. Think about an entire castle full of kids like that, who've walked away from everything they ever knew to learn how to handle an entirely different world. And then think hard, really hard, about whether or not you want to be a part of giving people like Alecto Carrow power over those kids.*

With an almost-audible snap, he vanished, and Draco knew there would be no more communications for a while. Fox tended to sulk after things like this happened around Malfoy Manor.

"Though there hasn't been anything *just* like this before." Sliding down from the bed, he lay in front of the fireplace, unlit on this warm May afternoon. "And maybe I'll ask Father if he can't get the Dark Lord to assign the Carrows somewhere else, once we have Hogwarts under our control." He rolled his eyes. "I mean, really. Mudbloods ought to know their place better than they do, but there's no reason to *kill* them. That's wasteful. They have their uses, if someone's willing to take a little time and train them up properly." A dreamy smile came to his face. "I can think of one I'd like to have for my very own. Perhaps I'll even be able to bring her home with me, after I complete this mission..."

Eyes half-shut, he lost himself in daydreams of a head full of brown curls bent in reluctant submission, and never noticed when his fingers crept up to stroke along the line of the scar marking his left cheek.

---

Hermione whipped around, her wand in her hand, as Floo flames erupted in Professor McGonagall's fireplace. On her other side, Harry had his own wand out, as well as his other hand open and upright, ready to choke off the fire and throw its occupant out at a random grating if they should see something they didn't like.

"It's Roger!" Artemis Moon shouted, flinging out her own hand in a don't-do-anything gesture. "Roger and—"

The tall Red Shepherd stumbled out of the green flames before she could finish the sentence, his arms wrapped protectively around a smaller person, one with hair out of which ashes were now cascading, revealing a warm shade of golden red.

"Natalie!" Hermione started forward, but Meghan beat her there, pulling her friend free and starting to give her a ferocious hug before squealing in glee at something she saw cradled against Natalie's front. Roger reached down between the girls and carefully extracted—



Another of the knots in Hermione's gut untied itself in a rush of relief as Zachary Davies, still sound asleep, nestled more comfortably into his father's hold. The third knot, though, refused to loosen.

*Where's Graham? Was he hurt, maybe, and they had to give him first aid on the spot? It might not have been safe to send him through the Floo, they could be coming by the Red Roads, and that would get them into Hogsmeade first, and then up to the castle by foot or carriage...*

Then she looked more closely at Roger's face, and at Natalie's where she leaned against Meghan's shoulder.

"Oh, no," she said quietly.

Harry muttered one short, sharp word under his breath.

---

Ginny had just turned the last corner to bring her to Professor McGonagall's office when she felt the spike of heat through her pendants. She didn't have to look down to know that the carving of the mostly-grown wolf which occupied one full side of her second pendant had lit up like a bonfire. Stopping where she was, she counted silently. *In three, two, one—*

The door of the office slammed open, and Harry stormed out of it, gripping his wand so tightly Ginny was surprised it hadn't shattered. He turned back long enough to shut the door without slamming, then wheeled around again and spotted her.

"Hi," he said in a voice which sounded surprisingly normal. "Where's everyone else?"

"Most of them went back to the common rooms. A couple of the DA leaders from each House are waiting down in Sanctuary for news." Ginny swallowed against the boiling anger coming off Harry, anger she could smell, could see, could practically feel. "You have news."

"That's one way to put it." Harry laid a hand flat against the stones of the wall, and Ginny felt the air temperature in the corridor rise by a few degrees. "Zach's safe. So is Natalie. Graham..." He looked up, and Ginny felt Lynx's snarling hiss rise deep in her mind, answering Wolf's fang-baring fury in the back of the green eyes. "Graham put the rules in the right order. Just like Fox did. *More* than Fox did. Dammit, Ginny, he's *dead!* "

Ginny bowed her head for a moment, allowing the pain and anger to swamp her, then retreat. *I don't have time, she reminded herself, right now I don't have time. In a few hours, in a day or two, then I'll have time, then I can do this. Not now. Now I need to be strong. Now I need to be alpha.*

Crossing to Harry, she offered her hand, and he took it, pressing it tightly, echoes of her same determination spiraling through his scent and the expression on his face. "Pearl isn't taking it well," he said, starting towards the stairs. "It helps that Natalie got home alive, but she's grieving herself, and all the more because he literally died saving her, saving *them* ." He grimaced. "She was carrying Zach, and she's such a little thing, a Killing Curse would have blasted right through

her and got him too."

A chill ran through Ginny's blood at the thought. "That would have been so much worse," she said. "Not just because two people would have died instead of one, but think about what it would do to Selena and Roger, and their Pride. Not to mention, Graham never would have forgiven himself."

"And the effect on the DA wouldn't exactly be choice." Harry's laugh held nothing of humor at all. "Can you imagine anything better calculated to get the Houses going after each other again than a Slytherin boy who didn't save a Gryffindor girl, not to mention a baby not even a year old yet? The Death Eaters would turn it into Graham realizing what side he ought to be on, into him *letting* Zach and Natalie die, and for all we've done together, there are still enough people who're ready to think the worst of Slytherins that they might have been able to drive that wedge between us. Fracture what we've fought so hard to build."

"But it didn't happen like that." Ginny squeezed Harry's hand once, and felt his answering pressure firm and sure against her fingers, though his breath was still shaky and his scent swirled with anger and confusion. "Is it awful of me to be thinking that we must have done something right?"

"No, because I'm thinking it too." Harry sighed. "And hating myself for it, because he's dead, Ginny. Graham's dead. He'd barely turned fourteen, and we went out and saved him on our first real mission of the war, and now he's dead anyway, so what the hell was the point of it all?" His skin heated against hers. "What the hell's the point of any of it?"

Ginny held her peace. Her love knew as well as she did why they trained, why they fought, and reciting platitudes at him would only fuel the flame of his anger. What he needed now was more a listening ear than anything else.

*Because for all we may know this war is necessary, that doesn't take the pain away when people die.*

*And we wouldn't want it to.*

"We found Romilda Vane," she said into the silence, and felt Harry's hand tighten around hers again. "I know you'd have seen it on the Galleon, but I was coming to tell you more about it."

"So, tell." Harry let the fingers of his other hand trail along the stones of the wall as they descended a flight of stairs. "Where was she?"

"In a little closed-off alleyway, the sort of thing you have to live in a place to know about. Which she does, or did. Live in Hogsmeade, I mean. Her family's from there, they run a bed and breakfast on the west edge of the village." Ginny allowed herself one fast, fierce grin. "We surrounded her and moved in fast. She never even got her wand clear before we had her down. Ron and Blaise are bringing her in, along with the two Slytherin girls who Blaise found, or they found him. They were part of this, but changed their minds at the last second, and the things they're telling us...well, Ron used the Weather Vane Inn's Floo to pass most of it along already."

"The anti-DA." Harry shrugged. "We couldn't expect to be the only ones who'd figured out we're stronger together than alone. Though I'd hoped the other side would still be so fractured they wouldn't be able to pull very much off."

"They weren't," Ginny pointed out. "This is bad, but think about how much worse it could have been. If they'd been able to do it on a larger scale. If Romilda hadn't been caught trying to use a Love Potion on you, if they'd somehow found her and turned her while she was still in the DA, while we still trusted her. Or if one or two, or ten, of their other people had managed to hold their noses and join us. We could have been trying to trace fifteen or twenty kidnappings instead of just one. Or if they'd been smart enough to get some adults in the picture, possibly we'd even be dealing with a hostile administration, or something like it."

"Something like it?" Harry glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"Think back to Umbridge." Ginny knew she'd made her point when Harry's shoulders tensed. "Yes, exactly. Now imagine she'd managed to get the Defense position as well as High Inquisitor, and that you hadn't been able to figure out what Dumbledore was telling you in his office, how to find the entrance to the Den and disappear. Or that you'd gone ahead with that detention instead of telling her you wouldn't. How much harder would it have been to get people to join the DA, to make it strong and incorporate all four Houses and keep it going?"

"It would have been easier, just at first, if Umbridge was worse," countered Harry. "People would have wanted her gone no matter what. People *did* want her gone no matter what."

"But once she was gone, we would have lost our focus." Ginny held up a fist, then let it spring open, wagging her fingers aimlessly, meaninglessly. "Everyone who was willing to fight against her would have assumed that once we got her out, we didn't have to go on fighting. But as it happened, she was just the beginning, the problem that got people in the door. Once they were there, we could get them looking at the real threat, at Voldemort and the Death Eaters."

"All right, I can see that." Harry nodded. "But that was Umbridge. She was all about Fudge and the Ministry. They were stupid and power-hungry and bad, but how does that tie into Voldemort? You just said yourself—"

"That he's the real threat, and he is," Ginny confirmed. "But what makes you think he wouldn't have used them? Used what they wanted, what they'd do to get it, for his own ends?"

Harry growled under his breath. "Damn it. That's exactly what he'd do. And could still do, with plenty of the people in the Ministry, the ones who still are like Percy used to be. The Ministry's the authority, the law of the land, and therefore I obey it without question. I don't have to look at the effects of the rules, that's not my job—I just carry them out, do what I'm told, whatever that may happen to be..."

"So as long as he can replace or Imperius anyone who'd be high up enough, or have enough guts, to question his rules, he can take the Ministry like *that* ." Ginny snapped the fingers of her free hand. "And if he could get someone high enough to appoint another Hogwarts Inquisitor, or get

enough influence over the school governors to have them sack Professor Dumbledore and appoint someone he liked better, he'd have Hogwarts too."

"Not necessarily." Harry stroked the stones of the wall once more, a small, possessive smile on his face. "Remember the stuff Professor Jones and Professor Kettleburn told Hermione and me? About the cornerstone of Hogwarts, and the castle's inherent magic, and all of that?"

"Yes, I remember." Ginny frowned. "But I thought the cornerstone needed all four Heirs to use it, and Consorts and Champions to go with them."

"It does, but we wouldn't need it, not yet." Harry wagged his hand behind him, then tapped his own chest. "I'd bet you Pearl and Captain and I could probably get Hogwarts itself partway awake, if we worked together. Get the castle, and all the magic in it, to accept Dumbledore as Head, and...object if someone tried to make him leave." His smile grew until it was positively a grin. "It might not even let people like that on the grounds at all. Stall them at the gates, bat their broomsticks out of the sky, cut off the Floo if they tried to come in that way. The students and teachers could still come and go, and people who have legitimate business here..."

"But no one from the Ministry." Ginny couldn't help but smile in her turn at the image of a league of furious bowler-hatted wizards casting spell after ineffective spell against the gargoyle-guarded gates. "I like that." Her smile faded as they arrived at the fourth floor mirror. "Not like what we have to do now. Telling everyone what's happened..." She sighed between her teeth. "Why did I want to be the Pride's alpha again, and help lead the DA and the year to go with it?"

"Because you were born to be a leader." Harry touched the corner of the mirror, making it grate aside. "Because anything less wouldn't be worthy of you."

Ginny stepped into the opening in the wall. "Is it wrong to wish I were just a little less worthy, then?" she asked softly.

"No." Harry joined her. "I do a lot of it myself."

The mirror closed behind them as they set off down the tunnel towards Sanctuary.

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Minerva paced back and forth in the corridor outside the Head's office, glaring at the gargoyle when it turned its head to watch her. Finally it edged timidly aside, making room for the door out of the revolving stairway, which discharged a weary-looking Aletha, stroking a red feather between her fingers.

"There you are." Minerva hurried up to her colleague. "How is he?"

"Tired." Aletha tucked the feather into her pocket. "Very tired. I've sent him to bed, and Fawkes is going to make sure he stays there long enough to get some actual rest. But..." She looked up into Minerva's face, her brown eyes full of a quiet sorrow. "We need to talk, Minerva." The slightest smile curved the full lips. "Now that he's finally authorized me to tell you the truth."

"The truth—" Minerva pressed a hand to her mouth as a chill struck through her chest. "Aletha, you don't mean—"

"Nothing's going to happen tonight," Aletha interrupted in her best Healer-calm tones. "But..." She glanced back at the gargoyle, which was pretending with all its might that it wasn't eavesdropping, and at the two or three paintings hanging along the wall, the occupants of which weren't bothering to pretend. "Perhaps we should go somewhere with fewer sets of ears," she suggested pointedly.

"Yes. Please." Minerva led the way down the corridor, her mind in a whirl.

*This cannot be happening. Not now. I knew it would someday, possibly even soon, Albus is an old man even for a wizard, but now? When the war grows more complex by the day, the school is in terrible danger, the Order needs a steady hand on the helm...*

They turned into an empty classroom, Aletha shutting the door behind them. Minerva absently conjured a pair of armchairs, noticing only as they formed that they were a brilliant shade of plum, rather like one of Albus's favorite Muggle suits—

"Oh, dear," she said aloud, and sat down abruptly as her usual resolve failed her at last.

"I'm so sorry, Minerva," Aletha murmured, and strong arms slid around her, undoing her still further. She pressed her face into the offered shoulder and wept, releasing her control as she would have done with very few others.

"You're sure," were the first words she found herself able to articulate, several minutes later.

"Yes." Aletha sighed deeply. "I could wish I weren't, but I am. He's worn himself to the bone, trying to be three men at once, and he doesn't have the reserves he did five or even two years ago. It won't be tonight or tomorrow, it may not be next week or next month, but it won't be much longer than that." She drew a handkerchief out of the pocket of her robes and handed it to Minerva. "By the time the children return to school in the fall, you will be Headmistress of Hogwarts."

"Will I?" Minerva blotted her eyes. "That's not doubting you, Aletha, not in the slightest, but with all the forces conspiring to take control of the school, will I be allowed to remain in that office? My loyalties are well-known, and I hardly have the resources Albus does, to play one side against another with countervailing loyalties and come off unscathed from the fray..."

"Exactly the reason I'm bringing this up to you now." Aletha smiled. "Albus has been making arrangements for the last year to keep as many of the school governors as possible from being easily or quickly suborned. And even if Voldemort takes the Ministry and manages to push through some regulation or other that contravenes the official system and places Hogwarts under direct control—only 'as an emergency measure, for the duration of the current unpleasantness', I'm sure is how they'd put it—you'll already be in place here by then, and they'll have rather a difficult time sacking you."

"They will?" Minerva frowned. "Why?"

Aletha extended one of her hands. In its palm hovered a globe of clear blue light. "Magic," she said simply. "The magic of the school, and of its Founders." Her smile quirked to one side. "Harry's already come up with the same idea independently. One of the portraits overheard him and told me as I was leaving Albus's office."

"What a young man he has turned out to be." Minerva dabbed at her eyes again. "You should be very proud."

"Oh, I am. We all are." Aletha gazed for a moment into the distance. "Not happy about how much he's already had to shoulder," she said quietly, "but so, so very proud of how strong he's been through it all. But that's for another day." With a shake of her head, she was all business. "As soon as Meghan's able to concentrate on things again—which might be sooner than we think, she tends to respond to pain more in anger than in sorrow—we'll hold a little ceremony naming you to the castle as Albus's designated successor, and ask if you're acceptable." She chuckled once. "I don't think there should be much question of that..."

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Remus stood in the entrance hall, waiting. In his mind's eye, the Map spread out before him, expanded to show Sanctuary below his feet, now empty after Harry and Ginny had delivered the painful news and the DA's leaders from each House returned to their common rooms to pass it along. Outside, a small knot of students came along the path from the gates, three young wizards grim and determined, three witches fearful and unsure. Behind him, in the kitchens, an honor guard of DA members awaited an even sadder arrival. And to one side, moving swiftly up the stairs—

Danger, beside him, glanced over just as Severus Snape emerged from the doorway leading to the dungeons, his face set like stone. **He must have been to Headquarters, she said silently. God, Remus, poor Voni and Par, not just for themselves but having to explain what's happened to Bernie—she's only seven, how can she possibly understand this—**

**She won't. But she'll accept, eventually.** Remus reached out and found Danger's hand already moving towards his. **It shouldn't ever happen this way, but that doesn't mean it won't.**

The great oak doors creaked once and opened. Ron and Blaise Zabini stepped inside, each holding one arm of Romilda Vane, whose defiant expression would have looked far more convincing if her lower lip hadn't been trembling. Behind them walked Dean, his wand pointed steadily at a pair of Slytherin girls, both glancing nervously around the entrance hall as though expecting doom to descend upon them at any second. One's name was Rivers, Remus recalled from his teaching days, Laurasia Rivers, and the other was one of the Carrow twins—Flora, he thought, not Hestia.

Snape advanced on this second trio, stopping a pace or two short and extending a hand with an abrupt, commanding gesture. Dean reached inside his robes, extracted a pair of wands, and placed them in Snape's palm. With a nod, Snape slid them away in one of his own pockets, then turned his attention to his cowering students.

"I have just returned," he said in a very quiet voice which nonetheless filled the entirety of the room, "from explaining to a man and a woman in whose bloodlines even your most fanatic relations could find no fault why they will never see their only son grow to be a man. I suggest that you do nothing which might...*displease* me."

Both girls shook their heads in a frantic, uncoordinated duet which would have been screamingly funny if not for the circumstances surrounding it. Snape cut them off with a second, jerky nod, beckoned curtly for them to precede him, and started for the dungeon stairs once more, pausing for an instant beside Blaise. "Well done," he said, even more softly than before.

**Good for him.** Remus watched Snape out of sight down the dungeon steps once more, Rivers and Carrow huddled together in front of their Head of House. **I'm certain he won't like administering that test Albus wants, but I'm even more certain he'll do it rather than face the members of his House getting each other killed any longer.**

**Though in this case, blame rests all over.** Danger growled softly, the way her wolf form might, as she looked at the rampant lion embroidered on Romilda's robes. **Time and past it to deal with such things...**

The sound of more footsteps brought everyone's heads around just as a small procession appeared from the hallway which led to the kitchens.

Lee walked in front, his own face hardened and expressionless, a shock to anyone used to seeing him laughing and cheerful, ready to assist the Weasley twins in their most outrageous pranks or think up his own and happily claim their help in turn. In his arms, he carried the small, slim body of his wife's cousin. That same wife kept pace beside him, her eyes filled with tears but her scent one of purest rage. Behind them came Selena, Lindsay Jordan, and a double file of other DA members, all with their wands at salute. Hannah Abbott was there with Ernie Macmillan by her side, Su Li and Terry Boot behind them, and Colleen Lamb bringing up the rear, looking across the hall to acknowledge Blaise with the briefest of nods.

As if by prearrangement, the honor guard spread out as they entered the hall, fanning across the possible exits in pairs, all of their eyes fixed with loathing on Romilda Vane, who was now shaking in good earnest. Lee continued to advance, and Remus, beginning to understand what was about to happen, drew his wand and conjured a waist-high block of white stone in the center of the hall. With a small sigh, Lee moved to it and gently laid Graham down upon it, as though he were only sleeping.

Ron and Blaise released Romilda and moved back to guard the oak doors with Dean as Maya bore down on the Gryffindor fourth year. "Hello," said the older witch, her teeth bared in a wide, mad smile. "My name is Maya Pritchard Jordan. You killed my cousin."

"I never!" Romilda shrieked, her voice echoing around the silent hall. "I never did anything to him! I put a spell on Natalie in the toilet this morning to make her want to have the baby all to herself, I did that, you can get me in trouble for that—and then I activated the Portkey and she touched it with the baby in her arms, I didn't want to do that to her but they *made* me, they said I'd

go to *prison* if I didn't—he wasn't meant to be there, he wasn't meant to go with her, that was an *accident* , if he'd left her alone it never would have—"

The silent regard of the DA around the hall seemed to unnerve her, and she dropped to her knees with a wail. "I didn't *mean* to!" she cried, looking around as though hoping for some shred of pity. "I never meant for *any* of this to happen!"

"What a shame." Maya bent down and seized the girl's arm. "Get on your feet."

"What?" Romilda looked fearfully up at her Housemate. "Why?"

"Because." Maya gestured behind her, to the bier where Graham's body lay, to Lee standing beside it like a guardian statue. "You're going to come here. And you're going to take a good, close look at what you *never meant to happen* ."

With a whimper of fear, Romilda allowed herself to be pulled upright. The DA members standing at their posts watched coldly as Maya propelled the younger witch firmly into the center of the hall, to the side of the stone block. "This is my cousin," she said, releasing Romilda. "His name is Graham. He has a little sister he loves to tease and play with, and he was going to have a summer job stocking shelves at Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, and he thought he might have a bit of a crush on one of his good friends, but he wasn't sure if she liked him back or not. But now he'll never know or do any of that. Not ever again." She stared into Romilda's eyes. "Because of *you* ."

"I told you, I never—" Romilda paled at Maya's snarl and shut her mouth instantly.

"Good," said Maya softly. "Very good. Now, there's just one more thing." She laid her hand on Graham's head, stroking her fingers through his hair, as Remus had seen her do many times before. "Touch him."

"No!" Romilda shrank back, her hands darting behind her. "I won't!"

"Yes." Maya never looked up from her caresses. "You will."

"You can't make me!"

"Oh yes I can." Maya breathed each of the four words almost lovingly, as though she were bestowing a blessing upon Graham. "Oh yes I will."

"But—I don't *want* to!"

"That's funny," said Lee, speaking for the first time, in a voice as cold and hard as the stone on which his young Pridemate lay. "I don't think Graham wants to be dead." He stepped around and caught Romilda's chin in his hand as she tried to jerk away. "But he hasn't got a choice any longer, now has he?" he asked, looking down at her. "And neither do you."

He released her and stepped back to his original place, clearing the way.



Trembling harder than ever, Romilda approached the bier. Twice her hand darted out, only to pull back at the last second. Tiny whines escaped from her, like an animal pushed past its endurance, but the faces of the DA surrounding her showed no mercy and no pity, and with a shuddering gasp she laid the very tips of her fingers against Graham's palm. "He's...cold," she whispered, looking down at the silent, serene face under the black hair, now disarranged from Maya's stroking. "So cold..."

A sobbing scream tore its way out of her throat. "I didn't want this to happen!" she shrieked, tearing herself away and spinning wildly to face each pair of the DA in turn, holding up her hands in pleading. "Don't you understand? Don't you *see* ? All I wanted was—all I wanted..."

Her rotation brought her back around to face Lee and Maya again, and the still, small form of what her desires had cost.

"I wanted to *be* somebody," whispered Romilda Vane, staring at Graham Pritchard's lifeless body. "I wanted people to know my name. To never be able to forget me, no matter what."

She dropped gracelessly to her knees, still unable to take her eyes from Graham's face. "I just never thought it would happen like this..."

Silence fell over the entrance hall once more.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 36: The Unfairest of Them All (Arc 7)

Bernadette Pritchard huddled up in a ball behind one of the hangings in the drawing room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, hoping no one would think to look for her there.

She remembered the summer before, when she'd helped Meghan deal with being sad, but this time she and Meghan were both sad together, and so was everyone else around her. Her mother wouldn't come out of her room, and her father had his hardest angry face on, and they hadn't seen Maya since *it* happened (even in her own mind, she flinched away from naming *it*), and everything was wrong, wrong, *wrong* —

A hand pulled back the hanging close to Bernie's face. She made a little growling noise at the light which hit her square in the eyes and turned her head to glare at the person who'd invaded her hideaway.

The person glared right back at her, staring down his wrinkly, greenish-brown nose with distaste. "Little mistress tries to hide from her pain," he said, waving his other hand at the hanging, which obediently slid aside on its rings. "But the pain follows, yes? It follows wherever the little mistress may go."

"That's none of your business," Bernie snapped, but underneath her annoyance she was confused. How could Kreacher, one of the banes of her existence, know so exactly what she was feeling?

The ancient house-elf shook his head. "Kreacher's business is his masters and mistresses," he said. "And Kreacher has lost in his time, oh yes, Kreacher has lost much." One long finger beckoned her. "Come, little mistress. Kreacher will show you a place where pain is not always so very bad."

Bernie hesitated for a moment. Then she saw the two figures lingering in the doorway, one smaller than the other, and pushed off the floor to get to her feet. If Echo and Cissus were going with her, things ought to be okay.

"Good." Kreacher nodded and turned swiftly around, padding towards the door. "Little mistress will come, she will climb with Kreacher, and Kreacher will show her one of the secrets of the house, one of the secrets Kreacher's blood masters no longer know..."

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Five minutes later, on the roof of number twelve, a long-disused trapdoor creaked, swayed, and swung open with a groaning complaint of metal against metal. Out of it stepped three house-elves and one human, who shaded her eyes to look across the forest of rooftops spread out before her. "It's like a whole 'nother world," she said, taking a few steps sideways for a better vantage point. "One nobody on the ground even knows is here."

"Kreacher came up here often," said the oldest of the house-elves, snapping his fingers at a section of the railing around the rooftop walkway on which they were all standing, which quickly rose

back into its proper upright position. "When times were so bad for the House, when Kreacher's Master Regulus had died and the Mistress was...not well. Kreacher would come up here, and breathe, and think, and for a little while, some of the pain would go."

"For a little while. And some of it." Bernie walked forward to lean on the newly repaired railing. "Will that work for me?"

"If the little mistress will let it, then perhaps." Kreacher watched as the elflets tucked themselves against Bernie's legs, Echo on her left, Cissus on her right. "Tell the troubles to the wind, little mistress," he said quietly. "The wind will sweep through and carry away any parts of them that are not held so tight as others. And when some of the troubles are gone, little mistress will have room in her heart again for some of the good things she still has." He glanced down at Cissus, who returned the look blandly. "Like her friends."

Bernie turned her face into the wind, grateful that she could blame any tears spilling out of her eyes on its power. "My brother is dead," she told it, feeling the breath whisked away from her lips almost before she could finish shaping each word. "He died doing a good thing, and some of the people who put him in the way of getting killed are already being punished, and we'll find the other ones who were part of it and punish them too—but he's still dead and he's never coming home and I don't *want* people to get punished, I want *Graham* back again and I can't *have* him, and it's not *fair*, it's not *fair*, it's not *FAIR!*"

Her voice had risen through her recitation, until by the end she was shouting, flinging each word into the teeth of the wind as though her love and grief and anger could fix things. With a sob, she dropped her face into her hands and let her tears boil out of her.

"Why did they have to take him away from us?" she whispered. "He never did anything wrong."

But not even the grownups in her world had an answer for *that* question.

*Unless it's that they think he did.*

She wept quietly as the wind rushed over her, as her friends offered what comfort they could by simply being there with her, as Kreacher stood to one side, watching in silence. When she finally lifted her head again, she felt...different.

*It's not really better, not a lot better, anyway. But it's just like Kreacher said. A few tiny bits of my hurting blew away on the wind, and that means I have a little more room to remember good things.* She looked down and smiled at Cissus, who reached up to squeeze her hand, then knelt down to accept Echo's hug.

Her sad and her angry hadn't left her, not all the way, not now, and possibly not ever. But now she didn't feel like she couldn't breathe because of them anymore, and she thought she might even be able to eat.

*I'll have to see if Mother will come up here with me,* she decided, starting for the trapdoor again.

*Or Father. The wind might help them too.*

"Thank you, Kreacher," she said as the elderly house-elf opened the door with his magic.

Kreacher bowed low, and for once, Bernie didn't feel like he was making fun of her with the gesture. "Little mistress is welcome," he said, and waved her and her friends in front of him so that he could close the door behind them as they descended.

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Meghan's eyes and throat ached when she awakened, but she'd expected nothing less. Crying had predictable results on her, none of which were pretty. But now she'd cried her tears, and got them out of the way for the time being, and she needed to do something useful with the remaining strength of her pain.

*I'm going to go find my Mama Letha. She'll know where I'd do best to start.*

Dressing quickly, not forgetting her potion piece, she hurried down the stairs, glancing in passing at Natalie's empty bed. Her friend had gone home to be with her parents for a little while, with two Order members assigned to watch their house at all times, but she'd promised Meghan to be back again before the end of the month.

*She's stronger than I think I could be. If I lost Neville...*

The thought burned within her, more painful than the soreness of her throat, but she soothed it with the sight of that selfsame wizard, waiting for her in his usual spot near the bottom of the girls' stairs, making a bit of vine dance as he wagged his finger at it.

*We still have each other, and Natalie still has us, and the rest of her own Pride. So does Maya, and she and Lee have each other, and the shop to help tend. Not to mention, Percy probably has a list of Red Shepherd work he can give them, missions against places that the people who were there in those caves might be hiding.*

She found herself smiling, in a way which made Neville give her an appreciative look, as she rounded the last curve and leaped the last three steps down to the common room. "You look like you're having good thoughts," he told her, tucking his vine back into his pocket to take her hand.

"I'm thinking about us." Meghan laced her fingers with his. "The DA, the Red Shepherds, the Prides. Even the Order and the Pack. The Death Eaters think we're just a...a pile of bottles, like the ones you could throw balls at when we had the May Day Fete. If they knock one of us out, we all come crashing down."

"But we're not." Neville retrieved his vine and laid it across their intertwined hands. At a brief puff of breath from him, it writhed and began to send out tendrils, wrapping around fingers, palms, and wrists until they seemed to be wearing a single green glove. "Bottles are dead, not living. And we are very much alive. They can hurt us—they *did* hurt us, yesterday—and that makes us weaker right there and then. But afterwards..."

"Afterwards, we're like the trees with holes in their trunks, out in the Forest, or the bushes we grafted in the greenhouse, to make Ginny's roses for the wedding." Meghan stroked the vine-glove with a finger of her other hand. "We grow back together. We heal. And when we do, we're *stronger* than we were. The second Pride isn't *ever* going to give up on hunting Death Eaters now, and good luck trying to tell *anybody* in the DA that all Slytherins are bad!" She sighed deeply, her momentary good mood sliding away. "I just wish it hadn't had to happen like this."

"So do all who live to see such times," Neville quoted softly. "But that is not for them to decide." He squeezed her hand, bringing her eyes up to his face. "Breakfast?"

"Breakfast," Meghan confirmed, glancing around the common room until she'd located most of the rest of the Pride in their usual spot (Harry wasn't there, but if anyone could take care of himself at Hogwarts, her big brother was the one). "We have to learn and practice if we're going to win the war, and that takes staying healthy. And then I need to talk to my Mama Letha about *how* we can win the war best, and *she'll* probably be at breakfast too. So yes. Breakfast."

"You know, that's what I love about you." Neville found an end of vine and tugged once. The vine-glove unraveled briskly from around their two hands and shrank as it went, until he was holding his original, three-inch bit of green between his finger and thumb. "You always see everything so clearly."

"Is that *all* you love about me?" Meghan pouted.

"No, but if I stand here and keep listing things, Ron will get to breakfast before we do and then there won't be anything left."

She hadn't known she could still laugh.

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Harry slid out of the hole by the fireplace in Dumbledore's office. "Good morning, sir," he said, and smiled at the clothed house-elf who was directing the silver teapot to top off the Headmaster's cup. "Good morning, Dobby."

"Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby levitated another cup over to the teapot and began to fill it. "Dobby has brought a letter from Harry Potter's godfather, all to do with Kreacher—but the news is good," he added hastily at the look on Harry's face. "Dobby must get back, though, there is much to do at the house, and Winky and Mrs. Wheezy are both with Mrs. Pritchard today..."

For a moment, Dobby's cheerful features hardened, and Harry had a sudden insight into why the wizards of the past might have thought it wise to tie their elves to their families with such strong, deep magic as they had used.

*Because just like goblins, they're powerful enough to do a whole lot of damage if they're allowed—and just like goblins, they've got all the same feelings human beings do...*

"These Death Eaters are very bad," Dobby said quietly. "Not in all the stories Dobby's parents told

him and his sister, nor Winky's parents told her and her brother, of all the days gone by when house-elves have worked for wizards, was the killing of wizard children ever a thing that wizards did. *Taking* children, yes, to make the parents do things, or to make the children into more like themselves. But killing..." He shook his head, and waved one finger, sending the full teacup, sloshing gently, across the room to Harry. "No. Killing is new. And a bad new, instead of a good one."

*I wonder.* Harry caught the cup in midair and took a sip. Before his fire magic had been awakened, it would have scalded his tongue, which meant that now it was just the way he liked it. *House-elves have been nannies and nursemaids to pureblood kids for all those same 'days gone by'...how would they take the news that their precious masters are out there now killing off kids like the ones they helped raise? None too well, I'd think.*

"But Dobby is daydreaming, and work must be done! Have a good day, sirs!" Dobby bowed to Harry, then to Dumbledore, and disappeared with a loud *crack* .

"Good news about Kreacher, sir?" Harry asked, coming into the room to take a seat in one of the visitors' chairs.

"He appears to have responded to the needs of Bernadette Pritchard, as a pureblood child resident in his house, by moving past some of his earlier grudges and prejudices to help her with her grief." Dumbledore unrolled the small scroll lying on his desk and skimmed down the boldly written lines (Harry would have been able to name the writer as Padfoot even had Dobby not mentioned it). "Sirius believes it might now be time for the reward you had promised Kreacher. After which, perhaps, a meeting between him and Dean Thomas could be arranged."

Harry glanced over at the closed cubbies in which Slytherin's locket and Hufflepuff's cup reposed, innocent-appearing items that they were, with Gryffindor's sword in its glass case set on the top of the shelf above them. "Can we do that today, sir?" he asked, letting his hand drift down to his dagger. "I think it might make all of us, my Pride, feel better to see one of those things die."

"That sounds like an excellent idea." Dumbledore set aside the scroll and cradled his teacup in both hands. "And once it is done, perhaps we should see about a certain plan I believe you once broached, involving your own weapon and that of Godric Gryffindor?"

For a moment, Harry drew a blank. Then he remembered, and couldn't help but grin. *Carry around my dagger for everyday, just like I do now, but whenever I say the right trigger phrase and make the right movement, I've got the sword instead...*

"I like that idea too, sir," he said aloud. "Besides, won't that mean the sword gets the basilisk venom in it, like my dagger already has?"

"It will." Dumbledore nodded. "And whenever you have no need of the sword, it will be here, available to me or to the next resident of this office."

Harry almost laughed. *Next resident—thinking ahead a bit, isn't he? McGonagall becoming*

*Headmistress is years off yet, and we're hoping to finish the war before November...*

Then his nose got its chance to catch up with his brain, and he went very still.

"You have been told what the Death Eaters hope to accomplish, using your brother as their cat's paw," said Dumbledore, as calm as if he were discussing a plan to add a vanishing step to every staircase or enchant the suits of armor to do cartwheels rather than the possibility of his own death. "For all the precautions we may now take, we cannot be certain that their plan will not succeed. And perhaps, in a larger sense, we would be wisest to let it do so."

"We should *what*?" Harry wasn't sure how he'd stopped the final word from being a full-on shout, and judging by Fawkes's annoyed whistle on his perch behind Dumbledore, he'd still been louder than he should have. "Sir—"

"Have you ever, Harry, heard the saying, 'The graveyards are full of indispensable men'?" Dumbledore reached around to stroke Fawkes's feathers, and the phoenix grumbled a little in his musical voice but also leaned his head into the caress. "If Voldemort were to die tomorrow, the Death Eaters would have no strong voice to lead them, no central authority whom they all would follow. The infighting and squabbling for place would disorganize them entirely, and you can imagine we would not hesitate to destroy them while they were at such a disadvantage."

About to ask what this had to do with the price of raspberries in Reading, Harry stopped and forced himself to think it through. "He judges us by himself," he said after a few moments. "Doesn't he?"

"What else does he have to judge by?" Dumbledore smiled. "His strikes are already scattered due to the need to try to locate the many different groups who oppose him. He believes that my influence is the only thing which ties all those groups together, that without me they will drift apart, each to its own smaller agenda." He gazed into his tea as though he were trying to see the future in its dregs. "How little he understands us."

"Good," Harry said flatly. "I don't *want* him understanding us. That'd mean he could fight us better."

"So it would, Harry. So it would indeed." The Headmaster drew a long breath, bringing himself back from wherever his mind had been wandering. "But as I was saying. If the Death Eaters' clever strike succeeds, or even *seems* to succeed, they will believe that Hogwarts and the Order of the Phoenix are both theirs whenever they choose to stretch out their hands. Whereas, if we prepare ourselves properly for such an occurrence..."

"Things won't fall apart," Harry finished, nodding with a sense of profound relief. A feigned weakness, meant to lull an enemy into complacency, was something a Marauder's cub understood perfectly. "If you went into hiding to make them think you'd died, Professor McGonagall would become Headmistress..." He frowned. "But she wouldn't lead the Order, would she? I don't think she'd want to."



"She would not." Dumbledore chuckled. "Indeed, she has told me so repeatedly. Look closer to home, Harry. Who among the Order has already proven himself a leader—unless I should say *themselves*, for surely the effort is a joint one?"

Harry groaned aloud at his stupidity in not seeing this ages ago. "They'll be good at it, sir," he said after another sip of tea. "And I'm not just saying that because they're my parents."

"No, you are saying it because it is true." Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. "Remus always had potential, but only after Danger came to him was the greatest part of it unlocked. They are more, together, than either could ever be alone. As well, Danger has been working in the Pepper Pot since before it opened, and is therefore thoroughly conversant with the methods and plans of the Red Shepherds, while I have been bringing Remus further and further into the workings of the Order, and my own thoughts and beliefs about the course of the war, for some time."

"Because the graveyards are full of indispensable men." Harry drew his dagger and turned its blade back and forth, letting the light reflect off it. "What time should we start making Voldemort a little closer to being indispensable, sir?"

"I would imagine his Death Eaters already consider him so," Dumbledore remarked. "Would just after lunch work well for all of you?"

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Draco groaned, shoving the frustratingly vague Transfiguration text across his desk. "I give up," he said to thin air. "I'm never going to understand this stuff! Everything else, I'm already up almost to O.W.L. level, past it in some things, but not *this* ..."

Pushing back his chair, he stood up to pace, but stopped halfway across the room at the sight of his bed.

"Maybe I'm not," he said, starting to smile. "But I know who is."

Getting comfortable took only a few moments, dropping off to sleep scarcely longer than that, but to Draco's annoyance, Fox was nowhere to be seen when he opened his dream-eyes. He was getting ready to sit down and sulk when something occurred to him.

*I may look four years old, but I know more than a four-year-old would. I know lots of kinds of magic. And Fox always says, you can do whatever you want in dreams. Maybe could I put both of those together and come up with a spell that would tell me where he is?*

Reaching into the pocket of his robes, he came up with his wand, and had to laugh as he realized that it had fitted itself to the contours of his dream-body's hand. After giving it a few experimental waves, which sent gratifying showers of sparks every which way, he walked out to the center of his room's open space and shut his eyes.

*What should I say? Not an incantation, not a proper one, I'd have to know it exactly to get it right—but maybe if I try a rhyming spell, like Fox uses to joke with me, that would work...*

Slowly, he raised his wand over his head, like someone getting ready to cast the first spell of a duel. "Water, fire, earth, and air," he said, then hesitated for an instant before the proper rhyme occurred to him. "Show me Fox and take me there!"

After three seconds of silence, Draco sighed and opened his eyes, disappointed. *I should have known that wouldn't—*

His thoughts broke off in what would have been a squawk of amazement if he'd been able to make any noise at all.

He was no longer in his bedroom.

A vaulted ceiling, with broad windows set all around, soared high above him. Bookshelves with ladders to get to their upper bits, staircases of graceful wrought iron, and paintings of snoring wizards and chattering witches lined the curved stone walls. The floor space, what there was of it, was taken up by one enormous desk, several comfortable-looking chairs, and a small crowd of people, most of them Hogwarts-age except for one older wizard with an impressively long silver beard and flowing hair to match. And standing behind them, watching intently, was—

"Fox!"

Somewhat to Draco's disappointment, his relation neither jumped nor yelped. Instead he went quite still for the space of a breath, before turning to face Draco. "You," he said with a curious mixture of worry and thoughtfulness in his expression, "are *not* supposed to be here."

"I know. But I wanted you." Draco trotted over, peering with interest at the people. "Is this your family? They look like the story-pictures you showed me that one time."

"You mean you don't—" Fox cut himself off. "Never mind, of course you wouldn't. Yes, here they are. They won't be able to see us, but you knew that already."

"Because we're just dreams to them, the way you are to me?" Draco hazarded, allowing Fox to lift him up when the older boy's arms came down almost absently.

"Not quite." Fox balanced Draco expertly on his hip and walked a slow circle around the little group. "It's more like...I know that this happened, or something like it, very recently. But I can't see the real thing, not without a whole lot of magic to give me extra strength, because that's not my gift. I'm a dreamsculpter, not an astral traveler."

Draco frowned. "What are those? Dreamsculpter and as-as..."

"Astral travel is when your spirit steps outside your body for a little while, to go to a real place and see real things that are happening." Fox set Draco down on the broad desk, motioned for him to watch, and stamped one foot on the floor. It rippled. "But that's not what's going on here. See how it's all soft down below us? That means this is all inside my mind, a made-up place and not a real one. A dream."

"So this place isn't real?" Draco sat down, disappointed. "I should have known. It's too nice."

"What, this place where we are?" Fox chuckled. "No, it's real all right."

"But you just said—"

"If you have a model of Hogwarts, does that mean Hogwarts itself doesn't really exist?" Fox interrupted. "This is just like that. It's a model of the Headmaster's office there. I've been in it a few times, so I know what it looks like." He smiled. "Starting when I wasn't much older than you are now, come to think."

"So you have been to Hogwarts!" Draco slid off the desk, tremendously excited. "You can tell me about it when we get back to my room, there's still so much I need to know—"

"No." The word was flat and cold, a tone Draco seldom heard from his relation, and Fox's arms were folded across his chest, the blue eyes narrowed in anger. "I thought we'd settled this already. I'm not going to help you with that one."

"Why not?" Vaguely, in the tangle of people behind Fox, Draco thought he saw a flash of silver and red, heard a strange hiss like the Dark Lord speaking Parseltongue and a smash of breaking glass. "What's wrong with—"

Fox stamped his foot again, making the office vanish around them. They stood together on a featureless gray plain, Draco now looking at his relation from the same height, rather than from below. "Hey!" he objected, hearing a similar voice to his waking one, if not quite so well-controlled. "That's not fair, I wasn't ready—"

"Why not?" Fox mimicked his four-year-old tones almost exactly. "Because if you were really taking this whole mission thing seriously, if you were going to act like you're almost seventeen and ready to take responsibility for your actions, you should have been paying better attention than that. I'll tell you this much, Draco, if by some miracle you manage to pull off what your father wants you to do, and they catch you at it—which they will—it won't matter to them that you were just obeying orders. They'll come down on you like a ton of cauldrons. You'll probably never even see daylight again, let alone any of those rewards he keeps promising you."

"Why would you think I'm going to get caught?" Draco scoffed. "It's a perfect plan. The *Pack* has themselves deluded into thinking I was with them because I wanted to be, so I'll just pretend they're right and that I want to 'come home'." He paused for an overall shudder at the thought of what such a homecoming would really mean, if it were to happen, then went on. "Father knows a spell that will give me the information I need to play along with their twisted little ideas, I'll convince them I'm for real and get them to let me in, and then I'll ask them if I can't have some time alone—"

"What happened to them wanting you to be their slave?" Fox broke in, drumming the fingers of one hand against the other arm in a complicated rhythm pattern. "Trying to steal your magic for Hermione all the time, and make you do the chores?"

"That's the beauty of it." Draco grinned. "They only dare do that when they're at home, and they're *not* at home now. They're at Hogwarts."

"True enough." Fox nodded slowly. "But I still don't see—"

"Dumbledore's such a goody-good, they'd never dare admit what my life was *really* like in front of him," Draco continued, surprised at Fox's slowness to catch on. Usually his relation was much quicker than this. "So they'll have to agree with everything I say, and let me have the sort of things that seem reasonable. Like a few minutes to myself, to enjoy being back where I belong. Or even a private word with the Headmaster, because I've seen so many things while I was with the Death Eaters that only he should hear about..."

"And once you're alone with him, you're going to kill him." Fox's voice had returned to its earlier, flat, disapproving tone. "Kill him, and set up a target that a properly tuned Portkey can always get to, even through wards like Hogwarts has. Then your father and a bunch of the other Death Eaters will come through using that, and spread out through the school to hide other targets just like it in places people would never think to look—and once that's done, they'll come back, pick you up, and leave again. With Dumbledore dead and Hogwarts theirs whenever they want it."

"That's how it should go." Draco smirked. "Simple, elegant, and foolproof."

Fox choked. "Sorry," he said when Draco looked askance at him. "Swallowed wrong. But there's just one problem with foolproof plans. People keep inventing better fools."

"Oi!"

"Hold it, hold it—" Fox snapped his fingers, and Draco, about to charge at his relation and demand that Fox take it back, found himself abruptly wearing his four-year-old body again. "That wasn't meant for you, no matter what you may think. And we aren't going to get anywhere going around in circles on this. You're going ahead with it, no matter what I say, aren't you?"

"Yes I am." Draco crossed his own arms defiantly. "And you can't stop me."

Fox smiled. "Was that a challenge?"

Draco's first instinct was to say no, but he overrode it—how dare this, this *dream-bully* think he could push around a son of the Malfoys? "Yes it is," he snapped back. "This is the one thing my father's ever asked of me, in exchange for his spending his whole *life* trying to get me back, and I'm not going to let you mess it up!"

"If you say so." Fox went to one knee, looking at him with a thoughtful, searching expression. "But remember this, Draco. I may not agree with everything you want, but if things go wrong out there, I'll be here to help you. Think you can trust me that far?"

"I guess so," Draco said after a few moments of consideration. Fox hadn't said he was *going* to mess up the mission, and one of his father's most-often-repeated maxims was that a wizard could

never have too many friends. Of course, his father tended to use the word "allies" or even "debtors", but it meant basically the same thing, didn't it?

"Thanks." Fox blew out his breath. "So, what were you looking for me about this time? Transfiguration again? I bet I could even guess what lesson you're on, I had the same trouble back in my O.W.L. year..."

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"Again," Sirius instructed, watching Harry bring himself into ready position. His godson was sweating heavily and breathing hard, but his movements were as fluid and clear as they had been at the start of this exercise. "And—go!"

Strike, block, strike, duck, lunge, parry, weave, feint, Harry executed one of the knife-fighting patterns Sirius had taught all the cubs when they were younger, shortly after Amy Freeman had given them their daggers for Christmas. Only this time, when he came to the rest position in the middle, he twisted his wrist once and pulled his arm back, and his eyes went momentarily abstracted as he mentally pronounced the phrase he'd chosen, *Filio leonis* if Sirius recalled it right

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The silver blade in his hand lengthened and broadened, the rubies ornamenting the grip swelled. In less than a second, what had been Harry's dagger was now the sword of Godric Gryffindor. Sirius had no doubt the dagger was now ensconced in the glass case upstairs in the Head's office, probably looking rather odd and lonely up there.

He eased back as Remus stepped up, his own sword in his hand, to take the position of adversary in this new portion of the bout. Harry brought the sword up to guard, and they eyed one another for a moment, two alpha wolves seeking one another's weaknesses.

When they moved, they did so in near-perfect unison, and the clang and clash of silver against steel rang through the main room of the cubs' Hogwarts Den. Sirius, no swordfighter himself, could and did still admire the poetry in this form of combat, though he'd spotted several moments when an adept knife fighter could easily have sneaked a shorter blade through either side's guard

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*Though I'm probably just deluding myself, because my bouts with Moony always end up the same way anymore, no matter what we're armed with. Either we get a mutual kill pretty early, or we go at it until one of us is so tired he makes a mistake and the other one wins basically by default. He grinned to himself. Which is pretty much what the Death Eaters are counting on us to do, next week, and pretty much what we're going to take advantage and do to them...*

The tests of intent had been just as unpleasant an ordeal as Dumbledore and the Heads of House had suspected they would be, but a surprising number of students had passed them. Sirius suspected Snape had altered the wording in a few cases, but also suspected the Head of Slytherin had his eye very closely on those particular students, and had let them know about the observation in no uncertain terms.

*Because if there's anything a Slytherin hates, it's knowing he isn't going to get away with whatever he's got planned.*

Probably also inevitable was the handful of students who had left the school "in protest" once the tests had been announced, but before they could be administered. Sirius was fairly sure the gap had been there on purpose, and wondered if any of the students who had departed realized that for themselves.

*You're willing to up and leave over having to prove you don't want to hurt your fellow students? That's great, that's fine, don't let the door hit you in the arse on the way out...*

But the developments over the last few weeks that Sirius liked both most and least hit him a bit closer to home.

*Kreacher, for one. Whatever Harry and Meghan hauled him off here to Hogwarts to do, it chirked him up like nobody's business, and he went off to meet with Dean Thomas like he was eighteen months old again, starting his duties all fresh and shiny-new. And Pearl did something too, something involving stabbing, or at least that seems to be what I see her miming every once in a while. He sighed, waving his wand absently at his face to dry a bit of the sweat running down his forehead. What is it with me and violent women? Though be fair, Padfoot, it's not just you, the entire Pack seems to be full of them...*

And then, of course, he was looking at the thing he'd been trying to avoid looking at since Aletha'd reluctantly shared it with him.

*The Death Eaters are sending Fox here, to try and kill Albus. And Albus wants to let them. Not just because he thinks Fox isn't as far gone as he seems, but because he's dying, and that's not right—he wasn't supposed to die, not now, not like this—*

The mingled scent of flowers and bread hit his nose just in time for the voice in his ear not to make him yelp. "Thinking too hard again?" Danger inquired.

"Albus Dumbledore," said Sirius shortly, "is out of his *mind*."

Danger regarded him for a few moments. "There have been times I'd have agreed with you in a heartbeat," she said finally. "But I'm honestly not sure this is one of them."

"What part of his risking his life is a good thing, then?" Sirius demanded.

"The part where we know it's coming so we can prepare for it?" Danger patted the wall beside her hand, smiling. "And the part where we get our missing cub back, practically gift-wrapped?"

"Brain-blanked is more like it." Sirius growled under his breath. "If I ever get my hands on Lucius..."

"Queue starts behind me and Remus." Danger's smile had disappeared at the invocation of the elder Malfoy's name. "But Sirius, tell me this. After we've been informed that our Draco, Draco

Black, would be protected from the worst of what his father wanted to do to him—after we've had more than a few indications that he might still be in there somewhere—and after we know that the beginning of the Death Eaters' plan is for him to pretend that's still who he is, that he's escaped and he's coming home—after all of that, do you truly think he's going to be able to muster enough anger for a Killing Curse? Against anyone, let alone a man he's trusted since he was four years old?"

"I think it depends on what kind of protection he had, and how effective it was." Sirius turned his head just enough to see Harry and Remus come to salutes, then relax from their guard, grinning at each other though Harry was favoring one shoulder and Remus putting more of his weight on his right leg than his left. "And really, Danger, under all of it? I just don't want Albus to die. Not this close to the end of the war, to everything he's fought for and believed in. That's not fair to anyone..." He sighed deeply. "And I know, I know. No one ever promised me fair."

"Or if they did, they were lying." Danger leaned her head momentarily against his shoulder. "But he's made his choice. He'll face Draco and trust that all those years of our love are stronger than a month of Lucius's hatred, and if the stress of that turns out to be too much for him, the way Letha says it might well be..." Her breath hitched once, then settled. "Minerva's been confirmed by the castle as his successor, and the Ministry will have a hard time arguing with a few thousand tons of semi-sentient stone. And Remus and I have a decent handle on the Order work, and Harry and the Pride on whatever they've been so mysterious about. If there was ever a good time—or maybe I should say, a *least bad* time..."

"Yeah." Sirius slid his arm around his sister. "Guess so."

They stood in companionable silence, thinking of how far they'd come together, and how far they still had to go.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 37: Greetings and Farewells (Arc 7)

Luna stood over the cauldron containing the Imprimatus Potion, gazing down into its depths. When it was ready to be used, it would turn as clear as water, as clear as glass. Draco had left a message for her at the bottom of the cauldron, to be sure she would know when the potion was ready, even if he wasn't there himself.

*I could cheat.* She closed her eyes and imagined opening them with their focus just slightly off, with Hermione, pacing back and forth along the sinks, casting the shadow of Neenie the cat, with Myrtle, hovering above Hermione's head, glowing an even more brilliant silver than was usual. *But I won't. He didn't want me to see it until the potion was ready, and the potion isn't ready.*

*Even if it is the fourth of June, and coming close to midnight.*

"I don't understand," said Hermione, as she had already, several times. "We did everything right. It should be finished."

"It does say 'final boiling times may vary'," Luna pointed out, as she had every time Hermione had lamented this fact. "The temperature in the room, how much water is in the air, how we're feeling while we work on it, even having Myrtle here—" She nodded to the ghost, who blushed. "All of that could change how long it takes to finish."

Hermione growled, crooking her fingers like claws. "But we need it now!"

"No, we don't." Luna sat down beside the cauldron, enjoying the warmth of the bluebell fire in its jar underneath. "We won't need it for another few days."

"How can you be so calm about this?" Hermione worked her hands through her hair, rendering it, improbably, wilder than it had been a few moments before. "I can't do this, Luna. What they're all expecting, what we've been planning. I just can't go through with it. How am I supposed to look at him, to talk to him, when all the time I know—"

"Forget what you know."

"What?" Hermione stared at her. "How? And more importantly—*why?*"

"Why is simple. To trick the Death Eaters. To make them think their plan is working, and we don't have any idea what they're doing. But how..." Luna tapped her fingertips together thoughtfully. "Imagine how you would feel tonight if things were different," she said at last. "If he'd only been taken prisoner, not Marked or put under any magic. That's how it would be, isn't it, if he were your born brother, instead of beginning as a Malfoy? They would want him more as a hostage, then, to control you and the Pack. So he'd be well-treated. And if he was careful to act frightened, and not too smart, or even to pretend he was slowly seeing things their way, they might not watch him as closely as they should, and he could have had the chance to escape."

"If only." Hermione rubbed her hands up and down her arms. "But I don't—no, wait, yes I do." She began to smile. "I do see what you're getting at. For all the Death Eaters know, that's exactly what we think has happened. They won't want to believe we have spies there—or if they do, well, then, obviously we're just delusional enough to explain away Draco's acting like a Malfoy again as his making the best of a bad situation, going along with the person in charge until he gets a chance to run. And who knows?" She sighed. "Maybe it even *is* like that, somehow. Neville did say his magic was hidden, and a little twisted, but not broken."

"Neville's right." Luna turned her head as a very particular sense inside her mind, one to which she'd paid close and careful attention since the day her Seeing returned to her, pulsed three times like a triumphant firework. "And you need to go find your parents and get ready. He's coming."

Hermione shivered once, throughout her body, then exhaled a long breath. "He's coming. All right." A shaky little laugh found its way out of her. "How is it harder to be getting ready to see him again than to say goodbye to him?"

"Hope," said Luna simply. "It's a difficult thing."

"But human." Hermione leaned against one of the cubicle walls. "Very human. Or Pack, I suppose." She pushed herself upright. "You're sure you don't want to be a part of this?"

"Draco knows what I can do." Luna twirled a finger in the steam rising from the cauldron. "It's been so much a part of our lives that I don't think even his pendant jewel could have made him quite forget it. He'd be nervous if I came too near him, afraid that I would know what had happened to him, and he might make a big mistake."

"This whole night is a big mistake." Hermione grimaced. "This whole *war* is one. Why can't the purebloods just shut themselves up behind their fancy walls and dance their little pattern dances until they inbreed themselves to death?"

"Because there are good things in the wizarding traditions. We just have to find them, and mix them properly with the good things from the Muggle world, so that we can make everyone as close to happy as we can." Luna made a flicking motion with both hands. "Go, hurry. He'll expect to see you first of all, or nearly."

Hermione went. Luna waited until her friend was well out of sight, then bent over the cauldron and blew onto the surface of the potion she hoped would avenge what became of her love this night.

*And I will see it. I will see all of it.*

*If I don't, I might make an even bigger mistake than Alecto Carrow.*

The thought of the unintended consequences of the Death Eater witch's stupidity buoyed Luna's spirits. Of those Slytherins who remained at Hogwarts now that the tests of intent were finished, fully half had joined the DA, walking into meetings openly and proudly, as though daring their Housemates to judge them for their choice. Quite a few of them had told Blaise, who'd acted as

their unofficial sponsor into the club, that they had come because of what had happened to Graham.

*One of my yearmates said it best. Freese, I think his name is. Luna gazed into the potion, which was now revealing a typical, if rather tense, evening scene in Professor Aletha Black's office. "I'll climb over a few bodies to get what I want if I have to, but they're damn well not going to be little girls and babies that I stood by and let get killed from behind. Blood or no blood, I'd have done the same as Pritchard."*

And that sentiment, Luna knew, was what would eventually bring down the Death Eater movement, from all around and from within.

*But first, we need to get through tonight.*

She peered eagerly into the cauldron as everyone's heads turned sharply towards the door.

---

Sirius looked up from the tin of mints he'd been transfiguring into a pencil and back again as a knock sounded at Aletha's office door. Across the room, Meghan sprang up, Harry dodging out of the way of yelling chess pieces as the board between them went flying.

"Sit," Aletha said firmly, freezing everything where it was with a sweeping circle of her wand, then aimed a backhanded flick at her door. "Come in, Severus."

Snape, in the corridor, looked mildly nonplussed as the door swung open in front of him. "Don't ask," Sirius advised him, getting up. "This is it?"

"Thank you, I will not. And yes." Snape looked past Sirius at Meghan, who was plucking chessmen out of the air and restoring them to the board which Harry had righted. "You will be more hindrance than help if you have so little control tonight, Miss Black," he said coldly. "Restrain yourself, if you can."

Sirius almost objected, but then thought better of it. For all Snape's presumption in giving Meghan orders in front of her parents, he'd taken exactly the right tone with her. Indeed, her chin was already on its way into the air.

*Challenge Pearl to do anything, and it's as good as done.*

"Mint?" he said instead, holding out what he had in his hand to Snape. Snape looked at it, then up at Sirius with an expression mingling disbelief and annoyance. Sirius glanced down himself. "Oh. Sorry." A quick stab with his wand, and the pencil he'd been offering Snape writhed in his grasp and changed forms. "Mint?" he said again, this time holding out the tin with which he'd started.

"No. Thank you." Snape turned to leave, then paused, looking around at the Blacks and Harry. "Depending on how this night ends, I may not see you again," he said, the words coming slowly, as though he had to think about every one. "If I do not...take care of one another."

"You do the same," Sirius answered, marveling at the ease of the exchange. He could recall a time when something along these lines would have come out of either or both of their mouths with such utter reluctance that they might as well have been grinding their teeth through the words.

*Guess we've both grown up some. Took us long enough.*

"I shall." Snape's eyes shifted back to Harry, who was standing near the back of the room in something suspiciously like the pose of attention he used when he was listening to Dumbledore. "Tell me, Potter," he said coolly. "Do you own the original of that...unusual Potions text you once used as a distraction in our lessons?"

"Yes, sir." Harry seemed surprised by the question. "Why?"

"I had always wondered what became of it, after your father decided it would be an enjoyable last-day-of-school prank to purloin it from my bag." Snape nodded, as though this were no more than he had expected. "Be so kind as not to lose it. Should we both survive this war, I will want it back."

With a final nod to Aletha and a long look at Sirius, Severus Snape turned and left, shutting the door behind him.

Meghan had both hands pressed firmly to her lips. Harry opened and closed his mouth once, twice, then rounded on his Pack-mother, pointing at the door. "You never told me *he* was the Half-Blood Prince!"

"You never asked." Aletha rattled the latch on the cupboard in which she kept her dangerous ingredients and her samples of completed potions, nodding as she confirmed it was firmly shut. Sirius knew the password which would open it (the same one to which her office door was set), as did the rest of the Pack and Pride, but he doubted anyone else would have had the first clue.

*Even with "When does a fireplace not chime?" written there on the wall beside it, and outside in the corridor. Only one of us would be able to trace that all the way back to the London Den and the charm Moony thought was funny to put on the Floo fire there, to tell us when someone was connecting into it, and from there come up with "Howl" as the word...*

He smiled a little as Harry and Meghan hurried out through that same door, talking in quiet, urgent voices, as his wife waved him out before her so that she could lock it behind them.

*The last time we had it set up that way was late July of '84, when we first brought Draco home with us.*

*Sounds like a good omen for tonight to me.*

Letting his nerves flow away from him, as he did before a battle, Sirius accepted Aletha's offered hand and kept pace with her towards the stairs.

*Here we go. And may the best side win.*

*That, of course, being us.*

---

Draco leaned against the castle wall, breathing hard, trying not to stare upwards at the fantastic array of towers and battlements which was Hogwarts. The person the Pack had deluded themselves into thinking he would have seen this sight often.

*Let me go over it one more time before I invoke that spell all the way.* He ducked back a little further into the shadows, watching and listening for any sign that he'd been detected, but there was nothing. *We arrived outside Hogsmeade, and Father Side-Along-Apparated me into the Shrieking Shack. Not sure how they think I would have done that one on my own, but he says they won't be too surprised I was able to get in. We said our goodbyes over there, and then I headed down through the passage...*

He had half-expected the barely-seen wards in the middle of the cramped tunnel to halt him—he did carry the Mark, after all—but after a long moment of seeming consideration, the magic had allowed him past with barely a tingle across his skin. That was when he'd begun to feel uneasy about this night.

*Of course the wards let me past, he tried to tell himself. Father couldn't forget a precaution that basic. And even if he had, the Dark Lord wouldn't. It's some new technique, something that will only work once or twice, or only on a single person, not an army, so that's why they're using me.*

Still, he couldn't help but wish he were somewhere else. Fox's warnings about getting caught kept recurring to him.

*You said you'd help me, if I got in trouble, he thought tentatively towards the middle of his mind. Did you mean that?*

Silence, for so long a moment that Draco began to wonder if Fox were there at all. Then—

*I meant it, his dream-relation said curtly. But remember what else I said. I'm not helping you with this mission of yours. Even if I didn't respect and like Professor Dumbledore, which I do, you shouldn't be killing people just because your daddy said so.*

*That's not why I'm doing this, Draco shot back, stung. I'm doing it for me. To prove I deserve the place I lucked into—to show everyone that I'm a Malfoy, born and bred—*

Fox's answer was brief, profane, and ended with the feeling of a slammed door. Draco scowled. "Well, fine," he whispered. "Be that way."

He reached into another part of his mind, for the spell his father had laid on him just before they left. Compiled from the reports of spies and informers who'd watched the Order of the Phoenix, and the Pack within it, for as long as either had existed, it would help to prompt him with the forms of address and the mannerisms the Pack would expect from the Draco they'd concocted in their minds, the one who'd been raised as an equal with their other children—

*Cubs*, the spell whispered as it took hold, *they're called cubs— we're called cubs—the bigger girl is Neenie, and the littler one is Pearl, and, and, and, and...*

He staggered a step or two under the deluge of information, but then straightened. Moving a few more steps to his right, he located the stone with the carving of the school motto on it. With a grin, he slapped his hand against his own name.

A section of wall just underneath the carved one disappeared, and he climbed briskly inside.

It was time to earn his life.

---

Harry pulled his Galleon out of his pocket as it warmed. "Ginny and Ron report all teams in place," he said, reading the message from it. "As soon as the Death Eaters are inside, they'll be followed, and anything they leave behind will either be removed or...altered."

"Rerouted to the Arctic, perhaps." Danger grinned once, savagely. "Or into the middle of a volcano."

"Feeling bloodthirsty tonight, love?" inquired Moony.

"Feeling motherly." Danger stroked her hands down her hips, her scent eddying with anger, patience, eagerness, fear. "And disinclined to believe that visions are what they seem to be." She clenched her fists, then relaxed them, a flare of fire appearing and disappearing in the air above her. "But whatever else happens tonight, we'll have him for a little while. One more time."

"Speaking of which." Moony hooked a thumb down the corridor next to the one where they were standing. "Places, everyone. And where's—"

"Here I am," panted Hermione, rounding the last corner at a run. "Here I am, I just got caught up in something, I'm sorry to be late..."

"Calm," Harry told her, touching her arm to bring her around to face him, then straightening her robes and motioning for her to fix her hair, as much as this would make any difference. "He may not remember it now, but he's still got Snow Fox's nose, and he'll panic if we give him a reason to."

"Right. Got it." Hermione breathed deeply, in, then out. "Calm."

"Better." Harry tweaked her nose to hear her growl. "Shall we?"

---

The spell took firmer and firmer hold as Draco hurried through the passage, bent almost double because of the low ceiling (he suspected it had been built for house-elves), until he stepped out into the ground floor corridor feeling strangely detached from himself, as though he were floating a little ways away from his body. He could still do things, say things, he wasn't completely cut off,

but his father's magic surrounded him like armor, warding him safe from the corrosive, lying "love" of the Pack—

"—telling you, there's someone down here!" The girl's voice rang out around the corner, as strident as it was familiar. Draco almost cringed, but the spell turned it into a hopeful step towards the light cast by the branch of candles mounted to the wall near the corridors' intersection. "I can feel it!"

"If I had a Knut for every time you've 'felt' something in this last month—" responded a boy's voice, wearily tolerant, equally familiar.

Prompted by the spell, Draco stepped forward again as the speakers rounded the corner.

Harry Potter checked abruptly, his green eyes widening behind his glasses. Beside him, Hermione Granger-Lupin gasped, then cast a triumphant glance at him. "See?" she demanded. "I *told* you so."

Draco smothered a choke of laughter and instead spoke up. "Hi, Neenie," he said, a little diffidently, as he imagined she would expect. "Hi, Harry. I'm back."

"What, no 'well' on the front?" Hermione's eyes shone bright in the light from the candles, and with a small jolt Draco realized she was actually crying. "We've missed you so *much*, I can't *believe* you got away—"

"Don't!" The word shot abruptly from him as Hermione started forward with her hands held out, and internally he swore, but he'd stopped her from touching him, and that was what mattered most. If they touched, skin to skin, she'd be able to see inside his mind, understand what had happened to him, and drag him back under her control, for that was how the blood-magic worked. The only problem was that he'd have to come up with a reason that would convince her to stay away, but he thought he had that handled.

"It's..." He had no trouble coming up with a shiver. "I'm...I just don't want to be touched right now. Not after..."

"Don't worry about explaining," said Harry, beckoning Hermione back to his side. "Not until you're ready. Come on, we can camp in the kitchens, the house-elves won't mind, they never have before."

"Sounds good." The spell offered a tidbit of information, making Draco smile. "How'd the Quidditch team do against Ravenclaw?" he asked. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there."

"We won, but it wasn't the same." Harry grimaced. "It shouldn't have been me hoisting up the Quidditch Cup first, Seeker or no Seeker—that's the captain's right, it should have been you..."

"I'm sure you led the team just fine," said Draco magnanimously. "And there's always next year, right?"

"There always is," Harry agreed, glancing once at Hermione before he turned to lead the way to the kitchens.

Deep in the back of his mind, Draco sensed sniggering. *What?* he snapped irritably in Fox's direction.

*Oh, nothing.* Fox got his mental laughter under control, but the sense of vast amusement lingered. *It's just that your dad's information gatherers aren't nearly as good as they think they are.*

*What? Why not?* Draco ran over the brief conversation in his mind, frowning. *Wasn't it Ravenclaw they played a couple weeks back?*

*Oh, it was. You were right about that. No, this is something else, something small. They might not even have noticed it...*

Draco was about to persist on this point when a breathy shriek dragged his attention back to the world around him. From a cross-corridor ahead, a tiny battering ram in Hogwarts robes came charging at him, silver eyes shining, braids flying out behind her. Automatically he turned to face her, opened his arms, braced himself—

"Fox!" Meghan Black wailed aloud, and flung herself into Draco's embrace.

Losing his footing in shock, Draco sat down hard under the impact, barely noticing how naturally his arms curved around this small, sobbing person. "It's okay," he said with what breath he had, fending off Harry's grab for the back of Meghan's robes, "she's all right, leave her be..."

Inwardly, his attention was all focused on one point.

*Why did she just call me by your name?* he demanded as loudly as he could without giving himself a headache. *What is going on here?*

*Which question do you want me to answer?* Fox still seemed mightily amused by something. *Look, we don't have time for this right now. They're going to get suspicious if you stop answering them for longer than a few seconds. And with this part, I can help you. Want it?*

*Yes. Please.* Draco realized one instant too late that he hadn't defined his terms very well. *But what are you going to—*

Fox's mental arms came around him before he could finish the sentence, lifting him up as easily as ever his dream-form lifted the four-year-old Draco, setting him in what felt like a comfortable chair to one side, where he could see and hear and even feel, but it was Fox who was now in control of the body. "Easy, Pearl," his voice soothed, as his hand came up to stroke the side of the little girl's face until she looked up with her eyes filled with tears, "it's all right. I'm here." He looked up at Harry, his lips curving in Fox's comfortable smirk. "And if you're going to tell me Ginny let you be captain instead of her, I'm going to call you a bigger liar than Padfoot in one of his storytelling moods."



Harry's face hardened, his smile twisting downwards into a scowl. "Are you saying I wouldn't make a good captain?" he said coldly.

*You're messing it up!* Draco protested. *He's getting angry—*

*He's challenging me.* Fox was unruffled. *Teasing me, even. It's in his scent.*

*His scent?* Cautiously, Draco turned his attention to the mingled smells and tastes in the air. There did seem to be more of them than usual, or perhaps he was simply recognizing them better—

"No," Fox said to Harry while he was so occupied. "I'm saying you're so damn busy with your classes and the DA that if you tried to run the Gryffindor Quidditch team too, you'd never have time to sleep. O.W.L. year or not, Ginny's got more time for that than you do. And speaking of the DA..." He adjusted his hold of Meghan so that she was seated more comfortably within the curl of his arm, drawing her closer to him. "Pearl, I was so sorry to hear about Graham."

Draco withdrew his attention a little ways, satisfied. Fox was doing what he'd said he would, helping with the first part of the mission, getting him inside Hogwarts, accepted as one of these people, allowed to be left alone. The second part of the mission would be up to Draco himself, but that was fine by him.

*Wonder how he knows so much of this stuff, though.* He shrugged, accepting it as just another quirk of Fox. *Probably his own family's like this, all lovey-dovey and things, so he knows how it goes. And wherever he is right now, he's obviously got lots of time to spare, so he's been able to pay better attention to the information about the Pack that the Dark Lord's spies have brought in, where I've had to spend most of my time trying to train up to the level in magic I ought to be at...*

It was plausible. It was logical. It hung together.

He wondered why it didn't, quite, convince him.

---

"Well?" Danger murmured to Aletha as they stood together near the back of the Hogwarts kitchens, watching as Draco accepted a cup of tea from one of the house-elves with a smile, Meghan still cuddled against his side, Harry and Hermione seated nearby, making light conversation about what Draco had missed in his month away. "Is he or isn't he?"

"I can't quite tell." Aletha sounded frustrated, which feeling Danger shared fully. Having their missing one physically back among them, but with no guarantee that the animating soul was truly that of the cub they'd raised and loved, was coming close to making her tear her hair out. "He's under some *strong* compulsions, I can tell you that much. I'm astounded he can so much as breathe for himself. And I think those spells may be the problem—they're blurring everything to the point where I can't tell anything else about him." She looked over at Danger. "Do you want to try?"

"I suppose I'd better." Danger sent a pulse of reassurance to Remus, who was lurking outside the kitchens with Sirius as a backup if things went too badly wrong, and began to meander towards her

cubs. She knew by the changes in their scent when first Harry, then Hermione, noticed her approach, but Draco, his back to her, seemed still oblivious—

*No, he's got me now.* She smiled as Draco craned his neck to see her, moving to one side so that he would have a better view. "I'm glad to see you again for real, love," she said, testing the waters. Hermione had reported her twin's original slip out in the corridors, then the self-correction a few moments later, but this was still more obscure, something no spy of the Death Eaters could possibly have learned—

"I'm still not sure it *is* real." Draco looked down at Meghan, across at Harry and Hermione, then back to Danger, his eyes holding just the right shades of fear, worry, relief. "Is it?"

*Very good. And now the final test.* "It's as real," Danger said, stroking her fingers across her right cheek, "as you are."

Draco lifted his own hand to his face, mimicking her motion, then reached out in tandem with her, his scent taking on a hint of—*warning? But not that he wants me to stop, more that he wants me to be careful—*

Danger held herself tightly in check, allowing her perceptions to open only for the instant that her fingers brushed against her Pack-son's cheek and his tapped against hers, completing the scent-touch on both sides.

It was long enough for her to understand.

"I love you, little Fox," she said, kissing her fingertips this time and stroking that kiss along his hair. "And I always will."

"I know." Draco smiled wistfully at her. "I always did."

*Oh, well done.* Drifting back while Harry began a conversation about Snape's latest misdeeds in Defense class, Danger let her hand casually float into Hermione's line of sight. A moment later, her fingers were seized.

**What is going on with him?** Hermione demanded, her mental tone, far shriller than usual, speaking to her confusion and fear. **First he wasn't himself, he was a terribly bad imitation, he wouldn't even let me touch him, and now all of a sudden he is himself again, he's getting everything right, but that might be just a stronger blind, a better disguise, and I don't know what to do, how much to tell him, how to treat him—**

**For now, treat him as himself, but tell him nothing at all,** Danger interrupted, opening what she'd seen both to Hermione's eyes and to Remus's. **Because he is himself, but he's not alone.**

**So there is someone else sharing his mind with him.** Hermione frowned, trying to make sense of the brief glimpse Danger had caught of the two sets of thoughts, the one currently controlling the body clear and cool and known, the other more chaotic and fractured, as though their originating

mind belonged to a child younger even than Bernie Pritchard, though the compulsion spells would force a certain amount of clarity upon them. **But who? And how? It doesn't make any sense—**

**Does it need to, Kitten?** Remus interrupted gently. **We know the most important thing now. The promise was true. Our Fox was protected. Lucius hasn't destroyed or broken him. And if tonight goes the way Albus thinks it will, he may have a chance to find out more of the details, and you and Harry between you will catch anything he misses...**

---

Draco was beginning to see why he'd been placed under so many careful layers of shielding spells, and why he'd needed to learn as much magic as possible, before he was permitted to embark on this mission. The allure of the Pack, especially once they were all gathered in one place, was almost tangible, a slow spiral of scent in the air around him that promised peace and calm and happiness if he would only let go, surrender, allow himself to become one with it, one with Fox, one with—

*No.* He pulled back sharply, reminding himself of his memories, the *true* memories of what his life had been like before his father's successful rescue. *That's a lie. All of it is a lie. They've hurt me as long as I can remember, and they'll do it again if I give them half a chance.*

But it was hard to keep that in mind, especially when Meghan was curled so warm and trusting against his side, when his ears were filled with the barking laughter of Sirius Black (who had ruffled his hair in a startlingly familiar gesture when he'd first come in), when the man's wife Aletha kept humming something he could half-hear, something that reminded him of a song Fox had sung to him once or twice, all about rainbows and stars and wishes—

*They're nothing to do with me anymore, and how could they be anything to do with Fox?* Firmly, he pulled his mind back to the task at hand. *It's just a weird coincidence that Meghan called me that. Or maybe they know there's someone related to me named that, and they were trying to scare me with it. Fox is my friend, so he's handling them for me, keeping me from getting caught in all their fancy mystical love-and-kisses gunk. Especially...*

He hardly dared to look towards the spot where the werewolf and his wife were sitting, for fear his disgust and horror would override Fox's control of the body and give him away on the spot. Granted, Remus Lupin bore very little resemblance to the monsters of his pre-Fox bedtime stories—if he liked to eat his meat extra bloody, there was no sign of that on his person or clothing, and his smile was as free of stained, pointed teeth as that of any wizard of Draco's acquaintance—but that didn't change what he was .

*And then there's Danger.* He glanced quickly towards the woman, then away again before she could catch him looking. *I can't help feeling like she saw me when she did that cheek-touch thing, but how could she have? Father set my shielding spells so well that the Dark Lord himself would have trouble seeing through them, not to mention some stupid jumped-up Muggle borrowing her husband's magic. I'm just nervous, on edge, because this part's going so well that I'm afraid something will go wrong next.*

But the only thing that would be likely to go wrong—he stole a look at his watch—would be his going overtime and making his father, and the other Death Eaters waiting for his signal, start to fret about him.

*And if I wait too long, Father might take my magic away again.*

Even Fox's current control of the body couldn't stop Draco from shivering at that one. Lucius had been forced to that expedient only once since his son had returned to his proper place, but that once had been enough to convince Draco not to disobey.

*Fox was pretty steamed at me for it too. What was it even about? Some stupid little thing—oh, that's right. I was in the library without his permission, poking at one of the walls. Why would I want to be in there anyway? I can't remember what I went in for, but I do know I haven't been back. That hurt, when he grabbed onto my hand and pulled my magic out of me like that. And even when I promised I'd be good, and he gave it back to me, it still stung to do anything magical for a day and a half afterwards...*

To one side of him, Harry yelped in comic dismay and punched his godfather in the shoulder in an attempt to recover his snatched glasses, as Aletha shook her head with a sigh. To the other, Hermione listened intently to something Remus was telling her, while holding onto Danger's hand. Beside him, Meghan snuggled closer, pulling his arm more tightly around her, as though nothing could be wrong with the world while he held her by his side.

*We need to get going,* Draco thought toward Fox, trying his best to make the words sound intense and grown-up rather than childish and whiny. *I'll get in trouble if I'm late.*

*I know.* Fox sounded...not sad, exactly, Draco decided after considering it. More resigned, as if he'd expected this and was only sad at how quickly it had come. *Let me make your excuses and get you alone, and then you can have the body back. But just fair warning—if you do get within range of Dumbledore...*

*Yes, I know.* Draco kept his mental voice level with an effort. *You won't help me.*

*More than that.* Fox's answering tone was dark. *I'll try to stop you. Just so we're clear.*

*Understood,* Draco sent back, and quickly closed himself off for a few moments of private thought, all the more welcome since he had no reason to want to watch Fox be disgustingly goopy with the Pack.

*He may try and stop me, but it's my body when all's said and done. Oh, he took over pretty smoothly a little while ago, but that was with my permission, because even the spell wasn't enough to make me act the way they were expecting. He won't be able to do that when I don't give permission, when I'm actively against it. That's just not possible.*

Opening himself back up a bit, he observed with bewildered admiration as Fox accepted an embrace from both Lupins without so much as a shudder, as he actually hugged them as tightly as

Draco sometimes wished he dared hug his own father, though he knew any such public demonstration of affection would be punished as befit a vulgar display by a young man of his breeding. Malfoys simply did not require such things, and that was all there was to it.

*Though I do like it, in the dreams, when Fox hugs me or holds me, when he picks me up. Even sometimes when he gives me a kiss on the cheek, and I always thought kissing was for girls...*

And a girl was kissing him now, he noted. Fox had lowered his body to one knee, and Meghan stretched herself upwards, to administer a kiss in the middle of his forehead. "Be well," she told him intently, gazing into his eyes. "And come back to us soon."

"I'll try." Fox returned the salute, addressing it to Meghan's cheek, then nodded to Harry and Hermione as they followed the Lupins and Sirius out of the kitchens. Aletha was waiting by the door, and smiled as she saw him looking her way.

"Come on, love," she said. "I know where you can have a little time to yourself."

*And a little is all it's going to be. Draco mentally hugged himself in glee, as Fox obediently went to the side of the tall, dark witch. Just long enough to change over who's in control here, and plant the first Portkey target where no one will see my father and his friends using it, and then it's time for me to prove I deserve to be called a Malfoy...*

---

Albus Dumbledore stroked a hand along the back of the gargoyle which guarded the stairway leading upward to the office occupied by the Head of Hogwarts. Helga Hufflepuff, he thought, might well have touched this same statue in this same place, on the night she walked out of the castle and into the Forest, never to return.

Turning away, he too began to walk, though his feet took him not only down but up as well, rambling aimlessly along corridors and past classrooms. At last he paused, leaning against a windowsill, looking out into the warm June night. The little alcove he had chosen was in one of Hogwarts's many isolated towers, away from statues and paintings.

*Perfect for what must happen here. The only eyes and ears will be the ones I intend.*

Idly, he drew his wand and tapped it once against the stones beside the window, then began to sketch a pretty drawing on the night air, a picture of three animals playing together, a dark-furred wolf sneaking up on a white fox, while a tricolored cat prepared to pounce on the wolf's back. A little more definition on the cat's eyes, but not too much, or it would seem to have been drinking certain highly regulated potions—

"*Expelliarmus*," hissed a boy's triumphant voice, and Dumbledore lost his grip on his wand, the force of the spell driving him into the stones he had softened only a moment before. He made sure to erase all traces of his own smile from his face before turning to face his attacker, moving slowly, as might an aged, injured man.

The fair-haired boy who stood before him with Dumbledore's wand resting in his off hand, pureblood pride written in his every line of body and face, was unmistakably the son of Lucius Malfoy. But deep within the gray eyes—or perhaps not so deep, for it was stirring even as Dumbledore looked for it—

"Hello, Draco," he said calmly, directing his words at both personages his Legilimency could sense within the young man before him. "I'm glad to see you well."

"Really?" Draco Malfoy scoffed, tucking the wand of elder wood inside his robes, his own hawthorn wand lowered to his side. "You're glad to see me? You shouldn't be. Don't you know what I'm here to do, old man? Can't you guess why I might have come here, here where I should have been all along?"

"I can guess what you believe. But why should I, when you wish to tell me?" Dumbledore spread his hands. "Please, continue."

"I'm here to *kill* you." The word seemed to bring Draco pleasure, as he lingered over it for a long, loving moment. "To tear down everything you stand for, and get my own back for everything your precious *Pack* ever did to me and mine. And there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"Without my wand, I would surely seem to be at your mercy." Dumbledore nodded once. "Proceed, then."

Draco frowned, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "What, just like that? You're not even going to try?"

"But perhaps I am trying, Draco." Dumbledore allowed his smile to return to his face, for the boy he was addressing would surely misinterpret it, and the other presences now witnessing this little interplay would just as surely understand it aright. "Perhaps I believe that you are not a killer. Certainly not without good cause."

"Good cause?" Draco sneered, and spat on the stones beside his feet. "You want good cause? Your friends killed my mother, dragged my father off to rot in prison, turned me into their servant boy—did their level best to wreck my life and keep me away from the one person who really cared for me for almost thirteen years—but it didn't last, old man. It couldn't. And now I'm here to bring you down, to get my revenge on the people who tried to destroy me and prove that I deserve to stand with my father at his Master's side. All with just two little words." He smirked and began to raise his wand into casting position. "Say good night, Headmaster."

Halfway to its target, Draco's arm locked into place, as though his joints had suddenly frozen. Draco stiffened, his eyes unfocusing, as though he looked within. "Fox?" he breathed aloud, incredulously. "But you can't—"

*I haven't, up until now.* The voice was silent, but as distinct to Dumbledore's Legilimency as the audible one was to his ears, and as well-known. *Because I didn't want to scare you, or take the chance of hurting you. But you kept pushing ahead, you wouldn't listen, and I can't let you do this,*

*Draco, especially not with my body—*

"Your body?" Draco blinked at his arm, still obstinately refusing to rise above a forty-five-degree angle. "You're out of your mind—"

"In fact, he is not," said Dumbledore, his heart aching for the confusion and fear he could see warring for place on the features of the young man before him. "For those same thirteen years you mentioned, there has been no one in existence by the name of Draco Malfoy. The body you are currently using has belonged instead to a young man whose name is Draco *Black*, after the mother who asked her cousin and his family to adopt her child and bring him up in love. Though he is more commonly known, by that same family and by his friends here at Hogwarts..." He inclined his head to the person he could see watching him from behind the gray eyes. "...as Fox."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 38: Know Thyself (Arc 7)

Draco stared open-mouthed at Professor Dumbledore, completely lost for words. What the older wizard had said was ridiculous, impossible, the stupidest thing he'd ever heard.

*How can there be no such person as Draco Malfoy? I'm Draco Malfoy, and I know I exist! He's losing his mind, or the Pack got to him and Confunded him, or—*

*Or he's telling you the truth.* Fox's voice echoed sadly inside his head, sounding, Draco realized with a shiver, almost precisely like his own clear tenor. His eyes refocused on Dumbledore's blue ones, calm and sad behind their half-moon lenses, without *his* intending them to do any such thing. *Sir*, Fox went on, now addressing Dumbledore, *is there any way you could—*

A quick jumble of images followed, incomprehensible to Draco, but Dumbledore nodded when the flurry subsided and turned his head to look at a spot a few feet from both him and Draco, the third corner of an equal-sided triangle. His fingers moved, sketching runes on the air, Draco realized, but he'd Disarmed Dumbledore himself, there should have been nothing magical the old man was able to do—

The light of the candles in their wall sconces began, impossibly, to shimmer and waver on the spot where Dumbledore had concentrated his attention, as though fog or heat were warping the air out of shape. Draco clenched his teeth as an upheaval went through his mind, something moving behind his eyes where no motion should be—

With a soundless explosion, a third person stood in the corridor between Dumbledore and Draco, his face and body formed from rippling candlelight. He was exactly Draco's height and could easily have been the same age, and his features, though lacking any color except that of the candle flames, would have caused anyone with working eyes to declare him some relation to both the Granger-Lupin family and to Draco himself. In his hand he held a wand, lines of force issuing from its tip and tangling around Draco's own wand arm, binding it in place.

"Thank you, sir," said Fox, bowing in Dumbledore's direction. "This should make things a little easier." He grimaced as he looked back towards Draco. "Not much, but then, nothing would."

"Agreed." Dumbledore leaned against the windowsill beside him, breathing deeply. "So, then, Draco. Ask whatever you wish, of either of us. If we can answer it, we will."

"Why should I?" Draco fought against his panic, reminded himself sharply that he'd known everything might not go perfectly, that he had to stay calm, keep thinking, not let unexpected problems trip him up. "You're liars, both of you, you lie as easily as you breathe, why should I ask you anything and expect you to tell me the truth?"

"When have I ever lied to you?" countered Fox. "Give me one example."

"One—" Draco nearly choked on the bald-faced nature of this. "You said you were a *relation* of mine!"

"And how am I not?" Fox grinned briefly. "You're Lucius Malfoy's son. So am I. By blood, at any rate, I don't care to acknowledge the relationship beyond that. You're Narcissa Black's son. So am I." His eyes warmed. "That one, I'm proud of."

"Oh, you're proud all right." Draco hunched his shoulders, glaring. "So proud that you go around making up to the people who *killed* her."

"Consider the source, Draco," said Dumbledore in a tone of mild reproof, cutting off Fox's more heated denial before it could go beyond a wordless growl. "Your father has told you that the Pack was responsible for the death of your mother. Do you have any other source for this claim?"

"Why should I?" Draco drew himself up, insulted. "My father would never lie to me!"

"No, he just ignores you unless he's got a use for you, hurts you when you didn't even know you were doing wrong, and throws you into dangerous situations without proper preparation," Fox countered. "Obviously a model daddy."

"And your family's so much better?" Draco snapped back.

"You saw them." Fox kept his eyes on Draco, his expression a paradox, soothing and challenging all at once. "You tell me."

Draco shifted back and forth on his feet, scowling. He knew what he *ought* to say, what he *wanted* to say, but somehow the words wouldn't form themselves on his tongue. Every time he tried, he kept remembering the strange pride he'd felt when Meghan cuddled trustingly against his side or Harry laughed at a joke he (or rather Fox) had cracked, the little bursts of warmth through his veins at the attention the adults had paid him, the ruffling of his hair, the humming of a song, the touch of fingers to cheek, even a simple smile. His father had embraced him on the day he'd first come home, and smiled on him when he did something well, but other than that—

"No," he said, shaking his head convulsively. "I'm not letting you do this to me. You're lying, you're both lying—you're *all* lying, you knew I'd be here tonight, you set this all up to try to trick me into coming back, into giving myself up again—"

"So the whole world's lying, except your daddy?" Fox scuffed one insubstantial foot against the stones of the floor. "Quite a bunch, we are. Amazing how we all got our stories straight without really needing to try, though."

Dumbledore gave him a quelling look, and Fox shut his mouth. "Tell me this, Draco," said the Headmaster, turning his attention back to the other real person present. "Clearly you know my reputation. Would I befriend people capable of such acts as you have claimed the Pack committed?"

"If you never knew about them, you might." Draco nodded, on firmer ground here. "And the Pack's smart. Smart enough to keep me locked up inside the house doing chores, never let me get out or talk to anybody who might help me, never let me learn anything, especially not magic—"

"How much is two and two?" Dumbledore interrupted calmly.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Four, but that's not—"

"Spell wand for me," the Headmaster overran his protest.

"W-A-N-D—all right, so I learned *some* things, but—"

"Name the guardian of the Gryffindor common room."

"The Fat Lady." Draco froze at the sound of the words emerging from his mouth. "But that doesn't count, the Pack are all Gryffindors—"

"What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?" Dumbledore continued inexorably.

"There is none, they're the same thing, but—"

"And the incantation for a Patronus Charm?"

"*Expecto patronum* ." Draco felt his arm contract as his wand tried to rise into a movement he had surely never learned on his own. Dumbledore nodded to Fox, and the lines of force surrounding Draco's wand disappeared. For an instant Draco considered going for the Killing Curse instead, but Fox had already proved he could stop him, and besides, he'd been curious about a Patronus for a long time, what it might be or look like—

"*Expecto patronum*, " he repeated, bringing his wand up through what his muscles insisted was the proper motion to accompany the words.

A fine, silvery mist sprayed from the end of his wand, then dissipated.

"Care for some help with that?" Fox asked. "No tricks." His eyes, the intense blue of a candle's center, lingered on Draco's. "I promise."

Draco glared for form's sake, but he had to admit Fox had a point. The other boy's promises meant something, or always had in the past.

*Though now that I know he's part of the Pack, how can I be sure they didn't send him to live in my head and try to lure me back to them? That would be just like them—*

But there his mind stalled, for the stories and images of the Pack lingering in his head, the ones he'd awakened in his own bed at Malfoy Manor remembering and dreamed about in terror every night until Fox had come to chase away his nightmares, were in every way the opposite of what he'd experienced for himself a few minutes before.

*And Fox never hurt me. He's been angry with me a few times, and he's stopping me from doing what I want right now, but he's never hurt me, and he's never lied to me.*

"All right," he said, lowering his wand. "What do you want to do?"

"Here, let me..." Fox came towards him, his movements half an ordinary walk, half a ghost's gliding step. "Merlin's boots, this feels weird. Okay, I'm going to come around behind you, just like—yes, that's it, and now—"

Draco swallowed as Fox's wand arm, outlined in shimmering fire, sank *into* his, overlapping it precisely, sending waves of hot and cold through his nerves. "On three," Fox said quietly, his voice echoing both inside and outside Draco's head. "And remember to think of something happy. One—two—three—"

The memory of the tune Aletha Black had hummed in the kitchens coincided within Draco's mind with his recollection of Fox singing the same song to him, after telling him a story about warriors and how they'd fought evil together. His arm and Fox's rose in unison, and two voices shouted the same words.

*"Expecto patronum! "*

The mist this time was much thicker, but seemed unsure what shape it should take, roiling and twisting within itself. Draco glared at it, lowering his wand. *Stop playing around*, he thought towards it irritably. *Turn into what protects me, and do it right now!*

With a final writhe, the mist split into two, one piece larger than the other. Both pieces coalesced with a rush into four-legged, point-eared creatures, each bounding towards Draco. The larger, clearly a wolf, passed him by to twine around the legs of Fox, who'd stepped back towards his original place. The smaller skidded to a halt at Draco's own feet and sat down, looking up at him with a panting, open-mouthed grin.

Draco stared down at it, feeling himself start to shake. Its ears were oversized, its paws likewise, its coat thicker than any he'd ever seen, but unmistakably his Patronus had taken on the form of—

"No," he whispered, snapping his wrist. The silvery fox managed to look hurt and disappointed in the last instant before it vanished. "No—that's not true, my father protects me—"

"Bang-up job he's doing, sending you off to become a murderer before you're even of age." Fox stroked the head of his wolf one final time, then swirled his wand around her, dissipating her into thin air. "And just in case you were wondering, my nickname? It's from this." Releasing his wand, which disappeared up his sleeve, he leaned forward to fall onto all fours, shrinking and twisting as he went, until the fiery twin of the Patronus Draco had just dismissed stood before him on the floorstones, his brushy tail waving idly back and forth behind him.

"Stop it!" Draco shouted, clenching his fists and restraining himself at the last second from stamping his foot. "Stop it, you're confusing me, it isn't *fair* —"

Dumbledore made an urgent motion in Fox's direction, and began to move his hands in patterns which tantalized Draco's eyes, containing seeds of meaning which fluttered frustratingly away from his understanding. Something about appearance, Draco thought, and surely that had been a reference to him? Fox, resuming his human form, replied in the same manner, a considering look beginning to creep over his face as his fingers shaped out *no, small, protect, help*—

"I said stop!" Now Draco did stamp his foot, not once but twice, despite the shock of pain that ran up his leg at both impacts. "Stop talking in front of me like you think I don't understand you! I'm not four years old!"

Fox swung around to meet his eyes. "Are you sure about that?" he inquired.

"Just because you like to make me that way in those dreams—" Draco began hotly.

"Whoa, back up the broom." Fox held out a hand. "I never made you anything. That first night we met, when I told you 'Cinderella' because you were scared of the storm? You were dreaming that before I ever got there, Draco, and you were four years old in the dream. I didn't change a thing."

"But..." Draco looked down at himself, confusion growing by the second. "I'm *not*."

"If I may?" said Dumbledore before Fox could speak. "Draco, you enjoy stories, it seems."

Draco shrugged. "They're all right."

"Will you listen to one now, and tell me if it makes sense?" Dumbledore's eyes were steady on his. "It may answer some of the questions we all share, and untangle us from this particular coil without undue harm to any."

After piecing this together, Draco nodded hesitantly. Surely listening couldn't do him any harm, and it might even distract Fox for long enough that he could get his shot off and run for it. His father and the others must be here by now, must be spreading out through Hogwarts and placing their Portkey targets, if he could only finish his own part of the mission, this night could still be a success—

"Once upon a time," Dumbledore began, "there was a young man who at the age of four underwent an immense and stunning change in his life. Now although this change was for the better, it was still a great shock, and it had effects upon him. At a level too deep for conscious thought, a piece of his personality, of his very soul, split off from the rest."

"Souls can split?" Draco asked in surprise. "I didn't know that."

"Many people do not," said Dumbledore gravely. "But as I was saying. A piece of this young man's soul split away from the rest—not half, nor even a quarter, but a much smaller piece than that. And the split-off portion of his soul, frightened of the new parts of his life, fled away into the recesses of his mind, where it walled itself off and remained in hiding, in a sort of limbo. It did not grow older with the rest of him, nor indeed was it aware of the passing of time, for it had

created a tiny world about itself where nothing ever changed. So far, does my story ring true?"

"I guess." Draco considered the thought of a little world all his own, one where he was in total control and no one could come in unless he allowed them, and found it far more appealing than he'd thought he would. *It would be like the dreams Fox makes for me, where we're the only two people in the world and that's all we need, where we can do whatever we want and no one hurts us or bothers us or makes us do things we don't want to...*

"But one day, great changes again befell this young man." Dumbledore glanced over at Fox, who acknowledged this with one lifted shoulder. "An unscrupulous man took him prisoner, and planned to force him to betray and hurt those he had learned to love. And to that end, this man wanted to torment his prisoner's mind and force him to believe untruths, to twist his memories until they appeared to be the opposite of what they truly were. To make him distrust everyone who had ever loved him, and love the man who wanted only to use him."

"That's bad." Draco considered the scenario for another moment. "That's *really* bad. Because then even if his family did come to rescue him, he wouldn't let them, because he'd think they were just trying to hurt him again."

"So he would." Dumbledore nodded. "But our unscrupulous villain had not accounted for one invisible player in the game. The young man's mother, who had loved him very dearly, dearly enough to make a great sacrifice for him."

"She died." Fox's hand rose to his chest, but dropped again before making contact. "She wrote a letter to her sister, explaining what she'd done and why, and then she took poison and she died. Not because she was afraid to face the consequences of what she'd done, but so that no one could ever say to her son, look, we rescued your mother from what was happening to her, you owe us."

"That's...wow." Still listening, Draco sat down on the floor, leaning an elbow against one crossed knee. "She was really brave."

"She was also clever." Dumbledore smiled. "Such a death left the protection of her great love to linger about her son, magically. And when our villain tried to twist the young man's mind, to make him believe lies in place of truth, his mother's love shielded him long enough that he could escape the spells, dive into the depths of his mind and create for himself a protected place. But in so doing—most inadvertently, I would assume—" He looked over at Fox, who seemed caught between anger and embarrassment.

"What?" Draco sat up straighter. "Did he find that other piece of him, the little one, the one who didn't grow up?"

"Yeah." Fox seemed fascinated by the tiles beside his feet. "Yeah, that's who he found. And who the spells found, half a second after him. He didn't even have a chance to really understand what he was seeing before the spells took effect—it was only afterwards that he realized what had happened, and he did his best to make it right, as much as he could."

"So..." Tracing patterns on the irregular stones of the wall, Draco tried to put the story together. "The grown-up mind ran away from the lie spells, but the little kid mind got caught by them, and started believing the lies?"

"More than that." Fox looked up, his face still caught in that strange expression which left Draco unsure if his relation were about to shout at him or beg his pardon. "The bigger kid, the one who'd grown up like he should have, he actually took over the little kid's place inside his mind, the little world he'd built to keep everything else out. Only he opened up a few channels to the surface, so he could see and hear what was going on. And what he saw and heard..." He winced. "His memories were still there, inside the mind," he said after a moment. "The imprints of them, the knowledge. So the spells could take those and twist them all around, make the bad things good and the good things bad, and give them to the little kid like true memories."

"Because he was hidden away inside his mind all those years, and never grew up like he should have, so he wouldn't have proper memories to get in the way." Draco rubbed a hand along his arm, trying to get the hairs on it to lie down again. "That's awful. Not the story, I mean, it's good for being a story, but if it was real, it'd be awful..."

The silence thickened around him until he looked up. "What?" he said defensively. "Wouldn't it be?"

Fox muttered something that sounded rather like "Clueless", then knelt down, bringing himself to Draco's level. "Yes," he said evenly. "It would be pretty awful if it were real." His eyes hardened. "Which it is."

"It is?" Draco started to get to his feet. "Why are you still standing around here, then? Why don't you go and help—"

He froze halfway upright as the implications finally sank in.

*He means—they're talking about—*

"No," he said, coming to his feet in a smooth rush. Across from him, Fox did the same, his movements like looking in a mirror. "No, you're wrong, that's not how it is—that can't be what's happening here, don't you think I'd know if—"

"You were really four years old, using someone else's body, and working with an implanted, completely backwards set of memories?" Fox shrugged. "Stranger things have happened. Granted, I can't think of any at the moment, but they have to have. Somewhere."

"Consider the facts, Draco," said Dumbledore softly. "Lucius Malfoy may take pride in you, but it is the pride of a man for a prized possession, not a beloved son. He desires your success not on your own behalf, not because it will make you happier and stronger and more free, but because it will bring glory and power and riches to him and to his name, and win him the approval of his Master. And in return for the affection you so strongly desire from him, he demands that you commit a terrible act, and tear apart your own soul in so doing."

"Stop it." Draco shook his head, backing away a step or two, feeling the battle begin within him, a harsh and impersonal force impelling him forward to complete the task he'd been given, his own fears and wishes crying out for him to run, run away, find a safe place, somewhere to hide from this nightmare—

"Whereas Fox, and his Pack through him, have been nothing but kind to you," Dumbledore went on, smiling at the other boy, who flushed, if a figure made of fire could be said to do such a thing. "He soothed your fears, helped you through your difficulties, freely gave you the love for which your father wants you to pay so high a price. And the only return he has ever asked is that you not use his body as the instrument of murder. Whom, on this evidence, would you say you ought to trust more?"

"I said stop!" Draco dug his hands into his hair, breathing hard and fast, fighting to get one clear thought through the clamoring voices in his head, the feeling that he was being pulled apart, torn to pieces, as he'd been torn once before, if the story was true—

*But it's not true.* He latched onto this as to a lifeline. *It can't be. I have the scar on my face from where the Pack put me under Hermione's blood-magic, they can't explain that one away—I'm a pureblood wizard, my own magic ought to have healed up anything that small a long time ago unless there were some other power preventing it—there it is, there's the proof, they're liars and my father's telling the truth, I knew it, I knew it—*

Fox groaned. "Lost him again," he said, his fiery wand coming into his hand with a shower of sparks. "Sorry, sir, I really thought we had it that time."

"Do not apologize for what is not your fault." Dumbledore's breathing was somewhat ragged, but his eyes, as he lifted his head to meet Draco's gaze, were clear. "I had not wanted to do this," he said. "But I fear it is now the only way. Forgive me, if you are able."

Draco opened his mouth to ask what he should be forgiving—

And then he was somewhere else, he was *someone* else—but no, he was still himself, his body felt as familiar as ever, even if his wrists were itching awfully, his chest felt oddly constricted, and his mouth tasted like someone had dared him to eat a handful of Bertie Bott's in which blood and dirty sock had figured prominently. It was only his mind that had changed, it was filled with clarity, decisiveness, the ability to shunt aside fear and *think*, none of which belonged to him, but all of which he could easily have believed did belong to Fox—

"Thank you again, my lord, for the help you have given me with this." The voice echoing through the darkness around him was his father's, a smooth veneer over roughness, but filled with a gloating glee Draco had seldom heard except when Lucius was exulting over the downfall of some enemy. "I could never have done it correctly without you."

"Why should I refuse my help in restoring to you what is yours, when you plan to place it immediately into my service?" replied the silken tones of Lord Voldemort, high and cool with the hint of hissing laughter which always seemed to be there. "Are the preparations finished?"



"Almost, my lord. One more spell to complete."

Draco started to sit up from where he was lying, to turn his head and look at his father, to ask what spells were being done, what his father planned to give the Dark Lord now, as was surely the right and proper thing to do—

*Don't bother*, Fox's voice whispered inside his ears. *You can't do any of that. You're tied up, blindfolded, gagged. Or I was, when it happened to me.*

*What? No!* Panicked, Draco tried to struggle against the bonds he could now feel with pitiless clarity, but his body seemed paralyzed, refusing to obey his frantic commands. *No, I won't let you tell me lies like this—I won't let you make me think this happened—it didn't, do you understand me, it wasn't like this! Let me go, let me go, let me GO—*

With a strangled yell, he tore himself free of the memory, *the lie*, and bolted away down the passage, no longer caring that he hadn't completed what he'd been sent to do, wanting only to get away, get away, find somewhere *safe*, somewhere that the terrible fear could never come, never follow him—

*Believe it or not, that's all I want too*, murmured Fox's voice, though the fiery figure was no longer anywhere to be seen. *I don't hate you, Draco. I want to help you.*

*Shut up*, Draco returned bitterly, shoving aside a tapestry and dodging into the secret passage behind it. *Why should I listen to you? What have you ever done for me besides try to confuse me, mess around with my head, shatter everything I wanted to believe in?*

*Oh, I don't know*, Fox drawled in a surprisingly good imitation of Lucius in an expansive mood. *Got you in here in the first place, perhaps, when by yourself you'd have been caught in that first little trap Harry laid for you, to say nothing of all the others? Spent time with you and coached you in magic, when your dear daddy never seemed to think it was worthwhile to do that for you, just flung books at you and expected you to figure it out on your own? Which, by the by, you weren't able to do because you're a pureblood and a Malfoy. You were tapping into my memories of six years' worth of classes and practice. So you're welcome for that as well.*

"Yes, well, if you'd never existed, *I* would have been the one taking those classes," Draco snarled aloud as he climbed out of the other end of the passage. Distant shouts seemed to indicate that something else was happening at Hogwarts tonight, but he wasn't interested in that. *"And I would have been able to do what my father wanted from me. So you're not welcome for that."*

*You really are a piece of work, aren't you.* Fox's tone somehow included the body language which would have gone with it had they still been face to face, slowly shaking head, folded arms, incredulous laugh, and all. *How do you know this night wouldn't have ended up exactly the same, or only a tiny bit different, even if there'd never been a Pack at all?*

Draco was preparing a furious salvo in response to this when he turned a corner and stopped dead.

He was no longer alone.

"Hello, Draco," said a girl's quiet voice, and Hermione Granger-Lupin stepped forward into the light, her hands hanging loose at her waist, open and empty. "I've been waiting for you."

*Well, well,* Fox murmured, freezing Draco's feet in place momentarily, overriding his first urge to turn and run the other way. *What do we have here? I believe it's known as a tiebreaker.*

*What are you talking about?* Draco yanked at Fox's control, but it refused to let him go. *She's going to grab me, put me back under her filthy magic, if you actually cared about me you'd help me get away from her—*

*But what if she's not?* Fox seemed to be taking care to make his voice slow, soothing, and against his will Draco found a little of his terror subsiding. Certainly Hermione hadn't moved since taking those few steps into the light. She was simply standing, watching him, with no wand in her hand, no vial of potion, nothing that could threaten him...

*She doesn't need things to threaten me,* he thought furiously towards Fox. *You know she doesn't! All she needs is to be herself, to have my blood running in her veins and hers in mine, and she can steal my magic, control me, force me to do whatever she wants—*

*Who told you that, Draco?* Fox interrupted, his tone turning a little sharper, more impatient. *Your father, wasn't it? And I think we should already have established that he's about the biggest liar since someone told Merlin there was no such thing as magic!*

*But—*

*The bond between you isn't one of control,* Fox overrode Draco's automatic objection. *It could have been, it was meant to be in the beginning, but it was set up the other way around. You were meant to be able to control her, to steal her magic. And that's because the Pack never put that bond on the two of you. Your father did.*

"He—no!" The words ripped out of Draco without his conscious consent. "He'd never—not my blood —"

*He did. Trust me on this one.* Fox chuckled, a bit sourly. *I was there, after all. But whether or not you believe me, this is the answer you've been looking for. The way we can know, know for sure, which of us is right. Which of us is real.*

"How?" Draco cast a suspicious glance at Hermione, still watching him quietly, her feet planted shoulder-width apart.

*Touch her. Just a little touch, your hand on hers. See what's in her mind, what she's thinking right now. And no, I'm not trying to get rid of you,* Fox snapped as Draco's thoughts went momentarily incoherent. *If you're right, if what you believe is true, if she tries to snatch you and control you and turn you into a slave, then you have my word that I will stop her, Draco. I don't want you to*

*get hurt, not by anyone, do you understand me? So if Neenie tries to hurt you, I'll stop her. Whatever it takes. Are you hearing me?*

"Yes." The word came out in a breathy whisper, as Draco clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to keep his terror from taking him over again. "But she *will*, I know she will—"

*And then you'll have my help to save you from her, and get you away from here, back to your dad. But if she doesn't.* Fox's voice took on a still more measured tone. *If she isn't interested in enslaving you. If instead she's happy to see you, she wants to hug you, she says she's been worried sick about you. What would that mean?*

"It would mean...that you're right." Slowly, Draco nodded. "That the Pack's good, and that you want to help me." He took a long breath, nerving himself up for the words. "Okay. I'll try it. But I'm not taking any chances. I want my wand out." A little smirk got through to his face, though the expression felt weaker than usual. "Just in case."

*That seems fair,* Fox agreed. *Move slow, make it nice and obvious what you're doing.*

"Got it." Draco reached into his pocket for his wand, withdrawing it slowly, between two fingers. Hermione tensed, but did not draw her own in response, instead beginning to smile, and for one instant Draco allowed himself to believe that possibly things weren't so bad after all, that maybe there could still be a happy ending, like in his favorite stories—

*"Expelliarmus!"* a boy shouted hoarsely from behind him.

The spell hit the center of Draco's back, tearing the wand from his hand, shoving him forward in a stumbling run. Hermione lunged and caught him just as he lost his balance, dropping to the ground with him in a controlled fall, her hand clasped around his.

**Draco, thank God you're all right,** her voice babbled in his mental ears. **Are you hurt? What's happened? I've been so worried—**

**Neenie!** Fox answered her, his tone sharp, urgent. **Neenie, don't say anything else, there's something—oh, God, look out!**

With no more warning than that, Draco felt his father's spell tighten around him again, shrinking down to fit perfectly against his skin, binding him as Fox had been bound before—

*It's true, everything Fox said, it's all true—I'm not really me at all, he ought to be me, I'm just a fragment, a memory, I'm nothing, and he's going to have everything, everything I ever wanted, unless I do something about it—*

He stood face to face with a perfect copy of himself, pale and pointed features distorted in fury, white-blond hair disordered from the passage here, silver eyes narrowed to take stock of his opponent, on the featureless gray plain where Fox had sometimes brought him in dreams.

"I don't want to be nothing," he said quietly. "I *won't* be nothing."

"You've never been nothing to me," Fox returned. "Draco, this isn't you, this is that magic I told you about once, the magic that could hurt you, make you do things—come on, fight against it, don't let it *do* this to you—"

"But what if I want to?" Draco felt his breath coming faster. "What if I want to let it do this? What if I want to destroy you, and turn *you* into nothing instead of me?"

"God, *listen* to yourself!" Fox shook his head. "That isn't you talking, that's Lucius! This is what he set up in case you started to see the truth, to make sure you never got free of him, not even inside your own head—"

"You lied to me!" Draco shouted. "You said you wouldn't, but you did! You kept me looking one way, talking all about trusting you and believing your bloody *Pack* would never hurt me, just so I'd never turn around and notice Harry Potter sneaking up behind me to Disarm me—"

Fox groaned. "So he overreacted a little—give the man a break! He'd only just got there, he saw you facing his sister with a wand in your hand, he did what he's been trained to do—"

Draco grinned, feeling the expression stretch his face, wide and mad. "So will I," he said, and lunged.

The frightened crying in the back of his mind grew fainter by the second as he grappled across the ground with Fox, the exultation of battle singing through him. He would defeat his enemy here, and then he would return to his body and destroy the enemies awaiting him there, and after that he would go forth and fulfill what he'd been expected to do from the beginning, for nothing would be present to stop him, not ever again...

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"What the hell?" Harry quickly shoved Draco's wand inside his robes and sprinted forward to pull his brother's limp form off Hermione. "Neenie, what just happened?"

"I don't know!" Hermione was still clutching Draco's hand, her eyes half-shut as she concentrated. "I heard him, Harry, I heard Fox, he was there, but he told me to look out, and then—" She snapped the fingers of her free hand. "He was gone. Just gone, like that. Pulled inward, along with whoever else was there with him, another *him*, almost..."

Harry swore under his breath and dropped down beside them. "Can we go after him?" he asked.

"It'll be dangerous," Hermione warned. "And not just to our bodies. Our minds, Harry, and our souls." She looked down at her twin's face. "But...he would for us."

"Yes, he would." Harry pulled off his cloak and wadded it up for a pillow. "But that doesn't mean we have to be stupid about it. We're going into enemy-held territory; it may be Fox's head, but it's been Draco Malfoy's mind, for the past month at least. And if Lucius was paranoid enough to put some kind of dead-man spell on him like this, just in case Fox ever recovered somehow—"

"Then he'll probably know it's been triggered," Hermione finished. "Which means we'll have to hurry."

"Not only that, but assume anything we say, unless we get to a safe spot—wherever Fox has been hiding, maybe, or back out of there to our bodies—assume Lucius can hear us." Harry laid his hand atop Hermione's and Draco's, roping them together loosely with a few coils from his wand. "Pride-sign should be okay as long as we don't use too much of it, though. He wouldn't have been interested in that."

"No, he wouldn't." Hermione swallowed, easing herself down to lie flat beside Draco. "All right. Are you ready?"

"Hold on." Harry mentally began the words that triggered his 'walking' state. "Go," he said as he slipped into the edges of sleep—he was drifting, floating, sinking through a sea of silver glass—

And then he was standing on an endless gray plain, Hermione's hand still entwined in his. In front of them, two identical young men were embroiled in a furious fight, rolling over and over in their mock-loving clutch, white-blond hair and pointed features appearing and disappearing as they grappled for place—

Both heads turned to face the incomers. One face lit up with hope, the other with dismay.

"Harry! Neenie!" one Draco gasped out, freeing his hand to reach towards them. "Help me!"

The other Draco growled and cuffed his opponent across the ear. "Get out of here!" he shouted towards them. "This isn't your fight!"

Hermione glanced at Harry. *Got it?* her fingers asked.

*Got it,* Harry signed back.

Without another word, they flung themselves at the battling pair.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 39: Flower and Fade (Arc 7)

Luna pressed her fists to her lips in delight as she watched the scene on the surface of her cauldron. Harry and Hermione had just torn apart the embattled pair of pale-blond boys; now Hermione was pinning down one of them with her own weight, the silver blade she'd drawn from its sheath at her waist pressed lightly against the side of her captive's jaw, while Harry hoisted the other one to his feet, an arm around his back to help him regain his balance.

"Good," she whispered, her voice echoing in the dark, empty room around her. "Good, very good, you've got it right, now *remember the prophecy ...*"

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Fox writhed, trying to get Neenie's attention, but she only bared her teeth at him and covered his mouth still more securely with her sleeve-shielded hand. "Stop that," she said, emphasizing her words with a slight pressure of something sharp against the side of his face. "We're not fooled."

*Yes, you are!* Fox shouted mentally, over the sound of Draco's noisy blubbering against Harry's shoulder. *You've got it wrong, damn it, you mixed us up, can't you tell that's not me—*

"I said *stop* ." Neenie twisted her wrist a little, bringing the shining silver dagger in her hand into Fox's line of sight, its pommel stone gleaming like Harry's eyes as he glanced their way. "Do you understand me?"

After one instant of utter stillness, Fox managed a fractional nod.

"Good." Neenie looked away from him. "Harry, do you remember that little bit of prophecy Luna gave us a while ago?" she said, the sound of her voice bringing both boys' faces towards her, Harry's neutral, Draco's tearful. "Those four lines she got while she was working on a project with me?"

"I...think so?" Harry frowned. "Was that 'Abhor the spell from last to first' or something?"

"'First to last', but yes." Neenie smiled warmly at Draco, who returned the expression shakily. "Don't you think it was probably meant for right now?"

Harry's lips moved as he dredged the quatrain out of his memory. "Seems like," he agreed when he was done. "We've done the third line already, the one about knowing a lie from truth." He thumped Draco gently on the back, then bestowed a glare on Fox. "So now for the rest of it. Breaking the spell, helping the ones who need help, all that sort of thing."

"We should probably be ready to run." Neenie looked around dubiously. "There'll be a final strike in case anyone breaks the spell, that's just the sort of thing *he* would think was clever...but are we going to be able to find any sort of safe place?" She turned her head slowly, scanning the horizon, and allowed her gaze to dip just for a moment as she looked past Fox.

Swiftly, Fox blinked twice at her, and cut his eyes to the right.

"We'll make one if we can't find it, it's nothing to worry about," said Harry breezily, turning away from Fox and Neenie to face Draco full on. "Got yourself under some pretty nasty magic, didn't you," he said, his tone still light. "Want me to get it off?"

"Please." Draco didn't quite clasp his hands under his chin, but his worshipful look came close to nauseating. "Thank you so much for this, I thought no one would ever be able to help me, but to have it be *you* —"

"Easy, now." Harry patted Draco's arm. "We're not out of the woods yet. This may hurt some, but it's got to be done. Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do." Draco bristled up, insulted. "Aren't you my brother?"

"Oh, I am." Harry grinned, taking firm hold of Draco's shoulders. "I am all of that. Neenie, ready?"

"Ready." Neenie's weight shifted on Fox's chest as she prepared herself to move quickly.

"Hey," Draco began, looking sideways at Fox, "but what about—"

Harry's hands tightened their grip.

Draco shrieked in terror as flames engulfed him, engulfed Harry, roaring around them as though they'd offended some ancient god, swirling first one way, then the other, almost but not quite masking the two figures at their heart—Harry stood unmoving, unchanging, as Draco shrank and twisted under his hands, screaming in pain and fear while streamers of the substance coating him melted and evaporated in the merciless heat of the fire Harry had summoned—from having the same general form as Harry, an inch or two taller but built on more slender lines, he was nearing the size of Meghan, then of a goblin, then of a house-elf—

"Now!" Harry shouted, the flames cutting off with the word, as he spun and flung the child he held towards Neenie, who had already pushed off and was bolting towards him in the direction Fox had indicated, arms open to receive. Passing her by, Harry skidded to a stop beside Fox and went to one knee, grabbing Fox's hands in his. "Some day, isn't it?" he remarked.

"You have—" Fox shoved himself upright in time with Harry's heave. "—*no* idea."

"Want to bet?" Harry steadied Fox for the first few steps, until he found his balance. "We got there about the time Dumbledore said he was trying."

"Huh. Guess you do have some idea, then."

The sons of the Pack sprinted after their sister and the little boy she carried in her arms as the world began to shake around them.

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Draco buried his face in the shoulder of the girl who held him tight (Neenie, he remembered, her name was Neenie, sometimes Hermione, but always Fox's twin) and tried to keep from crying, but so much had *happened*—first the magic that had tried to make him act like Fox, and then the magic that had made him try to *hurt* Fox, and now all the magic was gone, he was just himself, no mixed-up memories or spells trying to make him be seventeen when he wasn't, he hadn't ever been—

*And I'm never getting to grow up that far, either.* He risked a quick glance over Neenie's shoulder and stifled his whimper in her robes. Behind the running shapes of Fox and Harry, looming tall and terrible, shaking the ground underfoot and the sky overhead, was a towering wave of sickly green, half water, half magic, his *father's* magic—

*I hate him.* Draco's jaw set as he stared up at the evidence of what Lucius Malfoy really wanted and cared about, how much he treasured the son who'd returned to him after so long. When that wave broke, when it crested and fell, whatever it touched would be wiped out of existence, destroyed without a trace. *I hate, hate, hate him, I'll never help him again, but I won't have a chance to do anything to stop him either, we'll never get wherever we're going in time—*

Then he saw them.

Well behind Harry and Fox, very near the wave's leading edge, two other figures stood, their backs to him and their hands upraised above their heads. He couldn't tell for sure if they were men or women, not from this far away, but both of them had long cascades of hair spilling down their backs, one sleek and fiery red, the other a mass of brown curls, very like the one bouncing beside him with Neenie's every stride—

"Here!" called a voice, and Draco's head snapped around in shock. He *knew* that voice, he'd heard it before—

The woman standing beside a carved stone opening in what could equally have been a cliff or a wall smiled at him. She was slim and straight and pale, with soft blonde hair spilling across the shoulders of her robes, and her heart was in her blue eyes as she steadied Neenie's hasty climb to the opening, which Draco could now see led to a slickly polished tunnel.

"I love you," the woman said softly to Draco just before Neenie pushed off, and one cool finger stroked against his cheek. He started to reach back towards her, but a turn in the tunnel hid her from sight.

"I love you, too," he whispered back nonetheless. "Mother."

---

Harry nearly lost his stride as he saw who was waiting for them at their objective.

*I knew Fox's mum helped keep him safe, but I wasn't expecting this!*

Narcissa Black halted her son with one hand and waved Harry into the tunnel with the other. "He

must close it," she said. "It is his place." Her voice reverberated slightly in his ears, as befit her status as—*whatever the hell you call a dead person who's come back to help you. Revenant, maybe? That seems to fit...*

Shoving aside his wonderings to be revisited if they should live through the next thirty seconds, Harry accepted Narcissa's hand up to the tunnel opening (her skin was cool, he noted, but not utterly frigid) and pushed off, glancing behind to be sure Fox was following.

Only his training—*once you're out, you don't go back*—kept him from clawing at the walls of the tunnel, trying to stop himself, to be sure he'd seen what he thought he had.

*There was someone else back there. Two someone elses. Holding off that wave, keeping it from falling on us before we could get here. I only got a second's worth of a look at them, but—*

An echoing boom told him Fox was safely inside, and had sealed the tunnel behind him. Harry exhaled a long breath of relief. "One of them was a witch with red hair," he whispered on the end of it. "And the other one looked like Danger, only she wasn't."

*Maybe Narcissa knew she wasn't going to be able to handle it on her own, and called in reinforcements...*

The tunnel twisted, turned, and dumped out into a small, comfortable bedroom, with Neenie seated on the edge of the bed, a shivering four-year-old cradled in her left arm. Harry rolled and came back up on his feet with his wand in his hand, nodding to his sister, who had her own out as well, trained on the tunnel's exit.

*Fox will forgive us for being careful if it's really him back there, but no amount of forgiveness will make up for dead if it's not.*

But the person who swung his slender frame lithely out of the hole in the wood-paneled wall, then closed it with a murmured, "Thank you, Mother", had an oval-triangular face set with lively blue eyes, topped by waves of sandy brown hair, and the little boy Hermione was holding made a noise caught somewhere between joy and consternation at his appearance. "Fox," he said, his child's treble beginning to waver. "Fox, I'm sorry —"

"Ah-ah." Fox crossed the space between them with three brisk steps and plucked little Draco out of his twin's hold. "Remember what Professor Dumbledore said. No apologizing for things that aren't your fault."

"But—"

"No buts." Fox sat down beside Neenie, so close that their hips brushed together, swinging Draco easily into his lap. Harry opted to sit on the floor, leaning his weight against the bottom corner of the bed. "It was the magic on you that made you do all those things, Lucius's magic, and now it's gone—you don't want to hurt me anymore, do you? Hit me or choke me or pull out your wand and hex me?"

Draco shook his head hard.

"And there you are." Fox smiled comfortingly at his smaller self. "The magic's off. You're just you now, Draco, and that's all you'll have to be, ever again."

"You promise?"

"I promise." Fox stroked his fingers along his face and touched them to Draco's cheek. "Pack honor. Speaking of which—" He nodded towards Hermione. "I know you've heard their names already, but it's politest to do it anyway. This is my twin sister, Neenie, and down on the floor over there is my brother Harry, though sometimes we call him Wolf."

"Just don't call me late for dinner." Harry extended his hand towards the little boy, who looked at it dubiously for a moment before closing his own around it. "Pleased to meet you, Draco."

"You too." Draco smiled briefly, then turned to accept Hermione's handshake as well. "Fox tells me lots of stories about—" An enormous yawn interrupted his words.

"Little sleepy?" said Fox sympathetically. "It's been quite a day. Sleep's probably the best thing for you." Shifting the little boy's weight until it rested against his upper arm, he turned to scoot more fully onto the bed, his voice taking on a lulling, almost hypnotic quality. "Nothing to worry about now, Draco. We're here. We'll take good care of you, we won't leave you alone, there's nothing to be afraid of anymore..."

Draco smiled sleepily up at his older self as his silver eyes drifted shut. "Love you, Fox," he murmured, just before his body went limp in utter relaxation.

"Love you too, kiddo." Fox leaned over to lay Draco gently down against the pillows of the bed, covering him with a soft green-and-gray throw Hermione handed him and bending down to drop a kiss against the cap of blond hair. "Sweet dreams."

Catching the ragged edges to his brother's scent, Harry got quietly to his feet, moving outward from the bed. Hermione did likewise on her twin's other side as Fox gestured a shimmering curtain, like a Privacy Spell, around the sleeping boy. "There," he said, looking down at the image of what he'd once been. "He should be all right for a while..."

As he turned to take a step away from the edge of the bed, his knees buckled under him.

Hermione darted in for the catch, Harry half a second behind her, easing his siblings down to the floor, holding them tight as Fox clung to Neenie, shaking in every limb. "Merlin's bloody mother and the ship she rode in on," Harry's brother choked out. "That should *not* have worked."

"Are you complaining?" Harry grunted as Fox's back-jabbed elbow hit him in the ribs. "Now I know it's you, you always did fight like a girl—"

"Which girl?" Fox could have been either laughing or crying through his words. Judging by his scent, Harry thought it was most likely both. "Because if you mean one of the Pack-mums, or our

Warrior ladies, that's not an insult, it's a compliment."

"Suit yourself." Harry caught Hermione's eye over Fox's head. "Can you get me out of here?" he mouthed at her. "And back in, once I'm finished?"

His sister nodded, her eyes thanking him silently for his understanding.

"Back in a minute, Fox," Harry said, shoving his brother affectionately on the shoulder, then standing up. "I'm just going to duck out and make sure nobody spots us where we are in the real world."

"Good plan." Fox grinned, though the expression looked a bit sickly. "Getting captured again would suck a whole nestful of dragon eggs."

"You said it," Harry agreed, and wrapped a quick blanket of tame fire around the twins before stepping through the gleaming portal Hermione gestured into being in the air before him.

*And I also know that Fox needs to fall apart for a minute or two. He opened his physical eyes, noting with relief that no one had found them in their tiny expanse of corridor, though some of the shouting was closer than it had been. He probably needs a lot longer than that, but that's what he's going to allow himself right now, and he won't even do that if I'm there watching. If it's just him and Neenie, he won't have to pretend, he can let go for a little while—the only thing better would be if Danger or Letha were here, but they're not, so we'll have to make do...*

Thoughts of Letha reminded him of a technique she'd once discovered out of sheer ignorance that it shouldn't be possible, and had later taught to her cubs as a curiosity. A few moments later, a smoky mist was flowing from the tip of Harry's wand and forming itself into illusory blocks of stone across the entrance to the corridor, giving the impression of an unbroken wall.

"There," said Harry in satisfaction, finishing his work with a quick snap of the wrist. "It won't fool anyone who knows the castle, but the Death Eaters don't, or haven't for a long time."

*It also wouldn't fool anyone who had some kind of locating spell on Fox. Which Lucius probably still does. He glanced back to where the twins lay side by side on the stone floor, hands still entwined within their rope cocoon. But I might be able to do something about that...*

He laid his hand against the nearest wall and concentrated, as he had done a few weeks before when he, Neville, Meghan, and Letha had worked together, the rest of the Pack and Pride joining their magic in support, to rouse Hogwarts's inherent magic just enough that the castle would understand its approval was desired for Professor McGonagall as the next occupant of the Head's office.

*Hi*, he said mentally as he felt the magic waking again, a little quicker than it had been on the previous occasion. *Remember me?*

Hogwarts did, and liked what it remembered. This one was like another one, long-gone but

lovingly preserved in the castle's memories.

*Good to know. Listen, there's some people here tonight who shouldn't be. Especially this one. Harry brought up his memories of Lucius Malfoy, of the man's arrogant walk, his sneering face with its single scar below the left eye, his carefully enunciated pureblood diction. If he tries to find us here, can you confuse him for a while? Send him down the wrong corridors, make stairways come out where he doesn't expect them, that sort of thing?*

Hogwarts would be glad to do that thing for this one.

*Thanks. Appreciate it.*

Withdrawing his consciousness, Harry caught his breath—what passed for Hogwarts's 'mind' thought at a different rate than human beings did, and the need to match paces could drain a lot of energy—then walked slowly back towards his siblings. Sitting down beside them, he opened the front of Hermione's robes.

A certain person deserved to get his treasures back.

---

Fox leaned against the side of the bed, letting the last of his current bout of shakes work their way out of him. Neenie's arms were strong and warm around him as they had been so many times, as he'd thought they never would be again, and the fire Harry had left behind was helping to fight his after-combat chills. "You scared me half to death, you know," he muttered. "Making me think you'd got it wrong like that."

"We thought there might be magic to watch out for something like that." Neenie squeezed him a little tighter. "And we weren't wrong, were we?"

"No, you were every bit right." Fox spent a moment or two just breathing, drawing himself down to calm, as he had done in his room at Malfoy Manor when his personal nightmare began. It seemed fitting to do the same on this, the night when it finally ended—

A sudden weight around his neck made him look down in surprise. Then he felt a grin erupt on his face which boded to be so wide that his cheek muscles would hurt for hours afterwards, as within his mind small blossoms of knowledge began to flower. *Horcruxes, yes, and Hallows, and Sanctuary, and the year—it's all here, everything I left behind, it's back again, I'm me again, every bit of me, right at the end of things—*

"Good for Harry." Neenie reached around and tugged gently at Fox's pendant chain, hanging in its proper place at last. "And I suppose the next thing will be—yes, there it is," she finished as Fox reached down to his side and came up with his green-stoned dagger, its hilt still holding a faint warmth. "Did you see—"

"That you were using this, instead of your blue one, to threaten me?" Fox sheathed his dagger again, feeling his grin, impossibly, widen. "Why do you think I stopped fighting you?"

"Oh, good!" Neenie laughed. "I'd *hoped* that's why it was, but I couldn't be sure—"

"Dream or no dream, you were going to have a hard time doing anything to me with a blade that goes straight through things when I tell it to." Fox pushed himself a little further upright, now that his arms were able to do so once more. "But Neenie—*how did you know?* "

His twin frowned at him. "How could we not?" she asked. "When you gave us such perfect clues?"

"Clues? I didn't give you any clues! I wanted you to get away from there, to not get involved in this mess..." Fox stopped. "And that's it, right there, isn't it?"

"That's one of them." Neenie laid her head momentarily against his shoulder. "You *love* us, Fox. You've proved that, over and over. And when you love people, you don't want them to get into trouble for you. The only problem is, when you love people, most often they love you back."

"And then they want to get into that same trouble, if only to get you out of it." Fox chuckled, and noted gratefully that the sound was almost back to normal. "All right, so what else was there?"

Before Neenie could answer, a flash of light signaled the reappearance of Harry, who dropped down beside them with ease, crossing his legs. "What else was there what?" he asked.

"How did we know which of them was which," Hermione elaborated, waving her hand between Fox and the sleeping child on the bed.

"Oh, that." Harry snorted a laugh. "Fox, the day you beg for help in a fair fight is the day I get down on my knees in front of Voldemort—and how do you get fairer than fighting yourself?"

"And even if it hadn't been fair, if he'd had some kind of advantage that meant you really needed the help, that's not how you would have asked for it," Neenie finished. "You would have made a joke out of it, said something like, 'Whenever you're done staring, I could use some help here.'"

Fox rested his head against the mattress behind him. "Some people," he remarked to the empty air, "might get a little testy about having their siblings know them this well." His gaze came down to rest on Harry and Hermione again. "But then some people would still be wrapped up in Lucius's damn dirty magic instead of sitting here free with said siblings." He glanced behind him. "And one little bitty complication."

"Yes, what are you going to do with him?" Neenie turned to look at Draco, curled into a ball under his throw, one lock of hair falling across his closed eyes. "He can't exactly stay here..."

"Why not? It's where he was before all this started. I just improved on it." Fox flattened a bit of the carpet under his palm. "Besides," he said without looking up. "Unless I've been reading the calendar wrong, it isn't going to be a problem for very long."

"Yes, and *that* is not something I'm just going to *allow* ," Neenie began heatedly.

Harry made a small noise, cutting her off and bringing Fox's head up. His brother, his alpha, was

regarding him closely, starting to nod. "You know something," he said. "You've worked something out about tonight. Haven't you?"

"Worked something out?" Hermione's voice went momentarily shrill. "You mean—"

"I mean," Fox broke in, turning to face her, hoping she would read in his eyes his need for her to stay calm, to keep him calm in turn, "that I think I understand something the Ravenclaws told me once. They said that Luna's vision—that gravestone, and the person she meets there, and the things they say to one another—is a moment when two very different paths cross. That either path could lead to that point, so they can't tell for sure which one we're going to take. But tonight's the jumping-off point for both those paths. The moment of balance." He felt his smile turn wistful. "I've had a lot of time to think about it, this past month or so."

"And where did your thoughts take you?" Harry asked, his tone more strongly resembling Moony's professorial prompting than he probably realized.

"They took me to...readiness." Fox held out his hands, palms up. "Being ready and willing to walk down either one of those paths, to flower or to fade, whichever one comes to me. I have to believe that I've been told as much as I have, and *only* as much as I have, for a reason. If I expect one resolution over the other—if I even *hope* for one over the other—then somehow that tips the scales so that everything goes wrong." One hand sank to his knee, the other went up to head height. "So I have to be totally open if I want to win this. Completely ready for either way it could fall out."

"Including that you may well die tonight." Neenie sighed between her teeth. "I don't like it, Fox. I understand it, but I don't like it."

"I'm not too thrilled by it either. But." Fox extended his hand towards her, and after a moment she closed her own around it. "Whatever happens, Lucius won't be able to hurt you any longer. Not after I get done with him."

"What are you going to do?" Neenie asked, cradling his hand in hers.

"Something he did to me once already, or to the little one. Though he fixed it afterwards, and I'm not going to." Fox glanced back at Draco again. "I'm going to steal his magic. Tear it out of him by the roots."

Neenie's eyes widened. Harry whistled soft and low. "Permanently?" he asked.

"No, it grows back. Takes about six months, but it does. But he'll be basically a Squib most of that time, and you *know* how well that'll go over with His Dark Lordliness." Fox nodded at Neenie's soft, satisfied exhalation. "Means he probably won't go home right off, he'll lurk around us for a while to see if he can nick a few things to help him out, since we have some Muggles and Squibs on our team already. Plus it hurts like bloody blue blazes, which is not a negative from my point of view."

"Nor mine." Harry leaned back on his hands. "So even if he walks away tonight, instead of you, he'll be down his magic, which gives Luna a nice easy shot at him when the vision happens. And if he doesn't—if you're the one who walks away instead..." He looked around the room. "You know, this is a decent place, but it could stand to be a bit nicer. Especially if your mini-me, or whatever you want to call him, is going to spend a while in here."

"Why don't we go with little brother?" Neenie suggested. "You do have the same parents, just like you told him earlier. And speaking of which, out beside the entrance to this place, was that really —"

"My mum?" Fox nodded. "She didn't come alone, either. You might not have seen them, you were in a bit of a hurry, but right behind us, holding that wave off—"

"I saw them." Harry touched his chest, over where his pendants hung. "My mum. And yours, Neenie. Your born mum. Rose."

"My—" Hermione blinked, taken aback. "But she was a Muggle! How can she have—"

"Does that matter?" Fox asked quietly. "She loved you."

"I know, but..." Neenie sighed. "And now I feel awful, because she *did* love me, I know she did, and so did my father, but I don't miss them, because I never knew them. I was too young, just like you were, Harry, I only have stories and pictures, Moony and Danger are who I think of when I think about parents, and Padfoot and Letha right behind that—"

"And that's the way they would have wanted it," Harry said in a tone of certainty. "Because they did love you, Neenie, and that means they would want you to be happy with the Pack-parents, instead of still theirs but miserable because they weren't around." His eyes went momentarily distant. "Trust me. I know."

"That's right, you would." Neenie sketched an archway in the air with her free hand. "Because you saw your born parents, at the Department of Mysteries. James and Lily..." She laughed suddenly. "How funny!"

"What?" both boys asked in unison.

"Our mums!" Neenie pointed at the three of them, one at a time. "Rose, Lily, Narcissa! How did I never see that before?"

"Too busy living?" Fox suggested.

For some reason, this struck everyone as exquisitely amusing. Before long, three Pack-cubs lay flat on the floor, little gurgles of laughter rising and falling as each of them tried, and failed, to sit up once more.

"That ceiling really is a bit of a mess," said Neenie conversationally after several minutes had gone by. "And we should do something with the outdoors, if he's going to be here for a while. He's



an active boy, he should have some room to run."

"I can do that, the outdoors bit." Fox achieved upright status on his fifth try. "We've put together *how many forested dreamworlds by now?*"

"I don't keep count. They all look alike to me anyway." Harry rolled onto his hands and knees, shook his head like Wolf might, and shoved from there to his feet. "What do you want me doing?"

"Fix the fireplace," said Fox promptly, pointing at it. "Smokes something awful, I never could get it to draw properly. Which probably explains the ceiling."

"This I can do." Harry trotted over to it and poked his head inside to peer up into the chimney, suppressing a sneeze with one hand.

"And I..." Neenie glanced around until she spotted the leather chair Fox had crafted for himself, in front of a desk with several Muggle-style television screens set in the wall above it. "I'll sit over here for just a bit. If I may."

"My room is your room." Fox swept her a grand bow. "Got something special in mind?"

"Yes, actually. But I have to see if it will work." Neenie seated herself in the chair and waved two fingers in a circle, shutting herself off behind a Privacy Spell of her own.

"All right, then," Fox murmured, turning to what would, in Malfoy Manor, have been the door onto the balcony, but here had led nowhere at all, until now. "Let's see what we can do with this..."

---

Luna sat back, satisfied, as her love and his siblings embarked on their work. A quick check of her watch showed her fifteen minutes until midnight, when it would become 5 June.

*And then I'll know. Then I'll finally know...*

The picture on the surface of the Imprimatus Potion flared up once and went dark. Luna looked sidelong at it.

*Or maybe I won't.*

"Who's there?" she said, standing up and turning in a slow circle. "Someone did that, and I know it wasn't me..."

A faint glimmer of light caught her eye. She turned to face it, and sighed. "I should have known," she said, extracting a letter addressed to Draco Black from beneath an empty flask. "What do you want now? I've been very patient with you, but—"

*But you can't see this, no more than anyone else can,* whispered the faintest of voices within her mind, too quiet even to tell if it was male or female. *Didn't you hear him? The only way to get the*

*outcome we want from this night is to be totally open to everything—*

"Including letting Lucius kill him?" Luna curled her lip. "Revenge might be satisfying, but it won't give me back my Fox."

*Neither will your watching tonight, Luna. It will make things worse, not better.* The voice, hushed though it was, sounded utterly convinced. *I can't force you not to, but if you ever trusted me, you won't.*

Luna turned the letter over and over in her hands, watching the gentle glow within the parchment fade away.

Then she tucked it into her pocket, extinguished the candles with her wand, and slipped out of the toilet, making sure to lock the door behind her.

---

When the boys reconvened a short while later, Fox streaked with tree sap, Harry sooty but satisfied, Neenie was just straightening up from where she'd been tucking something into bed beside little Draco. "What do you think?" she said, smiling.

"Of—" Harry began, coming around the bed. Then he stopped short. "Wait, is that—"

Fox exhaled a soft breath of wonder as he caught a glimpse. "That's perfect, Neenie. Just perfect. It was the one thing I was worried about, I promised him he wouldn't be alone, and now he won't be—but how did you do it?"

"Oh, everyone's got a piece of themselves that never grew up." Neenie flexed her fingers, contemplating her work. "I just had to find mine, and ask if she wanted to come out and play with a nice boy who needed a friend."

Cuddled up beside Draco, nose pillowed on her paws, a tricolored kitten twitched her tail in her sleep.

"So I guess we're almost done," Neenie said absently, looking around the room. "He should be very happy in here...for however long he'll have it..."

Her lips quivered, and she whirled, catching Fox in her arms with a sob. "I love you so much," she whispered. "It's not *fair*, we've only had this tiny little last bit of time together, and now..."

"I know." Fox held her close to him, stroking her hair, soothing both of them at once with the motion. "But I'm not going far this time, Neenie. No matter what happens, we'll see each other again. You know that."

"Doesn't stop it from hurting." Harry's voice was rough. "Or us from wishing it didn't have to be this way."

"Agreed." Fox freed one arm to add Harry to the embrace. "But we had those few minutes in the kitchen with the whole Pack, and now this with just us. It matters, you know. It really does. Because this way..." He had to stop and swallow, but his voice, when it returned, was strong. "This way, if I die, I die on my feet. As myself. Standing tall, protecting the people I love." He sighed. "Tell everyone...well, you know."

"That you love them." Neenie lifted her head to look up at her twin. "That you'll always be watching out for them. And not to do anything you wouldn't do."

"Which doesn't put all that many limits on us, mind," Harry added.

The three shared one final, tight embrace. Then Fox released his brother and sister, stepping back from them. "You'd better go," he said. "We all should. It's nearly midnight."

"Excuse me!" Neenie tossed her hair over one shoulder. "Are you implying that I'm an ugly stepsister?"

"Not touching that one." Fox held up his hands in surrender. "Not touching that one with a ten-foot wand."

"Eleven-foot?" suggested Harry.

Laughing, the three figures disappeared from the dreamworld they had made for the last piece of Draco Malfoy within the mind of Draco Black, and awakened in their corridor at Hogwarts still smiling. Harry loosed the coils of rope which had bound their hands together, and they all sat up, watching one another closely in the candlelight.

"You might need this," Harry said after a few breaths of silence, extracting a wand from inside his robes. "Sorry about Disarming you, I wasn't sure who was in control."

"It's fine. Worked out in the end, didn't it? And no, I won't need it." Fox waved the offer away. "Give it to Neenie if you like. To remember me by."

"Why not?" Harry handed the wand over as requested. "How're you going to get his magic out of him without it?"

"It's not a wanded spell. Skin-to-skin, like our twin-bond." Fox extended one hand. "All I have to do is touch him."

"And how do you plan to get him close enough to do that, if you can't defend yourself?" Neenie inquired, running the wand through her fingers.

Fox hissed between his teeth. "I *knew* it was too easy."

"Maybe it still can be." Harry was looking at the branch of candles mounted on the wall. "Got anything in your pockets you don't mind losing?"

"Let me find out." Fox began to rummage, coming up with a few loose coins, a bit of fluff which Harry shook his head at, and then—

"Another one?" said Hermione in surprise as her twin withdrew a second wand from an upper pocket. "Where did you get it?"

"You know, as crazy as this night has been, I'm not really sure." Fox shrugged and tossed the wand over to Harry. "Guess that one's yours, then. And—ah-ha." A large piece of crumpled parchment made its appearance. "This do?"

"Perfect." Harry slid away the wand in the same pocket where he'd put the first one and extended his hand over the parchment. "Just give me a second here..."

A few moments later, Fox pocketed the parchment ball with care. "Thanks," he said. "That'll even things up quite a bit."

"You'd have thought of something else. I know you." Harry got to his feet, swirling his own wand towards the illusory stone to dissipate it. "Break a leg," he said, helping Hermione up in her turn. "Preferably his."

"I may do that." Fox grinned. "You two take care."

Neenie held up her hand and flexed thumb, ring finger, middle finger in turn, *I love you* in visible Pride-sign. Fox stroked his fingers down his cheek, kissed them, and blew across them in her direction.

Then Harry Potter and Hermione Granger-Lupin slipped away from the small corridor where they had fought for their brother's life, leaving him there alone.

A few turns away, Harry signaled for Hermione to hold on a moment, and laid his hand against the wall. *You can let that one find his way now*, he told the castle. *The other one is ready.*

A soft rumble shook his bones in answer.

"What was that?" Hermione asked, looking around worriedly. "Is everything—Pearl!"

Harry turned swiftly to see his younger sister at the end of the corridor, her shoulders very stiff. "What's wrong, Meghan?" he asked, starting towards her.

"I'm glad I found you." Meghan tried to smile, but her lips didn't seem to want to curve upwards. "I need your help."

"With what?" Harry reached her side and took her hand. "What's happened?"

"Mama Letha sent me..." Meghan swallowed hard. "...to find the Headmistress."

Harry shut his eyes for a moment, fighting his dual urges to curse and cry. It wouldn't help. It

never did.

"She's most likely in her office," said Hermione out of the darkness, her voice thick but unwavering. "We can try there first."

"That sounds like a good plan." Harry opened his eyes and managed a smile for Meghan, who produced a small, wavering one in return. "And if she's not, her great-grandmother can have the paintings check around for her..."

---

Lucius Malfoy paused at the bottom of a set of stairs, breathing deeply. The scent of the air around him had changed. No longer was he following his own increasingly stale tracks in circles. Instead

*My son. At last.*

*He is alone now, but very recently he was not. And—oh, how interesting. Smoke and flame wound about his scent, as though he has them ready for me...*

Drawing his wand, he began to stalk cautiously through the corridors, not bothering to call out. The thorough destruction of the magic he and his Master had so carefully laid on his ungrateful child had told him how useless such an act would be.

"That's right, Father," a cool voice murmured from no particular direction, "come and find me. This is where it ends. Only one of us will walk away this time."

"Indeed," Lucius replied in similarly quiet tones, straining all his senses to find where his son was speaking from. "And I fully intend that one to be me."

"That might be. And then, it might not." Draco laughed softly. "Either way, you'll never hurt my family again. I won't let you."

"Won't you?" Lucius paused beside a corner, smiling to himself. "And how will you accomplish this feat—when you are *dead*?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Draco countered with another laugh. "If you ask me nicely, maybe I'll tell—"

Lucius stepped into the open, the incantation ready on his lips, his wand coming down to casting position.

Draco whirled to face him, the ball of parchment in his hand igniting, his arm coming back to throw.

---

Twelve golden necklaces chilled ever so slightly about their owners' necks. The glow of the

carvings upon them was faint and fitful, so much so that most members of the Pack and Pride did not even bother to draw their pendants from their robes.

The death they reported had hardly been an unexpected one.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 40: Tonight (Arc 7)

Evanie Pettigrew's final blast of red dye from her potion piece hit the paper target, with its outline of a human figure in robes, dead center. Her audience, a pair of nearly-grown elflets named Brekky and Levvy, applauded with excitement.

"Miss Evanie gets better every day!" Brekky said admiringly, bouncing in place on the bed until his sister got firm hold of one of his ears. "Ow, ow, OW—"

"It's all right, Levvy," Evanie said, smiling as she disarmed her piece and set it down on the table. "Let him be excited."

"I is begging your pardon, Miss Evanie, but it is not being all right anywhere but here." Levvy released her brother, but gave him a stern look, causing him to cross his arms and pout. "We is being eighteen in another month, and our papa's master is expecting one of us to be coming to his home and learning our duties there. And he is *not* expecting his new house-elf to be bouncy, and noisy, and, and..."

"A person?" Evanie sighed, sitting down heavily and beginning to disassemble her piece for cleaning. "And let me guess, you won't see each other again after that? Or only for a few minutes, if one of you can finish your chores early and slip away, and if your masters haven't given you outright orders to stay home?"

The elflets shrugged in unison. "House-elves are being used to it, Miss Evanie," said Levvy. "House-elves are there to make their masters' lives easier."

"That shouldn't mean that house-elves have to lose everything they want or care about," Evanie began, but froze at the rattle of the door, her hand going out automatically to one of the potion cartridges she'd removed from her piece in favor of dye for target practice. Brekky and Levvy tumbled off the bed, darting into the shadows. One of Levvy's long fingers made a whisking gesture in Evanie's direction, and she managed not to jump or gasp in shock as the curve of her belly visibly flattened.

*I can still feel my baby, she's perfectly safe, but if someone's coming in here who shouldn't be, there's no reason to give them more ideas than we have to...*

Then she heard the tuneless whistle of the person undoing the spells on the door, and relaxed. "It's all right," she whispered to the elflets, standing up with a small grunt of effort. "It's Peter. You two had better get back to the kitchens with your mother—what he doesn't know can't hurt you."

Levvy muffled a giggle in her hands and Disapparated with a muffled crack. Brekky took a moment to undo his sister's cloaking magic, and to grin at Evanie. "Brekky will find a way to see his sister," he said with great assurance. "Brekky is a clever elf. And someday..." He glanced to one side, then to the other. "Someday, Brekky and Levvy will be *free* elves too."



"I hope so." Evanie smiled. "Maybe one of you could come to live with us, then."

Brekky nodded hard, then vanished. Evanie stepped back a pace or two, out of the direct line of sight of the door, scooping up the yellow potion cartridge along the way. Just because her husband was letting himself in, it didn't necessarily follow that he was alone.

*Though if someone was forcing him to do that, I doubt I'd be able to fight them all off...*

But her precautions were unnecessary this time, as Peter opened the door and stepped inside under his own power, shutting it quickly behind himself and circling his wand twice at it to reset the protective spells. Evanie exhaled a small sigh of relief and set the cartridge on the table as she came over to kiss him and hang up his cloak. "How are things?" she asked, noting the odd expression on his face, a mixture of uncertainty and amusement. "What's happening?"

"No one's quite sure. Which I have to believe is good news for us." Peter flexed the fingers of his fleshly hand, wincing as his knuckles cracked. "The team from Hogwarts reported back. Everything went very smoothly placing the Portkey targets, right up until one of the pairs realized they were being followed by a teacher and a student, and decided the smartest thing to do, of *course*, was to shoot off a random spell in their direction." He rolled his eyes. "Because everyone knows Hogwarts teachers are chosen for their incompetence and slowness to react."

"Was anyone hurt?" Evanie sat down in her place again, her hands taking up the comforting routine of cleaning her potion piece without intervention from her mind. "Or don't you know?"

"Judging by the frantic nature of the bragging, I'm going to say no." Peter went to the tea tray and tapped his wand twice against it. "Midnight snack for two, please, with tea," he said clearly to it, and leaned against the shelf on which it rested, watching Evanie. "Though some of what they're claiming could be true—I'm certainly in no position to judge. What I do know is who didn't come back with the rest of the team." His smile turned wicked, until Evanie had no trouble imagining him as Wormtail the Marauder. "And that would be the Malfoys, father and son. Lucius apparently told the others to take the Portkey back without him, that something had happened to Draco which he needed to *handle* ..."

Evanie giggled, thinking of her own experiences with the most likely candidates for the 'something' which had befallen the younger Malfoy. "They took him back, didn't they?" she said, shaking the last few drops of water from her empty dye cartridge and setting it aside to dry while she reloaded her piece with the potion cartridges. "The Pack, I mean. They broke whatever spells Lucius put on Draco, and took him as their own again."

"I certainly hope so." Peter nodded in satisfaction as the snack he'd requested materialized on the tray. "And if they were also able to use him to arrange for mischief to Lucius...well, more power to them. Though what they've already done has its own form of appeal." Setting the tray down on the table as Evanie re-holstered her piece, he took his own seat, smiling reminiscently. "Lucius Malfoy, two-timing Phoebe and Diana ..."

"Doing what?" Evanie poured a bit of tea into Peter's cup, approved of the color, and continued

filling it. "I hadn't thought he had even one girlfriend, let alone two—"

"You mean I've never told you this story?" Peter accepted his cup and grinned at Evanie's headshake. "You'll like it. I know I've told you how James Potter used to come up with all sorts of silly ways to talk about what happened to Remus on the full moons. His 'furry little problem' and things like that. Well, Sirius used to counter that with bits and pieces of ancient myths he'd had to learn growing up as a pureblood, the names of moon goddesses, Artemis and Phoebe and Diana and Selene, and claim they were all Remus's girlfriends, that whenever he wasn't around, he was sneaking out to go and visit one or another of them ..."

"I do like that." Evanie set down the teapot from filling her own cup and opened the covered basket. "Mm, muffins." She held it out so that Peter could take one, then chose another for herself. "Selene," she said thoughtfully, breaking the muffin in half. "Annette Selene." She looked over at Peter, who was watching her closely. "To take something painful from each of our pasts, and make it good again."

"I only hope we can." Peter set his muffin on his saucer and reached across to take Evanie's hand. "Not all stories end happily, you know."

"This one's happy now." Evanie squeezed his fingers gently. "And for tonight, that's enough."

---

Danger opened the swinging doors and stepped into the hospital wing, eyes and nose both reporting that she was the first member of the Pack to arrive.

*Not counting the one who's already here, of course...*

Poppy Pomfrey stepped out from behind the screened-off bed in the corner, coming to meet her. "It happened quietly," she reported in an undertone, "just a few moments ago, now—but you'd know that already."

"I do, but not much else." Danger glanced at the screen. "It doesn't seem possible, does it? And I know thinking that way will only slow us down from what has to be done now, that we need to be looking to the future, but..."

"But we're only human, after all." Poppy pressed Danger's hand gently. "Is everything else all right out there? I'd heard shouting, and some of the paintings were reporting people dueling in the hallways—"

"We had Death Eaters in the castle." Danger raised her free hand to calm Poppy's shock. "*But*, we knew at all times where they were, where they were going, and what they wanted. And they must have had orders not to engage us too much, even if they were seen. You'll have a few scrapes and bruises to treat, a wrenched knee and a case of reversed joints, but on the whole it looks as though they'd finished what they came here to do before they saw any of the people who'd been following them."

"At which point they'd rather run than fight," Poppy finished. "Which is all the better for us. What in Merlin's name did they want here, though? Were they trying to kidnap students?"

"Not exactly," Danger temporized. "It's complicated. We've stopped them, though."

*Except for the one who's still here, her traitorous mind whispered. The one who's facing your little Fox, somewhere in this castle, and who might already have killed him for all you know—since Fox, of any of the cubs, would be the one to remember to tell his pendants not to report his death, and bring us running to get hurt or killed ourselves...*

Firmly she removed her thoughts from this path. It would do her no good to circle around a dead-end scent. There was work for her, both as simply herself and as alpha female of the Pack, here and now.

*First, secure this den—which is to say, the castle. Make sure all enemies are gone, that the boundaries are strong, and that the alpha of our allied pack is firmly in command. Then, move to the next den—Headquarters—and the next pack—the Order—and do it all over again...*

The doors swung wide, revealing a thin-lipped Minerva, Remus and Sirius flanking her, Harry behind them in tail-guard position.

*And here we go.*

Aletha emerged from behind the screen, nodding to Poppy as they passed and meeting Minerva's eyes levelly. "I'm sorry not to have called you earlier," she said. "A great deal happened very quickly, and I thought it was more important to keep my attention here, rather than split it by trying to send messages."

"Of course." Minerva waved this away. "Aletha, what *happened*? I hadn't thought things would progress nearly so quickly—was it something about tonight?"

"It..." Aletha hesitated, her eyes half-shut as she sorted through her thoughts. "It was, and it wasn't," she said finally. "He'd taxed himself a great deal by doing complicated wandless magic, as well as a prolonged bout of Legilimency, also wandlessly. But I could have helped him recover, drawn enough strength from the castle to sustain him." Now she looked up again. "If he'd allowed it."

Minerva nodded slowly. "He always does think of the larger picture," she said, then winced. "Did. He *did* think. And what he thought in this case was that we would all be better off with that amount of power devoted to the defense of his students and his school, rather than propping up the failing faculties of one foolish old wizard." Unexpectedly, she smiled. "How close have I come?"

"Almost word for word." Aletha looked past Minerva, at Harry, who couldn't seem to decide whether he was angry or horrified. "He also said to tell everyone that he'd made his own choices about tonight, and they weren't to blame themselves," she said with delicate emphasis. "Not for anything."

"Yes, sir," Harry muttered, then colored. "I mean—"

"I know what you mean." Aletha sent a quick scent-kiss in Harry's direction before turning back to Minerva, all business. "At your service, Headmistress."

"Good, because we will certainly need a Potions professor for next year." Minerva seated herself on the end of one of the beds, the rest of the Pack-adults finding places around the room. "As for the rest of you..." She glanced back. "Harry," she said, bringing that young man's head up. "I know Albus had you and your Pride working on something quite specific. Can you tell me anything about it?"

"We're making progress, Headmistress," Harry said immediately. "There's one more thing we need to find, but we have a list of places to look already."

"Excellent." Minerva drew her wand to conjure ink, quill, and parchment. "I will instruct your teachers to overlook reasonable absences in service of that necessity, so long as you don't abuse the privilege."

Harry's eyes widened. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Thank me by not getting yourselves killed when you should have been in school," Minerva returned tartly, making a notation on her scroll, and looked back at the Pack-adults. "As for the rest of you—would you accept positions on the faculty, if they were offered?"

Remus raised a tentative finger. Minerva waved a hand at him. "We will find some way to circumvent that absurd dictate from the Ministry, or simply lie to them outright if we must," she said. "You are one of the very few people I trust without reservation, and I know that you will teach these students to defend themselves as well and as fully as lies within your power. As Albus would have wished." She took a single, shuddering breath. "As I now wish, in his stead."

"Then, yes." Remus bowed to her. "I would be honored, and very happy, to return here as a teacher. Perhaps..." He glanced back at Sirius.

"There we go." Sirius tossed and caught his wand once. "Have my name on the slot, and I'll take any classes where there'd be kids who'd blab to their parents or some such, but you do the rest, Moony." He paused. "Just to check, we are talking about Defense, here, right?"

**No, we're talking about Herbology, Remus said sardonically. Pomona was nibbled to death by bowtruckles and you haven't heard about it yet.**

**Damn you, Remus! Danger fought to keep her face straight. Sirius is I looking at me , you know! And isn't it just a little morbid to be making that sort of joke right now?**

**Love, if I don't laugh, I'll cry. And we none of us have time for tears tonight.**

**Too true.** Danger sighed. **Far, far too true.**

"And you, Danger," said Minerva, turning to look at her. "I assume you would feel most comfortable in your old place as Charity's adjunct?"

"Yes, if she'll have me back. Which I think she will, since we suited well enough a few years ago." Danger wrapped a bit of her robe's hem around her fingers. "Not that I expect a high sign-up rate for Muggle Studies, with the way the war is going now."

"All the better." Minerva smiled. "You will have an unquestionable reason for being here, and an equally unquestionable amount of free time with which to circulate among the students."

"And keep an eye on them, as only a mother can do." Danger nodded. "Fair enough."

Harry's stillness finally registered with her as profoundly unnatural, of the variety she tagged after a moment as confused. She fluttered her fingers at him, catching his eye. *What's wrong, cub of mine?* she signed to him.

*What happened to Snape?* Harry signed back, or so Danger assumed his hand slicked across his hair and his down-the-nose look of distaste was meant to signal. *He came to Letha's office and said goodbye, but I didn't think—*

*He came to the rescue of some of the Death Eaters who weren't doing so well against Hestia Jones.* Danger winked. *Spread the word through the DA that we're not best pleased with him, if you would.*

*Glad to.* Harry's expression cleared. *So he left with them?*

*He did. I fully expect we'll be hearing from him within the week, through one conduit or another.* And that, Danger added with an emphatic glare, *is not for sharing.*

Harry's small, weary sigh conveyed as much annoyance as a full-on eyeroll could have done. *Yes, Mummy.*

Danger conjured a small, hot burst of flame under one of Harry's ears, startling him almost off the bed. *Behave yourself. As much as that's possible.*

Remus turned around to glance at his Pack-son just in time to avert Harry's first response to this. *We should check in on Fox,* he signed instead, glancing downwards as though he could see through the floor. *I know we weren't supposed to interfere, but there's been time for whatever was going to happen by now...*

*Someone's already on their way,* Remus broke in, motioning Harry to settle. *We'll have news shortly. Now, ears open, hands still.* He bestowed his most quelling look on the younger wizard. *And if you give me a "Yes, Daddy" or anything like it, you cheeky little brat...*

Harry snapped to seated attention.

*Good.* Remus turned back around. "So sorry, Minerva," he said smoothly, just in time to forestall

the Headmistress's question. "You were saying?"

Behind Remus's back, Harry's hands swiftly shaped two signs before darting back into his lap.

*Yes, Daddy.*

Danger kept her mouth shut, her face straight, and her end of the bond placid.

Remus wasn't the only member of the Pack who laughed so he wouldn't cry.

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Elsewhere, in a suite of rooms which strongly resembled the ones traditionally used by the Transfiguration professor at Hogwarts, an auburn-haired wizard seated himself in a comfortable chair and smiled at his companion, who was perched on the windowsill.

"And now," he said quietly, "we wait."

One hand smoothed a section of the air, revealing two images of darkened, stone-walled corridors. Along one, a young witch and wizard walked hand in hand, talking in quiet, worried tones; along the other, a witch crept cautiously, alone, her wand at the ready.

The watcher smiled fondly and sat back. Much remained to happen still tonight, and he intended to see it all.

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"You're sure about this?" Neville said one more time as he and Meghan stopped outside Professor Black's office.

Meghan sighed theatrically. "I *told* you, Mama Letha and Madam Pomfrey were already talking about using a drop or two of Calming Potion in everyone's pumpkin juice tomorrow as a possibility. And we're not the ones who're going to decide whether or not it should be used. I just want them to have it ready, if they do decide to use it, or if the Headmistress..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "That feels so *wrong* to say. And will she still teach Transfiguration as well? Professor Dumbledore never taught anything, he was too busy being Headmaster..."

"I don't know where we'd find another teacher at this point in the year, though." Neville shrugged. "Perhaps they'll just let those classes go, since O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s are already over and regular finals are about to start, if we still have them. I feel terrible for Ginny and Luna, having to take their O.W.L.s while all of this was going on around them."

"Ginny said it helped, though," Meghan pointed out. "Because she could get herself to concentrate on studying and forget everything else that was happening around her, all the worst parts of the war, and Draco being gone, and finding the real-world places that match the ones we got on the map, from..." She placed her fingers in the sign for *Horcrux*. "And searching them carefully enough that we're sure each one isn't right before we move on."

"And Luna..." Neville smiled a little. "Luna is Luna, and I don't even try to think like she does. Mum's been helping her dad with his security, you know, just in case the Death Eaters tried anything against him, because of Draco."

"I don't think they're that smart." Meghan scowled. "I wish they weren't smart enough to do *anything* right. Then maybe Professor Dumbledore would still be alive and we wouldn't be waiting to hear what Hermione says about what's down in the corridors where she and Harry left Fox—and I wish they hadn't done that!" She pounded a little fist against the office door. "His fight or not, they shouldn't have left him alone—"

Her second pound made the door creak slightly on its hinges.

Neville snatched her back with one hand and pulled his potion piece with the other. "It's not latched," he whispered.

Meghan's eyes went very wide. "But she always—and I saw her—"

Without further words, she drew her own piece, taking her place on the other side of the door. Neville placed his free hand on one of the panels, mouthing clearly, *Three, two, one—*

He shoved the door open wide, and they both aimed their pieces' muzzles at the office beyond.

An instant later, they were recoiling, coughing. Neville pulled a bit of his robes over his mouth, but the fumes still beat at his eyes, until Meghan laid her hand on his arm and the tears subsided. Quickly, he swapped piece for wand and cast a Bubble-Head Charm, first on himself, then on her.

"Shields," he said loudly, motioning to the corridor. Meghan nodded, and they hurried three paces out from the office door and cast the strongest Air-Tight Shield Charms they could, anchoring them in the stone all around, imprisoning the cloud of potion fumes which was now billowing outward in thick coils.

Neville thought it would be a safe bet, even with his notoriously bad luck at games of chance, that someone had broken into Professor Black's office while she was away.

*But there's something strange about the door...*

He stepped closer, peering at it, then ran a quick diagnostic spell his father had taught him. His ears registered Meghan's urgent chatter into her Zippo, no doubt reporting the burglary to her parents, but his attention was all on the results the spell was giving him.

"They're on their way," Meghan said, raising her voice enough to be heard through their two bubbles of clean air, as she snapped her Zippo shut. "Dadfoot says not to touch anything, we could mess it up, and I know you know that already, but he said to tell you anyway, it's just procedure."

"I haven't, touched anything, I mean. But come look at this." Neville performed the spell again, running his wand along the edges of the doorframe. "Do you see what I see?"

"I...don't see anything," Meghan said hesitantly. "Just the usual magic, that's on all the Hogwarts doors. Magic to stop anyone from coming in who doesn't have the password, or can't answer the question, or whatever the door is set for—"

"Yes, exactly," Neville broke in. "The magic's still there. Still strong. There aren't any ragged bits, no rough edges, no places where it's missing. Which means—"

"Which means, whoever came in didn't do it by breaking the magic on the door." Meghan ran her fingers along the reminder-sentence her mother had scribed on the wall. "There's plenty of things broken, all her samples and her ingredients and everything, but that isn't one of them. So either they're so good at tickling locking spells that they got in without leaving any traces, or they're so smart that they could completely reset the spell as they were leaving, or—"

"Or whoever was in Professor Black's office," Neville finished, "either knew or guessed her password."

They looked at each other in silence, neither wanting to say the name that filled both minds.

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Breathing shallowly through her mouth, Hermione slipped from shadow to shadow, not knowing what she expected to find, but sure that she could no more go back without looking than she could fly without her broom. She'd done her duty, helped Harry and Ginny and Ron deliver the sobering knowledge to the DA—*Dumbledore's Army, we were once, and will be still, in his memory*—but this was for her. This, she had to do alone.

*He said there might be another way.* She clung to that, remembering Fox's calm as he'd held her close, as he'd met her eyes and smiled at her for what she refused to believe was the last time. *Another interpretation, another possibility. The grave could be a ruse, "Lucius" could be him, everything could still come out all right from tonight—*

She had just time to register an acrid tang at the back of her mouth before her limbs stiffened.

*The Body-Bind—but I didn't hear a spell, or feel one—*

Hands caught her shoulders just before what would have been a painful impact. She strained her eyes, trying to see who was lowering her to the floor, though her nose was already reporting the scents of musk, of blood, of triumph—

"Can't you recognize my face?" asked a soft, gloating tenor, the most refined of pureblood accents casting an imperfect veneer of smoothness over an underlying rasp. "Is it hard to see? You did choose rather a dark hallway for your approach. Let me shed some light on the situation."

A tall, slender form in tailored robes moved limpingly to the end of the hallway, plucked a candelabra from the wall with one long-fingered hand, and turned back to face her.

"There," said Lucius Malfoy, smirking as Hermione's breath choked off audibly. "Isn't that better?"



Calm yourself, girl," he added impatiently. "I don't mean to hurt you. Not this time." He extended one hand and regarded it. "Your dear little *twin* has put paid to my ability to do any such thing, for the present." He laughed deep in his throat. "Not that I haven't returned the favor in full. But let me start from the beginning, and give you the fullest story possible, for you to take back to your dear *Pack* ..."

---

"A break-in that's not a break-in." Sirius swept his wand around the office, but he already knew what he would find. Neville's first analysis had been the correct one—whoever had ransacked Aletha's office, overturned her furniture, and smashed the vast majority of her samples and ingredients onto the carpet, had done so without disrupting the charms which kept the doors of office and supply cupboard locked. "Sure is a mess, though."

"My money's gone." Aletha looked up from one of her desk drawers. "Two hundred pounds, Muggle, and fifty Galleons, magical. Sirius, what would...anyone," she finished lamely, avoiding a certain name as Sirius had been doing himself, "want with Muggle money around here? I only kept it because when I was Mare, I wasn't ever sure I was staying through the end of the day, and then afterwards, when my memories joined back up, because you never know what might happen..."

"Suppose somebody else feels that way tonight." Sirius grumbled under his breath. "...better hope I never catch up with him," he finished a bit louder. "There won't even be enough left to bury..."

---

"I suppose I should apologize for not leaving you much to bury," Lucius said, setting down the candles beside Hermione and seating himself on the floor with a wince. "But that would require me to be sorry for what passed between us, and given what your loving brother had intended to happen tonight..." He reached very carefully into his pocket and extracted, between two fingers, a silver dagger, its hilt muffled in several layers of knit fabric. "I hardly need to tell you, little Kitten, what would become of a werewolf stabbed by such as this." A careless flick of his hand, and the dagger clattered to the stones between them. "You know it all too well, from experience."

Part of Hermione screamed in rage, another part sobbed in grief, while Neenie the cat keened for the loss of her littermate. The rest of her swept all those parts aside ruthlessly and concentrated on listening. Lucius Malfoy in a talkative, expansive mood was not an informational boon to be regarded lightly.

*Even if we have paid far, far too high a price for it.*

"So, from the beginning." Lucius leaned back against the wall. "You were with him, I believe, very close to the end, and muddled my footsteps until you were finished with whatever you had been doing. Until he was alone, and prepared for me. Quite nasty preparations, I might add. Burning a man's wand out of his hand, tearing his magic from him, then, when he is entirely helpless, stabbing him with a substance known to be horribly fatal to those of his persuasion?" He clicked his tongue. "Hardly characteristic of the image your little *Pack* likes to portray of itself. Though,

of course, I've known the truth for years." His eyes hardened. "Ever since your dear *Danger* decided to take her revenge on me."

With a wrench, Hermione regained the use of her voice. "She didn't know," she croaked, and cheered inwardly as Lucius jumped to hear her speak. "None of us knew—"

"Yes, yes, I know the story you tell the world." Lucius waved a hand grandly. "She had no idea she could transmit lycanthropy via her bite, none at all—she bit me only so her dear *mate* would not need to bear the guilt, and they discovered with horror, a month too late to change it, that they had done what they intended *not* to do. Tell me the Heir of Slytherin lies buried in Godric's Hollow and I might believe you, girl, but that?" He shook his head, his curtain of silver hair swaying. "Never. Now, to return to my tale."

Though she growled under her breath at this maligning of her parents, Hermione kept listening. She had to know.

*I have to know everything.*

"We came upon one another in an open stretch of corridor," Lucius said meditatively. "Not unlike this one, in fact. Picture it, if you can. The father at one end, his wand ready to cast; the son at the other, fire igniting in his hand..." He passed a fingertip through one of the candle flames. "Quite a poetic image, I'm sure, if one were not a part of it. Perhaps I can find someone with artistic talent who might be interested in rendering it for me..."

Hermione snarled aloud, her body tensing for an attack.

"Merlin's wand, what a wildcat." Lucius reached into his pocket and uncorked a small vial, setting it in front of Hermione's face. "And I do see why your little DA has never placed this potion into more prevalent use. 'Short-lasting effects', indeed. Thankfully the antidote lasts longer. Though I suppose your emotions could be playing a role in how quickly you shook off your initial dosing. Now." He wagged a finger at her chidingly. "Lie quietly and listen to your father, little girl. You may learn something."

The bitter fumes of the potion flooded Hermione's nose and throat, making her want to cough, but her limbs had stiffened again, returning to the fully-locked position. For an instant she considered trying to break free, using Harry's method, but in the next breath decided against it. Lucius was watching her too closely, and would surely notice before she could complete the sequence.

"I was able to contain Draco's little fireball, which rendered him momentarily weaponless," Lucius said softly, leaning forward to lock his eyes with hers. "He thrust it into his pocket and leaped at me before I could cast another spell, and I felt his mind, his soul, making violent inroads upon my own, endeavoring to tear my magic from me. Naturally I defended myself, which placed us in constant mental and spiritual contact for..." He sighed. "I daresay it was only a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. And in that eternity, such things I saw, such wonderful, horrible things..."

Hermione's heart faltered in her chest. *Fox had his memories back before we left him, he knew everything we've done, all about the Horcruxes—but he would have died before he'd let Lucius see that, this can't mean—*

"No need to smell so stricken, my dear." Lucius chuckled. "I use the terms as *I* would use them, not as you would. By 'wonderful' I mean how bizarrely attractive my son found your perverted, unnatural lifestyle, and by 'horrible' I mean that lifestyle itself, what glimpses I caught of it within his memories." He shuddered once. "Living in one another's laps, always joking and playing pranks, never a moment of privacy or dignity to be found. Charming fireplaces to howl like dogs or blenders to explode, being chased onto bookcases for imagined slights, tumbling over one another in pursuit of bits of raw meat, cheering on fools who sculpt ice with Muggle bludgeons..."

He paused, suddenly looking thoughtful. "Though I must admit that touching Draco's mind has given me one piece of insight I never had before," he said slowly. "I believe that I now understand what attraction he found in his music. Perhaps I will even take up one of the instruments he so loved, in memory of him." He shook off his mood. "Though of course, I will have little time for practice until this war is finished. And I am being shockingly rude to you, my dear, leaving you in such an uncomfortable position while I maunder on. My apologies." His hand pressed against his heart as he inclined his head and shoulders forward.

*You can take your apologies and—* Hermione choked off the words before she could complete the sentence. Even mentally swearing at the man she was now sure had killed her brother didn't trump finding out what, exactly, had happened.

"As I have said already, we battled, Draco and I. He to take my magic from me, I to stop him doing so." Lucius's brows drew in. Clearly he had no liking for this part of the story. "And, as you may have guessed from my use of this unsatisfactory little stopgap..." He tapped his finger against the vial of potion. "Draco was victorious in his aim. I am, at the moment..." His lips worked, as though the word tasted as awful as the potion smelled. "A Squib."

*But then...* Hermione stared at Lucius, trying to understand. *If he beat you, if he took your magic, then how...*

"If only he had not been so foolish, or so careless." Lucius turned his eyes upon the candles once more. "If only he had thrown his weapon aside, rather than trying to save it for later use." He shook his head, slowly, sadly. "My own containing magic upon the fire superseded whatever had been keeping it from harming him to that point, you see. But when Draco snatched my magic from me, all active spells which had come from my wand were broken in that moment." He gazed for a moment into the flames, as though seeing it all again. "I can give you and yours this consolation," he said quietly. "It was quick. He had time to scream only once."

*I'll show you quick, if we ever meet on the battlefield.* Hermione felt the words forming within her mind like the imprints of a solemn vow. *Your ghost will have to linger long enough to find out who killed you, for I will give you no chance to see me coming while you are alive...*

"And so, pretty Kitten, I take my leave for tonight." Lucius stroked her hair once, corked and

pocketed the vial of potion, and got to his feet, smiling down at her. "Do be careful, through these next few months, not to get yourself killed. You are, after all, my only heir, and I may have need of you when this war is over. Though I shall surely choose a bloodline far superior to that of Weasley for your husband." He shuddered delicately. "Ginger Malfoys. The mind boggles."

He took two steps in the direction from which Hermione had come, then paused. "When the potion wears off," he said, looking back at her. "Take the second turning on your right and walk to the end of the corridor. You will find what you are looking for there." A smirk twisted his features. "Do take the candles with you, though. I would hate for you to soil your shoes with ashes."

With a slight, mocking bow, Lucius Malfoy disappeared around the corner, the hem of his black robes and the ends of his white hair the last thing Hermione saw of him.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 41: Forgiveness and Permission (Arc 7)

Ginny paused with her hand on the doorknob. The scents from beyond the closed door were as good as shouting "GO AWAY" at anyone with a sense of smell like her own, but with Harry, "GO AWAY" half the time meant "I'm miserable and need help but I can't let anyone know that."

*Especially on a day like this.*

She opened the door and stepped inside.

The desks and chairs inside the unused classroom were shrouded in white cloths, making them look oddly ghostlike. The dark shape of a messy-haired young wizard, his hands thrust into the pockets of his robes, stood motionless against the breaking dawn beyond one of the windows. "What do you want, Ginny?" said Harry in a monotone.

"Nothing in particular." Ginny sat down on the edge of one of the desks, watching him. "I just thought you might not want to be alone."

"You thought wrong." The words never varied, in tone or delivery, yet Ginny had the feeling of staring into bleak green eyes over the tip of a wand pointed at her. "Now would you mind going away? Before I hurt you t—"

He cut himself off so short Ginny wasn't quite sure if she'd heard the consonant or not, until a wave of fresh anger at his own stupidity wafted over to her.

"Hurt me too?" she said, settling herself more comfortably on the desk. "The way you think you hurt Draco?"

"The way I *killed* him, you mean." Harry snarled the sentence at the inoffensive morning beyond the window glass. "Let's not mince words between husband and wife, shall we? I killed my own brother today, as surely as shoving him off the Astronomy Tower without a wand—"

"Bollocks to that."

Harry jerked around to face her. "What?"

"I said, *bollocks to that* ." Ginny emphasized the crudity a little harder, and was pleased to see a bit of color creep back into Harry's cheeks. "Whose word do we have for what happened down there, Harry? Lucius Malfoy, that's who—and we both know he'd swear up and down that the moon was striped chartreuse and aubergine if he thought it would mess with your head and give his precious *Master* some advantage over you! Tell me this, didn't you give that fire very strict instructions that it wasn't to burn anything, *anything* , except for one particular wand?"

"Yes." Harry no longer looked as if he wanted to be sick or strangle something immediately, but Ginny could tell the battle was far from won. "But how else—" He broke off, motioning for her to

wait, and walked carefully to the front of the classroom, to the open space between the first row of desks and the teacher's desk. There, he transformed into Wolf, and ceremoniously chased his tail for twenty rotations one way and ten the other, before changing back into his human shape.

"Feeling better?" inquired Ginny, allowing her smile to surface since Harry would catch her amusement in her scent anyway.

"A little." Harry shook off his dizziness and leaned back against the teacher's desk, mirroring her pose. "How else could his body have been burned like that, Ginny?" he asked softly. "When Malfoy didn't have any magic left?"

"I can think of three ways, just off the top of my head." Ginny left unsaid the *and so could you, if you weren't wallowing* portion of her sentence, but had a feeling by the glare Harry bestowed on her that he'd caught it anyway. "One, he could have thrown that spell right before Draco tore his magic out, or even as it was happening. Two, he could have been carrying an amulet that would do that for him—it's the sort of thing a Death Eater might plan for. Or three, and I think most likely, he could have stolen a potion to do it out of Professor Black's office."

Harry's eyes widened at the third possibility, and Ginny knew she had him. "He knew Hermione would tell us everything, Harry," she said quietly. "It's why he said the things he did to her. He wanted to hurt her and frighten her as much as he possibly could, and hurt and frighten the rest of us through her."

"And I've been letting him." Harry growled again, but this time the sound trailed away into nothingness. "Did you feel like this?" he asked, looking her in the eye. "Empty, and off balance, and like you can't even reach out for the people you usually can, because they're just as off balance as you are?"

"Yes." Ginny slid off her desk and straightened the cloth over it before walking to the front of the room. "And I wish I could tell you when it's going to get better, but I can't. It happens slowly, and not in the way you might expect. Sometimes the littlest things make it all suddenly so real again that it hurts almost worse than it did the first time. But..." She shrugged, taking a place beside Harry to look out into the slowly brightening morning with him.

"It gets better?" Harry asked after several seconds of silence. "Or no?"

"Not exactly." Ginny made a fist and curled it inward, and found in it the analogy she'd been seeking. "It's like the exercises we did with the DA, with the weights on our wrists and our ankles, to build up our muscles and our endurance. At first that extra strain was just too much for us. It burned and ached, and we all complained, because we were working so hard and barely getting anywhere. Then little by little, day by day, those weights got easier for us to lift, until finally they were just another part of life. Just part of the routine, things for us to be going on with." She released her fist. "But the weights never got any lighter, did they?"

"No." Harry's voice was rough. "We got stronger instead."

Neither of them was ever sure who sought the other's arms first.

---

Ron sat by himself in what he was sure anyone else would have considered a dark corner, writing briskly on a pad with his wand. Across the room, Hermione leaned against Mrs. Danger, with Mr. Moony sitting behind her, occasionally stroking her back or hair. They might be talking through the bond they shared, or they might simply be taking comfort from each other's presence. Sometimes, Ron recalled from the bewilderingly painful days near the beginning of May, it had been better for the Weasleys not to say anything to one another, but just to *be* there.

Neenie's eyes were shut, but she wasn't asleep, far from it. The colors of her face, to Ron's vision, were beginning to shade out of 'unbelievably sad' into 'unbelievably angry'. He was only too happy to see the change, but if he were any judge, it would take at least another twenty minutes to finish (as much as it would, for now), and he'd gone about as far as he could go with his current mad idea.

*At least without something solid to look at. I could doodle it out, but how'm I going to know if I have it right? And I don't fancy going down to the library and having to write my little heat-glow rune on every last thing my search spell turns up! There's got to be another way—*

A discreet knock at the door made everyone look up. Mr. Moony held up a hand to Ron and went to open it.

"We've only just heard," said Percy, revealed in the corridor with Crystal Huley behind him. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you." A brief handshake passed between the two wizards before Mr. Moony stepped back, inviting the Red Shepherds inside. "Will this affect anything you have in the works?"

"Not at the moment—assuming you will be taking over with the Order, that is." Percy's expression suggested he was repressing a grimace. "One or two of the other members are...not best pleased with some of our methods."

"So I've heard." Mr. Moony smiled. There was no humor in his face. "Rest assured they will not be interfering with your work..."

Ron stopped listening at this point, as Crystal, having waved a hello to Mrs. Danger, was now headed straight for him. "You," she said, sitting down beside him, "are thinking about something frustrating. What is it? And don't even give me that look," she added. "It's not my fault you've practically got the same face as Percy, and him I can read forwards and backwards by now."

A moment of understanding hit Ron at this. He shoved it to the back of his mind for examination later. "There's something I want to look up," he said. "Only it's going to be hard for me to get it from the library, because I'm not sure where it is or what it'd be filed under. It won't be in the Restricted Section, it's not that sort of a thing, so I won't get in trouble for it, but I don't want to be calling things all over the place and working my little spell on them every time so I can see what



they are for myself, and the person who'd usually give me a hand with that, well..." He jerked one shoulder in the direction of Hermione.

Crystal tapped her temple. "If all you need is a working set of eyes, will I do?"

"You'd actually be perfect." Ron smiled, getting up. "See, loads of people have donated their family archives to the library here, especially the Sacred Twenty-Eight everyone makes such a fuss about." He snorted. "You know, I bet if we looked them up right now, we've probably got more of those names in the DA than the Death Eaters have got on their roster."

"Possibly even some overlap," Crystal murmured. "But I'm sorry, you were saying?"

"I'm looking for the plans to a house." Ron shut the door behind them and started for the stairs, since the last place he'd seen the entrance to the library was on the fifth floor and they were currently on the third. "It's an old house, but since the plans are magical, they should have updated themselves every time the owners made a change to the house, which means we'll be able to see what it looks like today, and that should help me with what I want to do to cheer up Hermione whenever she's ready for it..."

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Hermione wrapped her fingers around Danger's hand, feeling love, grief, pain, all humming through her Pack-mother's mind. **I hate him**, she growled through their bond, squeezing hard. **I hate him so much. How dare he, how dare he call me Kitten— no one is allowed to call me that except—**

**Except your father**, Danger cut in. **Which is what he hoped to exploit, my love. He wanted to frighten and anger and unsettle you, by using the name you accept only from your Moony.**

**...oh.** Hermione considered the other bizarre aspects of that terrifying, surreal conversation in this light. **Is that why he called me all those other things?** she asked doubtfully. **His heir, and his darling, and Draco's twin? To frighten me?**

**Partly. But partly, I think, he's been forced to face facts.** Danger slid her free arm around Hermione's side, and though Hermione heard a little sob catch in her sister-mother's throat, felt the quiver of her shoulders, her mental voice remained clear and calm. **Given what he's just done, you are his heir now, love. He knows you're intelligent and imaginative—you don't need me to tell you what he would do, what he will do, if they win, to ensure that his bloodline continues...**

A hiss of rejection burst from Hermione without her conscious intent.

**Precisely. He wants you thinking about that, running it over in your mind, imagining it again and again, to obsess you alongside your grief and distract you doubly from the war at the very moment you can't afford such distractions.**

**Well, I won't bother with that. Because he's not going to win.** Still, Hermione pressed her face

into Danger's robes and allowed herself a single brief shudder for the mere possibility.

**That's my girl.** Danger bent her head to administer a kiss to the top of Hermione's. **As for calling you Draco's twin...** She laughed sadly. **Lucius may never have acknowledged that before, my love, but he knows that you do, that we do. I'm sure he was trying to hurt you with it, but that still means he *has* acknowledged it, so as foolish as this sounds, let's claim it as a victory...**

"But it doesn't sound foolish at all." Hermione turned her head so that her words, hoarsely whispered as they might be, would come through clearly. "It's a tiny truth, on a night full of lies. And sooner or later, tiny truths add up to a big truth, the sort that will bring the Death Eaters' pyramid of lies crashing down in ruins—"

**Pardon me.**

The voice was masculine, apologetic, and familiar, but it was very definitely not Moony's. Hermione stiffened, and felt Danger do the same. **Yes, Alex?** the Pack's alpha female acknowledged politely.

**I thought you might want to know.** Alex seemed to pause for breath. **Our newest arrival is settling in comfortably, and asked me to send you his love. He looks forward to seeing you again. At Halloween, if not sooner.** A moment's pause. **That's him coming to you, by the by, not the other way around. He may not be able to stay very long, but he says to tell you he wouldn't miss it for the world.**

As Alex's sense within their minds vanished, Hermione curled herself into Danger's embrace and finally allowed her tears full rein, her imagination building the picture of her twin arranging a room within the Founders' Castle to suit his own taste. Surely he would have a comfortable chair for reading, and a corner for practicing his music, and a full-sized window so that he could leave by broomstick whenever the mood struck him, and...

Another spasm of sobs gripped her as the figure of her brother paused to stroke lovingly the heads of the tiny creatures sleeping on his bed, atop a wildly patterned, hand-crafted blanket. Cuddled together in an untidy bundle were a tricolored kitten and a brown-furred fox kit.

*At least our little selves will always have each other.*

*And someday, when it's my turn, I'll see him again too.*

Then her pain surged up again, and for a little while, there was nothing in her world but loss.

Finally, finally, the first storm blew itself out, and Hermione began to take notice of what was going on around her again. Moony's voice and Percy's continued to speak quietly at a distance, with the feel of Danger's mind a bit abstracted as she followed that conversation through Moony's ears, but closer by and sounding rather oddly cheerful were the mingled tones of Crystal Huley and—

She opened her eyes, or tried to. The lashes had stuck together with all the crying she'd done. A little growl of annoyance mixed in her throat with a highly inappropriate laugh—

**Why inappropriate, love?** Danger murmured, and the salt rime gumming Hermione's eyes shut disappeared. **Life hasn't stopped being funny just because we're hurting. Come see what Ron's found.**

"I thought that was you," Hermione said aloud, succeeding this time in opening her eyes and managing a smile in return for Ron's. "What—" She blinked at the enormous piece of parchment sprawled across the card table someone had conjured in the center of the room. "Is that—are those plans? Building plans?"

"That's right. We might get Ginny to make us a model of it later, but parchment'll do for now." Ron started to get up, but Danger waved for him to stay seated and conjured another chair beside the table for Hermione. "Ah, thanks. So I was thinking," he went on, his tone studiously casual as Hermione took her seat. "Malfoy's going to call you his heir, you'd better start living up to the role. Planning on what you're going to do with your inheritance, once you come into it. Since we are going to win this war, and that's going to involve kicking his skinny little inbred arse from here to Brazil and back again."

Hermione couldn't help but giggle slightly at the imagery.

"Shame we can't find a way to make the magic-loss permanent," Ron went on. "But then, it's not like that would make him stop being dangerous." He nodded to Crystal, who fluffed her hair innocently with one hand. "We'll have to settle for hoping his ghost hangs around to be properly horrified by what we're up to."

"Is that..." Hermione caught sight of the elaborate lettering in the corner of the plan nearest her. "It is. It's Malfoy Manor. Ron, what on earth—"

"Two for one," Crystal put in, leaning back in her chair. "We know they're set up there already, so this will give us an idea how many people they could be housing, where we might have to watch for traps, and so on, and so forth. And then there's the advance planning." She grinned. "Seeing as this place is going to be yours after the war's over. You wouldn't happen to know a whole load of people who might want to live pretty well in each other's laps or anything, would you?"

"In each other's—a den?" Hermione stared in shock at the rooms outlined on the parchment. "You want to turn Malfoy Manor into a den? For the Pride?"

"If you're against it, we won't, but I thought it might be fun." Ron began to outline areas of the house with his wand. "There's a great big library already, right here, and we could knock a couple doors here and expand it into the room next door if we need to. And seeing as we're talking about you, not to mention my sister, and your sister, and Luna for that matter, we'll need to. That room's set up as a fancy show-off-how-rich-I-am thing anyway, so no use to us. And the next room over from that is what they're calling the drawing room—lots of open space, and wood paneling on the walls, so I figured we could turn that into the music room. They've even got a nice conservatory

out the back, all ready for our plant-lovers to set up in..."

"What about a Quidditch pitch?" Hermione leaned closer, looking at the outline of the ground floor of Malfoy Manor with renewed interest. "Maybe right here." Her finger landed on a broad swath of garden labeled *Maze*. "I don't think Harry would care to have one of these around, not after the way the Triwizard Tournament ended, and I *know* he'd love having a real Quidditch pitch within sight of the house." She looked up at Ron with a smile. "I don't think you'd mind it either."

"Straight through the hoop I wouldn't." Ron mimed a Quaffle shooting cleanly through a goal.

"I thought your job was to stop people doing that," said Crystal with an overly puzzled expression.

---

Percy glanced over at the small, square table as laughter broke out. "He's growing up," he said softly, almost to himself. "How can it surprise me every time?"

"The same way it does all of us," Remus answered in the same tones. "I'd imagine your mother says that about you every so often as well."

"Oh, only once or twice." Percy grimaced. "A day. But as I was saying. Things are not getting any better at the Ministry, and this development may embolden the faction that's trying to take control—I *think* we have all of their members spotted, but I can't be certain, and if we've missed even one..."

"What about the other side of things?" Remus flipped his hand, palm to back. "You and Arthur between you have solid contacts in every critical department, I'd assume?"

"Yes, we do." Percy frowned, as though trying to track down the relation of this piece of information to the conversation as a whole. "But if we lose the Ministry entirely—" Then his face cleared. "Ah. Of course. The 'Ministry in exile' plan."

"It may be our best option, if they're so far along as all that." Remus closed his right hand into a fist and cloaked it behind his left hand, fingers outspread. "They can't corrupt what they can't find, and we can keep the most critical things going from here. Including giving ordinary people, the kind who'd usually never dream of breaking a law, an alternative to outright defiance of what I'd hope *some* of them will see are truly horrible policies under...is there a name attached to this puppet-Minister they're trying to put in?"

"If I had to wager, I'd lay a few Galleons on Pius Thickenesse." Percy scowled. "High-ranking, well-connected, purity-minded, and gullible enough that it's even possible they could talk him into acting for them without any Imperius Curse being needed. Though I'm sure they'll use it anyway, simply to have him as fully under their control as possible."

"Most likely." Remus nodded. "So we'll have the Thickenesse administration on one side, enacting the sorts of laws that will confuse and frighten most people—since they're not, thankfully, intelligent enough to take things slowly and avoid arousing suspicion—and on the other ...I like

your phrase. The Ministry in exile. Fighting to stop the terror, to keep things as they were, and with a Minister of our own, someone people will trust and follow willingly."

"I don't envy whoever that turns out to be," said Percy frankly. "He'll have enough work for eight people on his hands, never mind just one."

**And if he turns out to be eight people?** Danger inquired, flashing an image behind Remus's eyelids. **Or, at least, to have seven people very near and dear to his heart, on whom he can call for the help he's bound to need?**

**Now, now.** Remus returned the favor, tossing towards his love a picture of the gleaming blade he'd last seen in Harry's hand. **That's up to the Sword, or will be if we can get everyone to agree to abide by its decision. Which, if the Ministry falls in the fashion I'm expecting, is entirely possible. Frightened people will agree to almost anything they think will restore some order to their world.**

**Why do I find it ironic that we're coldbloodedly planning to use the very same reactions our enemies are hoping to exploit?**

**...silence, witch.**

Danger stuck out her tongue in his direction.

---

Sirius sat wearily in the desk chair in the War Room at Headquarters midway through the afternoon, trying to drag his thoughts back into some semblance of order. Aberforth Dumbledore had disclaimed any interest in the arrangements of his brother's funeral, which threw the burden back onto the Hogwarts staff and the Order, and of course the only proper people to be organizing such things for Draco were the Pack.

*As sick and wrong as it is that we have to do that for one of our cubs.* He sighed, with more than a hint of growl in the sound. *And it's not even the first time...*

There would, at least, be no disagreements over the interment of either body. Albus Dumbledore, by special order of the school governors, was to be granted an honor befitting the wizard who had held the position of Headmaster for one of the longest terms on record. A spot by the shores of the Hogwarts lake had been chosen, and a tomb would be erected there tomorrow, when the rest of the arrangements had been made.

*And as for Fox...* Sirius squeezed one fist tight, then let it go. *I know I thought it was ghoulish of us to arrange to buy the plots around James and Lily's way back when, but damned if it isn't turning out useful, in the worst possible way. First Marcus, now Draco...what is it with us and boys? We'd better be keeping a close watch on Harry—*

His throat tightened, and after a quick glance at the door to be sure it was shut, he let it. No one was here to see him. If he wanted to grieve, for his friend, for the son he'd never met, most of all

for the child he'd made his own, he thought he was entitled.

"It's all such a waste," he whispered harshly. "Such a goddamn, useless, *stupid* waste. So much we'll never get to see him do..."

His mind, perhaps predictably, decided to present him with images of those things, sharpening them into clear focus for an instant before blurring them over with the fog of might-have-been. Draco on his last day at Hogwarts, finding a spot in Gryffindor Tower to carve his initials with his wand, as generations of Gryffindors had done before him... carefully following Aletha's directions to finish the potion which might earn him a spot on one of St. Mungo's antidote-brewing teams... looking up from his music with joy but no surprise as Hermione burst through the door, her face alight with happiness and a new ring adorning her finger... gently massaging Luna's shoulders and supervising the placing of a cradle in a sunny bedroom...

Sirius swore under his breath, angrily swiping at his eyes. "Not our fault he never will," he muttered. "*Not* our fault. In fact—" He surprised himself by producing a sound which bore some resemblance to a laugh. "Let's regularize that, shall we? Thousand years from now, somebody goes and digs all of this up, we'll want them to know he had *our* full support to do everything he ever wanted, it's Lucius who decided he shouldn't have it..."

Finding parchment, quill, and ink on the desk, he began to write in his best pureblood calligraphy.

*I, Sirius Valentine Black, do hereby grant Draco Regulus Black, my son by law, permission to finish his seventh year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and stomp his N.E.W.T.s into the ground.*

"Which he would have done." Blowing on the ink to dry it, Sirius regarded his effort with some satisfaction. "It may not change things, but it places the guilt where it belongs. And we're going to need that."

*Especially Harry and Neenie, and probably Pearl as well. We raised them responsible, and to believe they could make a difference in the world, but that does have side effects. Such as blaming themselves whenever anything goes wrong around them, no matter if they could really have changed it or not...*

With a long sigh, Sirius rolled his parchment back into a scroll, tucked it into a pocket, and got to his feet. Plenty of work remained to be done still today.

He was halfway to the door when a silver wolf intercepted him. "*Padfoot, if you're at Headquarters,*" it said in Remus's voice, looking up at him thoughtfully. "*Box in side drawer in War Room. Bring back with you please?*"

"Box in side drawer?" Sirius frowned, and headed back to the desk, starting to rummage through the drawers which lined its two thick legs. "What kind of—ahh." Carefully, he lifted out a carved wooden chest, about as long as his forearm and as wide as his hand. "Found it." Unable to resist the urge, he shook it slightly, and heard a rattle from within, as of wood on wood. "Wonder what's

in there. Ah well, none of my business." He tucked it under his arm and made for the door again. "Moony wants me to know, he'll tell me."

*I got cured of peeking into strange boxes before I was ten, right upstairs from here, as it happens. Bella and her parents had come for a visit, and I thought her jewelry case looked just fascinating, all green and scaly like it was.*

"Green and scaly for good reason," he grumbled, stepping out into the corridor. "Damn thing was made of dragon skin—and dragon's *teeth*, too, enchanted to take a piece out of anybody who tried to open it without its owner's permission..."

He tagged that memory as one to share with the rest of the Pack tonight. A few moments of laughter, unrelated to the events of the past day, would do everyone a world of good.

---

"Thank you for remembering this, love," said Remus in the suite he and Danger had quietly claimed for their own once the house-elves had removed the personal belongings of Severus Snape, the same one they had occupied nearly four years earlier, when their own and their Pack's worst worry had been a single pair of rogue Death Eaters instead of the full complement along with their Master. "Merlin knows it'd slipped my mind entirely."

"That's why there are two of us." Danger ran her fingers across the top of the box. "But how in the world could Albus have predicted this, so long ago?" Lifting the lid, she reached without fear into the Gubraithian fire and extracted one of the items lying inside. "I may not have grown up magical, but a few things I have learned. And no wizard ever thinks he'll be without his wand." She cradled the long, slender rod of elder wood between her fingers. "But then, Albus always was an exception to every rule, now wasn't he?"

"Perhaps he's told us how he knew." Remus removed the other item from the inside of the box and slid his finger under the flap of the envelope. "As long as it's not a time-delay Howler..."

"I think we'd know." Danger sat down beside her husband, watching as he emptied the envelope of its contents. "One letter, with enclosures—enclosure," she corrected when Remus had unfolded the single sheet of parchment. "Another envelope. A thick one, letter plus enclosure of its own." She rubbed it between her fingers. "Ragged edge on there. Might be a page torn out of a book or some such. Addressed to Harry."

"Which he does not get until his seventeenth birthday, and possibly even later than that." Remus waited until Danger had dropped the smaller envelope back into the box, then closed it once more. "But this is for us, and for right now." Flattening the letter in his lap, he began to read, Danger shutting her eyes to share his focus.

*My dear friends,*

*I have begun this letter a dozen times, and a dozen times destroyed it, cravenly telling myself that you have no need to know such ancient history as I was about to write down. Such things are*

*buried in the past, I tried to argue, and have no meaning for the present and the future. Surely my friends do not wish to know the shame and pain I suffered, or the foolish actions into which I blindly thrust myself, when I was almost as young as your cubs are now.*

*And yet, the present and the future are built upon the past, and the only way in which we may avoid shame and pain and foolishness ourselves is to learn from those who have suffered them.*

*A thirteenth time, I begin.*

*My father, Percival, and my mother, Kendra, had three children; I was their eldest, my brother Aberforth a year or two my junior, and our sister Ariana, the baby of the family. We lived simply, but happily, until the incident which shattered my sister's childhood, and brought with it consequences far beyond what any of its participants had ever dreamed possible...*

---

"Do you think you can scare something up in House colors for the DA to give tomorrow morning?" Harry asked Neville as they climbed the stairs together. "Nothing huge, just a wreath. But we've got to have them all, or none."

"I'll talk to Professor Sprout. She's got some special stuff back in the restricted greenhouse, and if this isn't the time..." Neville broke off, turning his head. "Is someone singing?"

Harry stopped walking to listen, and caught a whiff of scent on the slight draft carrying down the first floor corridor. He coughed a little to draw Neville's attention, then sketched a crescent-moon curve on his forearm with a finger, a moment before their Pridemate began to sing another verse, her sweet, clear tones seemingly untroubled by so much as a hint of grief.

"Oh, Father, go and dig my grave,  
"Go dig it soft and narrow,  
"Sweet William died for me today,  
"I'll die for him tomorrow..."

Luna rounded the corner and stopped, tucking a piece of parchment into her pocket. "Hello, Harry," she said. "Hello, Neville. Did you know your mum was going to close up Fireflower House and go to stay with your gran for a while?"

"I...didn't." Neville frowned. "Why do you?"

"I was just home to see Daddy." Luna brushed a streak of ashes from the shoulder of her robes. "When we were writing our notes to Draco earlier today, giving him our permission to do the things he would have wanted to do in his life, it reminded me that I needed Daddy's permission to do some things as well." Her smile, though seemingly as absent as ever, sent an odd chill down Harry's spine. "One thing if the path leads one way, and another thing if it leads another. And it's a good thing I went when I did, because Daddy's going to put the Landing Zone under the Fidelius Charm tonight, with your mum, Neville, for Secret-Keeper."



"With...wow." Neville blew his breath out. "The things that happen when I'm not looking."

"It's probably smart, though." Harry tucked his hands into his pockets. "The Burrow's under loads of security by now, almost as good as Headquarters, so the Weasleys ought to be all right, and my parents are going to be spending most of their time here from now on, but some of the things your dad keeps around, Luna, are pretty strongly magical, and they might interfere with a standard security mix."

"And Mum's thinking in terms of offering them fewer targets, and better-protected ones." Neville smirked. "I'd pity the first Death Eater who underestimates Gran, but it'd be a waste of time."

"Yes, it would." Luna rubbed her fingers together absently. "Do you still have the bush that grew the roses I carried at Harry and Ginny's wedding?" she asked, looking into the distance between the boys.

"It's in the greenhouse right next to Ginny's." Neville nodded. "Why?"

"Will you bring a cutting from it tomorrow afternoon?" Luna turned her gaze on him. "To grow over his heart, and his name. Just the way it ought to be."

Harry swallowed hard as Neville nodded again, more slowly. "If that's all right?" he asked, looking over at Harry. "I don't want to do anything you wouldn't want."

"It's—" Harry coughed once, twice, then cleared his throat loudly. "It's fine," he said, his voice ringing off the walls with unexpected force. "Fine," he repeated less stridently. "It sounds just about right, actually. And we can bury the letters there too, to stay just as close to him."

"Thank you." Luna smiled, then turned and went on her way, beginning to hum "Barbara Allen" again almost before she was out of sight around the corner.

Harry and Neville looked at each other for a long moment, a bitter truth hanging in the air between them.

Whatever the next day might bring, the Pride had already been irrevocably changed.

---

Luna stepped into Myrtle's toilet, stroking her fingers along the edges of the note she'd asked her father to write for her, granting her permission to do the same thing she'd seen Mrs. Danger writing down in the note she would leave behind her tomorrow.

"I'll have to go last," she murmured aloud. "But that shouldn't be too hard..."

Flickers of movement caught her attention. Myrtle, above the cubicles, was dabbing at ghostly tears with one hand. The other was pointing towards the cauldron which held the Imprimatus.

No trace of blue could be seen in the potion's reflection on the ceiling.

With a sigh of understanding, Luna walked slowly towards the cauldron, to see what message her Fox had left behind for her.

Traced on the bottom of the cauldron, in the warm red he'd always favored, were four simple words.

*I love you, Luna.*

"I know you do," Luna whispered, reaching into her other pocket and lifting out the green-stoned dagger which had been dropped negligently in front of Hermione by Lucius Malfoy early that morning. "I know you always will."

Slowly, ceremoniously, she lowered the dagger into the cauldron, and watched the potion bubble around its blade as the goblin-wrought silver dutifully absorbed the liquid into itself.

Then she slid the dagger back into her pocket, collected Amanda's letter from its place under the flask, and departed for Gryffindor Tower.

She hoped not to die for her love tomorrow, but lying convincingly to the man who'd murdered him, then destroying the killer's mind forever, would be quite tiring, especially coming on top of two separate funerals.

A good night's sleep was indicated.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 42: When All Is Fair (Arc 7)

On a sunny June morning, by the quiet waters of the lake, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was laid to rest on the grounds of the school he had loved so well and served so long as teacher and Headmaster. The students stood to do him honor as his body was carried past, dressed in his best blue and gray robes, with his wand in his hand, and the faintest of smiles on his face.

Representatives of some of the largest student organizations came forward to place floral tributes on the bier, including Selena Moon, Maya Pritchard, Hannah Abbott, and Cho Chang, each of whom presented a quarter of a wreath made to represent her own House's crest. Fitted together, they formed the crest of Hogwarts, at which a number of first and second years broke down sobbing.

Headmistress McGonagall spoke briefly about her friend and colleague, about the times both good and bad through which they had worked together and the lessons she had learned from him, then yielded the floor to a sandy-haired wizard many of the older students recognized. A flurry of whispering went through the crowd.

"Remus Lupin...Remus Lupin..."

Remus waited patiently until the noise had subsided, his hands resting against the seams of his black robes. He carried nothing, no notes or scroll from which to read, though one or two students did note that his wife, sitting to one side with Professor Black's arm around her, had a folded sheet of parchment in her lap.

"Yesterday, I received a letter," Remus began when the only sound was the slight sighing of the breeze among the leaves of the Forbidden Forest. "It had been left for me by Albus Dumbledore, and written in it was a story. He asked me to share that story with you today, in its truest form, to counteract the lies and half-truths which will inevitably spring up. So I ask you to listen carefully, and to bear in mind this truth:

"Who we are at any given time is not necessarily who we will always be."

Another set of whispers ran through the students. Remus let them die away before he spoke again.

"Albus Dumbledore is best known to us today as a champion of the rights of all people, magical or non-magical, human or other thinking being. But when he was young, younger than most of you are now, his life was marked by an act of senseless cruelty against his sister Ariana, committed by Muggles who were frightened of a young girl's playful magic. The consequences of that act included the loss of his father and his sister's permanent incapacitation. So you can see that as a young man, Albus Dumbledore had little reason to feel friendly towards Muggles.

"Some years later, Dumbledore befriended another young man, near his own age, who had

attended Durmstrang Institute and was in England to visit relations. He was very personable, this young man, and very persuasive. An excellent speaker, especially when he spoke about Muggles. They were dangerous, he argued, dangerous not only to wizards but to themselves. Only look at the ridiculous destruction they were wreaking with their stupid, pointless wars! In the best interests of all, said this young man, those who had magic should exert control over those who did not.

"For the greater good."

Remus paused as several gasps sounded through the audience, and met the eyes of Hestia Jones, who was smiling grimly. "I see some of you have been paying attention in History of Magic," he said. "Yes, 'for the greater good'. The motto of Gellert Grindelwald. One of the Darkest wizards of recent history, and one of the most dangerous. Many, many people fell into the trap of believing that by helping Grindelwald, they could truly bring about some 'greater good'. And for a short period of his life, Albus Dumbledore was one of those people."

The furious chatter which broke out at this dwarfed all earlier outbreaks. Remus stepped back to wait and glanced over towards the Pride, seated in a block near one side. Most of them looked as shocked and horrified as the rest of the audience, but Luna's face had not lost its usual composure and Harry, though he clearly didn't care for what he was hearing, seemed already to understand where the story was headed.

"For the rest of his life," Remus said when he had the students' attention once again, "Dumbledore regretted that it took yet another personal tragedy to awaken him to Gellert Grindelwald's true aims. Grindelwald spoke convincingly about the greater good, and very probably believed in his motto. But he also believed that in the service of that greater good, he was entitled to use the Darkest of magics as he pleased. To threaten or to cause terrible pain. To control the actions of another. And, in the final extreme, to kill, not because he or another was in danger which could be resolved in no other way but simply because this death, at this time, would be...convenient."

Hermione was not the only member of the audience who hissed at the word.

"For all our magic, there are some things even we cannot do." Remus drew his wand, balancing it on his palm so that all the students could see it. "We cannot alter the past, nor can we reverse true death. But." His fingers closed around the wand, bringing it into casting position. "The future is ours, to do with as we will. Only consider that Albus Dumbledore, who once considered Gellert Grindelwald his closest friend, is today noted in our history books, and on our Chocolate Frog cards," he added, winking a few brief snickers, "as instrumental in Grindelwald's defeat. If you remember nothing else from today, please, remember this. As long as you still live, it is not, it is *never*, too late to make a different choice.

"Thank you."

As Remus took his seat beside Danger, he noticed Sirius giving him a strange look from the other end of the row. *Something for you?* he signed briefly, as Minerva and the Heads of the Houses (Professor Sinistra of Astronomy acting as interim Head of Slytherin) stepped forward to close the

tomb.

*He really asked you to tell everyone that?* Sirius signed back.

Danger patted her hand against the letter she still held in her lap in answer.

*Well, all right. But it seems...* Sirius shrugged. *Odd.*

Remus wagged his fingers in the sign for *Too complex, will explain later*, and rose to his feet with the rest of the audience as teachers and prefects began to lead the students, many sobbing openly, back towards the castle.

"All right, let's have it," said Sirius once the Pack-adults were alone beside the white tomb. "I always thought a funeral was a time to talk about somebody's good points—why would Albus ask you to tell everyone *that*?"

"So no one like Rita Skeeter could get hold of it, sensationalize it, and turn it into a trashy serial for *Witch Weekly*, maybe?" Danger snapped before Remus could reply.

"Hey!"

"Taking things a little personally today, are we?" Aletha interjected, cutting off Sirius's heated denial. "Sirius, that story would have come out sooner or later, especially with Albus no longer able to speak in his own defense. This way, no one can say we tried to hide it or cover it up. It becomes what it really is, the story of a young man who got carried away by a plausible liar." Her eyes pinned him where he stood. "And who, when he discovered his mistake, spent the rest of his very long life doing his best to atone for it. Does that sound familiar, by any chance?"

Sirius growled under his breath. "I don't have to *like* it," he said grudgingly.

"None of us do." Danger folded the parchment again and slipped it into her pocket. "But if we ignore the truths we don't like, they'll come back to bite us when we can least afford it." She turned her face into the breeze. "Like what we have to do this afternoon..."

At the edge of the Forest, leaves rustled briefly, making Remus look around. A branch swayed low down on a bush, but whatever had been there was gone.

*It could have been almost anything, or anyone. A centaur, a wise wolf, even Harry's friend Sangre...*

"Thank you for coming," he said softly in the direction of the sound, then turned back to Danger, drawing her gently into his arms.

The Pack still had their own loss to mourn today.

---

Hermione carried her best black robes down to Ginny and Luna's dorm, ostensibly for their help in

getting dressed, in reality to keep an eye on Luna. She'd been acting...

*Well. Strange isn't exactly the word I want.*

*Stranger than usual, perhaps.*

Luna's frantic fear when she'd originally had her vision of Draco's gravestone, her terror and weeping and denial that it could possibly be true, were conspicuously absent now that the vision's time drew near. The blue-gray eyes showed no signs of tears, the sweet and silvery voice was clear and unthickened—

*She's even singing a little to herself, the way she does when she's happy.* As Ginny directed the efforts of a shoe cloth with her wand, Hermione turned her attention to Luna, who was brushing her dark blonde hair in front of the room's small mirror, humming in time with her brushstrokes. The tune was familiar, she'd heard it many times before...

As the words which matched the melody surfaced in Hermione's mind, she had to grip the post of Ginny's bed very hard indeed to avoid having any more visible reaction.

*"In sleep he sang to me, in dreams he came..."*

The song was that which lent its title to the stage show from which Luna had once witnessed herself and Lucius Malfoy singing a duet, in a graveyard, at dusk.

*She's caught up in the vision, in making it come true. She's given herself completely over to that role, to believing what she'll say tonight. Is that why she didn't see a lie in anything she said to him in the vision? Because she's made herself believe it, in order to lure him into her trap?*

With shaking hands, she straightened her hair, using the familiar motion to calm herself enough that her voice would not give her fears away.

*If only that's how it comes out, Fox may not have died for nothing after all...*

---

Luna continued to brush and hum, fully aware of Hermione's eyes on her, and more cognizant of her older Pridemate's thoughts than Hermione might have believed.

*She still doesn't understand.* Spreading the skirts of her robes, she curtsied to her reflection in the mirror. *Even after Fox explained it to her himself, she can't see it.*

*The only way for me to win tonight is to be open to possibilities. Be ready to believe anything, anything at all.*

Rising, she patted the pocket where she carried two letters and a carefully wrapped dagger.

*Even if that 'anything' is that I have to lose to win.*

---

"The song really doesn't make sense for them," said Meghan in the greenhouse, in the tone of someone grasping at straws to stave off tears.

"Which?" Neville looked up from the cutting of Luna's dark red rose, which he was wrapping in damp cloth to better survive the journey.

"'Barbara Allen'. She only cared about herself, and how many people drank her health in the taverns. It's why the briar grows from her heart in the end, because she was prickly and drove people away from her." Meghan laid a fingertip on one of the rosebush's thorns. "That's not how Luna is at all." A weak giggle escaped her. "Me maybe, but not Luna!"

"No briars for you." Neville pointed a stern finger at his lady. "You are *not* allowed to die in this war, do you understand me?"

"Not even if you do?"

"I'm not planning on it, so the problem shouldn't come up. And no, not even then." Neville placed the cutting carefully in his pocket. "You've got your whole Pack and the rest of the Pride to love, and there's a whole world out there, with an awful lot of wizards you haven't met. And Muggles, for that matter. You'd find somebody else, Pearl. I'd want you to." He held out an arm, and Meghan fit herself inside it. "Because no matter what else happens, I love you, and I want you to be happy. Got it?"

"Got it." Meghan sniffed once. "But still just please don't die."

"Same goes to you." Neville drew her close and held her tightly for a few moments, then kissed the top of her head and escorted her from the greenhouse.

Behind them, the rosebushes, deep red and gold-hearted pink, bloomed warmly in the full light of afternoon.

---

Aletha had just finished fastening her robes when a silver doe stepped gravely through the wall of her quarters. "*Lucius Malfoy*," the doe said in Severus Snape's laconic voice, "*has not yet returned to his home.*"

"Hasn't he," Aletha murmured as the doe vanished. "I can't imagine why."

"Can't imagine what now?" Sirius stepped out of the bathroom, fumbling with the gold cuff links Danger had given him two Christmases before, formed in the shape of rampant Gryffindor lions. "Damn things never close right, even when they're bloody well enchanted for it..."

"Did you invoke the enchantment?" Aletha drew her wand. "*Necto leoni*."

Sirius pulled his finger out of the way just in time as the link snapped neatly shut. "Now why didn't I think of that."



"I would make a comment about you and thinking, but it gets less and less apt as time goes on." Aletha waited until he had the other cuff link in place, then repeated her spell nonverbally to seal it shut as well. "That was a message from Severus. It seems Lucius is intelligent enough not to try presenting himself to Voldemort as some kind of hero while he's a Squib."

"Heh." Sirius grinned briefly. "Love to see him try it. Wonder if they'd demote him to pot-scrubber, or just pat him on the head and tell him to go sit in his room, there's a good boy, and let the grown-ups get on with things? Or..."

"I know that face," said Aletha when the silence had continued for several seconds. "What have you just thought of, that you don't like in the least?"

"Need to talk to Moony, find out if it's possible. But." Sirius scrubbed his hands along the front of his robe. "What if Lucius hasn't gone home because he's hoping to grab Hermione and take her magic to replace his?"

"You'd think he would have when he had her helpless this morning," Aletha objected.

"Helpless in the middle of Hogwarts?" Sirius waved two fingers in a circle above his head. "Especially when Harry'd already asked the castle to slow him down some, muddle him up? He wouldn't have wanted to try anything that delicate in a hostile environment. And yes, I know it worked for Draco, but Draco belongs here—*belonged*," he corrected in a growl. "Don't I just *wish* it could have fallen out the other way. What would it matter to us if Fox didn't have magic for a couple months, hmm? He and Neenie could have shared, you or Harry or Pearl could have pulled from the castle to help replenish them... or hell, he could just have potted Death Eaters with his potion piece, Merlin knows he was good enough with it!"

"Don't," Aletha said thickly, "please, don't, you'll set me off—oh, God, too late..."

"Oh, love." Sirius caught her in his arms and held her close. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

"No, it's probably best now," Aletha managed to say. "We're still here, I can fix myself up, and if I break down all the way out there, so will Pearl." Her throat closed for a moment. "Which is not a thing I ever wanted to be thinking about my daughter," she whispered, when she could. "How to keep her from tearing herself apart with grief, when she's lost a friend and a brother so close together. She deserves so much more, Sirius, so much better than this—they all do, every one of them..."

*But what you deserve and what you get in life are hardly ever the same thing,* she finished silently, as her voice was too thick to speak.

"Tell you one thing," said Sirius conversationally after a few moments. "If I ever find out who was the first person to say 'All's fair in love and war'..."

"I can tell you exactly who." Aletha blinked away a last tear and looked up at her husband. "Somebody who won their particular battle, and didn't much care for the methods they'd used

being questioned."

"Ain't that the truth." Sirius sighed deeply. "It hasn't been very fair for you, has it?" he asked, his eyes and voice devoid of any vestige of laughter. "What I've put you through, I mean. All this time, all this trouble."

"All this love." Aletha closed her hand around his. "And yes, this war as well. I'd be fighting it even if we'd never met, Sirius. You know that. As it is, I fight better because I know you'll be there to back me. And we've added another fighter to our ranks between us, and raised others to make their choices well. To love the truth..." She smiled, hearing her own double meaning. "And the star, and the wolf, and the warrior. And to be warriors themselves, and fight against evil." Her eyes welled up again, but she held her voice steady with an effort. "Even if they die doing it."

"Even if they die." Sirius shook his head. "It sounds so poetic, doesn't it? So romantic and uplifting. Until you run smack into it, and suddenly it's not. It just hurts. Because you never realize, until it comes right home to you, that everybody who's out there dying for what they believe in? That's not happening in a vacuum. The ones who die have parents, and siblings, and people they might have married one day—and somebody'd better have put that in the box of permission," he added as an aside. "I'd have done it myself, but I had mine picked out already."

"Mine was music, but I'd imagine Remus or Danger thought of it." Aletha squeezed Sirius's hand. "Now, let me fix my face, and then we have to go."

"Right." Sirius released her. "Because it's just not on to be late for your son's funeral." He scowled at his reflection in a corner of the mirror as Aletha began to repair her makeup. "Not that it's so much better to be having one of those in the first place..."

Aletha refrained from further comment.

---

The funeral of Draco Regulus Black was quiet and private, as had been that of his Pack-brother Marcus James, held in the same location a year and a half before. First his parents, then his siblings, and finally his closest friends came forward to place their letters of permission in the simple wooden box Remus had conjured for the purpose. Luna, as befit her place in Draco's life, took her turn last, and allowed her hands to rest atop all the letters for a moment before she rose and stepped back.

Neville and Meghan came forward hand in hand, as Danger, her face very still, waved her wand once to close the box and swirled it three times to dig a pair of holes in the newly turned earth atop the grave where the small urn of ashes had been interred. With care, they laid the box in the larger of the holes, and Neville placed his rose cutting in the smaller one, then pressed his fingers to it and closed his eyes, concentrating.

Before the eyes of the gathered Pack and Pride, a golden glow developed around the young wizard and witch, and the rosebush began to grow, its vines stretching upward towards the sun and twining around the nearest available support. After a moment, though, the glow began to flicker,

to fade, and the growth of the bush faltered.

Aletha and Sirius stepped forward, so smoothly that it seemed to have been rehearsed, and held out their hands to the younger people, Aletha to Neville, Sirius to Meghan. The hands were grasped, the glow expanded to surround the adults as well, and the rosebush's growth continued, until the cleanly cut stone with its three simple lines of text was all but covered in vines and buds showing lines of rich, deep red, along with one fully open blossom. The grass which surrounded the new-made grave moved in at Neville's beckoning wave, to cover its bareness of earth.

The glow faded away, and the Blacks and Neville returned to their earlier places. Hermione, pressing her lips tightly together, turned her face into Ron's shoulder, apparently unable to look at the grave any longer, green though it might now be.

Harry released Ginny's hand and took one step forward. "In his name," he said quietly, "we go on."

Slowly, by twos and threes, the Pack and Pride bowed their heads in acceptance.

---

Ginny ascended the stairs towards her dorm, glancing down as she went at an unwontedly sober Gryffindor common room. Final exams had been canceled (though that didn't affect her, since O.W.L.s, like N.E.W.T.s, had been conducted a few weeks earlier), and classes were in abeyance until Headmistress McGonagall could consult with her staff and work out who would be taking which years through which topics.

*Which doesn't leave us a whole lot to do with ourselves.*

For just now, though, she had another worry. Luna had excused herself about twenty minutes before, claiming she needed a nap. None of the Pride had thought much of it until a few moments ago, a slip for which Ginny was still kicking herself.

*We thought, as long as we were in the common room and she was in the dorms, that she couldn't get past us to go out by herself and fulfill that blasted vision.*

*Apparently we're all too punch-drunk to remember that Luna, when she wants them, has wings...*

At any other time, she would have been running, but running would be pointless now. If Luna was gone, she was gone, and Ginny's wearing herself out further wouldn't make her come back.

*And if she's not gone yet, she'll be more likely to go if she hears my feet come pounding up here. If I'm quiet, I might be able to surprise her, and talk her out of it—*

She turned the doorknob, lifting it slightly to take the weight from the creaky hinges, and pushed the door open.

Luna, seated on the windowsill, looked at her coolly across the barrel of her potion piece. "I thought you might come," she said. "Don't shout, please."

"I won't." Ginny stepped inside, keeping her hands in plain sight. "Luna, you don't have to do this alone. We can go with you."

"No, you can't." Luna shook her head. "He says not to."

Ginny stiffened, feeling rather as if she'd walked through a ghost unexpectedly. "He says—Luna, *who* says?"

"Draco, of course." Luna smiled, as though surprised Ginny had asked. "That's why I came up here to sleep. So that he could come to me in my dreams, sing to me and call me to him, just like the song says. I can't stay much longer, or the light will be wrong for my vision, but I wanted someone to know before I left."

"Luna..." Ginny swallowed hard. "Draco is dead. I know you probably don't want to think about that, but you have to believe me."

"Oh, I believe you." Luna's smile brightened. "I believe everything just now. It's how I have to be, if I'm going to close the circle and win the war for us." Her face lost its shine. "It may not be very much fun for me, parts of it, anyway. And Daddy won't like it at all. But then, he's under the Fidelius by now, and I don't think Neville's mum will tell him about this, not until it's all over. There won't be anything he can do in any case."

"Close the circle, win the war—" Ginny started to step forward. "Luna, what are you—"

"Stop there," Luna warned, bringing the piece up a little ways. "I don't want to, but I will."

"I believe you." Ginny stopped. "Luna, please. We don't want to lose you too."

"I know." Luna held her piece steady. "That's why I'm going to find myself. Will you tell everyone that I love them, please? And that I'm not afraid anymore?" Her smile returned. "Even the worst things that could come out of tonight will help us win the war in the end, you see. Draco's told me so." She blew a kiss with her free hand. "Goodbye, Ginny. I'll see you again."

Holstering her potion piece, Luna turned and leapt.

Ginny made it to the window in time to see Starwing the snowy owl gliding away across the grounds.

"If you lied to her," she muttered fiercely in the direction of the Founders' Castle. "If you lied to her, I'll...I'll kill you again."

A general lack of response did not improve her mood.

---

"Just this, sir?" said a middle-aged clerk at a small store selling odds and ends in Godric's Hollow, ringing up the black half-mask and the hooded cloak on her old-fashioned register.

"Yes. If you please." The last few words seemed to be added as a last-minute afterthought, as a long-fingered, pale hand slid a twenty-pound note across the counter. "I trust this will be enough."

"Oh, absolutely, sir." The clerk looked a bit askance at her long-haired customer, who returned the regard coolly from his pale gray eyes. "Do you...did you need your change in any...particular way?"

Silver-white eyebrows ascended, giving the clerk the unnerving feeling that she was about six inches high. "Quickly," the man said, his hand making an abortive motion towards his pocket, as though he were about to reach for something he had just remembered he was not carrying. "I have...an appointment to keep." He smiled thinly, fastening the cloak around his neck and sliding the mask into its pocket. "One for which I have been waiting some time."

"Of—of course, sir." The clerk counted out the change as quickly as she could for the shaking of her hands and passed it over. "Have—have a pleasant—"

The bell over the door tingled as the man pushed it open to walk briskly out into the street with his limping step.

"Day," the clerk finished in a whimper, and ran into the back to indulge in a mild fit of hysterics. She hadn't been so frightened of anyone, as she would shortly inform all her friends, since that Halloween night some years back when that poor young couple's cottage had blown up from the gas leak, and she'd happened to look out the window and seen *such* a strange-looking person walking down the street just a few minutes before it went off...

---

Luna knelt in the grass Neville had grown only a few hours before, letting her fingers caress the leaves and buds of the new rosebush. In the back of her mind, she could feel her younger self watching, and smiled a little to think of how frightened and worried she'd been then.

*It does hurt, being apart from him. But in only a few minutes, one way or another, everything will be settled, everything will be done. Either I will avenge my love, or I will go to be with him, and our two lives will be the price of planting a deadly trap among the Death Eaters...*

She wished she could have explained that possibility more fully to Ginny, but it would have caused a great deal of trouble, not to mention delaying her far longer than she could afford.

*And now, it begins.*

Lifting her head, she regarded the rosebush. "And from his heart," she sang softly, reaching for the single blossom which had opened fully, "grew a red, red rose..."

Pity for the girl who watched her now, the girl she had once been, overtook her, and she began to weep, sobbing where she knelt, letting the sorrow of two full years of mourning for her doomed love wash over and through her in this moment.

*It isn't fair, she cried silently, as she had done so many times before. It isn't fair—we've never done anything wrong, why should we have to suffer like this? Why?*

Lost in the grief she lived again, she heard the newcomer behind her only when he began to sing to her, his voice rough, as though unaccustomed to the action.

*Wandering child, so lost, so helpless,  
Yearning for my guidance.*

Luna's head snapped up and around with the first note. She wiped the tears from her eyes to clear her vision—

And Saw, hovering around the cloaked and masked figure, what she had only half-expected, and had not wanted to believe, that she would See.

Her voice nearly choked with emotion as she began her answer.

*Angel or father, friend or Phantom?  
Who is it there, staring?*

Her partner sang over her final words.

*Have you forgotten your Angel?*

She picked up the line.

*Angel, oh, speak...what endless longings  
Echo in this whisper?*

The man before her took the line again, his voice caressing.

*Too long you've wandered in winter,  
Far from my far-reaching gaze...*

Pressing her hand to her chest, she fought to keep her breath as she sang. She must not, *must not*, lose her control now, or her belief would slip and all would be lost.

*Wildly my mind beats against you...*

The wizard smiled mockingly.

*You resist...*

Drawing breath as one, they sang together.

*Yet the soul obeys!*

Their eyes were locked on one another, searching, finding, believing.

*Angel of Music! I denied you,  
Turning from true beauty!  
Angel of Music! Do not shun me,  
Come to me, strange Angel!*

The man's song taunted and tantalized.

*I am your Angel of Music...  
Come to me, Angel of Music...*

Drawing her first free breath in the pause which followed the singing, Luna found stillness, clarity of mind, even joy. All would happen as it had been foretold, for what she now saw she had never seen before.

*And my every word can and will be true.*

"Such a lovely voice," the man said after a few moments of silence. "A pity to choke it with weeping. Did you love him so much, the one who lies buried here?"

Luna slipped her hand between the thorns of the rosebush to caress the writing beneath. "No, I suppose I didn't," she said, turning her head to smile up at the man. *I still love my Fox at this very moment.* "Silly of me, to cry for him." *When there are so many more helpful things I could be doing.*

"Indeed. For when did he ever give either of us reason to love him?" The man regarded the grave dispassionately. "I regret what I was forced to do, but I had no choice. You know that."

"I do." *Harry was not the only one for whom 'neither can live while the other survives'...*

The man closed his fingers around the stem of the one blooming rose, deftly broke it off, and offered it to Luna. "Come away with me, Starwing, silent huntress of the night," he said quietly. "Come and be my eyes and ears and hands, and my swift-winged messenger until messages are needed no more. It cannot last much longer, and I believe I know how it will end."

"So do I." Luna rose and accepted the flower. "And I will go with you." *Though I am afraid, I will be brave.* "I will do what you cannot, and fly to carry your words to far-off ears, until your side—" She drew breath and called to mind her Pride. "—our side—reaps our well-deserved victory."

The man smiled fully this time. "My lady, your way with words delights me."

Luna dropped a brief curtsey, then bent and laid the rose on the grave where she had been kneeling. "We should go," she said, straightening. "I've wasted enough time here."

*Grief is pointless when justice lies so readily to hand.*

The man undid his mask and laid it on the grave over the stem of the rose, then offered his wrist. Luna rippled herself into Starwing's form and fluttered upwards to a landing on that slender perch, leaning in to preen a long strand of silver hair which had escaped the hood of the cloak. Its owner smiled, pulled his hood forward again, and walked away briskly, cradling her close to his chest.

When they were out of sight of the grave with its red rosebush, she mantled her wings, forcing him to stop. Swiftly she leapt to the ground, changing forms again as she went. "I have something for you," she said softly, reaching into her pocket. "Something very important..."

Quick as she was, he made his move before her.

A stab of pain ran through her arm, and her vision began to gray. Dimly she realized, as his triumphant smile loomed ever nearer, that he was doing to her precisely what she had intended to do to him. The Pride, she thought with her last few moments of clarity, would be very angry when they heard, but this would help to win the war in its own way, and besides, she had brought her fate upon herself. It was only fair.

*And I will be with my Fox again, even if he does scold me terribly at first for coming after him...*

A vast sense of contentment overcame Luna Lovegood, and she closed her eyes and let herself go.

---

Severus Snape sat in a small, secluded nook in one of the grander reception rooms of Malfoy Manor, watching as the Dark Lord held court.

*For he may not call it that, but so it is. I wonder how long it will be before he decides that he ought to be promoted, from "lord" to "king"? Or will he think that a little too comic-opera even for him?*

He allowed himself a sardonic smile. *And would a King Voldemort trust a half-blood Prince, or would he suspect such a being of coveting his throne and arrange to have him secretly killed off? Untraceably, of course...*

The door creaked. Severus turned to see who had entered and felt his eyes widen in surprise.

*It seems I owe Aletha Black an apology.*

*Or, at least, a correction.*

As calmly as though he had never left, Lucius Malfoy walked up the center of the room, the limp with which he had moved since he had become a werewolf perhaps more prevalent than it had been but somehow incorporated into, rather than marring, his sinuous grace. At precisely the right distance from the Dark Lord's thronelike chair, he stopped, went to one knee, and bowed his head. "My Lord," he said, all conversation ceasing with his voice. "I have returned."

"So you have." Lord Voldemort waved away Dolohov and Yaxley to lean forward and look closely



at his prodigal follower. "Rise, Lucius, and tell me for yourself what has happened. Such stories come out of Hogwarts these days that one scarcely knows what to believe."

"My Lord, both good news and bad." Lucius got to his feet, as he had been bidden, and stood at his ease, a small smile on his face. "Though Draco did not prevail in the mission we had set for him, still Albus Dumbledore is dead. The strain of the night proved too much for his heart, or so the story goes."

"So that much is true." The Dark Lord smiled. "Excellent. What of you and your son?"

Lucius sighed. "I fear, my Lord, that my part of the work we did together failed under that same strain," he said, his lips momentarily compressed in what looked to Severus like some vestige of true grief. "I was forced to kill my own flesh and blood, or be killed in my turn. And he, before his death, inflicted a terrible wound on me." A long breath, as though nerving himself up for a painful disclosure. "My magic, my Lord, is gone. It will return to me, in time, but for the moment it is no more."

Whispers broke out all around the hall, as the Dark Lord's red eyes narrowed.

"But." Lucius held up a finger. "I refused to surrender to despair. Instead, my Lord, I looked around me for some way that I could return to your service as something besides a useless burden. And I found it." He laughed unexpectedly. "In the unlikeliest of places! Who would ever have thought that a random, foolish recollection of *Draco's*—for our minds touched during that last battle, and such a chaotic jumble you have never—but I digress, my Lord. My apologies."

Planting his feet, he thrust one arm above his head, his wrist held stiffly.

A streak of white dropped from the rafters, as silent as the stars, drawing gasps from every direction.

Severus held his anger in check as Lucius lowered the snowy owl into place before him. *This may not be what it appears to be—*

With a flutter of wings, the owl leapt from its perch and became a girl, dark-blonde hair flowing over the shoulders of a black cloak similar to Lucius's, blue-gray eyes lowered demurely to the floor.

"Allow me to introduce my lovely little helper. Starwing." Lucius laid a proprietary hand on Luna Lovegood's shoulder. "Though please, don't all rush up to her at once." He smiled coolly. "She only looks sweet and innocent."

*Or perhaps it is precisely what it appears to be.* Severus gritted his teeth, well aware of the likely reception this news would garner in certain quarters. *Though how he has done this, I cannot fathom.*

"This little girl, my Lord, planned my undoing in a most painful fashion." Lucius tapped Luna's

arm, and she obediently withdrew a silver dagger from a pocket of her gray robes, holding it out on her palm as Voldemort leaned forward to have a better look. "The Imprimatus Potion, an ancient brew calculated to destroy a human mind and make its victim instead subject to two things and two things only. First, the instincts of the animal to which he is most closely akin—the wolf, in my case, due to my malady, but in lovely Starwing's case, of course, the owl—and second..." His smile turned gloating. "The will of the first man, or woman, the victim sees after the potion has taken effect."

"And you turned the potion onto her, rather than her using it on you." Voldemort chuckled. "You rise to greater heights than ever, Lucius. Though I fail to see how this will amend your lack of magic."

"My Lord, only her human *mind* is no more." Lucius twirled a finger at the girl, who slid away the dagger and instead drew a pale, slender wand from her pocket. "Her magic is fully intact. And, like the rest of her, under my complete control. Starwing, I think Yaxley could stand to be a trifle more cheerful..."

"*Rictusempra*," intoned the voice Severus had heard in his classes for the previous five years, and Yaxley, caught by surprise, doubled over in a fit of pained laughter. The rest of the Death Eaters roared in appreciation, howling and clapping their hands, until Voldemort rose smoothly to his feet, cutting off the noise. Lucius snapped his fingers at Starwing, who quickly ended the spell and folded her hands over her wand, her eyes, clear and blank, resting worshipfully on his face.

"I approve," proclaimed the Dark Lord. "Harry Potter's pretty Pride is lessened, and we are strengthened. Go and amuse yourselves as you please until morning, when we shall reconvene. Lucius, I will want to see you in private before the general meeting, so that we can arrange for duties more congenial to your current needs."

"Of course, my Lord." Lucius bowed low, Starwing following suit with a graceful curtsy, as Voldemort departed from the room by a small side door.

Severus waited until the bustle and noise of the Death Eaters' departure from the room was in full swing before stepping out of his small nook. Lucius, as he had half-expected, turned to face him before he had taken more than three steps towards the sole living representative of the House of Malfoy.

"Now why," said the older wizard lazily, "do I suspect, Severus, that you are about to say something to me of which our dear Master would not approve?"

"I respected you once, Lucius," said Severus stiffly, keeping his gaze fixed on Lucius's sculptured, sneering face, so that he would not have to see the adoring and nauseating blankness in the wide eyes which had once belonged to Luna Lovegood. He noted, with the clarity of detail that came to him only when he was suppressing strong emotion, a new ring on Lucius's finger, matching one on the girl's. Both had the semblance of two serpents coiled together, holding red gems between their mouths. "I do no longer."

"Strangely enough, that fails to move me." Lucius turned and waggled two fingers at Starwing, who fell into step at his left shoulder. "Be sure to record everything faithfully for your report, Severus. It wouldn't do for the Pack and Pride to be left in the dark about the whereabouts of their beautiful Starwing." He stroked his ring-wearing hand down the girl's hair, possessively. "Or, should I say—*my* beautiful Starwing."

Smirk firmly in place on his lips, Lucius Malfoy strolled away, Starwing trotting obediently at his heels.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 43: Doing Well (Year 7)

Danger strode with purpose across the sun-drenched lawn, hearing the sounds of laughter and music from a small gazebo half-hidden by a projection of stone wall.

She'd left behind a badly shaken Pride, one on the verge of turning against itself. Harry had pulled out of his earlier bout of self-blame and was working to rally his Warriors, but it was an uphill battle, especially without his usual shieldmate.

*Since Ginny has decided that what happened to Luna is her fault, which is irritating both Ron and Meghan to the point where we've had to step in and decree separate areas of the castle for everybody, just so they won't be sniping at each other every ten seconds...*

Her personal suspicion about Luna's fate revolved around the timeline of the last thirty-six hours, on what had happened to whom, by whose hand, and when. If she was right, Lucius Malfoy's seeming victory over his son's beloved was as empty as his triumph over Draco himself, and his own spite had been his undoing.

*Though hasn't it always?*

Between one of her steps and the next, another woman materialized in her way, white-shot brown hair curling about her round and determined face, robes of golden-yellow streaked with dirt. "You shouldn't be here, Danger," said Helga Hufflepuff, holding out a hand to block her honorary Heir's further passage. "You know we can't let you talk to them."

"Them," Danger repeated, feeling the flutter in her chest she'd almost forgotten was called hope. "Not him."

"Oh dear, I shouldn't have said that, should I?" Helga sighed, but there was a decided twinkle to her eyes. "Well, I suppose since you know that much, I can at least let you have a look. But you can't call attention to yourself, do you understand me? If they so much as glimpse you—"

"I understand. No contact, no messages." Danger sighed. "It's against the rules."

"Which are there for your protection, love." Helga held out a hand, and after a moment of consideration Danger took it. "Can you imagine if young Mr. Riddle suddenly found himself able to truly talk to all the Dark ones who've gone before him, learn the secrets they took with them to the grave? If we tear the veil for you, even for a moment, that's a weakness he can exploit. And would, as surely as Tentaculas bite."

"But Halloween—"

"Is long established as a time when the veil thins, meaning we can stretch the rules a bit that night. Or bend them, as Aletha's done. Though you'll have to ask her about that, not me," Helga added

hastily at Danger's frown. "Come along, now. One look, and then home with you..."

---

Ginny huddled in one corner of the blue bedroom of the Hogwarts Den, finding the décor singularly suited to her mood. Not only was she feeling gloomy, self-loathing, and otherwise thoroughly depressed, but she'd always wondered if Luna might not have been a Ravenclaw if it hadn't been for the Pride.

*And why should there have been a Pride in the first place? What good are we, really? Her thoughts found the beginning of their well-worn path and began their dreary, spiraling dance once again. All our oaths and pretty words about protecting each other don't mean anything when you come right down to it. One of us is dead and another one's been mind-blasted forever—even if we could rescue her body, that's all there is left of her, she's got the mind of an owl now, as if she'd been transfigured for too long, only it happened all at once—and there was nothing we could do about it, because we're useless, we weren't even there—*

The door creaked.

Ginny was Lynx before she could think about it, and under the bed with scarcely more thought than that. *Come right in, sit right down*, she willed the feet in a battered pair of trainers she could see from her limited vantage point. *The blood I really want belongs to somebody named Malfoy, but I'll take a pint or two of Potter if that's all I can get.*

"You do remember what Hermione's Animagus is, don't you, Gin?" said Harry, his feet not moving from the doorway. "And what Draco's was, come to that. I know you're angry, but chewing on my ankles isn't going to solve anything."

*And your talking at me is?* Lynx growled under her breath. *I'm not coming out, no matter what you have to say to me...*

"You don't have to come out," Harry added. "All I want you to do is listen."

*Fine. I'll listen.* Lynx edged closer to the foot of the bed. *And then I'll bite your legs off.*

"So, there was this kid." The feet adjusted themselves into the position which meant Harry was leaning on the doorframe. "He really cared a lot about some other kids who were his friends. Including the girl he was pretty sure he wanted to marry some day. But there were these problems, and all this family drama, and he ended up dying before he could do any of that. Thing is, Ginny, he didn't die scared. Not for himself, anyway. And he didn't even really die angry. He died thinking about those friends, and that girl. About how much he loved them, and wanted them to be safe. And when you're magical—and he was—when you're magical, dying like that...well, it has an effect."

*An effect? Really?* Lynx scoffed under her breath. *An effect that didn't work this time, maybe! Look what happened to—*

"So when the person who killed this kid, who happened to be his dad, by the way, when he went after the girl his son loved..." Harry's breath was shaky, but mingled with the scent of sorrow in Lynx's nose was that of disbelieving, overwhelming joy. "He got her body, Ginny, but that's all he got. The potion didn't work the way he thinks it did. Danger saw—let me show you what Danger saw."

A quiet jingle heralded a small cascade of golden chain falling to the floor beside the bed.

Lynx considered the matter for a moment, then scooted forward and hooked the chain under the bed with a paw. Flattening her ears and shutting her eyes, she ducked her head inside it. **Five seconds**, she said warningly as the link between her and Harry came live. **That's all you get.**

**That's all I need.** Harry spread the mental picture before her. **Look at them.**

Ginny looked, and looked again, and felt the knowledge contained in that look spreading out through her mind, draining off the poison in which she'd been drowning herself.

Three people sat in a small, white gazebo in the midst of a carefully tended garden. The eldest, a wizard of middle years with a long fall of auburn hair and a full beard to match, was holding out a handful of yellow confectionery for a bird with red and gold feathers to regard with one beady eye. Across from him sat a younger man with hair of a soft, sandy brown, waving gently about a strong-featured face highlighted by brilliant cobalt blue eyes, currently fixed with a frown on the music stand before him, which held several sheets of manuscript paper and a polished silver flute.

Kneeling on the bench between them, her left hand outstretched to a passing butterfly, was a witch of Ginny's own age, her tumbling dark blonde locks seeming to hold a hint of red within them, though that might only have been the strong, rich light around her. Her eyes, a mingling of blue, gray, and green, shone bright with their usual wondering joy as the butterfly fluttered to a landing on her palm, just short of the unornamented golden band which circled her slender finger.

**But how**— Ginny stammered mentally as the vision ended, reverting to human and wiggling out from under the bed. **But who**—

"Best guess?" said Harry, reclaiming his chain. "Fox sneaked out of their little pocket world and headed for the graveyard to see how the vision would happen. Might even have been him Luna was really talking to. And when Lucius spotted the dagger in her hand, and managed to get it away and use it on her instead, he dove in, Fox did, and grabbed her out of her body before the potion could hit. Left behind just her Animagus-mind, the part of her that's all Starwing, barely any Luna at all. Which is basically what the potion was supposed to do anyway, so Lucius wouldn't notice."

"And Luna..." Ginny found her voice shaking, and didn't care. This grief would heal, rather than wound further. "Luna's with him now. And she always will be. They'll watch over us, until it's our turn to go to them ..."

Harry pulled her close. "One more thing you might not have noticed," he murmured into her ear. "I didn't, not my first three times looking at it. Their hands."

"What about—" Ginny looked down at her own hand, where a slender band of gold held pride of place, and another sob of pure gladness shook her. "Oh, *Harry!* But I thought, after they'd died..."

"It's the Founders' Castle. The rules are probably different. And Danger said that was what she put in her permission letter, so he's even officially allowed." Harry stroked his finger once across her wedding ring. "Bet you Professor Dumbledore did the ceremony himself. Just like he did ours."

"On the Astronomy Tower, at dawn," Ginny murmured. "Or maybe it was a lonely, winding road at twilight."

*But that doesn't matter now.*

The thought occurred to her, fleetingly, that either Danger or Harry might be lying to her, might have concocted the pretty memory-scene as a way to break her loose from her self-destructive spiral, but to her amusement she found that she didn't care.

*Even if it's all a lie and Luna really is destroyed, gone forever, I'd be doing her no favors by curling up in a ball and whining about how useless the Pride is. Of course it will be, if its alpha female gives up at the first really hard hit we've taken!*

Letting Harry's scent, his strength, his simple nearness soothe her for the first time since the news of Luna's fate had come to them, Ginny made her silent vow.

*I will live, she told her departed Pridemates, seeing again the clarity and joy in Luna's eyes as the butterfly waved its wings idly back and forth, the love and relief in Fox's as he glanced up in her direction. I will fight this war. And I will do it well, without anything that would make you sorry to admit you know me.*

*After all, Luna said it herself. We'll see each other again.*

*And I want to be able to look into her eyes without any shame when I do.*

---

In the library of Malfoy Manor, a fair-haired girl sat in a sunny corner, her black cloak draped across the lap of her gray robes. Nimble fingers, one bearing a gold ring set with a red stone, tugged a needle up, down, up again, stitching black ribbon to the cloak in a pattern all but impossible to see. As the two wizards seated at the table watched, her thread came to its end, and she unhurriedly tied it off, snapped it with her wand, and rethreaded the needle to begin again.

"Fascinating," said Lord Voldemort, watching the quick, darting movements of Starwing's hands. "You say she remembers nothing, Lucius?"

"I wish I had better news, my lord, but sadly she does not." Lucius Malfoy sighed, rubbing the red stone on his own matching ring. "I do apologize, but when I saw the shape of what she was bringing from her pocket, I fear I panicked."



Voldemort laughed. "I could wish all my Death Eaters would panic so usefully! To turn an enemy's weapon against her, and come off unscathed themselves...no matter, Lucius, we have other ways of learning Potter's plans, and the Order's. And you are returned to me, a useful man instead of a burden. And yet..."

"And yet, I would be nothing but that same burden, were I to go into the front lines, even with Starwing beside me," Lucius finished for his Master. "My lord, I have thought about that very thing, and I believe I have a solution." He spread his hands, indicating the room where they sat. "In this."

"Your home?" Voldemort hazarded. "Your library?"

"Both, my lord, and what they represent." Lucius turned to look at a somewhat grimy wall. "The line of Malfoy is old, older even than its name. This manor was built by the family of Beauvoi only a few years after the time when your honored ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, decided that the land and castle which he had inherited from his mother in Scotland would be an excellent place for himself and his friends to found their school of magic. I cannot claim that the line of descent is unbroken from that day to this, certainly, but I can and do claim that these lands, and this house, have never passed into the hands of strangers."

"So much I knew." Voldemort tapped his fingers together. "What about it?"

"My lord, so many hundreds of years of history, so many books and documents that my ancestors have collected—even the very house itself, its decorations and its construction—" Lucius looked around the room with a slow, searching gaze. "Might they not hold some ancient secrets which will help you with your quest today? Spells, potions, talismans which were well known to those of old, but which we of latter days forget? I cannot guarantee it, but I suspect it strongly. And if you will allow me to labor among these books until my magic returns, to catalog them and set aside any which may be of use, I can find out." He sighed. "I had meant to set Draco to that task, once he returned from his mission..."

"Your loss is a grievous one," Voldemort agreed, "but never fret. Who knows? Somewhere within these walls may even be hidden some secret which would allow you to father another son." He smiled thinly. "One who would, I have no doubt, live better guarded than before."

"Certainly one whose mother could never make ridiculous, treacherous choices." Lucius smiled, the expression a trifle strained. "So, my lord? Your decision?"

"Did you think I was likely to say no?" Voldemort got to his feet, Lucius following suit quickly. "The plan is a good one. Your work will be of use, but tedious enough that no one will think I favor you, and still it keeps you out of harm's way until you are more easily able to join in battle, and to defend yourself. Will there be anything you require to begin?"

"No, with Starwing at my call, I think I have..." Lucius paused. "Now that I think of it, my lord," he said diffidently. "Perhaps..."

"Come, come, Lucius, you know you need only to ask." Voldemort laughed. "I am your guest, after all! What is it?"

"Perhaps, an assistant. One whose mind is unimpaired." Lucius glanced back at Starwing, her eyes bent on her work, giving no indication that she heard the two voices, or that she was aware of the wizards' presence at all. "Some of the tasks involved in setting the library to rights will require human judgment, and I cannot do it all myself—or I could, but it would take far longer than my magic will require to regrow. And I had just the man in mind, if I may have him." He looked up, into his Master's red eyes. "Wormtail."

"Wormtail?" The place where Voldemort's eyebrows should have been rose. "I have been asked *not* to send him with certain of my Death Eaters whom I have assigned to important work, but never before this have I been asked *for* him. I had not thought you greatly attached to him, Lucius."

"I need not be attached to him to understand him, my lord." Lucius encompassed a small space of air with his hands, then shrank it still smaller. "He is weak and easily led, but his magic is passable, his attention span reasonable, and he obeys orders without quibbling or delaying. I require no more."

"And most of the missions on which I send my Death Eaters *do* require more," Voldemort mused aloud. "So that, were I to send Wormtail on one of those, I run the risk of not winning my objective. Whereas, if he remains here with you..." He nodded. "I like it. Yes, Lucius, you may certainly have Wormtail. I will have him sent for immediately."

"You are too kind, my lord." Lucius bowed. "As soon as he arrives, we will begin." His eyes rested once again on the expanse of wall Draco had once sneaked into the library to examine. "I know just where I want to start."

---

"Clean a wall?" Peter tried not to look askance at Lucius, or past him at Starwing. Both of them set his instincts on edge, warning that he should look out, run away, hide from the predators. Lucius's waft of werewolf musk didn't help either, as it woke several conflicting reactions of 'friend' and 'foe' in the various parts of his mind. "I can, but—"

"This wall is special," Lucius interrupted. "I have reason to believe there may be something painted on it which was later deliberately concealed, something I would be loathe to lose forever. Revealing it without destroying it will require a wizard who has a dexterous touch with magic." Silver-gray eyes raked Peter from head to toe. "Though I suppose, as my lord has no one else whom he can spare for the moment, you will have to do."

Peter swallowed an inappropriate choke of laughter and instead drew his wand. "Where should I start?" he asked, looking over the wall. It looked flat, white, and dirty, like most of the walls of Malfoy Manor which were not covered with wooden paneling or adorned with snoring portraits.

*But isn't there just a hint of something, on the left? Like a picture, a painting, that was almost*

*erased or covered up, but not quite?*

"Here." Lucius tapped the very spot where Peter had been looking. "If you can clear off the overlying layers of paint, we will be able to see if this is nothing but an idle dream, a moment of childish distraction, or if there is truly something here."

Watching from the corner of his eye as Lucius returned to the table and the book he'd been studying, Peter waited for his moment. "Childish?" he said aloud, softly enough that he could claim he'd been talking to himself if he were challenged on it. "I wonder if he means Draco..."

"Of course I mean Draco," said Lucius without looking up from his book. "Unless you think I kept a harem of other women sequestered in the house, and fathered children on them indiscriminately." Now he did look up, a gleam in his eye. "While we're on the subject, I believe congratulations are in order."

An instant of sheer panic had Peter's wand in his hand before his thinking mind took over again, thankfully soon enough that the wand's tip never pointed at anything but the floor. *If he meant to cause trouble, hurt Evanie or take her away from me, he wouldn't be telling this to me, now would he? Either he's playing with me, tossing out lures to see if I'll react, or he wants something from me and he's realized the fastest way is through her. Stay calm, don't lie, and push back just a little, he won't be expecting that...*

"Why, thank you," he said with a shallow bow. "You...sniffed it out, I assume?"

Lucius raised one eyebrow, then nodded slowly. "Well played," he said with the hint of a smile. "When do you expect your bundle of joy?"

"September." Peter turned to the wall, keeping his head inclined far enough over his shoulder that his voice would carry. "The house-elves have apparently declared that we should expect a daughter."

"And one disbelieves a house-elf at one's peril." Lucius's voice had turned thoughtful. "I must remember to do something about that. But not now. To return to the original topic, yes, I mean Draco. He slipped into the library during his brief period with us, and seemed very taken by that particular wall. And later, while we were battling for our magic and our lives, he tried to distract me with a flood of the strangest and most disparate images possible—except that one of them involved this very wall, with an intriguing mural painted on it. So, with your help, I propose to see if that particular vision of his is true or false." He chuckled. "Since I have already explored another avenue of those images, and found it entirely satisfactory."

Across the room, Starwing rethreaded her needle yet again and continued her stitchwork.

Cleaning the wall without damaging what soon became apparent was indeed a Muggle-style mural (the images neither flinched nor objected when he ran his wand over their faces, but continued to smile out at the world obliviously) required more thought and concentration than Peter had thought it might. To add to the burden, Lucius would from time to time toss a careless question

his way, usually to do with some odd point in magical theory or an obscure facet of the history of the wizarding world.

*Does he want to catch me out, maybe? Put me in my place so I won't give him trouble now that he doesn't have his magic to keep me in line? I wish I could tell him trouble's the last thing I'd want to cause—this suits me perfectly, it's work I can do, it isn't harming anyone, and it keeps me close to Evanie in case she needs anything the house-elves can't supply...*

But trying to second-guess Lucius Malfoy would be an exercise in futility, so Peter dutifully answered the questions he could and gave a flat "I don't know" to those he couldn't. Lucius, as far as Peter could tell, seemed satisfied with either answer, making a few notes on the scroll he had open beside his book, then returning to his reading and allowing Peter to get back to the cleaning.

The light had faded so far that Starwing had set aside her sewing, and Peter had revealed the faces of a rather Malfoy-looking man and a pretty, plump woman with a head full of brown curls beside him, when Lucius called a halt. "My ancestors will still be there tomorrow," he said, looking at the newly-cleaned area of wall with satisfaction. "And the next day, and the day after that. If your current rate of progress continues, you will have the entirety revealed in...a week, would you say?"

"Maybe a little longer." Peter tapped his wand gently against the center section of the wall. "There's more detail further in, so I'll need to move more slowly to avoid damaging it."

"Yes, by all means, do that. Damage to a priceless work of art such as this..." Lucius shook his head. "What my more recent ancestors can have been thinking, to cover it over with paint and pretend it never existed, I cannot imagine. But then, the past is the past. We must learn from it, not dwell in it." He held out his hand in Peter's direction. "If you can agree with me on that, Pettigrew, I think we will do extremely well together."

Peter looked from Lucius's faintly amused face to his hand, over towards Starwing, who was fastening her newly-embellished cloak around her neck, then back to Lucius. "I think we will," he agreed, and met the hand with his own. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Perhaps a bit earlier, if you would be so kind." Releasing the handclasp, Lucius beckoned with two pale fingers to Starwing. "The Dark Lord will not, after all, be visiting us every day."

"No, of course not. After breakfast, then?"

"That will do very well," Lucius agreed, with the slightest of bows. "After breakfast."

Starwing smiled and curtsied to Peter, and the strange pair turned together and walked unhurriedly from the library.

Letting out the breath he hadn't been aware of holding, Peter turned to regard the faces painted on the wall. "Does he make any sense to you?" he asked them whimsically. "He's your however-many-times-great-grandson, after all."

The faces disdained to reply.

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Danger lay sprawled across her bed at Headquarters, letting her mind rove back over the seemingly endless list of things to be done, and the dismayingly small proportion next to which she could place a mental check.

*Recast the Fidelius over this place with the two of us as joint Secret-Keepers, just in case one of the Death Eaters realized that with Albus dead, either Snape or Luna could have led them directly here—done. Familiarized ourselves with the most recent business of the Order, and matched it up with what the Red Shepherds are handling—done. Talked with Brian and Corona about finding and helping the former occupants of that cave complex behind the waterfall where Graham and Natalie were taken—done, and wasn't that just as uplifting as it could possibly be?*

She rolled over with a small groan. Knowing that the Death Eaters were sending the werewolves they controlled to prey on Muggles was one thing. Hearing the stories of the lives thus shattered, even second-hand, was altogether different.

*Though at least they were able to recruit Maya and Crystal to help them some. Maya to back Corona up when she talks to some of the women, since I'm sure they have very good reasons not to trust a man within twenty feet of them, and Crystal to tell them it really is possible to adjust your life around magic, even if you don't have any of your own...*

Running her hands through her hair, she sat up. "Three things done, and only about, oh, a million more to go," she said aloud. "Because, absolutely crazy people that we are, we've *also* agreed to take on classes at Hogwarts this fall! What were we thinking?"

**We were thinking that children still need to be taught, and that we need a good, safe base to work from,** Remus answered, as she heard his footsteps in the corridor outside the door. **And we were also thinking...** The door creaked under his hand as he came into the room, shifting into audible speech without a pause. "...that Minerva will need all the help she can get, both against external pressures and internal ones."

"Internal?" Danger frowned. "Wouldn't the tests of intent have got rid of most of the bad apples?"

"Who will save us from ourselves?" Remus chuckled, a trifle flatly, as he shut the door behind him. "It's not the Death Eaters' children she's worried about, love. It's ours. Harry and the Pride like her, they respect her, they'll listen to her, but they don't yet give her the level of immediate obedience they gave Albus. They may never. But us..."

"Us, they obey." Danger nodded. "Not *completely* without question, but we've got a better chance of keeping them from flying off the handle—you should pardon the phrase—than Minerva would alone."

"Exactly why she wants us all there." Remus sighed, sitting down. "Is it terrible of me to be glad that we can't get to Gerald at the moment?" he asked, his mind filled with a painful mixture of

guilt and relief. "Someone will have to tell him about Luna eventually, I know, but I can't help but feel grateful that it's unlikely to be me. She's been his world since Anita died, and for it to happen like *this...* "

"What's really bothering you?" Danger asked, pulling her feet up onto the bed. "There's something more here. Something personal. And no, I am *not* saying that you don't care about Luna," she added sharply as Remus's sense surged through the bond. "*Or* about Draco, come to that! But something has been eating at you ever since we heard what Hermione had to say, and I am damn well going to have it, Remus, or so help me I'll shrink you to house-elf size and stuff you in Kreacher's old den under the water tank until you talk!"

Remus raised an eyebrow at his wife. "You will?"

"I'll get Sirius to do it for me. Or no, better. Letha." Danger grinned triumphantly. "She's just as sick of you moping around as I am."

"Merlin's blood, she means it," Remus muttered towards the mirror hanging over the bureau.

"And why shouldn't she?" the mirror returned tartly.

"One of these days I'm mentioning to Sirius that he needs to replace the furniture around here." Remus turned away from the mirror's indignant squawks and, not without a wince, met Danger's eyes. **I thought this couldn't happen, Danger**, he said silently, restraining the worst tempests of emotion but still opening enough of his mind that she could see and feel the storms which shook him, storms filled with anger, confusion, but most of all, blame. **I thought I'd stopped him. After I saved his life at the Department of Mysteries, I laid that debt on him as a geas, a magical prohibition, against hurting any of the Pride. It should have stopped him from going after them again, and especially it should have stopped him killing them...**

Wordlessly, Danger sent back understanding, openness, a sense of readiness to hear.

**Damn it, I should have listened to him!** The words erupted from Remus's mind with enough heat and force that Danger flinched involuntarily, but remained where she was. **He told me, Danger, he told me so himself—eight lives for one, I was stretching it too far, the bond couldn't hold**

"And just how were you supposed to know he was telling you the truth?" Danger demanded. "Since as far as I know, that's not an art in which he's generally considered proficient?"

"Point." Remus sighed. "But still, I should have known it myself. It's basic maths—one for one is only fair, two or even four for one is stretching it some, but it still might have held—but eight?" He shook his head. "How did I ever think I could make that work?"

"You were thinking about the Warrior-cubs you love, and the other Warriors they're learning to love in their turn." Danger laid her hand on the bed between them, palm up. "And love is one of the only ways that one and one can equal more than two." **Like you and me**, she added silently. **I**

hope you realize I ought to be a great deal more offended that I am, that you thought I might be angry with you for this.

"How can you not be?" Remus kept his hands firmly where they were. "I failed you."

**Oh, now you're just asking for the water tank.** Danger glared at him. **You took a risk, Remus. We've all taken risks over the course of this war. Sometimes those risks work out. And sometimes—and this is why they're called risks, and not certainties—sometimes they don't. This one didn't. If it had, if Draco were still alive, if Luna were in possession of all her faculties still, I'd be thrilled beyond words. But don't you dare, don't you even dare, to think that I could possibly blame you for not being able to shield them from every possible ill!**

"All right, so you don't blame me." Remus produced something which bore a remote resemblance to a smile. "Now if I could just stop blaming myself."

"With that, I can't help you." Danger slid her hand closer to him. "Except perhaps to give you something else to think about for a while." **We have to stay strong now, love,** she added silently. **Even, or especially, when strong is the last thing we feel.**

**Because now it isn't just the Pack that depends on us.** At last, Remus laid his hand on hers, and looked once more into her eyes. **It's the Order as well. To some extent, the DA and the Red Shepherds. Even Hogwarts, with Minerva needing our help there.** He sighed again. **Heady stuff, for a wizard who only ever really wanted to ride a desk, like his father did. Or maybe teach Care of Magical Creatures, or work at one of the animal shops at Diagon Alley.**

**You think it's much better for a girl who thought she'd get some nice safe little job in a bookshop or a library, eventually meet a nice boy, give her baby sister some nieces and nephews to play with?** Danger smiled. **At least you knew about magic from the word go!**

**There is that.** Remus squeezed her hand gently. **And the way things fell out, I found you, and you found me. We have Sirius and Letha, we have the cubs—and for all the pain we've had from losing Draco, we know where he is, we'll see him again, and we'll never stop loving him.** He grinned, for an instant looking very like his full-moon-night self. **And one of these days, we will catch Lucius Malfoy off his guard...**

Danger slid across the bed into his arms in reply.

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Molly Weasley looked around with a frown as the small sound she'd heard a moment before was repeated. It seemed to be coming from the room off the kitchen which Sirius had refurbished for Dobby and Winky, and then enlarged in wizardspace when the news of Winky's pregnancy had been confirmed.

*Could something be wrong with one of the elflets? But if they were ill, Winky knows me well enough by now, she wouldn't have hesitated to ask for my help...*

The third recurrence of the sound was loud enough that Molly could place it definitely as a sniffing sob. Scruples set aside, she hurried to the small door and threw it open.

Winky looked up, startled, from the tiny bed beyond, her enormous eyes bloodshot, a piece of parchment crumpled in her hand. There was no sign of Dobby.

"Winky, what in the world," Molly began, before being halted by Winky's frantic headshaking.

"M-Mistress is not to be b-bothering with us," Winky said carefully, her eyes fixed on Molly's face, as she rattled the piece of parchment in her hand. "We is just having—having a bit of a *talk* about *things*, Dobby and I, and Dobby is going out to let off some of his feelings somewhere else, and I is s-staying here..." Her lips quivered, but she firmed them resolutely. "We is *not* causing trouble for Mistress, or for anyone else."

Molly looked suspiciously at the parchment. "Let me see that," she ordered.

A distinct look of relief crossed Winky's features as she obediently surrendered the note.

Accepting it, Molly took a step back to get the light from the kitchen candles.

A moment later, she could no longer see anything but red.

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"How about a swimming pool?" Ron, sitting in the Gryffindor common room with Hermione, Harry, and Ginny, tapped a spot on Malfoy Manor's grounds directly beneath one of the first floor suites' balconies. "Right here, and then I could just get up in the morning and dive straight in, I wouldn't even have to change..." He blinked as a sudden light erupted under Ginny's robes. "What's—ow!" Hastily he yanked his pendants out from under his own robes as they turned momentarily scorching hot. "What the bloody—"

Ginny held up her first pendant, the muffin tin glowing brilliantly. "It's Mum," she said. "Something's made her angry, angry or afraid, but anything that frightened her that much would probably be a threat, and it's hot, not cold—"

Harry's Zippo buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket and flipped the lid up. "Go," he said shortly.

"Stay together and do not leave the castle until further notice," said Moony without preamble. "Lucius Malfoy seems to be doing very well for himself. He's apparently found a way around a Fidelius Charm."

Hermione swallowed once and reached for Ron's hand, which was already on its way to hers. "How do you know that?" she asked, in a voice which sounded nothing like her own.

"Very simply." Harry might have thought his Pack-father cared nothing for whatever was going on, had he not seen the decided flicker of the Zippo flame and been able to feel the surge of Moony's anger through it. "He left a note within this house, stating that as long as Dobby and



Winky refrain from attacking him and his, he will not harm what he has taken from them."

"What he—" Ginny's eyes widened. "Oh, no."

"Yes," Moony confirmed flatly. "Echo is missing."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 44: Innovations and Renovations (Year 7)

Patroclus Nott turned a corner and stopped short. He had been looking for his nominal host all morning, and now it seemed he'd found him.

*Though not anywhere I would have expected him to be.*

*Still, whatever else has changed about Lucius, he hasn't lost his ability to pose.*

The only living scion of the House of Malfoy sat comfortably on one side of a window seat, the pallor of his skin and hair set off by his robes of unrelieved black, the bright sunlight of late morning falling full on the pages of the book he held in his slender, elegant hands. The rest of the seat was occupied by Starwing, who sat with her back to the opposite wall and her feet planted on the cushions, her black cloak and the equally black ribbon she was stitching to it spread across her gray-robed lap.

"What do you want, Patroclus?" said Lucius without lifting his eyes from his book. "Or did you simply come to enjoy the view?" Now he did look up, his gaze traveling slowly over Patroclus in the look which somehow always succeeded in reminding him of the many questionable spots on his family tree. "While I do admire your taste, I should warn you. If sufficiently agitated, she bites."

"I beg your pardon?" Patroclus let his hand hover significantly near the grip of his wand. "Are you insinuating I would be unfaithful to my wife?"

"Why not?" Pale eyes gleamed with dark humor. "Unless you're so foolish as to think she and that young man she hired to tutor her in the Romance languages aren't conjugating a bit more than verbs while you're away on the Dark Lord's business. About your son's age, isn't he—ah, ah." This in a chiding tone as Patroclus started to draw his wand, and found himself facing the tip of Starwing's, aimed directly for his right eye. "He means no harm, my dear. Do you, Patroclus." The voice managed, between one sentence and the next, to chill twenty degrees and lose all of its lazy, drawling good humor.

Clenching his teeth, Patroclus released his wand's grip and showed his hands empty and harmless. Starwing let go of her own wand, which disappeared up her sleeve, and unhurriedly picked up her needle, returning to her pointless stitchery.

"Why do you have her do that?" Patroclus demanded, pointing at cloak and ribbon. "What good is it to anyone?"

"It keeps her occupied, and free from fretting." Lucius smiled thinly. "And unlike other forms of threadwork, it will take no harm if she must drop it hurriedly. As you saw." Leaning back, he half-closed his eyes, regarding Patroclus lazily over the beam of sunlight which had been shining on his book. "Now, was there something you wanted? A message, perhaps, or a question?"

"What *happened* to you?" The words escaped Patroclus without his conscious consent. "You've... changed."

Lucius tucked a marker into his book's pages, shut it, and set it aside. "That which does not change," he said in a meditative tone, "dies." His eyes met Patroclus's squarely once more. "And I defy you to find any man who has looked into the face of death and has *not* changed. Especially when that death wears features so very similar to his own." One finger traced the slender scar under his left eye. "If I had not been willing to change, to adapt, to improvise, the final battle of the Malfoys would have ended far differently. And now?" He spread his hands, continuing the motion with the left to stroke Starwing's hair where it lay across the shoulder of her robes. "Now, Patroclus, I continue that adaptation to surround the new circumstances of my life."

"What do you mean?" Patroclus hovered his hand near his wand once more, and at Lucius's nod drew it slowly and conjured himself a chair, sitting down facing his fellow Death Eater.

"I have taken an injury." Lucius flexed the fingers of his right hand, looking thoughtfully at it, as though remembering what it felt like to hold a wand there and know that his magic would respond. "A painful injury, surely, and not one I like to admit, but one which *will* heal, given time and proper care. Should I deny myself that care, for the sake of my pride, and run the risk of crippling myself for life? Or, worse, losing our Master some objective he wishes to win because I cannot perform the tasks he demands of those who fight for him? Is it not much wiser to find those things I *can* do while I heal, and accept with as good a grace as possible the help I may need while I am, shall we say, not quite myself?"

Slowly, Patroclus nodded. "Only—why Wormtail?" he asked, glancing down at the floor, half-expecting to see the little rodent come skittering by, attracted by the sound of his name. "I would have thought you'd rather avoid him. Certainly everyone else does!"

"And because everyone else does, he will be fawningly grateful for the chance to do something, anything, for the Dark Lord's cause," Lucius countered easily. "As he is, and has been for the last week and a half. I have also taken care to possess myself of certain facts about him, which ensure his fullest cooperation in whatever I ask of him. And I amuse myself, as he works, by imagining my study, once the war is over and we may retake our rightful places." His hands shaped a box in midair. "An Unbreakable cage on a shelf, with a little wheel to one side, and rewards of food and water linked to how long and how swiftly he runs on it..."

Patroclus snickered, enjoying the image.

"He joined our side originally because he saw no other way to survive." Lucius caressed Starwing's dark blonde hair again, twining his fingers into it. "I see a certain poetry in taking from him everything *but* his bare survival. I had even considered using on him the dagger I wrested from little Starwing, inflicting the Imprimatus Potion upon him, but I doubt I shall." He sat back, watching her hands move. "A pretty girl under my complete control, a permanent Imperius, as it were, and with no more mind than an owl, is both useful and ornamental. A fat fool like Wormtail, with no more mind than a rat, would be neither. So he shall keep his humanity." His smile was cold. "Much good may it do him, in his cage on my study wall."

Elsewhere, a wizard named Novir peered around the corner of a building and considered his options.

None of them looked terribly appetizing.

*How are they bloody doing this?* He conjured himself a cup of water and gulped it down thirstily, hoping the soothing effect on his parched throat would help to stimulate his mind. *It's like they know where I am, like they can smell me or something—that'd be just like the Weasleys and their sort, putting spells on themselves to be able to sniff out a trail like animals...*

However they were doing it, the fact remained that the Red Shepherds had now found his hiding place three times in twenty-four hours, and it didn't look like he was going to make it to number four.

*I've got one shot.* He took another look around the corner, trying to calculate distances in his head. *If I can get out of this little alley, onto what passes for a main road in this blighted wasteland, there might be a few Muggles around, and they're squeamish about putting the animals in harm's way, or Merlin forbid, doing magic in front of them.* He snorted in disgust. *Not like a Memory Charm or three is going to harm them, they can barely see what's under their noses as it is. If I can just make it out there, I might have a clear shot at getting back to one of our safe houses...*

Gathering himself, he cast a Shield Charm around his body, then bolted for the alley's entrance. No spellfire followed him, no other forms moved—

*Caught them totally flatfooted—I can't believe it—*

With a final burst of speed, he dashed through the narrow gap between two buildings.

*I've done it, I've done it, I'm fr—*

A tiny *sproing* was all the warning he had as a net materialized out of nowhere, its fibers wrapping tightly around him and scooping him off his feet to dangle between the buildings. He yelped in shock, then quickly applied his wand to one of the ropes—if he moved quickly, he could still get loose from this trap before—

"*Expelliarmus*," said a calm, carefully enunciated voice, and Novir's wand was ripped from his hand. He slewed around in time to see a piece of the scenery stand up, catch his wand neatly in its off hand, and unhurriedly remove its Disillusionment, revealing itself as a bespectacled, disheveled ginger wizard with the smallest of smirks on his freckled face.

"Hello, Mr. Novir," said Percy Weasley, brushing a streak of dirt off his robes. "We've been waiting for you."

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Hermione sat on a windowsill in the Gryffindor common room, sun warm on her back, watching

Ron making minute adjustments on the schematic of Malfoy Manor the Pride had been happily customizing to their hearts' content. What Meghan had dubbed the 'Manor Den' would, they had decided, be established as soon after the end of the war as was convenient for all.

*And we might think about putting it under Fidelius for ourselves, now that we're sure Lucius didn't find a way to break the charm.* She growled under her breath. *Not that it's so much better that he could dig up the ancient history of Dobby belonging to the Malfoys, and make Starwing use what was left of that bond to force Echo to leave Headquarters and come to him, to bind her into his service instead...*

But as much as she hated the means Lucius had used to obtain himself a servant, it also opened a door she didn't think her "father" had considered.

*Echo isn't just Dobby's daughter. She's Winky's as well. And Dobby doesn't have a family he's tied to any longer, but Winky does—and it's the Weasleys. If one of them can get into Malfoy Manor, or even someone connected to them formally, a wife, a fiancée...* She rubbed her pendants with a faint smile. *A Pridemate. If we could manage that, we might be able to invoke that other side of her blood, give her clothes, and free her.*

The thought of blood and Malfoys, inevitably, took her mind in another direction, as her hand crept upward to touch her left cheek.

The skin under her fingers, for the first time since the end of her third year, was smooth and unmarred, with no sign of a scar.

*And I never even noticed when it happened.* Silently, she bared her teeth. *We were able to go back through my memories and trace it to about an hour after Ginny told us Luna was gone, which accounts for nobody spotting it right then and there. We had other things to think about. But I'm still angry because I should have seen, should have felt, something that important happening...*

After stroking the place where her scar had been one last time, Hermione deliberately lowered her hand.

*Just another thing to add to Lucius Malfoy's tally. He couldn't even leave me that outward sign of what Fox and I had created out of his twisted little plan—he had to have Luna, Starwing, whoever she is now, erase it from my body as soon as he had her under his control.*

Still, nothing could, or would, erase that love from her mind and her soul.

*And every time I see where that scar isn't, I'll fight just that little bit harder.* She let her eyes rest on Ron's familiar and comforting form, on the tufts of ginger hair around his ears which stuck out in every direction, on the way he hooked his feet around the legs of his chair to keep himself in balance, on the crease of concentration between his eyebrows that meant he was working in a state of flow which bypassed his usual uncertainties completely. *Because I've lost one person I loved, two with Luna, but I still have so many others here with me, and we're going to win this war together and find our happily ever after. For them, for ourselves, for everyone.*

*Including the ones who'll come after us.*

She smiled a little as her thoughts came full circle. *And while I can't talk about our own children to Ron yet—he's barely ready to think about that in Harry and Ginny's case, he'd have a fit if I tried to bring it up for us—I can talk about children in the general sense, Muggle- and magic-born alike...*

"I wonder what other pureblood mansions or townhouses won't have owners any longer, once the war is over," she said aloud. "Or whose owners will be on our side, and might not want so much space to have to keep up."

"Bet we could find out. Poll the DA, get a list on the ones who left school before the tests of intent, something like that." Ron looked up at her, shading his eyes from the brightness (or warmth, for him) of the sunlight at her back. "How come?"

"Because some of this mess we're in might have been avoidable." Hermione drummed her fingers on her knee. "You'd never really met Muggles, or anyone who lived like them, until we moved into the Den, had you?"

"Not to talk to. Seen them at a distance, but nothing else." Ron shook his head. "And that's even with Dad's hobby. He's fascinated by Muggles, but he's still got a bit of the 'not in my back yard' thinking going on. It's all right for him to wonder about Muggles, play with their stuff all day long, but his kids shouldn't go out and actually *learn* about them."

"Except that you did, by becoming our friends. You couldn't help it." Hermione leaned her shoulder against the stone side of the window. "That's something I think we ought to aim for, Ron. Putting more magical children, from both sides of the divide, in a place where they can't help it. Because waiting until they're eleven might be leaving it too late."

"When would you start it, then?" Ron pushed aside the schematic of Malfoy Manor and sat back, twirling his wand between his fingers as he might one of his drumsticks. "Seven or eight, like us, or even younger than that?"

"As young as we can get them, honestly. Young enough not to be surprised by magic." Hermione held out her hand to the sunlight, feeling its warmth pool on her palm. "Whether or not they have it themselves. Educate the whole family, not just the one child who has magic. I mean, imagine if Harry's aunt had been able to go somewhere magical *with* her sister, instead of always being left at home, left behind, left out. Maybe she wouldn't have been so frightened and hateful about magic in general."

"And maybe you wouldn't have your Pack," Ron pointed out. "Which would be a loss for everybody, seeing as you're the one family around that makes us look completely normal."

Hermione made a face at him. "It would have to be a place where people would want to come," she said, tilting her head back to the sun. "So if we did put it in a pureblood manor, it would have to be one of the prettier ones, that would clean up nicely. Get rid of everything that's meant to

intimidate people, scare them into behaving, make them think of themselves as unimportant or not worth noticing."

"Pureblood manor house to Muggles? That'd be just about everything." But Ron looked as though the idea were taking hold of him, somewhat against his will. "Still, they pay money to go and see Muggle manor houses, don't they? The really old and grand ones, with all the suits of armor and the paintings and the tapestries?"

"Yes, they do. So we'd keep that, if we could." Hermione swirled a finger in the air, watching the dust motes dance wildly on the currents. "We'd just find a way to make it old and grand and welcoming, instead of old and grand and forbidding. Maybe—oh, here's an idea. Have it set up like it *is* somebody's home, like a family that's mixed Muggle and magical lives there, and the rooms where the family would do certain things are also the places where the people who come to visit can do that!"

"Like what?" Ron frowned. "What sorts of things—"

"A study." Hermione slid off the windowsill to come and sit across from Ron, scooping up the plans of the Manor Den along the way. "Like this one." She planted her finger in one of the rooms dominated by its enormous desk and wall of cubbyholes. "Quill pens, ink, and parchment, and Muggle paper and pens, set out all along the desk. People can come in and write letters, using whatever they want, and then address them and put them in the cubbies, and they'll be collected once a day and sent out by owls or Muggle post, whichever is correct!"

"Oh, I get it." Ron peered at the plans. "Down in the kitchen, have human-sized everything right alongside the stuff they make for house-elves, maybe even a couple of house-elves there to say hello. Though if we're trying to keep from scaring the Muggles, possibly that's not the best plan..."

"House-elves can be a trifle alarming if you're not expecting them," Hermione agreed. "But there would probably be at least one employed there, and if she agreed to let herself be seen every so often, especially by the children, that might make house-elves into a fun mystery for them, instead of a frightening one."

Ron snapped his fingers. "Scavenger hunt. Give the kids a list of things they've got to find in the house, that the house-elf missed when she was cleaning up last. If they find them all, then they get to take them down to the kitchen and return them to her."

"Yes, that's even better!" Hermione pulled a quill from her pocket and unrolled one of the scrolls on which the Pride had been recording ideas for the Manor Den, finding clean parchment near its bottom. "Because then meeting the house-elf is a reward, something special that you only get if you're good!" She noted it down under the fresh heading of *Muggle/magical meeting place*. "It'll drive the poor house-elf mad, though, having to specifically set out clutter for the children to find."

"Nah, that's easy." Ron waved this away. "Just make it all clothes. Then she won't want to touch it."



A sock here, a mitten there, a hat over yonder..."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh.

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"What do you want?" Novir demanded, trying to find some position within the dangling net that wasn't quite as humiliating. "I don't know anything, you won't get any information out of me—"

"Really?" Percy Weasley cocked his head, as two more pieces of alley wall unfolded themselves behind him and to either side. One removed its own Disillusionment to reveal a shorter, stockier Weasley brother, one whose features seemed faintly familiar. The other, waiting patiently until the second Weasley's wand touched its head, was discovered as a girl with short blonde hair wearing Muggle-style clothing, holding a small L-shaped item in her hand. "That's a shame. My colleagues and I don't like exerting all this energy on people who don't know anything. Especially when my work is piling up back at the Ministry. I might just have to get back there and start in on it, which would mean I'd have to leave you alone with them."

"Would you?" The girl clasped her hands at chest level, staring worshipfully at the elder Weasley. "Percy, would you *really* ? I haven't had a Death Eater to myself in *ages*, and I've got some *lovely* ideas—"

"Oi, don't forget about me!" the other Weasley protested. "There's this thing with one of our fireworks I've been wanting to try out. Find out what happens if you shove it up his arse and light it off. Would he fly around for a while, d'you think, or just blow up right there?"

"Hmm." The girl studied Novir, eyes narrowed. "He'd probably just blow up. The gastrointestinal tract isn't meant for that kind of abuse. But if you reinforced it before you stuffed the rocket in there..."

"Now we're talking!" The other Weasley rubbed his hands together, glee lighting his brown eyes, turning them not entirely sane. "Couple good Stiffening Spells, and we'll have a human rocket on our hands. Metaphorically speaking, of course. Up in the air's where he'll be, skywriting around until the fuse hits the powder, and then..." He mimed an explosion. "Be a bit messy, but that's why I always keep fresh clothes at the shop."

"Can't I have a go at him first, though?" The girl began to turn something on the item she held in her hand, making a rhythmic clicking noise. "It won't get in the way of what you want to do, Fred—you're after his insides, and all I want's his extremities. Fingers and toes." Lifting the thing, she sighted down its longer side at Novir, her smile as wide and as mad as Fred Weasley's. "See if I can get one or two of them to melt clean off, instead of just turning them into goo..."

"Crystal, really," Percy said in a tone of reproof. "Didn't you get enough of that sort of thing in Hogsmeade?"

"Hmm." Crystal pursed her lips, considering. "No."

The invocation of Hogsmeade finally jarred Novir's mind out of its frozen terror. "Her," he croaked, jabbing a finger in Crystal's direction. "I remember her—outside that daft little tearoom—that thing she's got, I remember what it does—"

"Oh, were you there?" Crystal fluttered her eyelashes. "I'm so glad. It's not often I meet someone who recognizes me."

"You're the Mad Muggle!" Novir tried to wriggle away, to hide himself from the girl, but all it accomplished was to set the net swinging, with him in it. "And you—" He found his breath coming short as he understood at last his half-recognition of the younger Weasley. He'd seen this boy's twin in Hogsmeade, moments before his death, standing side by side with this same girl, and the unveiled contempt in Fred's brown eyes and Crystal's orbs of gray-blue told him everything he needed to know.

*They'll do it. All the stuff they're talking about, and worse, much worse, they'll do it to me in a heartbeat.*

*If they get the chance.*

"Don't leave me with them," he said to Percy, low and urgent, fighting not to lose control of his breathing. "You can't do it, it wouldn't be human, they're mad as Fwoopers—"

"Oh, I know that." Percy inspected his fingernails. "But you see, they're *my* Fwoopers."

"What's a Fwooper?" Crystal hissed to Fred behind Percy's back.

"Bird. Makes you crazy." Fred circled his finger around his ear. "Long story. Tell you later."

"Got it." Crystal returned to her position beside Percy, rocking back and forth between heels and toes, humming to herself as she continued to rotate the moving part on her little toy—*only it's not a toy, maybe it started as one, but it certainly isn't now...*

"As I was saying, they may be mad, but they work for me," Percy went on, in time with the clicking of Crystal's turnings. "And I've already told you what would compel me to stay here, and what won't. If you really don't know anything that would interest me, well, then..." He rose onto his toes, preparing to turn in place and Disapparate.

"Ashby-de-la-Zouch!" Novir blurted out. "There's a cell set up in the castle there, right under the Muggles' noses! And Ashton-under-Lyne, outside Manchester, we've got a safe house there, and a supply cache—I can give you names, directions, everything..."

"Much better." Percy came down onto the flats of his feet again, making a calming motion at Fred and Crystal, both of whom pouted before stalking off to the other end of the alley, muttering together in angry tones. "Don't mind them, they won't harm you as long as I'm here. Now." He conjured podium, parchment, quill, and ink in one flowing motion of his wand, dipped the quill neatly into the inkwell, and looked up at Novir through the lenses of his glasses. "Tell me more."

Elsewhere, in an unremarkable plot of forest, a dark-furred wolf sat back on his haunches and snarled at a bush in frustration. The object of his hunt, a blue-enameled brooch of bronze in the shape of a stylized eagle, was nowhere to be seen, smelled, or otherwise sensed.

A spotted wildcat padded up beside him and licked the base of his ear once, then rose onto her hind legs and became Ginny. "So much for spot number seven," she said, pulling a list from her pocket and scratching a line through an entry on it. "But we *are* going to find it, Harry."

"When?" Harry demanded, twisting out of Wolf's form, as Pearl loped out of the underbrush and Captain descended from a nearby tree, where they'd been keeping watch for ambushers. "Every day we don't get it is a day people *die*, Ginny. It's a day the Death Eaters and Voldemort go on believing they can get away with everything they do."

"And if we had some way to snap our fingers and know which one of these is correct, we'd do it, but we don't." Ginny tucked the list back into her pocket. "At least we know what we're looking for, and a limited number of places it might be. Imagine if we had to look all over the world, or even all over the country."

"I know, I know." Harry kicked at a clump of leaf litter. "It just gets to me, because there are so many things I'd rather be doing with my time." A small smile sneaked onto his face. "Scraping paint comes to mind. Or watching it dry."

"We could always go down to you-know-where, if that's what you're after," Neville suggested, rising out of his alternate form and rolling his shoulders. "The house-elves are touching everything up, making sure it's all fresh and clean."

Pearl scowled, an expression which looked decidedly odd on the face of a deer. "Because we're going to need it," she said as soon as she had lips which could form words. "Probably very soon."

"Thank you, Amanda," Ginny murmured, looking towards the sky. "For thinking of it, and getting us started on it."

The Pridemates stood in silence for a moment, until Harry sighed. "All right," he said. "Let's get on with it. Back to that village, whatever it's called, take the roads from there to the restaurant, and then make ourselves disappear?"

"That sounds like a plan." Neville nodded. "Only I didn't know you and Ginny had gone as far in Muggle magic as vanishing people. Last time I looked, you were still back at coins and cards."

"I will have you know," said Ginny with dignity, "that coins and cards are some of the hardest things to do properly. And no, I still won't teach you how to palm things," she added to Meghan.

"That's not fair! You taught Luna!"

"Because she was older than you are, and I knew she wouldn't use it to pass notes in class. Or if she did, she wouldn't get caught."

"And you think I will?" Meghan stiffened. "I'm a Marauder! I never get caught!"

"Except when you're tie-dyeing all the house-elves' tea towels in jewel tones," Neville said idly.

Meghan glared at him. "And if you'd *helped* me, like I *asked* you to, I *wouldn't* have!"

"Wouldn't have what?" Harry asked, moving out of range. "Done it, or got caught?" He dropped into Wolf's form and bolted away before Meghan could respond.

"Cheater!" Meghan shouted after him. "Cheater, cheater, pumpkin-eater!" The final word twisted oddly, due to her transforming through it and dashing after Wolf at the top speed her hooves could deliver.

Ginny and Neville looked at each other. "So we've just seen a deer chasing a wolf," Neville said finally.

"Intending to wreak havoc when she catches up with him," Ginny agreed. "Where *did* this madness start?"

"Platform nine and three-quarters, for me." Neville grinned. "Where was yours? Your mum's kitchen?"

"Well, we were on the stairs. Luna and I." Ginny looked away. "I remember she thought Draco was cute, and Hermione looked nice," she said softly. "And I saw Harry cross his fingers when he said he wasn't Harry Potter..."

"And if you'd been able to whisper through time, and tell that little girl where you are today, she'd never have believed you." Neville looked up at the partly overcast sky above them. "Just like I wouldn't, if I'd heard about any of this before I left for Hogwarts. But that's what makes life so amazing, isn't it? The way it builds on itself until it's something you never expected?"

"Like a Pride." Ginny held out her hand, and Neville took it. "Stronger together than we are alone. Even when we lose people."

"Even when." Neville squeezed her fingers gently. "We should go. It's not safe to be out here alone."

"Right." With a sigh, Ginny arched her back, stretching. "Want a ride?"

"Why not." Neville bent forward and shrank into the form of the shimmering silver demiguise Captain, waiting until Ginny had finished her transformation into Lynx. Then he swung himself to her side and climbed onto her back, patting the top of her head to tell her he was securely seated.

A moment later, only a single quivering branch would have told an observer there had ever been anyone there at all.

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"And..." Peter swept the final few paint shavings into a pile with his wand and Vanished them. "There. Finished."

"Is it?" Lucius looked up from his book. "It is. And most attractively so."

Peter stepped back to take in the full effect, as Starwing stuck her needle through her sewing and set it aside to come and look for herself.

The mural on the library wall, as revealed by several days of Peter's careful (not to say tedious) work, featured six people neither young nor old, by their grouping a set of siblings and their respective spouses. Peter frowned at the man in the coat of scale mail kneeling beside the seated, smiling woman, trying to place his appearance—his wife and her brothers, who stood on either side of her chair, all had the fair-on-fair Malfoy look to them, but the man reminded him of someone else, someone from his own past...

"Fascinating," Lucius remarked, breaking Peter's concentration. "I do believe this may be a depiction of the first generation of Beauvois born in England." He beckoned to Starwing, who obediently drew her wand and sent small jets of light at the wall. "Do you see it, Pettigrew?"

Biting back an objection to the marring of his work, Peter looked more closely. The light from Starwing's wand, it seemed, was only light after all, not a spell or sparks, and it was highlighting a particular set of swirls at the hem of each depicted robe or gown or jacket, a set of swirls that almost looked like—

"Letters," he said, leaning in still further, fascinated. "O-W-A-I-N...A-V-I-C-E..."

"Names," Lucius corrected. "Owain Beauvoi, the eldest son of the house, and his wife, Avice. My ancestors, of course. On their other side, Owain's younger brother, Dafydd, and his wife, Amanda." He frowned for a moment, contemplating the face of the serene, red-haired woman so named, but then shook the mood from him. "And seated, their sister, Angharad, and her husband, John. Contemporaries, unless my research is mistaken, of the grandchildren of the Hogwarts Founders."

Starwing made a small, wordless noise of pleasure and patted at the hand of Amanda Beauvoi, onto which had been painted a simple gold ring. "Magic," she said certainly, then turned to face Peter, looking him up and down with the intent gaze of a post owl wondering if she'd found the right person for her letter. Her examination done, she smiled sweetly. "Magic!" she declared, pointing at Peter's wedding ring.

"Er." Peter looked towards Lucius, who only raised an eyebrow. Clearly he was not disposed to intervene. "Yes," he said gently, turning back to Starwing. "It's a magical ring. It tells me if my wife is all right."

"Good magic." Starwing nodded sagely, laying her left hand against her collarbone. Her eye was caught by the red-stoned ring she wore on it, and she smiled again. "Good, *good* magic," she proclaimed, holding it out for Peter to see. "I *like* good magic."

"I like good magic too." Fighting the urge to laugh aloud, Peter examined the ring. The setting, in the shape of two snakes holding the translucent gem in their mouths, looked very nearly as old as the painting he'd just finished uncovering, and the gemstone itself...

With another glance at Lucius, he reached out for Starwing's left hand with his right, but she pulled back. "No," she protested, making a face. "Bad hand!"

"It's certainly not the one I was born with," Peter acknowledged, offering his own left hand instead. "Will this do?"

"Yes." Starwing bounced in place, smiling. "Yes, yes, yes."

Moving slowly, trying to make his unexceptionable intentions clear, Peter lifted and turned Starwing's hand until he could look through her ring's gemstone to the sunlight coming through the window.

*I might be wrong, but it almost looks like—*

"Are you quite finished?" Lucius asked in a tone which suggested that only one answer was likely to be acceptable.

"Yes." Peter dropped Starwing's hand immediately. "I beg your pardon."

"Not at all." Lucius flicked his fingers, and Starwing hurried back to her chair to gather up her sewing. "Amuse yourself as you please for the rest of the day. We will begin on the more serious research tomorrow."

"I will. Thank you." Peter hurried out of the library, his mind racing.

*I'm not wrong. That stone is hollow. And filled with some sort of liquid.*

*I wonder what would happen if someone took that ring off her?*

It seemed he had more information to go into his next letter to the Order than he'd thought he might.

---

Molly turned and smiled as she saw who'd just come into the basement kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. "Percy, darling! How are things—can you stay a few minutes? Your father's due back any time now, he had to go out on a call..." She trailed off, seeing the expression on her son's face. "What's wrong, dear?"

"Nothing. Yet," Percy added to his mother's raised eyebrow. "But there may shortly be a great many things." He tossed a scroll onto the table. "We finally caught up with the Death Eater we've been following the past two and a half days, and if he's to be believed—and after he'd heard what Fred and Crystal had to say, I think he is—the Ministry is closer to the tipping point than we'd

thought. Weeks, at most."

"Oh, my." Molly sighed. "Well, I suppose it just goes to show that I did the right thing letting Fleur's family handle all the wedding arrangements for her and Bill. I'll have Winky start packing our things, shall I?"

"Packing?" Percy frowned. "Where are we going?"

"Sanctuary, of course." Molly turned back to the stove to rescue the teakettle as it whistled shrilly. "And don't you give me that look, young man," she added more crisply, her back still turned as she filled the teapot. "I know you, and I know your father. If this Ministry in exile is going to be based out of Sanctuary, you'll both want to be there as much as possible, and I refuse to try to keep you fed and rested when you're wearing yourselves to a thread coming and going. So." Setting the kettle back on the stove with a thump, she turned around, dusting off her hands. "Sanctuary it is."

Percy smiled. "Has anyone told you lately that you're astounding, Mother?" he asked, coming around the table to hug her.

"Stop that." Molly stretched up to kiss his cheek and lightly swat his ear. "You'll make me blush. Now, what do you want with your tea? Winky made currant scones this morning, and I think I have some ginger biscuits around here somewhere..."

---

"I still say we should have gone for the firework," Fred grumbled as he Apparated into the back room of the Hogsmeade branch of WWW, Crystal on his arm. "Or your red cartridge."

"What red cartridge?" Crystal drew her piece again, snapping the three cylinders into place one at a time. One's indicator was white, the second yellow, the third pink.

Fred snickered. "So you threatened him with something you weren't even carrying! Nicely done."

"I tend not to bring the red out when we're only after the small fry." Holstering her piece, Crystal strolled to the door which led to the front of the shop. "Though I shouldn't be rude. He did give us some important information. Which is why we didn't go for the firework, or the Semi-Universal Solvent—we want to encourage them to tell us things, and killing them is generally a deterrent..."

"And what you came up with isn't? Though I do approve of it on general principles." Fred opened the door for her with a wave of his wand, saluting Lee as his friend looked around from his place behind the counter. "It's not like we have anywhere to keep them locked up as they are, and we can always fix them up and turn them loose after the war's over."

"They certainly won't be going anywhere between now and then," Crystal agreed. "And nobody could even argue that we're putting them in harm's way, because they'll be exactly as safe as all the Muggles they'd ordinarily be going after..."

---

Kady the house-elf walked unhurriedly across the lawn of Sanctuary. All around her, the rest of the Hogwarts house-elves were busily setting the place to rights (since the little masters and mistresses had surely meant well, but had left things in a terrible state for all of that), but she had her own job at the moment.

Reaching the edge of the pond which had been added to one side of Sanctuary a week or two before, she bent down and tipped in the contents of the bowl she was carrying between her hands.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven," she counted aloud, smiling to herself. "There is being seven big fishes in our little bitty pond now. Seven pretty fishes to be swimming around in circles and eating the breadcrumbs that the Muggle children is soon to be feeding them." Her smile turned predatory. "The Muggle children that is *not* being hurt by our fat, happy fishes."

She turned in place and Disapparated, back to the kitchens above. Dinner wouldn't cook itself.

Below, in the pond, the bright orange fish which had once been a Death Eater named Novir swam in a puzzled figure eight, as though trying to work out what had happened to him.



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 45: Weep No More, My Lady (Year 7)

Pulling socks out of the drawer in his wardrobe, Harry frowned as something rattled against the side.

*What have I got in here—*

Then he remembered.

Face set, he picked up the long, graceful wand Fox had given him in the stone-walled corridor a few weeks before. Hermione had one too, he remembered, and wondered for another moment where this one had come from, before shrugging and sliding it into the protected slot made for such a thing at the top of his trunk.

*It goes where I go, until we finish this war.*

Another few pairs of socks revealed a curve of glass, which Harry pulled out with a laugh, recalling the day Meghan had presented them with the mysterious glass globe she'd found in the Room of Hidden Things. Shaking it, he watched the tiny flakes of snow drift past the jagged cliff depicted inside, then excavated a hole for it within the folded underwear already half-filling his cauldron.

*Maybe now that school's over, I can figure out what link it might have to Voldemort and his Horcruxes.*

Straightening his back, he looked around the small, circular room with its six beds for what he knew might well be the last time. Even if school reconvened normally in September, he doubted he'd be sleeping here.

*Just a little too easy to find, and nowhere to run if I'm cornered. We'll set up shop down in Sanctuary, or even move into the Hogwarts Den full-time...*

That thought made him a little itchy, remembering his days in hiding from the regime of Dolores Umbridge, but with his Pride around him, he thought he'd be able to handle it.

*And besides, the Den's where I finally worked out how I felt about Ginny. Rubbing his wedding band, Harry felt a smile come to him, more naturally than it had in weeks. Moving past yesterday is easier when the face of tomorrow is that beautiful.*

Setting aside philosophy to be discussed on the train ride, he started to turn back to his wardrobe, when an oddity caught his eye. Draco's bed lay neatly made, as it had been for those same weeks, but one of the pillows seemed to have a lump at its corner.

Curious, he rounded the bottom of his own bed and pulled back the covers on his brother's.

---

Meghan paused in her careful folding of robes as the door, behind her, creaked. The window was open to the warm June breeze, and two of her dormmates, chattering across their own beds, hadn't noticed anything, but she thought something or someone might just have come inside.

*But who would come up here invisible, that would use a door? The ghosts can't touch anything, and anybody who should be here wouldn't need to hide...*

Casually, she checked her wand and piece, ensuring each were within reach for a fast draw.

*Because if anyone thinks I'm going to be easy just because I'm little, I'm going to give them a big surprise.*

A soft "whuff" at about the level of her thighs made her sigh with exasperation and lower her hands. "What do you want, Wolf?" she muttered without moving her lips, continuing her folding. "You *know* you're not supposed to be up here."

Warm, furry weight pressed momentarily against the backs of her legs, and beside her feet, a small blotch of color appeared in her peripheral vision. Meghan counted to five, then looked down.

Beside her sat a red-and-gold cuddly lion, of the type the Pack-cubs had cherished since they were small. She couldn't help but glance up at her own, holding pride of place, as always, on her pillow. "Why are you giving me your—" she started to say.

She broke off as another possibility occurred to her, and slowly bent down to check her thoughts against reality.

The tag on the lion's hind leg was marked, faintly but unmistakably, with an F.

*F for Fox. Because we couldn't use our proper names' initials, Harry's and Hermione's are the same, and he didn't want the "little" part written down...*

"Thank you," she murmured, and set Draco's lion beside her own on the pillow.

They could keep each other company while she finished her packing and ran an errand she'd been considering for a while.

---

"Your go." Dean Thomas held out a handful of slips of parchment towards Lindz Jordan. "Best way to defend against..."

Lindz plucked a slip from the handful. "A werewolf," she read aloud. "With the Wolfsbane, or without?"

"Do both."

"Right. So without the Wolfsbane, you get up high or out of reach behind a wall, and just Banish

stuff at him until he runs off. Or find something sharp and silver, and then it's not a problem anymore. Except cleaning up the mess." Lindz grimaced. "With the Wolfsbane is harder, because then it's like fighting another human, only a human with sharp claws and teeth. Really, really dangerous teeth."

"In which case the silver is probably your best option." Dean fanned his thumb along the edge of the strips. "Better make sure you know where your mum keeps the good cutlery."

"Definitely. Okay, your go." Lindz relieved Dean of the slips and held them out for him. "Best way to defend against..."

Dean looked down at the slip he'd chosen. "An Inferius." He shuddered. "God, those things creep me out. But they're only as smart, or know as much, as the person controlling them, so there's a weakness right there. They can't be given anything complicated to do, so even a basic locked door could stop them, as long as they can't knock it down just by persistence. Fire scares them, because it can destroy them, and..." He patted his hip, where his potion piece resided. "A couple things on here can do the same."

"A couple?" Lindz drew her own piece, looking at the indicators on the back end. "I know about the red potion, if you carry it, but what else do we have that could stop an Inferius? Most of it requires something alive to work on."

"Would you believe it's this one?" Dean turned his piece so that Lindz could see the indicator.

"The white?" Lindz blinked. "But that's the healing potion!"

"And healing is another word for restoring, for putting things back the way they ought to be. An Inferius is a dead body that was brought to 'life' by a spell, so healing it..." Dean snapped his fingers. "Breaks the spell. Puts it back the way it ought to be."

"Which is properly dead and not stuck in between." Lindz nodded. "All right, I suppose that makes sense. But it's not a very strong potion we carry. Would it still work?"

"Even if it didn't break the spell all the way, it'd help. Slow it down some, give you a chance to get your wand out. Or go grab the matches." Dean grinned. "Sometimes Muggle stuff works better. I mean, which would you rather? Say all four syllables of '*Incendio*' and hope you got the movement right, or just..." He mimed striking a match against a box.

Lindz pursed her lips, considering. "Can I have both options? Just in case?"

"Course you can." Dean pounded fists with his girlfriend. "Half-blood power." He smiled a little. "I'm going to miss you this summer."

"You probably won't miss me for long." Lindz slid the strips of parchment into her pocket. "Not if the Ministry falls as soon as Lee's been saying it might."

"True." Dean ran a hand along the stone wall of the classroom they'd commandeered for saying

goodbye, and for a little last-minute DA work. "I hope you like little sisters."

"Well, I don't know. Are you planning on serving them boiled, or fried?"

---

Meghan turned in a few lazy circles, holding out her arms to the sunlight, then shook off her momentary trance with a sigh and started walking. She needed to get to where she was going, do what had to be done there, and get back to Gryffindor Tower all without anyone noticing she'd ever been gone, and that didn't give her a lot of time.

*Here's hoping it's enough.*

At the edge of the spot by the lake where she'd sat with her Pride a few weeks before, fighting tears with all her might because she might not be able to stop, she paused and gave a little, respectful bow. "I hope I'm not disturbing you," she said quietly. "But I couldn't think of any better place to call. He was your friend, after all, and that means he might be listening here, if he is anywhere—"

A flash of fire in the air above the white tomb made her gasp, and a few notes of a song like liquid flame brought a smile to her face. "Fawkes," she breathed, hurrying forward to greet the phoenix as he landed neatly on the end of the tomb. "You did come! Thank you, thank you so much."

Fawkes turned his head to regard her with one round, black eye. *Yes, I've come*, he seemed to be saying, *but why did you want me?*

"Oh. Yes." Meghan pulled her robes tight against her side and drew her dagger, holding it across her palms. "It's for this. For me. Because I think I know what I ought to carry inside my dagger, the way Harry has Sangre's venom inside his. Would you, could you, give me a few of your tears? Please?"

The phoenix blinked at her slowly. *You can heal with your own power*, she could have sworn he was saying now. *Why would you ask for mine?*

"Because my power..." Meghan grimaced a little, but lying to a phoenix was a stupid idea. "My power is limited. It comes from me, from what I have inside. And if I use too much of it, then I'll collapse and have to be taken care of, and that's taking away my skills as a fighter, *and* as a Healer, *and* taking away somebody else who'll have to take care of me. But if I have another way to heal, beyond the normal spells and potions, then maybe I can save some people who couldn't be saved any other way, without always having to drain myself. Please, Fawkes? I won't use it stupidly, or for anything that doesn't truly need it." She gazed up at him with the dagger lying across her hands. "I promise."

For one more moment, Fawkes considered her. Then, with a small croon, he bent his head, and thick, glossy tears began to fall from his eyes, dropping one by one onto the dagger blade, where they were instantly absorbed. Meghan counted thirteen before the phoenix lifted his head once more and chirruped at her. *You have what you wanted, little chick. Now, remember your promise.*

"I will." Meghan sheathed her dagger again and stroked the back of Fawkes's feathered head. "Thank you again. This might help a lot of people."

Her other hand brushed against the lip of the marble tomb. Idly, almost reflexively, she let her power flow through it.

Fawkes mantled as Meghan sprang back with a gasp. "But—" Wide-eyed, she stared at the tomb. "But how? *Why?* I don't—"

Cutting herself off, she approached again, brushing her fingers across her eyelids to invoke her Healing Sight. The magic she could sense here came from two different sources, both strong, stronger than her own, but while one was strange and marvelous, known only on its surface and in its most obvious appearances, the second was as familiar as the faces of her Pride and her Pack.

"Ohhhh." She exhaled a long sigh as she placed a name to the second power. "So that must be why —"

One sharp, scolding note sprang from Fawkes, bringing Meghan's head around. "What?" she asked, shielding her eyes against the blaze of magic which was the phoenix to her Ravenclaw-sensitized eyes. "Am I wrong?"

Fawkes shook his head, then extended one wing to gently touch Meghan on the lips.

"No, I'm not wrong, but hush." Meghan frowned, and looked down again, then up. "That other magic is yours, isn't it?" she asked, blinking her eyes back to normal. "It looks just like you."

A bob up and down of a red-feathered head confirmed her guess.

"So it's like Mama says. I don't always need to know everything, just what's good for me." Meghan scowled. "Which I *hate* . But are there reasons that I shouldn't ask questions yet? Important ones?"

Another nod, more emphatic, and Fawkes took wing. Meghan dodged out of the way, and watched as the phoenix spiraled upward into the sunlight, until he vanished in another flare of fire. "I wonder if he's going back to the Founders' Castle," she murmured. "I wish I could have asked him to say hello to Fox and Luna for me." She smiled a little. "And somebody else, too."

Patting the hilt of her dagger, she started back to the Hogwarts she knew.

The sooner she got started preparing for this summer and fall, the better.

---

Severus Snape gave the potion he was brewing its requisite three stirs, then set the stirring stick down to turn and take an ingredient off the shelf behind him.

*In the normal course of things, I would have been back in Spinner's End for two weeks now, after the ending of the school year, but the Dark Lord wishes all his followers to remain close before he*

*makes his move towards the Ministry. While I do not care for most of the company, I must admit the working conditions are better here. Especially the light...*

When he turned back, someone was sitting on his windowsill.

"Hi," said the beaming young witch he still had to remind himself to call Starwing. Her face clouded as she looked him over. "I scared you?"

"You...startled me," Severus corrected, impressed against his will by the owl-minded girl's perceptiveness. "I did not hear you arrive."

"Startled." Starwing nodded, as though committing this to memory. "I come in?"

"By most reckonings, you are in already." Severus sighed at the perplexity on Starwing's features. "Yes. Come in."

"Thank you." Lithely, Starwing dropped to the floor, giving her black cloak a little tug so that it would slide free of the windowsill. Her eyes widened even farther than usual as she gazed around the room. "Magic," she breathed, as though entranced. "Magic, and magic, and magic!"

"Yes, indeed." On a whim, Severus picked up a jar of ordinary daisy petals. "Is this magic?" he asked, holding it out.

"No." Starwing shook her head. "Not magic."

"And this?" Severus reached to a higher shelf for a vial of dragon's blood.

"Yes." Starwing counted on her fingers for a moment, then shook her head again. "Not enough," she said fretfully, holding up all ten. "Too much magic."

Repressing a laugh, Severus held up two fingers of his own. "This many?" he suggested. "Along with yours?"

"Yes!" Starwing clapped her hands, looking as though she wanted to bounce in place, but restraining herself admirably, Severus thought.

*Perhaps a bit too admirably...*

"What," he said idly, returning the dragon's blood to its shelf, "is your name?"

The girl fussed with a bit of her hair. "Starwing," she said, her tone implying that he really should have known this already.

Severus picked up his stirring stick again. "What is your quest?"

This caused a moment's puzzled frown, before the blue-gray eyes lit with satisfaction. "Be eyes, and ears, and hands." A finger brushed against each of the named organs in turn. "For *him*." A kiss

on her red-stoned ring gave Severus the original of the pronoun, not that he had doubted. "Until we win."

"I see." Reflexively, Severus checked the door, ensuring that his spells of locking and soundproofing were still in place. This was not a question he wanted to be caught asking Lucius Malfoy's girl. "What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?"

Starwing's eyebrows rose as if he had affronted her terribly. "Not swallow," she said curtly, folding her arms across her chest. "Owl. "

"I beg your pardon." Severus stirred his potion three times. "The airspeed velocity of an unladen owl , then."

After frowning in consideration, Starwing shrugged. "Fast," she said. Then her head came up as though listening to an unheard call. "I go now," she said, moving towards the window. "Come back sometimes?"

Severus hesitated, then gave in to his curiosity. "Yes," he said, setting aside the stirring stick in favor of his wand, to adjust the temperature of the fire. "Whenever you see me here, and the window is open, you may come back."

"Thank you." Starwing beamed. "I see you again."

Seating herself on the windowsill, she swung her legs out of it, then pushed off. A flutter of hair and cloak in the wind was replaced quickly by feathers as she changed forms mid-fall, and a quiet hoot drifted back to Severus by way of goodbye.

*I may regret giving her that permission, and yet...*

A rustle behind him made him turn.

Lying on the floor beside the door, as though it had been thrust underneath, was a folded slip of parchment.

*My spells should have neutralized anything harmful, or stopped it from entering here.*

*Who wishes to send me a message—and why?*

He levitated the parchment onto his work table and opened it with his wand.

The two sentences within, in truly horrendous handwriting, had him glancing involuntarily towards the window once more.

*Luna Lovegood's ring contains some form of liquid, it read. What potions require constant replenishment for control?*

---



Percy Weasley had thought nothing could ever require more control from him than learning to bridle his anger while a captive of the Death Eaters, or keeping himself from falling in love with his brother's girlfriend.

*Clearly I never considered how irritating one man's arrogance and blindness could be.*

"—getting a little tired of your scaremongering, Weasley." Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour administered a long, searching look from his unusual tawny-gold eyes. "What are you hoping to accomplish by starting a panic?"

"Sir, I want only to keep people on the alert. We *have* an enemy, and a dangerous one—"

"And overstating the dangers will wear people down just as fast as open battles," Scrimgeour interrupted. "This is the *Ministry of Magic*, for Merlin's sake! Do you really think we can be taken over by a crowd of fools in ugly masks with an outdated agenda and no idea how to rally popular support behind them? Even if they got past our security measures, how could they possibly—"

A silver-white animal, long and slender, shot through the Minister's closed door and bounded up to Percy. "Now," it said in his father's breathless voice. "*It's happening now—warn everyone—*"

"What was that?" Scrimgeour demanded as the weasel-Patronus dissolved.

"An example of appallingly bad timing." Percy drew his wand and cast a Peephole Spell on the door, checked up and down the corridor, then eased it open and began to whisper into his own wand's tip. Intellectually, he knew there was no need for a clear line of sight when sending a messenger-Patronus, but he always felt better when he could watch them on their way.

*And with a message this urgent, my messengers will need all the strength from my good thoughts they can possibly get.*

His words finished, he summoned the memory of the Hufflepuff Halloween Extravaganza, of the cheers and laughter of the Hogwarts students as his twin brothers attacked blocks of ice with revving chainsaws, of the smug smile of Crystal Huley as she sipped the butterbeer which was meant to be the winner's reward. Pointing his wand first in one direction, then in the other, he spoke the words carefully.

*"Expecto patronum!"*

A tiny, four-legged creature with a short, narrow tail burst from his wand each time, one vanishing down the length of the corridor, the other making a right-angled turn into the wall.

*Which finishes my part of the notification tree.*

*Now to the next step—secure those I'm with, and persuade them to exit the premises as calmly as possible—*

"What do you think you're doing, Weasley?" Scrimgeour was on his feet, striding around his desk.

"How dare you ignore me, in my own *office* , no less?"

*Which may be a challenge.*

"If we could continue this discussion outside, perhaps, sir?" Percy motioned to the open door.

"The fresh air might do us both good."

Scrimgeour looked him up and down. "What's your game, Weasley?" he asked suspiciously.

"There've always been rumors about you, just bits and pieces, nothing I put any credence in, but now all of a sudden—"

"Sir, we have no time." Percy kept his voice low and even, his body language neutral, allowing only a trace of the urgency he felt to escape him. "The Ministry is under attack as we speak, and you *will* be a primary target. They would prefer to capture you and place you under Imperius, to give the general public the impression that all remains normal, but if that's not possible, they will kill you and replace you with the puppet they've prepared without a second thought. We have a whole string of safe houses, places they don't know anything about—"

"We?" Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. "Just how many of you are in this?"

Percy took a breath, ready to commit himself—

"Security!" bellowed a voice from behind him. "Don't move!"

"Let me see your hands!" added another.

The breath escaped as a half-audible curse, as Percy obediently held his hands out to either side of him, empty. One of the Ministry's security bravos he felt confident he could have dueled and won, but two would have required either specialized equipment or more skill than he currently possessed.

*And unless I'm wrong—*

One of the guards yanked him roughly aside, pinioning his wrists behind his back with one hand and slapping his glasses off his face with the other.

*I'm not wrong.* Percy winced at the sound of his lenses shattering, but nonetheless marked the spot where the frames had fallen, and likewise the arc of his wand's descent as it was pulled from his pocket and tossed aside. *Ministry security guards don't do this sort of thing. These two are fakes. Death Eaters.*

*I can only hope the Minister spots that as quickly as I did...*

"Sir, are you all right?" the second guard was asking Scrimgeour now, a blur of lime green robes and blond hair half-obscuring the Minister's tawny mane and crisp black robes in Percy's sight.

"Was this man threatening you, offering you harm?"

"Not exactly. What is this?" Scrimgeour's voice was skeptical, which gave Percy a thread of hope. "I didn't call for security—"

"The news just got in, sir." A ripple of movement was the false guard's arm, waving in Percy's direction. "This man is a member of the Red Shepherds, the vigilante group. Probably a high-ranked one, too. No telling when they recruited him, but they needed someone highly placed at the Ministry if they were ever going to achieve their goals, and if he'd been able to talk you into going with him—"

"So *that's* it." Scrimgeour exhaled through his teeth. "Weasley, I'm disappointed in you. I never thought you, of all people, would be taken in by such fringe insanity. But then I suppose blood will tell. Thank you, gentlemen, you've saved me a great deal of—"

He broke off with a choked gasp as a metallic gleam flashed in the false guard's hand. The scent of copper and iron flooded the corridor, and the Death Eater holding Percy's arms leaned forward eagerly, his grip relaxing.

Percy slammed his elbow backwards as hard as he could, tore himself free as his captor doubled over, and dived to the floor. The second Death Eater cursed at the noise and started to bring his wand around towards where Percy's had fallen—

From the other side, Percy rolled upright, armed his potion piece, and fired a blast of yellow potion into the side of the blond Death Eater's head.

*Never be where they expect you, Sirius Black's voice admonished in the back of his mind as he took out the Death Eater who'd been holding him with a second shot. If they took something from you, take them out first, then go back and get it. Otherwise they don't have to follow you, they just have to keep your whatever-it-is framed in their sights, and you'll come to them...*

Snapping his piece over to the white cartridge as he hurried to the spot where his wand had been thrown, Percy noticed with a distant pride that his hand was barely trembling. He'd pay for it later, he knew all too well, but just now the Minister's life and his own depended on his ability to stay strong.

Wand in hand, glasses repaired and restored to their spot on his face, he knelt beside Scrimgeour, who was still breathing but had lost consciousness, either from blood loss or from the fumes of the potion Percy'd used. He hoped it was the latter, but feared it might be the former. The knife the Death Eater had used to stab him was still sticking out of the wound, and the robes around it were saturated with blood.

*Some of them need to be more hands-on than others, it seems.*

He sprayed the wound with white potion and conjured a bandage around it, leaving the knife in place for the moment, and sighed in relief as blood did not immediately begin to soak his created cloth. Still, they weren't out of the woods yet by a long cast. Conjuring a stretcher was hardly a challenge, but levitating it along would obviate any chance for a wandless defense, and while he'd

just proven that a potion piece had a definite part to play in this game, one lucky spell by an alert Death Eater could leave him holding a bouquet of carnations or a pink-eared rabbit instead.

*Which would mean I'd have to drop the Minister to fight them, and the jar might well start him bleeding again. How am I supposed to—*

Noise from around the corner brought his wand up, and down again almost immediately as he recognized the voices. "Here," he called, getting to his feet as Charlie and Tonks appeared at a run.

*Thankfully, I don't have to. We will be able to manage a great deal better.*

"Antidotes," he warned his brother and sister-in-law, waving his free hand around. "I had to use my piece, they took my wand."

"Looks like you got it back." Charlie thrust his hand through the slit in his robes which gave access to his own potion piece, pressing it against his antidote patch so that the fumes of the knockout potion wouldn't affect him, then bent to look at Scrimgeour. "Well, damn."

"I wish we had the time to transfigure them." Tonks cast a poisonous glance at the two Death Eaters. "They'd make a nice addition to the pond. But we're already behind time. If someone isn't on the way to check on these two right now, they will be soon."

"Agreed." Percy started to sweep his wand towards the Minister, but Charlie beat him there.

"You just fought a battle, I didn't," he said, starting back the way he'd come, Scrimgeour floating beside him. "And you're going to have a lot more to do when we get where we're going—don't think I don't know who's been masterminding most of this stuff, keeping tabs on who was ours and who was theirs here at the Ministry, and who hadn't made up their minds..."

"If they haven't yet, they will need to now." Percy Summoned the wand from one Death Eater as Tonks did the same to the other. "Unless they plan to close their eyes and ears to anything strange they see or hear, to pretend that this is a perfectly ordinary and legitimate transfer of power."

"You think they won't?" Tonks's hair was fading out of its usual bubblegum pink to a mousy, tired brown. "We're lucky to be getting as many of them as we are. Most people don't particularly care who's in charge as long as their own personal little lives aren't affected. Which is awful of me to say, maybe, but I just get so tired of picking up the pieces. Especially after Mum." Her voice thickened, but her hand remained steady. "How she died for nothing better than some stupid political feud. Which, I know it doesn't usually go that far, but it did that time, and nobody even seemed to *care* ..."

Percy laid his hand against her arm. "We'll have a chance to start over, after the war," he said when she glanced around at him. "To try to make things better. But first we have to get there."

"Right." Tonks managed a smile, twisted but real. "Thanks, Percy."

Wands drawn, eyes and ears open, they hurried after Charlie, Percy pausing just before he turned

the corner to aim his wand back at the Minister's open door and whisper a three-word incantation.

Knowing in advance that they might have to give up the Ministry to the Death Eaters had given him and the other Red Shepherds a chance to prepare a number of unpleasant little surprises for the invaders.

---

Bellatrix Lestrange was less than impressed with the excuse the cringing, middle-rank fool who'd been placed in charge of the Ministry operation gave her for the delay in sending out teams to begin rounding up Mudbloods and their pathetic families.

"If the records are dancing, then make them *stop* dancing," she explained in her sweetest voice when the fool lay panting on the floor in front of her, courtesy of several seconds of her best *Cruciatus*.

"We've...we've tried," the wizard gasped, cringing away as Bella raised her wand again. "Please, my lady, no! We've tried, I swear we have, but every spell we try just makes them dance a different way, or do something we never expected—one spell made them multiply by ten, we tried it three times before we realized what was going on, there's a whole room full of duplicates—please, my lady, please—"

"Multiply by ten," Bella repeated, a thought tugging at the back of her mind. "Wait here."

Rising on her toes and turning, she Disapparated, reappearing back at Malfoy Manor, where her Master looked up from his discussion with Severus and Lucius to greet her with a smile. Lucius's pet, sitting behind him with her sewing in her hands, never even lifted her eyes.

"How are things at the Ministry, my dear Bellatrix?" asked the Dark Lord, tapping his fingertips together. "Has the cleansing begun?"

"Someone with more wit than hair had the sense to enchant the record rooms, my lord." Bella scowled. "Enchantments which cause the scrolls to dance around, or do other strange things in response to ordinary spells." She turned to look at Severus. "Including one which multiplied them tenfold."

Severus nodded. "The Weasley twins," he stated with confidence. "That was one of their trademarks, when they would release unexpected items on school grounds. Common spells causing unpredictable reactions."

"Can you stop it?" the Dark Lord asked, in a tone which warned that only one answer would be acceptable.

"My lord, I can." Severus smiled slightly. "I wrote a counterspell specifically for this type of mischief while I still had them under my tutelage. *Quod illud unde esset posuit, ita me iuvent*. Though sadly, it must be used on each individual item, so this may take some time."

"Do you need him, my lord?" Bella looked up at her Master with the little flutter under her ribs which always seemed to result when she regarded his pale, snakelike face. "Or may I borrow him, to try and hammer that incantation through a few thick skulls?"

"Just as long as you do not take that phrase literally. Not yet." The Dark Lord chuckled at Bella's pout. "Wait until we have the Mudbloods, my dear. Then you may do whatever your wicked little heart desires."

"My lord." Bella curtsied until her knee almost touched the ground, then waited for Severus to join her before Disapparating again.

"The other reason I wanted you," she said when they were back at the Ministry and on their way to the record rooms, "is that you'd know a few Mudbloods we can send the teams after right now, without waiting for the records. Strike some fear into them, get them realizing there's a new day dawning and they can't get away with pretending to be as good as us any longer. What do you say?"

"I say..." Severus stopped in the doorway, observing the chaos within. Several of the larger filing cabinets had formed a conga line, with two hapless Death Eaters caught in its middle. A handful of scrolls with shredded edges were doing a can-can, complete with shrill shrieks, and off to one side several yellowed sheets of parchment were executing a stately minuet. Thrusting his wand towards the mess, he whispered a few words, and a single scroll soared unerringly into his hand. He unrolled it, looked over the writing on it, and handed it to Bella.

"Dean Thomas," he said. "Harry Potter's dorm-mate. Muggleborn, with two young Muggle sisters. Will this do?"

"Oh, yes," Bella breathed, stroking the precious parchment with her fingers, feeling her blood rise as she envisioned the terror on the little girls' faces, heard them shrieking for their brother to come and save them. "Yes, this will do nicely..."

---

Dean was lying on his bed, reading, when he heard the thump in the hallway. Quickly, he shoved his right hand under his pillow, his left into his pocket—

"Hold it!" A masked man in robes stepped into his doorway, pointing a wand at him. "Don't move a muscle." Taking in Dean's position, he snorted in derision. "Wand under the pillow, Thomas? Really? What're you going to do, kill some feathers?"

"What do you want?" Dean asked, holding steady. If the man would just come a little further into his room...

"Oh, all sorts of things." The man snickered, strolling into the room and over to the bedside. "But you're going to have to come with us for most of them. Hold still, now."

With his wand, he flicked the pillow away.

Dean's right hand was empty.

"What—" was as far as the Death Eater got before Dean grabbed hold of his wand's tip, yanked his own wand free of his pocket, and Stunned the man nonverbally.

"I'm left-handed, if you didn't know," he told the unconscious Death Eater, getting to his feet. "Runs in the family."

"Master Dean!" Kreacher appeared in the center of the room with a loud crack, looking mortified. "Master Dean, Kreacher is so sorry—"

"Is everyone else okay?" Dean interrupted ruthlessly. "Mum and Eric, and the girls?"

"Yes, the family is well." Kreacher smiled, showing all his pointed, discolored teeth. "Miss Marcie is kicking one of the bad men Kreacher stopped and Miss Annabelle is painting the face of the other. The Master's parents pack up clothing and belongings to take away with them."

"I should do the same." Dean turned towards his closet. "Good thing I'd barely *un*packed from Hogwarts, huh?"

A loud double bang like a car backfiring outside the house signaled two Apparitions in quick succession. "Dean!" shouted a girl's frantic voice. "Dean, are you all right?"

"Go to her, Master," said Kreacher, waving Dean out of the room. "Kreacher will do the packing."

"Right." Dean bolted into his little sisters' bedroom to hang out the window and wave at Lindz, who must have been Side-Alonged by either Lee or Maya, both standing behind her. "All fine here!" he called. "Unexpected visitors, though."

"Tell me about it." Lee conjured a large, clear-sided tank in Maya's hands. "How many of them? We'll take them with us, when we head you-know-where..."

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"Really, Severus holds hidden depths," Lucius remarked later that afternoon as Peter brought the newest stack of requested books to the table. The master of Malfoy Manor sat comfortably in his chair, reading slowly through an old manuscript and occasionally comparing it to one or another of the volumes Peter had supplied him, making notes on a scroll of his own to one side. "Who would ever have guessed that he could understand the Weasley twins well enough to create such an appropriate counterspell?" He chuckled. "'Put that thing back where it came from or so help me', indeed."

Peter laughed dutifully, and hurried back into the stacks of books before Lucius or Starwing could get a good look at his face. Certain things were beginning to add up to a total about which he was quite thoroughly conflicted.

*It's not my problem*, he decided after several moments' hard thought. *In another world, another*

*lifetime, maybe it would have been, but it's not. I'll pass it along to the person whose problem it most legitimately is, and then I'll let it rest.*

*I have enough to worry about as it is.*

---

Hermione sat by herself at the window of the girls' room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, hearing footsteps rushing here and there, voices calling to one another. She should be out there, she knew, doing her part for the influx of Muggleborns and Muggle family members to Sanctuary, but a deep, painful melancholy had got hold of her and refused to be moved.

*It's stupid and I hate it, and of course it's happening at the worst possible time—we need everyone on their feet and working, not sitting in the dark and crying, but I can't, I just can't—I've tried, and my legs won't hold me up, my hands won't grip my wand, I absolutely hate this—*

A soft hoot drew her attention to the tiny screech owl on the windowsill, a small scroll tied to its leg.

"Is that for me?" Hermione blotted her eyes on her handkerchief and untied the scroll. "Thank you, but I wasn't expecting anything..."

Her eyes fell on the few brief words in an almost-indecipherable handwriting.

For a moment or two, she sat very still.

Then she began to smile. "Of course," she whispered, dabbing a last tear away from her unscarred cheek. "Of course."

Conjuring a shallow metal tray, she set the parchment on fire and allowed it to burn out, then crumbled the ashes with her fingertips and blew them away into the breeze outside the window. "No reply, thank you," she told the owl, which bobbed its head at her and flapped away.

Tying her hair back with her wand, Hermione Granger-Lupin hurried out the door of her bedroom. "Ginny!" she called, spying her friend in the center of a cluster along the corridor. "Where can you use me?"

Her tears were gone, and would not return.

Vengeance, in all its glorious fullness, was now the order of the day.

*And I know exactly what I'll be putting inside my dagger, once we get to Sanctuary.*



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 46: The Sword's Decision (Year 7)

Sanctuary was chaos.

The wails of frightened babies and the whines of fretful children battled for place with a hubbub of adult voices, male and female, human and house-elf. Every few moments, another member of Order or DA, or one of the Red Shepherds, would appear at an entrance, escorting another small, bewildered group, then vanish again. The members of the DA who had already arrived were doing their best, with the house-elves' help, to keep everything sorted out, but for every family they got packed off to quarters which would suit them, two more were arriving.

"We're falling behind," Hannah Abbott said between her teeth, fighting to keep her composure, hold herself level and steady. "If we can't even do *this* —"

"That will be enough of that," said a stern, motherly voice, as an imperious hand was extended for the parchment on which Hannah had been checking off the various suites and dormitory accommodations Sanctuary had to offer. "You never expected to be housing guests this soon, or with this little notice, did you?"

"No, ma'am." Hannah surrendered her parchment and turned away to exhale a single, shaky breath of pure relief. She hadn't met Molly Weasley before, but if the resemblance to Ginny hadn't given the older witch away, her composure in the face of this cacophonous scene would have done so.

"You're doing quite well, considering." Mrs. Weasley studied the parchment for a moment, then swirled her wand three times overhead. Three large signs formed, hovering in mid-air, directing 'ADULTS ONLY' to the left, 'FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN SIX AND UNDER' on the right, and 'FAMILIES WITH OLDER CHILDREN' in the center. "How many of you are here at the moment?"

"Seven—eight," Hannah corrected herself as she saw Lindsay Jordan detach herself from a tangle of people who'd just arrived on the far side of the cavern, kiss Dean Thomas on the cheek, and start across the lawn at a lope. "Nine, with me."

"Excellent. Three on each queue, then, with as many house-elves as you think the Muggles can handle. Or the house-elves, for that matter." Mrs. Weasley chuckled. "They have some of the most peculiar notions of propriety to our ways of thinking."

"Yes, they really do." Hannah caught the eye of her various compatriots and waved them over. "Susan, Arti, Elayne, Padma, Parvati, Su, and Hannah," she said quickly, pointing at each girl in turn. "And Lindz," she added as that young witch arrived, breathing hard. "This is Mrs. Weasley, Ron and Ginny's mum."

"Pleased to meet you all." Mrs. Weasley glanced back and forth between one of the girls Hannah had introduced and Hannah herself. "Two Hannahs?"

"We call this one Highland Hannah," Artemis Moon volunteered, causing the witch she'd named to squeal indignantly. "Because she loves to read Muggle romance novels, the sort with men on the covers wearing kilts. And nothing else."

"I see." Mrs. Weasley nodded, but her lips were curving suspiciously on one side. "Highland Hannah, then, and you two, Padma and Parvati, will you take the queue with the older children? Try to get as many of them into the dormitories as you can, it'll let us keep the larger suites for the families with the younger ones—which, Su, Susan, and Elayne, if you could cover that? And Hannah, Lindz, and Artemis..." She made a shooing motion. "To the adults."

Hannah nodded and hurried off towards her assigned line, noticing in passing that the unruly crowd was already quieting and calming now that some form of order was being imposed.

*But we still need something to keep the children happy, if we can find it...*

A thought came to her. As the next house-elf passed her by, she tapped it on the shoulder, and bent down to whisper into a large, pointed ear. The elf nodded vigorously and disappeared, and Hannah joined her friends at the adults' queue, putting on her best 'I know what I am doing and everything will be all right now' smile, as taught by Professor Alice Longbottom the year before.

*It's the face that got me through O.W.L.s, but will it work on a war?*

*Time to find out.*

"Welcome to Sanctuary," she said to the next pair in line, a middle-aged witch and an older woman in Muggle clothing who was probably her mother. "Accommodations for two?"

---

Joanne was bored.

It wasn't bad enough that her big brother Chris had to have stupid *magic* (she didn't know why Mum and Dad were so surprised, *she'd* known the stuff he could do was freaky since she was a *baby*, and she was almost grown up now that she was six), but the magic people were having a stupid war and people like her and Mum and Dad were in trouble, so they had to pack up their things and run away from their home and live in a *cave*. Which was actually kind of awesome, but nobody was going to get her to admit that, not when she'd had to leave home two weeks before her big football game, and she couldn't even tell any of her friends why—

Movement across the grass (and how weird was *that*, having grass in a cave) caught her eye. One of the little, funny-colored, big-eared people who seemed to wear nothing but tea towels was walking towards the big crowd, and beside her (or him, Joanne couldn't tell), walked something four-legged, black, and very large—

"Dog!" shouted Joanne gleefully, and wrenched free of her mum's hand to bolt towards the huge, jowly creature. He cocked his head as he saw her coming, but made no other move, and she reached his side and held out a hand for him to sniff, then scratched behind his ears once he had

done so, giggling as he turned his big, square head and solemnly swiped his tongue up her forearm. She could hear a small crowd of other kids behind her, but she'd been the first to start running and for these few, blissful seconds, the dog was all hers.

Having to live in a cave for a while might not be so bad after all.

---

"His name is Fang," Remus told the small sea of children, keeping part of his mind open to Danger, who was back at Headquarters, handling the Order's efforts to keep the damage from the Ministry contained. "But his bark is much, much worse than his bite. Fang, speak."

Obediently, the boarhound boomed out two of his basso barks, making the children laugh and poke each other, some of them imitating him.

"Fang is a very gentle dog. But if anybody hurt a person he cared about..." Remus stroked the side of the boarhound's muzzle. "Well, that just isn't a very good idea." Gently, he flipped back the dangling lip to reveal the assortment of sharp, gleaming teeth underneath it. "Is it?"

More laughter, as the five or six children who were using Fang as a pillow or backrest snuggled closer. Remus hadn't seen the boarhound this content since Hagrid's death, and wondered for a fleeting moment what might have been if his friend had lived.

*If he and Olympe Maxime could have made it work...I could see Fang guarding a cradle that would make him look like a spaniel, and the babies steadying themselves on his back as they took their first steps...*

"Look!" a little boy shouted, pointing across the lawn. "More doggies!"

"Wait," Remus said hastily, and just in time, as half the children seemed likely to surge up and stampede across the grass. "They'll come to us."

*And what they're doing in here, instead of out there, I haven't a clue.*

**I sent them,** Danger said into the back of his mind. **We've got all the help we need here, the Red Shepherds have the warnings and evacuations well underway, and what are the odds Harry would try and sneak out to give them a hand when my back was turned? Whereas there, with both you and Sirius to ride herd on him, we have a chance of keeping him out of harm's way.**

**Because this is our work. Only he can do his.** Remus stifled a sigh as the two dark-furred canines dropped to the ground beside the mass of children and were immediately mobbed. **And isn't that something I never thought I'd be saying about the boy I raised.**

**And yet, because we raised him, how much more ready and capable is he?** Danger blew an insubstantial kiss his way. **Go deal with your masses of children. I've got plenty of adults acting like children over here, and that's worse.**

**No argument.** Remus returned the kiss and let the link fall back into its semi-dormant state. "Yes, they are very pretty," he said to one little girl who was tugging insistently on his arm. "And they're also friendly. You should always ask first, you know, but these two are harmless."

Gray eyes and green shot twin looks of chagrin at him before half-closing in bliss as tiny hands scratched furred bellies.

"This one's name is Padfoot," Remus told the children, patting the stockier-bodied of the black canines on the shoulder. "And that one is just called Wolf."

"Cause he looks like one!" crowed a boy who was rubbing between Wolf's pointed ears. "Do they do tricks, Mr. Lupin? Fang knows roll over—"

"No!" squealed a trio of girls. "He'll squish us!"

"Hmm. Tricks." Remus smiled at his Pack-brother and son. "What a good idea."

Padfoot sighed in a very put-upon manner and closed his eyes. Wolf, for his part, sat up, shedding children left and right, his ears twitching in a manner which would have equated to a devilish smirk in the human Harry. Slowly, he stalked closer and closer to his godfather, the children who'd been petting and stroking Padfoot squeaking in gleeful fright and scooting back.

Then he pounced.

Girls shrieked, boys yelled, and Remus was at some pains to explain how, precisely, one could tell that this was not a real fight. "This is how dogs play," he told the children, summoning his best adult-authority voice from the days when the cubs themselves had been this small. "They wrestle and mouth, and it *looks* like fighting, but see where they're biting each other?" Wolf's teeth closed around Padfoot's ear even as he spoke. "There's no force behind it, no blood, no yelping or snarling. If they were really fighting, those bites would hurt a lot, and you'd be able to hear them telling you so."

"But dogs don't talk," objected one boy, leaning back against Fang, who was regarding the whirling ball of fur with the tolerant dispassion of one who had outgrown all such childish pastimes.

"Oh yes they do. With their bodies and their faces." Remus pointed at Padfoot, who had dislodged his tormentor and was standing off a few feet. "Look at the way he's standing. He's braced on his feet, he's ready to jump any way. And look at his ears. They're lifted up, listening hard so he knows when Wolf is coming. But the big giveaway, for him, is his teeth. Do you see them?"

"No," chorused half a dozen voices, with one little girl adding dubiously, "Only when he's panting."

"That's right, only when he has his mouth open to breathe. If he really was angry and wanting to hurt, he'd pull his lips back like this and keep them there." Remus bared his own teeth and growled

at both canines, who obligingly returned the favor. "But he only growls a little bit, and he lets his face relax again in between times. And sometimes—yes, see that?" As he spoke, Padfoot lowered his front half to the ground, then rose again. "That's how a dog says, 'Come play with me!' It's called a play-bow."

"Wolf did it back!" The same girl who had seen Padfoot's teeth bounced in excitement, pointing. "Wolf play-bowed too! That means they're going to play again!"

"Yes, it does. In fact—" Remus drew his wand and conjured a hunk of thick, knotted rope. "Why don't I give them a hand with that."

He tossed the rope into the air. In perfect synchronization, Wolf and Padfoot leaped to catch opposite ends, and came down already tugging. The children cheered, and Remus smiled with satisfaction and sat back to watch.

*Because the best thing for these little ones, magical or Muggle as the case may be, is to feel comfortable and happy and at home here.*

*They might be here for quite a while.*

---

"Percy!"

Percy turned just in time to receive an armful of Crystal. "Hello," he said in some bemusement. "What's—"

"Are you all right?" Crystal pulled back to look him over. "There's blood on your robes, and a bruise on your face."

"The blood's not mine." Percy frowned at it nonetheless, and drew his wand to remove it. "And bruises heal."

"Yes, they do." Crystal flushed, for no reason Percy could detect. "I just...I was worried. When we heard what happened at the Ministry, and that you were *there*."

"It won't be so bad." Percy patted her shoulder, a bit awkwardly. "We got most of the people who'd be in any true danger out of the Ministry in time, and we're locating as many families as we can who have Muggle or Muggleborn members and offering them protection in Sanctuary, if they don't have relations somewhere else that they can go to visit." A thought occurred to him. "Your parents?"

"Already here. Fred helped me go and get them." Crystal grinned briefly. "Dad's offered his services if they need extra help guarding the entrances."

"That could get...interesting," Percy said guardedly, before turning as his name was called again, this time from behind.

"What," his mother demanded, holding out a brick of a reddish substance, "is *this*?"

Percy looked over her shoulder at Fred. "Moving the stocks out of the restaurant?" he asked.

"Restaurant and the shop," Fred returned. "It's too dangerous to have them anywhere in Diagon Alley now that the Ministry's gone. Not all the Death Eaters are as anti-Muggle as they say they are. Somebody could recognize it."

"And *it* is?" Mrs. Weasley repeated, her voice growing dangerously sharp-edged. "And if you try to tell me 'modeling clay', Percy Ignatius Weasley—"

"It's called Semtex, Mother." Percy relieved his mother of her burden. "It's a Muggle substance which, properly prepared, can be used as an explosive."

"And you thought it would be a wise idea to leave large amounts of it near a great many *Muggles*?" Mrs. Weasley glared at both her sons, including Crystal along the arc of her turning head. "Some of whom might well recognize it, and try to take some for their own personal use? Absolutely not. Get it out of here. Keep it where you can get it if you need it, I can see how it could be useful, but if I find one speck of it near these children—"

"How about Hagrid's Place?" Crystal suggested, sliding her words into the conversation with an ease which made Percy suspect her mother had similar habits to his own. "If we put it up in the rafters there, then nobody who doesn't have a wand will be able to get it down. And there are spells that will stop it from responding to anything common, like Banishing or Summoning, aren't there? So that they can't just get one of the magical kids to bring it down for them—they'd have to know the particular spell it's been told to answer to."

"That will do." Mrs. Weasley nodded shortly. "But it goes *now*, do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mother," said Percy and Fred in unison.

Crystal snickered.

---

Late in the evening of the day the Death Eaters took the Ministry, the proper combination of spells was finally discovered to stop the records in the rooms from dancing. The team of wizards and witches assigned to this problem breathed sighs of relief.

Their emotion, as they discovered upon reading the now-quiescent scrolls, was premature.

"What does 'Nice as nine, very cold den' even *mean*?" wailed one of them, clutching her hair with the hand not displaying the scroll to the rest of the group. "Or 'dive nor rivet fur bumper'?"

Severus Snape plucked the scroll from his colleague's hands and stroked his wand across the words. The letters promptly rose off the parchment and floated above it. "Obviously," he said in the tone he used with his slowest students, "the names and addresses of the so-called

'Muggleborns' have been scrambled. We will need to repeat our earlier work to unscramble them. One scroll, one line, at a time."

Groans rose all around the room.

"The Dark Lord won't like this," the witch moaned. "The Dark Lord won't like this at all..."

---

The Dark Lord did not like it, and said so in no uncertain terms when the news was brought to him, the snake-Inferius which ornamented the back of his throne raising her head in uneasy sympathy with her creator's anger. Bellatrix watched with gloating anticipation as the messenger cowered before her Master. Lucius, his fingers woven into Starwing's hair as she busied herself unconcernedly with her sewing, waited until the first blast of Voldemort's icy rage was past, then spoke just as the yew wand was rising towards its target.

"My lord, if I may?"

Without taking his red eyes from the whimpering wizard lying prostrate before him, Voldemort gestured abruptly for Lucius to continue.

"My lord, you wish to win this war," Lucius began, sparing the briefest glance of contempt for the messenger. "The only way to do so is to have the most complete and correct picture of happenings at all times. And the only way to do that, my lord, is to be certain that your followers do not hesitate to tell you the bad news as well as the good. If they fear your anger towards those who bring tidings you will not like, they will conspire to conceal their failures until what would have been a very small problem becomes too large of one to hide any longer."

"Do I hear you saying, Lucius," said Voldemort in his softest tone, "that I should not punish those who fail in my service?"

"By no means, my lord. Punishments are vital and deserved." Lucius smiled coolly. "But should they not be meted out to *all* who have failed you, not merely the one chosen to speak the unhappy word?"

Bellatrix cooed appreciatively, and Voldemort, after a moment's consideration, nodded. "You dare much, Lucius," he warned. "In this case, your daring was wise. But it will not always be."

"I hear your words, my lord." Lucius bowed slightly, his silver hair shifting to fall over his shoulder. "That course which balances bravery and wisdom must always be my goal."

Starwing folded the black ribbon at an angle and continued stitching.

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Sirius was stealing a few seconds in Sanctuary's infirmary with Aletha when Rufus Scrimgeour began to stir on his crisp, white-sheeted camp bed. "Don't," he muttered to his wife, only half-jokingly, drawing her closer and forestalling her efforts to slide away. "Don't bother with him, I



want you..."

"Stop that." Aletha freed one arm and slapped him lightly on the ear. "You know better."

"Sure I do. But every so often, the Marauder in me gets loose." Releasing her after one last kiss, Sirius followed her to the bedside. "So they got him here in time, then?"

"It was touch-and-go for a moment or two when he first arrived, but yes." Aletha shut her eyes, then opened them focused differently, as Sirius had seen their daughter do many times before. "Excellent. His body's responding properly to the Blood Replenishment Potion, his heart rate's nearly back to normal, and that wound is all but healed. It might not even scar."

As though the words had been an incantation, Scrimgeour groaned softly and opened his eyes, squinting in confusion until he made out Aletha's face. Sirius spotted the man's spectacles on a small table in the corner and, repressing the urge to cause more trouble, Summoned them, handing them discreetly to his lady.

"Good evening, Minister," Aletha said, smoothly passing the spectacles to their proper owner. "How are you feeling?"

"Surprisingly well." Scrimgeour ran his free hand down his side where he had been stabbed, then exhaled a long breath. "I suppose I have Percy Weasley to thank for that."

"Yes, you do." Through some arcane feminine art which Sirius could only admire, Aletha kept the words entirely neutral, free of either gloating or blame.

*Or possibly it's a Healer trick. Merlin knows they see plenty of people hurt through their own stupidity.*

"He defeated the two Death Eaters who'd used Ministry security uniforms to gain your trust, then performed the first aid which saved your life," Aletha continued, still in the tone of calm fact. "Unfortunately, the Ministry itself has been taken over."

"We think they're going to claim you were killed in the attack, along with anyone senior to Pius Thickenesse," Sirius added, feeling one ignoble thrill of glee at the combined shock and offense which stabbed across Scrimgeour's features at the name. "He's the highest ranked official they've been able to suborn."

"Merlin's beard and boots." Scrimgeour pushed himself upright and hooked his glasses onto his face. "Thick by name and thick by nature—though what right *I* have to be pointing fingers, when I couldn't tell who was and wasn't trustworthy—"

"They're good at picking out the people you'd never suspect," said Sirius hastily. He might not be overly fond of Scrimgeour, but no one had ever faulted the older wizard's skills in battle or as a tactician, and they would need all the fighters and planners they could get. "The ones who'll go unnoticed simply because they're so ordinary, so everyday, that you'd never give them a second

look. Until suddenly they've got their wands in your face, or behind their backs, and your whole world's gone from under you."

"You would know." Scrimgeour regarded his hands for a moment, then offered his right one to Sirius. "I've had a few things wrong when it came to you, Black." His lips twisted, but he got his next words out clearly. "I apologize."

"Accepted, sir. And thank you." Sirius met the hand with his own, and didn't even have to trample on his glee very hard. "We got a fair number of people out of the Ministry before the broom went up. Every department's represented, though it's not always the top brass by any means. Still, we've got enough to set up a skeleton government, a Ministry in exile—"

"That's all well and good," Scrimgeour interrupted. "But it's got nothing to do with me any longer."

"Pardon?" Sirius plastered one of his dumber expressions across his face, both to give Scrimgeour incentive to keep talking and to hide his grin. *That's right, come on, play into it...*

"Politics, Black." Scrimgeour smiled sourly. "You never have liked them, have you? But you've learned to understand them, at least a little. What's bound to happen if the official Ministry's claiming I've been killed, and this 'Ministry in exile' of yours pops up with me as the leader?"

"It becomes a battle over you, doesn't it?" Aletha asked before Sirius could reply. "You become the issue, rather than anything else. Who's telling the truth about Minister Scrimgeour? And in the meantime, the rest of the issues—such as what's going to be happening to Muggles and Muggleborns under the new regime—get dismissed. People conveniently ignore or forget them, sweep them under the carpet. Which means the Death Eaters will have more or less a free rein."

"Precisely." Scrimgeour half-bowed in her direction. "So if I'm officially dead, let me *be* officially dead. I can do more good that way. Pick someone else to be your leader. Someone who's trusted, well-liked, well-connected. And I don't mean who they know," he added irritably at the look on both Blacks' faces. "Or I do, but not the way you're thinking. Someone who's an old Ministry hand, who's been around the pitch a few times." He narrowed his eyes at them. "Are you going to tell me you don't have a candidate in mind already?"

"No." Sirius shook his head. "But it won't be up to us. Or to anyone, really. We'll be starting the process out at the open-air arena in..." He glanced at his watch. "Probably about an hour now, depending on how long it takes for the new arrivals to taper off and everyone to get settled in. Anybody can come and watch, and I'd imagine an awful lot of them will..."

---

Harry sat just offstage at the arena, spinning his dagger on the polished floorboards in front of him, letting his ears give him an approximate count of people, Muggle and magical, filing into the seats and murmuring to one another. He wasn't sure he'd expected so many of them to come.

*But the Muggles are going to be curious about everything, and the magical people are here*

*because we spread the word that we were going to be choosing someone to lead us...*

Planting a finger in the center of his dagger's blade, he stopped its spin. "I hope they accept it," he muttered. "The way we want to do it, I mean. It's like something out of a story—it *is* something out of a story—"

"So have one of them verify it," Ginny said from behind him, only not startling him because he'd caught a whiff of her scent a single instant before she spoke. "Call for a volunteer, someone who knows how to run a diagnostic spell, and have them do one in front of everybody, so the results are visible."

"That's not a bad idea." Harry turned his head to smile up at her. "What would I do without you?"

"I have a more important question." Ginny seated herself beside him. "What are you going to do *with* me?"

Harry chose to provide a nonverbal response to this, and only broke it off when a toe prodded him in the side.

"We're getting ready to start," said Hermione, pointing to the stage. "If you're ready?"

"And what if I'm not?" Harry squeezed Ginny in a one-armed hug. "What if I like it here?"

"Your mums just sat down out there," said Ron from beside his girlfriend. "And ours, Gin."

Ginny flushed and ducked out of Harry's embrace, scrambling quickly to her feet. Harry blinked at her. "Wait. We're married. We're *allowed* ."

"Yes, but I'm still not sixteen, and since when did something being allowed mean a mum couldn't shout at you about it?"

"This is the truth." Harry brushed off his robes and got to his feet. "Who elected me the person to do the talking anyway?"

"You're famous," said Neville, coming through the curtained-off entryway with an unusually solemn Meghan at his side. "They'll listen to you just out of curiosity to start with, and by the time that wears off, you'll have their attention for other reasons. With anyone else, we'd have to explain who they are and why people should listen, and that would take time." He glanced upwards, at the cavern ceiling above them, mimicking the star-studded sky outside. "Which is one of the things we have the least of."

"Also the truth." Harry sighed, sheathing his dagger. "Right. Here we go."

After one more squeeze of Ginny's hand, for courage, he drew himself into a state of conscious alertness, as though he were about to fight or Apparate, and stepped onto the stage. The Pride flanked him, spreading out into a half-circle behind him naturally, as the predictable whispers from the audience began.

"Harry Potter...Boy Who Lived..."

As he'd been taught, Harry waited for the first wave of chatter to subside, then spoke.

"When I was little," he said in a normal tone, hearing the last of the whispering fade away as people worked to hear him, "I always wanted to curse people who annoyed me. So my godfather would teach me things he *said* were curses. It wasn't until I got to Hogwarts that I found out they weren't the kind of curses you use a wand to cast. Instead they were things like 'I hope you drop a glass of water down your front' or 'I hope your hair gets so tangled up that you have to brush it for an hour'." He glanced to one side, spotting Padfoot without much trouble. "It wasn't that he didn't know any real curses. More that he didn't want my godmother getting him in trouble for teaching them to me."

The wave of snickering through the audience was gratifyingly widespread.

"But the worst curse of all of them, and the one we kept only for people who really, *really* bugged us, was 'I hope you live in interesting times'." Harry smiled. "I was just a kid, and I didn't understand why interesting times would be a curse. Until my godfather took some old history books off the shelf and showed me the interesting times. Then I understood. And now, here we are." He spread his arms, indicating Sanctuary and everything beyond it. "Living in interesting times."

Heads nodded slowly throughout the seats as people leaned forward, listening.

"The Ministry's been taken over by our enemies, but they're not going to admit that. Not to start with." Harry glanced once towards Hermione, standing statue-calm beside him. "'Kill all the Muggleborns' isn't exactly the sort of thing you can win an election with. So they're going to try to make everyone think it's business as usual, just a harder-line Minister than before. One who'll somehow discover that dozens and hundreds of witches and wizards have committed crimes—witches and wizards who just *happen* to be Muggleborn. Which is why we've asked you to come here, to Sanctuary, where they can't find you, and where you can help us fight. But to fight, we need a leader. And that's *not* going to be me."

"Why not?" called a heavyset wizard from the middle rows, over murmurs of confusion from the rest of the listeners. "If you're really the Chosen One—"

"The *Daily Prophet* came up with that, not me," said Harry, a little more sharply than he'd intended. "And the most important thing about it is that it keeps You-Know-Who's attention on me, instead of on a dozen other places he ought to be looking. If I'm the leader, he'll spot everything coming, we'll never get anything done. Besides." He shrugged. "I'm not even seventeen. Wouldn't you rather have somebody in charge who actually knows what he's doing?"

The question drew a real, rolling laugh from the audience, and Harry allowed a little of his smile to show.

*Got them.*

"What I *have* done, with the help of my friends, here," he said, indicating the Pride, "is find something out of the wizarding world's past. Something that will find what we need most right now. A good leader, someone we can trust, someone who can win this war for us. And someone who'll be willing to give that power *back* when it's over." Drawing his dagger, he twisted his wrist, mentally pronouncing *Filio leonis* and bracing his arm for added weight.

The audience gasped almost in unison as dagger blossomed into sword, silver blade a gleam, hilt studded with rubies.

"Can I ask for someone who's good with diagnostic spells to step up here and show everyone what kind of magic is on here?" Harry asked, laying the sword down carefully, its engraved side to the stage. Invoking the name of Godric Gryffindor right now would only cause more confusion. "Raise your hands if you're—yes, please, the witch in the fifth row, with the silver hair, could you stand up? Thank you. Will she do, ladies and gentlemen?" he asked more generally as the woman rose, straightening her red work robes.

A few mutters made themselves known, but no one objected out loud to the choice.

"Excellent. If you'd step up here, ma'am?" Harry gestured towards the stairs, and the woman threaded her way out of her row of seats and climbed easily to the stage, kneeling down beside the sword and drawing her wand.

"*Specialis revelium omnibus*," she said without fanfare, and a series of smoke-drawn pictures erupted from the sword, drawing gasps from the Muggle portion of the crowd. "So let me see here." Tapping her wand against her lips, she studied the images. "As you said, Potter, this spell is meant to find a leader. To take the 'temperature' of a crowd, so to speak, and find a person who has both the ability to gain their trust and the integrity not to misuse it. A fighter, but a thinker too. And—intriguing." Her lips quirked up on one side. "Has to have at least one child, I see. Establishing a legacy."

"And is that the only magic that's on this sword?" Harry asked, trying not to frown as the suspicion he'd seen this witch before grew stronger in his mind. She had something to do with Padfoot, he thought, other than the obvious connection that they were both Aurors, but what, he couldn't yet fathom.

"Apart from a few incidentals like changing its shape when a better design comes along, yes, that's all." The witch dismissed the spell and got to her feet. "Would anyone care to check my work?" she asked the audience, one eyebrow elevated.

"Hold on a moment." The man who rose had been seated off to one side. His skeptical expression, as much as his jeans and T-shirt, made Harry suspect strongly that here was one of Sanctuary's Muggle inhabitants. "A *sword* is going to pick out the leader in this crazy fight?"

"It worked for Merlin," quipped Ron from farther up the stage, the wizarding section of the audience snickering in appreciation.

"In a story." The man glared around him. "But this isn't a story. These are our *lives* we'll be entrusting to this fellow, whoever he turns out to be, and I'm not too fond of the idea of blindly following someone just because a shiny hunk of metal likes him—"

"But we won't." Meghan had been sitting on the edge of the stage, dangling her feet off it, but now she in her turn stood up, looking at the man with all the certainty her silvery eyes could convey. "If we *blindly* followed, we wouldn't be us. We'd be them. The Death Eaters. Whoever he is, or she is, that the Sword picks out, will be a person who *wants* people to ask questions. Because that's the only way to make a battle plan good, or a strategy for a war, is for lots of people to see it and ask questions about it and find the problems with it before the enemy does. And besides." She looked around Sanctuary before returning her gaze to the man. "If we start fighting each other, then our enemies won't have to do anything. They'll just win by default."

"That's true," the man acknowledged, "but still, a *sword* —"

"Not the sword, but the magic on the sword." Harry bent and picked up the item in question, balancing it before him on its point. "The sword's just the vessel. It's the magic that's going to find a leader who's strong, and honest, and trustworthy. Who's ready to fight *and* to think, and to do whatever else needs to be done to win this war quickly and cleanly. For the sake of their own children and everyone else's."

The man sighed. "I suppose it's better than a popularity contest," he said, sitting down again. "But still. A *sword*."

*That's going to be the catchphrase of the next three weeks at least, isn't it.* Harry had to fight to keep his face straight. "But still. A sword." *Like we were asking a flobberworm to do the picking or something! Though I guess, for a Muggle, the two are about equivalent.*

*Time for him to see what it's really going to be like.*

*Time for us all to see.*

"Show of hands, please," he said, turning to the whole of the audience. "All in favor of accepting the decision of the Sword?" After a moment for everyone to look around and see the large number of hands in the air, he waved them back down. "And all opposed?" This showing, though present, was decidedly smaller. "All right, then." He drew his wand, a few more gasps rising from Muggles at the sudden appearance of the slender rod of wood in his hand. "Would everyone who's magical, who's willing to fight, and who has at least one child please rise?"

Off to one side, he saw Ginny crossing her fingers. *You and me both, love...*

"*Constituo* ," Harry Potter intoned, tapping his wand against the pommel stone of the Sword of Decision.

A soft hum, like a distant hive of bees, was Harry's first indication that the spell was live. Then, faintly at first but growing every second, the rubies on the hilt began to glow, and the Sword rose

into the air, Harry releasing it and stepping back as it pulled itself gently away from him.

*Not that I wouldn't be willing, but like I already said, I'm not even seventeen. I'll handle the DA and the Horcruxes. Somebody who can inspire a lot more confidence needs to run the rest of the war.*

Over the heads of the staring, barely breathing audience, the Sword floated, the hum of its power fluctuating in tone every so often as it moved slowly towards the back of the audience. Muggles gawked and reached out tentative hands, not to touch the Sword but to check underneath it for hidden pedestals or rods, Harry guessed. Some of them gazed not at it but above it, as if looking for wires.

*I wonder, sometimes, if life wouldn't be easier if magic was only pretend. If we could just go find Voldemort and kill him, and know he'd stay dead. But then, we'd lose all the wonderful things that magic can do. Animagus, and Apparition, and flying—Muggles can't fly, or only in airplanes or helicopters—centaurs and merpeople, house-elves and goblins, thestrals and unicorns...*

The Sword's hum grew louder, and Harry started to smile as he saw who it was headed for.

*And I think we've just found the perfect person to lead us in safeguarding all of that.*

Behind him, Ron breathed half a word in shock, then stood very still. Beside him, Ginny had her hands pressed against her mouth, imperfectly masking her smile.

The wizard before whom the Sword now hovered blinked at it several times, glancing to one side and the other as though certain there must be some mistake. When no relief was forthcoming, he sighed, squared his shoulders, and reached out as though to a friend.

The hilt of the Sword of Decision laid itself neatly in the hand of Arthur Weasley, and its blade came briefly alive with shimmering, dancing light.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 47: Through Summer Months (Year 7)

As soon as his head stopped spinning, Ron pulled Hermione aside, into one of the backstage corridors. "Harry didn't..." he began, and ran out of words, settling for a vague hand-waggle in the air. "Did he?"

Hermione's face flushed up in anger, but her features didn't shift, so Ron knew she was working hard to control it. "Would he?" she countered, lifting her chin to look Ron straight in the eye. "When this much is riding on it, when it's this important?"

"So we didn't risk getting someone else like Scrimgeour, someone who was so worried about looking good that he forgot about *doing* good? He might." Ron glanced back at the chaotic scene in the arena, over which his mother and brothers had imposed a certain level of order but which was still charged with excitement as witches and wizards chattered to one another about how well they knew Arthur Weasley, how shocked they were that this thing had happened, how they might have expected it to be almost anyone else. "You know someone's going to think of it, Neenie, if only because we're so close with the Pack—"

"And that's exactly why Harry wouldn't, and didn't, do anything to influence this." Hermione's tone developed a bit of a snap, letting through some of the anger Ron could still see on her face, though he doubted anyone else would have. "Everyone who doesn't like us, who doesn't like your dad, who thinks it should have been them the Sword chose instead, is going to run every kind of diagnostic and forensic spell they can think of, to make *sure* Harry didn't influence the outcome, or anybody else, either. And do you know what they're going to find? Nothing. Because there's nothing *to* find."

"Okay, good. Great. I was just..." Ron grumbled in his throat as words abandoned him once more. "How do you do it all the time?" he asked, looking down at the slim figure before him. "How do you always know just the right things to say, in just the right ways?"

"I don't think I do. But I suppose that's outsides and insides again, what you see balanced against what I know." Hermione smiled, the heat of her anger beginning to dissipate. "You really want this for him, don't you? For other people to see what he's worth, what he can do, and what he's never had the chance to show before. But you were just that least little bit afraid that it hadn't happened fairly, that it wasn't real."

Ron nodded, squeezing Hermione's hand gratefully. "I know Dad's not perfect," he said. "He doesn't do everything one hundred percent by the book, and sometimes he covers things over and takes thank-you presents for it that maybe he shouldn't, but he never ignores stuff that could be dangerous, just the stupid little bits and pieces the law goes after too hard, and he's not exactly for sale or we wouldn't be living where we are, would we? And it's him Percy gets the political side from, only Dad goes about it differently. He listens and nods and acts all absent-minded, and yammers on about his Muggle toys until you'd think he didn't have a brain in his head, and then..."

"And then, when someone says just that one word too many, he's right there with everything lined up in neat little rows and columns to prove what they've been up to." Hermione laughed once. "I remember how careful we had to be, talking about what we'd done today when we were little—because if the Pack-parents didn't catch us, one of your parents would!"

A smile came to Ron's face as he remembered this, and when Hermione slid casually along the curve of his arm and laid her head against his shoulder, he didn't object. After all, being the son of the Minister should have a *few* perks attached. Stealing a moment or two for a snog with one's girlfriend seemed just about right.

*Not like Dad needs me right now anyway, with Mum and Percy working crowd control.*

It was to be his last coherent thought for some time.

---

Remus tapped on the open door of the suite Arthur and Molly had claimed for themselves, coming in at Arthur's distracted wave. "How are you holding up?" he asked his friend, sitting down on the comfortable wooden chair, which looked suspiciously like those he was used to seeing all over Hogwarts.

"Still a trifle dazed, to tell you the truth." Arthur shook his head, then pressed his fingers to his temples. "I've been sitting here, thinking over all the men who would have been better for it, yes, and the women too, but no, somehow it's me who's wanted, and that's quite a lot to take in." He frowned, looking up. "I'm just curious, if you know—why weren't you chosen? You'd fit that description Harry gave, in almost every detail..."

"Children, for one thing." Remus smiled a little at Arthur's look of incomprehension. "I'll take it as a compliment that you're forgetting, but as far as we're aware, the spell refers solely to one's born children, and it might or might not take notice of the bond I have with Harry. But there's another, and a larger, reason why. The leader chosen by the Sword must be acceptable to the people he's being chosen for, and I wouldn't be."

"Why not—ah." Arthur nodded slowly. "I do tend to forget that part of it as well, since we know what kind of safeguards you have in place. But you're rather thoroughly outed, aren't you, after that messy business with Hermione a few years ago. And no one cares to think about the actual facts of the matter, that you're different from other men only one night out of twenty-eight, that this was nothing you ever chose or wanted for yourself, that it makes no difference to your actions and behavior the other twenty-seven days of the month—"

"Because none of that would make any difference to the average wizard or witch on the street." Remus sighed. "For that matter, it's not universally true of werewolves. Many of them never had the advantages I did, of family and friendships to bolster them up, so they're walking wounded when it comes to their emotions, and that tends to show through in the way they handle themselves. Or don't."

"Which is a terrible shame, and something that'll need to be dealt with. But first we need to

survive this war." Arthur looked down at his hands, cupping the right one in a way that made Remus suspect he was feeling again the weight of the Sword as it settled into his grasp, then got slowly to his feet, straightening his shoulders, lifting his head, drawing breath as his namesake might have done before going into battle or presiding over a session at the Round Table.

"Tell me," said the Minister of Magic, "what the Order of the Phoenix has planned."

---

Outside, among the chattering wizards and Muggles now thronging the lawns of Sanctuary, examining the pillars of bare rock and the cunningly painted walls between them, exclaiming over the stained glass above and the lush grass below, one man moved quietly, purposefully towards the harbor cave exit. He'd seen enough.

*My lord will give me such a reward for this. The center of the resistance against him, all the troublemakers at one blow, right down to Harry Potter himself—I'll be rich beyond my dreams, have women throwing themselves at me, everything I've ever wanted will be mine, just as soon as I kneel before my Master and tell him—*

He passed through the archway into the corridor beyond.

Everything went black.

---

Bellatrix Lestrange was not amused to be called away from her dinner by a delegation of goblins, bearing the body of one of the longest-standing Death Eater spies within the ranks of their enemies.

"He suffered a mischief within caves we had under observation," said the head goblin, eyeing her as she examined the body. "We thought he should be returned to you for proper disposal."

"Suffered a mischief?" Bellatrix repeated, wiping her fingers on her handkerchief. "His head is bashed in!"

The goblin shrugged. "He ran into a stalactite."

Bellatrix glowered. "I see more than one marking on him."

"He ran into a stalactite several times."

The black walnut wand was already in Bella's hand when an owl's hunting scream made her jump in surprise. Before she could recover her equanimity, Lucius was beside her, smiling urbanely at the goblins even as his fingers closed crushingly around her wand arm, holding it still. "Thank you very much for your thoughtfulness," he said rapidly. "Rest assured, it will be repaid as is proper. What do you think you are *doing*," he hissed at her in an undertone as the goblins bowed brusquely and filed from the room.

"I could ask you the same question." Furious, Bella twisted herself away, holding her wand not quite pointed at Lucius but in readiness, as Starwing landed beside him and unfolded herself into her human shape once again, straightening her black cloak with its ever-more-elaborate ribbon decoration. "They were lying to me, you fool! I intended to get the truth!"

"And is the truth about one measly spy worth risking our access to our family fortunes?" Lucius scowled. "Those of us who still have them. Not to mention important objects, both our own and those given to us to safeguard." His eyes met Bella's and held them for several seconds. "If we anger the goblins too far, they are perfectly capable of finding reasons why the vaults at Gringotts are not currently safe to enter. Many reasons, and difficult ones for wizards to disprove. Our Master would not be pleased."

Bella growled under her breath, but nodded reluctantly. A disruption in the service of Gringotts would indeed be a disaster at this early a date, before the goblins had been properly brought to heel. Best to let this one fall by the wayside, and make their point about who was in charge in the wizarding world later, once their power in the human sphere had been better consolidated.

*After all, it's not as if where and how this one man died would change the course of the war.*

She giggled a little at the very thought.

Lucius smiled faintly.

Starwing rocked back and forth on her feet, humming tunelessly to herself.

---

*Ginny—*

*The bargain is kept.*

*Tell your father to mind his borders.*

*—Kunora*

---

"No," Molly said firmly. "Not even an hour. *Half* an hour, if that."

"But dear—"

"No buts, Arthur. Not when everyone is looking to you." For a moment, Molly softened. "It's what I've always wanted for you," she said, straightening the hang of her husband's robes. "What I've always known you were capable of, and now everyone else will know it as well."

"You flatter me." Arthur slid his arm around Molly's waist and drew her close. "I'm terrified, Molly. This isn't anything I ever thought would come my way. I'm used to my little back office and my memos being ignored for days and weeks until people were good and ready to answer me,

and now I'll be the one who doesn't have to answer until he's good and ready—"

"Except that you won't." Molly kissed Arthur's cheek. "Not unless they deserve it, at any rate. Hangers-on and toad-eaters and all that sort of thing. The people who're just doing their jobs, you'll repay in kind. And the same goes for the ones who do well."

"I certainly hope so." Arthur pressed Molly's hand. "But there's more to think about here than there would be if I'd become Minister in any ordinary way, Molly dearest. We're in Sanctuary, and at least half the people here are Muggles. Possibly more than half. So if you're going to limit me to only thirty minutes a day when I can talk with them, it may be a bit difficult."

"Of course I didn't mean *that* ." Molly sighed. "Honestly, Arthur, you're worse than the boys. Thirty minutes to talk about things like batteries and plugs is what I meant, and you know it, too." She leaned against his shoulder. "How I wish it could be different for them," she said softly. "I never wanted them to know war, and here we are in the middle of it all over again, one of our boys dead, others of them losing the ones they love, and our little girl rushing headlong into everything I wanted her to be able to have in her own time..."

"Perhaps this is her own time, love." Arthur let the side of his face rest against the top of her head. "And whatever we've wanted for her, for all of them, this is what's been given to them, and to us. Let's make the best of it, shall we, and not waste too much time fretting over the might-have-beens?"

Molly laughed a little, forlornly. "What would I do without you?" she asked, just before she pressed her face to Arthur's robes and began to cry.

---

Theodore Nott battled the rising panic in his chest and considered his chances. They didn't look good, and hadn't from the moment he'd lost control of his broom about fifteen minutes before.

*Of all the times to get a bug in my eye, it had to be right then, when I was in the middle of trying to outfly a pair of Death Eaters. One split-second of being distracted, two and a half seconds of pure terror, and then I woke up with a broken nose, a splintered broomstick, and a wand tip in my face...*

Now he was sitting in a corner of an abandoned building, his hands tied behind his back. One of his captors had his head in the fire, while the other had gone to use the loo. A few hunks of bread and cheese were visible on the rough table nearby, but somehow Theo didn't think he was about to be offered any.

He wondered if this was how Draco Black had felt when he confronted Lucius Malfoy for the final time in the corridor under Hogwarts. A bit of a martyrdom cult was already springing up around Draco among the younger members of the DA, though his siblings and friends, to their credit, were doing their best to discourage it. Still, the story was a compelling one, from whatever angle you happened to view it.

*Unless that angle's mine. We've been mirror images all my life. Warped mirrors, but still. And now he's dead, and I wish I were, it'd be preferable to what is going to happen—I don't think Lucius would have held back whatever spells he used to mess with Draco's head, and once my father gets hold of me—*

Deliberately, he shook his head hard, jarring his nose and tasting fresh blood at the back of his throat. It hurt, but better a bit of pain than the unthinking terror he'd been about to drop into.

*I may not have a choice about what's already happened, but I'm damn well not going to just sit here and panic and throw away whatever chances I might still have! If I can get my hands free, especially while they're separated and the one here with me is busy firecalling, there's just the least possibility—*

As if he'd heard Theo's thoughts, the Death Eater pulled his head free of the ashes and brushed them out of his hair, coughing. "Just you stay put," he wheezed, grinning and showing off his yellowing, misaligned teeth. "We'll be having a special visitor any minute now!"

*Damn it. Too late.* Theo braced himself as the fire turned emerald green once more. "Why, hello, Father, how distinctly un-lovely to see you..."

The figure which materialized in the flames was far too thick to be Patroclus Nott, and most peculiarly shaped. Theo squinted at it, trying to make it resolve into a human form, and realized what it actually was only as the 'special visitor' stepped clear of the Floo fire.

*It's not one person. It's two.*

*And the only ones I want less to see than my own father, just now.*

"Well, well," said Lucius Malfoy, tossing his silver hair over his shoulder as Luna Lovegood released her tight grasp around his chest, drew her wand, and siphoned the ashes from his robes and her own with a careless twirl. "What a pleasant surprise."

Theo said nothing, concentrating instead on keeping his face straight.

"A very good catch indeed," Lucius told the Death Eater hovering at his elbow. "However did you do it?"

"Oh, we outsmarted him, we did." The Death Eater displayed his teeth once more. "Pincerd him right out of the sky. He never had a chance against us!"

Silver-gray eyes flicked to Theo, the question as clear as though Lucius had spoken it aloud.

"Bug flew into my face," Theo said shortly. "I lost control and crashed, they just had to land and pick me out of it."

"Here now!" the Death Eater protested. "Don't you be telling the gentleman lies!"

"He's not." Luna beamed at Theo, then turned an accusatory glare on the Death Eater. "But *you* are. Lying is bad." One slender, pale finger shook itself under the Death Eater's bulbous nose. "Bad man. Bad, bad man."

The Death Eater's face turned a blotchy reddish-purple as Theo struggled against a laugh.

"As the lady says, lying is bad." Lucius tapped one immaculately shod foot against the dusty floor. "Especially when you are out on the Dark Lord's errands, for then you are meant to be his emissaries, both feared and revered in all that you do. We cannot have the Dark Lord's messengers rumored to be liars, can we? Whatever would people say?" His smile made Theo flinch, even knowing it wasn't meant for him. "We shall just have to take steps to ensure that particular story goes no further. Shan't we, my dear?"

Luna giggled, and swung her wand swiftly into line with the Death Eater's chest. "*Obliviate*," she enunciated clearly, then spun and repeated the spell on the other Death Eater, who'd just stepped back into the room, before the wizard had time to do anything more than assimilate the presence of more people than he'd anticipated.

*What the bloody—* Theo cut off his thoughts swiftly as Lucius murmured something to Luna, who made flicking motions towards the door with her wand. Both Death Eaters meandered that way placidly under the influence of the Memory Charm, the one who'd been making the firecall stopping to pluck the bread and cheese from the table as he went.

"Excellent." Lucius strode over to the corner and took hold of Theo's upper arm, hoisting him to his feet. Luna shut the door behind the Death Eaters, then swiped her wand once in Theo's direction, and the ropes on his wrists fell away, cut clean through. "Have a seat, Theodore. We have much to discuss."

---

Percy had never known being safe could be so terrifying.

*But then, I had never before been safe when others were not, others for whom I am responsible and about whom I care...*

He lay on the roof of a house, concealed by a Disillusionment Charm, his wand in his hand. Below him, Crystal huddled against the house's wall, glaring furiously at the four Death Eaters who were snickering and elbowing each other. In her arms she held a groggy-looking red fox, its paw and one ear dripping blood.

*We knew they would start baiting us soon enough. Start setting up traps, luring us in. This time we fell for it—next time we'll check it more thoroughly. Assuming there is a next time.*

"Mad Muggle of Hogsmeade," one of the Death Eaters chortled. "Not looking so mad now, is she? Can't get to her pretty little toy without us dropping her first!"

"And she can't sneak it out on us, either," another one chimed in. "Not with that great flea-ridden

beast in her arms. You take him to bed that way, girly? Or do you make him turn human again first?"

"Human as he ever is." A third Death Eater sniffed derisively. "Not much more than what we left inside there."

*For which you'll pay.* Percy fought to keep his anger under control, his servant and not his master, as was the only reason he'd been alert enough to Apparate upwards as the Death Eaters surrounded the house, but it was hard, so hard, when this time they'd arrived too late to do anything but bear appalled witness to the games the Death Eaters liked to play.

*Placing the family members under Imperius, one by one. Forcing them to fight, to attack and kill one another. And all the while, telling the child who happens to be a Muggleborn wizard that this was all his fault, that if he'd never been born, never been so unnatural as to have magic, his family would have been left alone, that they would all still be alive, until he finally begged for them to kill him too...*

Wiping out the Death Eaters without mercy, and extending the same treatment to anyone who sympathized with them, seemed more appealing to Percy the longer he witnessed what his enemies enjoyed.

*But we have to live to tell the story first. And at the moment, that means getting away from here.* He began to calculate angles, to think about how he could best use surprise in his favor. *If I conjure a large enough rock above them, that could take out two of them, and then while they're still startled I can shield Crystal and Fred, which will give them a chance to defend themselves...*

"Please," Crystal said in a quivering, tearful voice most unlike her own. "Please, won't you just let me do one thing before you kill me?"

"What sort of thing?" said the Death Eater who had not yet spoken, his accent more cultured than the others and his tone decidedly suspicious.

"It's a little thing." Crystal sniffled. "A ritual. My people do it in their time of greatest need. It's called..." She bent over Fred, her words becoming muffled and indistinct.

"It's what?" The Death Eater moved a step or two closer, one of his compatriots doing the same. "What is it called?"

Crystal straightened and hurled Fred at their faces in one fluid motion, taking down both yelling wizards with her armful of snarling, clawing fox.

Percy channeled his surge of glee into an invisible Stunner to one of the Death Eaters still standing, and Crystal shot the second one in the face with her potion piece before he could finish pronouncing his spell. On the ground, Fred drew his wand and tapped the nose of each of the Death Eaters on whom he was now sitting.



"The Flinging of the Fox," he informed their stiffened figures cheerfully. "It's a classic for a reason."

Removing his Disillusionment, Percy swung himself down from the edge of the house, looking over towards Crystal, who was bent double again, making an odd noise. He breathed a sigh of relief as he realized she was laughing.

"They bought it," she wheezed when she had enough breath to speak. "Oh, ye gods and little fishes, they *bought* it! A ritual my people do in their time of greatest need—that is the stupidest story I have ever come up with, and they *bought* it! It's worse than claiming the garden gnomes stole my best gloves when I was ten!" She sucked in a deep breath and straightened up once more. "Though I still don't know what did happen to those gloves," she said more thoughtfully, though little giggles kept breaking through her words as she looked at their flattened enemies. "I left them outside one night, and the next morning they were gone."

"Huh." Fred inspected his bleeding hand and conjured a bandage around it, as Percy did the same for the side of his head. "I always did wonder where our gnomes got those tiny little leather jackets that one winter."

Crystal stared at them for an instant, then burst out laughing once again. Percy thought he could hear a note of hysteria in her tone, and wondered if he should rein her in.

*Though at this point, if she doesn't laugh, very likely she'll cry.*

*If Ron hadn't told me in confidence that he and the Pride are coming closer every day to being able to stop things like this, once and for all, I'd be doing a fair bit of crying myself...*

---

"And there goes lucky number thirteen." Harry scratched a line through the entry on his list. "Just as much luck here as at every other spot we've checked so far."

"Which is to say, none." Ron glanced around at the busy village street where the Pride had spent the last hour, carefully combing the area for any sign that a Horcrux was or ever had been hidden here. "Do you really think we're ever going to find it?" he asked quietly.

"I think we *have* to find it. So we will." Harry slid his notebook and pen (a Muggle area called for Muggle tools) back into his bag and waved Hermione and Ginny back from their examination of a display up the street. Neville and Meghan had disappeared into a nearby café, from which Harry had no doubt they would shortly be emerging with refreshments. Feeding the Pride was the sort of thing Neville kept tabs on automatically.

"But it's not going to be easy," Ron finished for him. "Because what has been, when it comes to us?"

"Being friends. At least, some of the time." Harry glanced at his own reflection and Ron's in the nearest window. "I think it's pretty well a habit by now, don't you?"

"I think Ginny'd kill me if I suggested anything else. Not that I want to." Ron settled back on his heels. "Are we really going through with the Den thing? Assuming we can get a house that would work for it, whether or not it's the one we've been playing around with?"

"I'd like to. As long as we have enough space to spread out in, and spots to be private when we need it, I think we'd do well sticking together." Harry bent down to retie a loose shoelace. "Why?"

"Just wondering." Ron seemed fascinated by his fingernails. "It started because of dreams, didn't it?" he asked a little obscurely. "The whole idea of the Pack, and denning. It was to stop people from having bad dreams. Right?"

"Right." About to ask why, Harry glanced up and caught the intensely uncomfortable look on Ron's face, and several aspects of the past few weeks suddenly made more sense to him.

*Like why he's been putting up a Privacy Spell around his bed every night.*

"I'll ask the girls if they want to have den tonight, maybe," he said, double-knotting his shoelace and standing up. "No special occasion. Just to be together."

"I wouldn't mind that." Ron flicked a bit of dirt out from under one fingernail and glanced towards the café door, which Meghan, a brown bag in one hand, had just held open for Neville, carrying two holders' worth of drinks. "Hope they remembered the sugar this time."

"After the tantrum you threw the one time we forgot?" said Ginny, coming up behind her brother with Hermione. "I'd hope so."

"That was not a tantrum." Ron turned to Hermione for support. "Was that a tantrum?"

"You pouted, Ronald," Hermione pointed out, her lips twitching. "I think that counts."

"I did not pout." Ron glared at his girlfriend. "I...I sort of...all right, I pouted," he admitted with a sigh. "But it was double strong and *not* double sweet, and I took a great big drink of it expecting that it *would* be double sweet—"

"And spit it out all over everything." Meghan stopped beside Harry and opened her bag, from which rose a delectable aroma of baking and sweet spice. "Including the pie Danger *just* finished baking." She grinned. "Good thing my Dadfoot has fast reflexes when it comes to saving pies!"

"It's never fun to get the wrong drink, or one that's meant for someone else." Neville angled the holder in his left hand so that Ginny could pluck out the cup marked with a G. "I remember the time I found out what Gran liked to put in her tea, from the bottle on top of the refrigerator that I wasn't supposed to touch."

"What'd you spit it out all over?" Ron asked, accepting his own cup from Hermione.

"An African Violent Gran was cosseting in the kitchen." Neville grinned ruefully. "It punched me in the eye."

The Pride laughed as Meghan began to hand around pastries, and Harry took a moment to catch Ginny's eye and hold up his hand, batting his thumb, ring finger, middle finger in her direction. She smiled and returned the gesture, unaltered Marauder sign for 'I love you', and Harry felt his pendants turn briefly, pleasantly warm against his chest.

*We'll find that brooch Horcrux, because we have to, he repeated to himself, taking a bite of his apple turnover. There's only five more places it could be, and we've got times lined up to check three of them already. Once we've got it, all we have to do is hunker down and wait for the younger Heir of Slytherin—hearing my strangest gift with friendly ear has got to mean them, and that they're going to come find us, whoever they are. When they get here, we can go ahead and kill the brooch, and then lure Voldemort out somewhere, while we get either Snape or that new spy the Order's got inside the Death Eaters to kill the Nagini-Inferius. But wherever we bring him, it's got to be our ground, not his...*

"Mmph," he said indistinctly through a mouthful of apples and puff pastry, holding up his free hand to get the Pride's attention.

"Mmph?" Hermione repeated with a chuckle. "Why, Harry, how articulate of you."

Ginny stuck out her tongue at her friend. "He said," she informed Hermione haughtily, "'Den'."

Harry paused in the middle of chewing and stared at his wife.

"Practice," said Ginny briefly, pointing at Ron. "Lots and lots of practice."

Ron reached over to smack his little sister lightly on the side of the head, leaving behind a few flakes of sugar from his glazed doughnut. Ginny snapped her teeth in the direction of the encroaching fingers, then submitted to Meghan's fussy brushing to get the sugar out of her hair. Harry forced himself to swallow, rather than laugh, as he didn't want to spend the next five minutes picking apple fragments out of his sinuses.

"I did say 'Den'," he admitted when his mouth was clear. "I think we should have one tonight, and talk about some of our final plans. For ending this, once and for all, when we've found what we're looking for."

"That's a wonderful idea!" Hermione bounced a little on her toes, and held Harry's eyes for a fraction of a second. *Thank you*, she mouthed, glancing towards Ron.

Harry held his turnover in his mouth for a moment to reply via Pride-sign. *He's my friend too*.

Hermione nodded, her expression strangely mixed between happiness and wistfulness, before she returned to the lively conversation, being conducted in carefully veiled language so as not to let any of the nearby Muggles know that the six teenagers enjoying an afternoon together here on this street were actually combatants in a deadly magical war.

*And that's all the wistful has to be for, really.* Harry retrieved his turnover and took another bite.

*Or she could be thinking about how there ought to be eight of us, not six...*

But that was a dead trail, and would be until the Pride got to within striking distance of Lucius Malfoy.

*I wonder what he's doing right now?*

---

"Discuss?" Theo repeated, mechanically sitting down on one of the rough wooden chairs at the table, his brain reeling almost as much as it had in the first few moments after he'd awakened from his crash. "What d'you want to discuss with me?"

"Your future." Lucius pulled the other chair out and tapped his finger against it. Luna swirled her wand at it, covering it in upholstery in bright red and blue checks, at which Lucius shuddered but sat down on it nonetheless. "Clearly obedience and good taste are not the same thing," he murmured, as if to himself, before turning the full force of his unnerving gaze on Theo. "So. Your future. What do you want it to be?"

"Does it matter?" Theo surprised himself with the anger behind his answer, and braced for a corrective spell, but Luna did not move from the place she had taken up behind her master's chair, leaning on its back.

"To you, clearly it does." Lucius settled into his seat, reaching up with one hand to toy with a lock of Luna's hair. "Do you want to rejoin your father? Or would you prefer to carve your own path?"

About to snap back that he thought it ought to be pretty bloody obvious, Theo caught hold of himself at the last second. *This isn't right. He's up to something. Almost like he wants to deal—*

He swallowed once against his sudden surge of excitement. *I've got to keep calm. If I blow up, he'll decide I don't know what I'm doing, that I'm not worth considering a dealing partner, and there go my chances. Facts and figures, Theo, facts and figures...*

"I'd rather go my own way," he said, placing one hand atop the other in his lap to keep them from trembling too visibly. "Father and I...we may have a lot of the same ideals, but we don't agree on how they should be carried out. Not any longer."

Lucius nodded. "As I assumed from your actions. But one must have things properly stated in such matters." He wound the lock of Luna's hair around his finger, then released it. "And I imagine you have no wish to join the shining warriors of the Light, or you would already have done so."

Theo shook his head. "We...wouldn't suit," he said after a moment to consider his phrasing. "I've been allied to them, but that was when I had something unique to offer. Now I only have my wand and my wits." He snorted a little laugh. "And I don't have my wand, so that takes me down even further."

"Ah. Yes." Lucius nodded to Luna, who trotted over to the door and disappeared through it. "So

you have no desire to be affiliated with either side of this war. Would you, if you had the chance, leave the country, go into hiding, take the chance of resettling permanently should your father be awarded the position and power he will deserve for his service?"

"Yes," Theo said shortly, fighting down both terror and disbelieving hope. *I know it could be a trick, he reminded his frightened side, but what have I got left to lose by being honest? And you shut up,* he shot towards the premature celebration. *This could all be nothing more than a big cat-and-mouse game, I have to stay alert—*

Luna stepped back into the room, twiddling a familiar wand between her fingers.

"As you say, you have little to offer either side of this war but your wand and your wits," said Lucius, drawing Theo's attention back to him. "And if you will forgive my bluntness, we could as well do without them. Whereas should you rejoin us..." He shuddered slightly. "I have *just* finished grooming Patroclus to the point where he makes a bearable companion. Should he have the opportunity to place you under his domination, he will talk of nothing else for weeks. Possibly months. I doubt I would be able to stand it."

With two fingers, he beckoned Luna to his side. "Still, you are his son," he said contemplatively. "His by right. What do you think, my lady?" His eyes searched Luna's as she laid Theo's wand on the palm of his hand. "What should I do with him?"

"Hmm." Luna looked Theo over, top to bottom. "Throw rug?" she suggested.

"Not this time, my dear. And don't pout. It's most unattractive." Lucius rolled the wand back and forth along his palm. "Run away, Theo," he said softly, his eyes on the wand. "Run away and never come back." He smiled thinly. "Oh, and don't forget to take the little Greengrass with you. She'll only follow you otherwise."

Theo caught his wand as it was tossed to him, and sat in dumb astonishment as Lucius and Luna disappeared once more into the Floo fire. Then he got to his feet and hurried out of the tumbledown building, heading for the nearest sheltered spot from which he could Disapparate to the vicinity of a house called The Plains.

Good advice was good advice, no matter what the source.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 48: Fight Brave and Bold (Year 7)

The master of Malfoy Manor sat in his house's library, his eyes on his book, turning the page every so often, though he was absorbing nothing from the words. His attention was directed out and back, towards the soft footfalls and breathing he could hear approaching.

*Perhaps I should not have trusted my dear Starwing's Memory Charm. She never had a chance to truly learn them, after all. Still, what else could I have done? And this will be for the best, after the messy parts are over...*

A wand's tip poked into the back of his neck, sliding between his layers of hair to prod against a vertebra painfully. "Get up," ordered a voice. "Hands where I can see them."

"Really, now, Rowle," Lucius said calmly, laying the book on the table and doing as he'd been told. "What do you hope to gain from this?"

"You took my prize away from me," Rowle accused, keeping his wand jammed against Lucius's neck. "The Nott boy. You let him go, and tried Obliviating me and my partner about it."

"Did I." Lucius took a long, deliberate breath, and smiled at the faint hint of old blood and powdery scales which lingered on the air of the library. "May I turn around? I dislike holding conversations with a man I cannot see."

"No funny business," Rowle warned, pressing a little harder on the wand before withdrawing it. "I've got you covered."

"As you say." Taking his time, Lucius turned about. "No...funny business." Face to face with Rowle, he looked the broader-built wizard over, head to foot and back again, enjoying the faint twitch of discomfort visible in the thick features before he had finished. "So," he said when he was ready to speak again. "You believe I released Theodore Nott from your custody, then altered your memories to hide the fact."

"I *know* that's what you did." Rowle grinned triumphantly. "The Dark Lord looked into my mind and saw it."

"And you think that entitles you to threaten me in my own home?" Lucius shifted his weight inch by inch as he spoke, letting the back of his mind work through the business of speeds, angles, necessary force. "To hold me at wandpoint and make demands of me as though I were a Mudblood?"

"You're a Squib, is what you are," Rowle began, "and—"

Lucius lunged, his left hand closing around Rowle's wand and twisting it savagely from his grasp, his right choking off the other man's howl of pain as his momentum carried them both back three

steps to slam against the wall. "You forget what else I am," he breathed, lifting Rowle easily from the ground by his clutch on the other's throat, Rowle's feet paddling ineffectively in midair as panic suffused his reddening features. "What I have been for some years now. And a predator, you see, knows only one way to deal with a threat."

His fingers closed with crushing force.

Rowle thrashed in terror, his face darkening from red to purple towards black as he fought for the air the ruins of his throat could no longer supply. Lucius stood immobile, watching his enemy die, and only when the last quiver had stilled did he allow the corpse to fall into a heap on the floor at his feet.

Soft, slow applause sounded from across the room, and Lord Voldemort stepped forth from between two shelves of books. "A masterful performance, Lucius," he said, waving the Death Eater to his feet when he would have knelt. "Now, explain yourself. Rowle's story was true."

"It was, my lord. But I acted as I did for several reasons." Lucius stooped to pick up Rowle's wand, setting it on the table beside his book. "Most, if not all, of which relate to the furthering of our cause."

The Dark Lord tapped his fingers against his opposite arm. "Go on."

"Patroclus Nott is a good and faithful servant to you, my lord. But he is not as single-minded as he could be, and the sudden appearance of his son would tend to divide his loyalties further. Especially since he is not as good a wizard as I was." Lucius scowled momentarily. "And will be again. Still, Patroclus would need to spend more of his time and energy on controlling the boy than I did with Draco. Time and energy which could be better spent in your service. To add to which, Theodore would be a constant danger, for it is possible that Patroclus might slip and allow the spells to lift, and Theodore could be intelligent enough to act as though they had not. And if he then began to send everything he saw and heard to our enemies..."

"Cogent points, both." Lord Voldemort nodded. "Is there a third?"

"My lord, there is." Lucius smiled. "I recalled a bit of gossip I had gleaned from Draco, and cast a spell in the dark by suggesting to young Theodore that he take Astoria Greengrass with him in his flight. Which, judging by what I hear from other quarters lately, he did. No doubt other young purebloods will also think to flee the country on a romantic quest for safety with their beloved ones, and will wish to be unremarkable among their new neighbors. Which means they will, most of them, begin to produce children within the next five years. Magical children, my lord. *Pureblood* children. And if my enemies could so thoroughly corrupt my son when they did not have control of him until his fourth birthday..."

"We could surely do the same, but in reverse." The Dark Lord laughed softly. "Lucius, you are a continual wonder to me. Now tell me how we shall find these happy little couples, and my day will be complete."



"Why, most simply, my lord." Lucius chuckled. "A spell I came across just last week does that very thing. And the only requirements are a bit of blood from two of the lost one's relatives—one from each side of the family is best, but anyone with a strong relation will do in a pinch—and a specially sensitized compass. With a drop of blood apiece from Patroclus and Deianara, for instance, we could find young Theodore across the widest ocean or over the tallest mountain. It would take time, but it could be done."

The Dark Lord frowned. "I take it the blood must be fresh," he said. "And that the results become less accurate as the degree of relation diminishes."

"Sad, my lord, but true." Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Had you hoped to use it on someone soon, perhaps? The compass will need to be constructed, first, and the process is complicated. The carving must be absolutely accurate to the diagrams, and certain potions are required for the sensitizing process..."

"Have Severus begin on those, then, and assign the construction as you see fit," Voldemort ordered, waving a dismissive hand. "Once it is finished, inform me immediately. Oh, and Lucius." His smile showed all the warmth of a wintry night. "Look up the Black family tree and find out who, besides Bellatrix, is Sirius Black's closest living relation."

"I will, my lord." Lucius bowed deeply, his eyes sparking with humor. "Because where one finds Sirius Black..."

"One will, doubtless, find Harry Potter," the Dark Lord finished. "To work, Lucius. And do not let me hear of such things as this from another's lips again." His flicked finger took in both Rowle's crumpled form and the accusations which had been hurled. "You understand."

"Perfectly, my lord." Lucius did kneel this time, and remained on his knees until Voldemort had left the room. "Echo," he called out once the door was closed, pitching his voice to reach barely to the opposite wall. "Echo, come here."

With a loud snap, a house-elf in a neat dress of dark brown appeared, her blue eyes wide and startled at the unexpected summons. "Master called?" she said timidly, then gasped as she caught sight of Rowle's body.

"Clean that up," Lucius ordered, waving his hand in the direction of the corpse. "And then tell Starwing that I want her, and fetch tea. To my rooms, not here. I will be resting."

"Yes, Master." Echo curtsied, then scurried to Rowle's side and gingerly reached for his hand. Lucius turned away from this in favor of rising to his feet, and spent a few moments regarding the paintings on the wall of the library, until another, louder crack announced Echo's Disapparition with the body.

"Did you ever deal with such troubles as this?" he asked his ancestors' likenesses whimsically. "Assassins in the library of one's own home, children denying and betraying their parents..." He shook his head. "What am I saying, of course you did. You lived in the time of Salazar Slytherin,

or only a little later than he." His eyes rested momentarily on the smiling face of a red-haired witch. "And if Draco's fanciful tale about our descent were the truth, you, my lady," he said with the slightest smile of his own, "would be much closer to him than my Master would care to hear about."

*Thus, I shall not tell him. Why should I brand myself the descendant of a Mudblood murderer, on no better authority than the defiance of a foolish boy?*

With a bow only a little less deep than the one he had granted to Voldemort, Lucius turned and left the library. A pot of tea and one of Starwing's near-magical massages would help him regain his balance after a decidedly difficult morning.

---

"Are you ever going to do anything with that?" said Ginny to Hermione, nodding to the silver dagger with its blue stone in its hilt, riding easily against Hermione's hip as the two Warriors stripped and remade the beds in the dormitory alcove they shared with Meghan. "I mean, about putting something inside it. Harry has Sangre's venom, and Meghan has Fawkes's tears..."

"I already have." Hermione patted her dagger affectionately. "And it's part of a whole plan I've worked out. Do you want to hear?"

"Yes, please." Ginny turned a pillowcase inside out, thrust one arm inside it, and caught the corner of her pillow, turning the case to the correct orientation with the other hand. "Dare I hope it's something bloody and awful for Death Eaters?"

"That's actually closer than you might think." Hermione chuckled, a sound which resounded oddly to Ginny's Lynx-ears. After a moment, she realized why. She was more used to hearing those particular undertones from someone like Fred or Selena Moon, someone who'd been deeply hurt by the horror of the war and was coping in ways which could generously be called unusual.

*Have we missed something about our Neenie? I can't imagine we have—but she did lose her twin, and that might have taken a while to really sink in to her...*

"It's the twinning potion, the one Lucius used on Draco and me," Hermione was continuing over Ginny's thoughts. "It doesn't take very long to make, once you know how, and my dagger absorbed it right up. And when it's finally my turn to go out and fight, when I get my chance to catch up with some Death Eaters, I'm going to nick them with it, just the tiniest bit. The potion will get into their body, and I'll be able to take a single drop of their blood. And then..." She traced a finger along one of the dagger's quillons. "I'm going to mix it with blood from a Muggle."

"Taking away what they care about the most, their precious purity, without actually hurting them hardly at all." Ginny tossed the pillow into place at the head of her bed and unfolded the top sheet, snapping it up and down once or twice to enjoy the crisp scent of freshly laundered linen before starting to tuck it in. "I like it. But are you going to be able to get any Muggles to give you some of their blood for that?"

Hermione's smile would not have looked out of place on her feline form, surrounded by pitchers of cream. "Top drawer of the wardrobe," she said, shaking out a hand-crocheted afghan of marvelously varied coloring and laying it across her own bed. "Go and have a look."

Ginny crossed the alcove to the wardrobe which served all three remaining female Warriors (not without some grumbling by Meghan about the curtailing of her clothing choices) and opened first the door, then the top drawer inside.

Five rows of neatly capped and labeled beakers, each holding a few drops of red liquid, met her eyes.

"It's amazing how many of them want to *do* something." Hermione spoke with her head down over her work, removing the blankets from Meghan's bed. "The Muggles, I mean. To get back at the people who've threatened their families, made them run away like this. They understand that it probably wouldn't be wise for too many of them to go out and fight, but this is something that they can do. Not very many of the ones I asked said no, not when I explained why I wanted it." Her finger caressed her cheek, where her own scar had healed over the day of Draco's funeral. "Though I may need more eventually."

"I hope you do." Ginny shut drawer and door, and started unfolding a fresh bottom sheet for Meghan's bed. "I hope you need twice and three times that much. If I never have to hear the word 'pureblood' again, it'll be too soon."

"Really?" Hermione laughed, more truly this time. "Think about that a little bit, Ginny. What are your and Harry's children going to be?"

"Witches and wizards," said Ginny promptly. "Nothing more nor less. And so will all their schoolmates be, and that's what we'll teach them from the beginning. Bring them up in both worlds, the way you and the rest of the cubs were." She grimaced a little. "Though of course that doesn't solve the Muggleborn problem. Why our ancestors ever thought it was a good idea to keep everything so secret until only a few months before the eleventh birthday..."

"Be fair, some Muggleborns get contacted sooner." Hermione caught the end of the sheet Ginny tossed her, and together they tucked it around the mattress. "But usually it's only after they do some enormous public feat of accidental magic, and they're in danger of being locked up because people think they're dangerous or mad or freakish. Which isn't any better." She paused, looking thoughtful. "Do you know, Ron and I were talking about something that might help with that before the school year ended. An educational center, where Muggleborns and their families could come to learn about the magical world, and where children who're magic-born can learn about Muggles."

"Magic-born." Ginny nodded. "I like that better than pureblood or halfblood. It's descriptive and truthful, but it doesn't set up any stupid ideas about things like breeding and bloodlines."

"So..." Hermione smoothed a wrinkle in the sheet. "We'll start using it and wait for other people to catch on?"

"Sounds like a plan."

---

Severus Snape paused in his careful cutting of tiny snippets of green from the ground of the woods surrounding Malfoy Manor to listen. Somewhere nearby, someone was playing a pipe, and someone else was laughing.

*And if I were wise, I would avoid them on principle. Forest-elves do exist, and though we trade peaceably with them for small luxury items such as wines, they take poorly to having their fastnesses violated.*

Still, he had a suspicion that the sounds had a more plebeian explanation, even if the first one to his mind could not have been the true one. The person about whom he'd thought, after all, was dead.

*But he was not the only person of my acquaintance who played a wind instrument. Merely the most likely to have been playing one in the middle of the woods, in the middle of a summer afternoon. Though these woods are hardly his natural habitat...*

Setting aside his unhelpful thoughts, Severus Disillusioned himself and went on the stalk. The Dark Lord, he reasoned, would want to know if someone had managed to slip through the protections laid around Malfoy Manor to enter its grounds without permission, and Severus himself had an interest in finding out who among his current colleagues might be carefree enough to indulge in music and laughter.

*Since they are either so hardened to what goes on here that they are effectively irredeemable, or they are clever enough to know that they must find time for simple pleasures or they will become precisely that hardened.*

Moving with the care he had learned from bitter necessity in his childhood and pausing every few moments to listen again, Severus located the source of the sound with ease.

Keeping his disbelief under control, as he stared at the scene before him, was more difficult.

*Did I perhaps think the explanation might be simpler than that of forest-elves?*

The fair young man sitting in a tree, his arm hooked companionably around an upthrust branch, his suntanned fingers dancing playfully across the holes of his wooden pipe, wore robes of a cut so antique that Severus had seen them in only a few pictures before this, and never in reality.

*And in one of those pictures, he himself was dressed in them.*

Unmistakably, the piper wore one of the faces uncovered on the library wall of Malfoy Manor, that of the second son of the ancient House of Beauvoi.

*Which makes it all the more fitting that the other person here present wears the face of his*

*companion. Severus watched the young woman as she twirled in place, her flaming hair and chiming laughter striking dull, painful chords within his heart. With a name which means 'beloved one'. An irony only to me, perhaps, but an irony all the same.*

Still, this encounter was one he did not think he would be reporting.

*What would I tell the Dark Lord? That his headquarters has been invaded by revenants? That spies are wearing faces out of the distant past to walk among us? If either of these young people appears anywhere inside the Manor, then I will speak. Until then, it is only a moment in the woods.*

Inclining his head silently to the young couple, Severus returned to his duties. The potions Lucius had sent to him would require careful tending for the first several days.

*And though I may not like the purpose to which they will be put, I must admit I enjoy the prospect of a challenge. Brewing endless doses of antidotes and healing potions, with only the Wolfsbane as a break from the monotony, had me nearly ready to throw my cauldron from the window. Though the occasional visit of little Starwing, with her unusual outlook on life, certainly has kept my days from becoming boring...*

---

**You have a visitor,** Danger announced in the back of Remus's mind, a moment before a hesitant knock on the door of their suite.

**I have one? How can you be so sure?** Remus tucked away the three scrolls he'd been comparing and got up from his chair.

**Because he saw me chatting with Letha as he was coming across the cavern, and he nodded but didn't stop. And he smells scared to death, so whatever he wants, be gentle?**

**Curse you, woman. You've piqued my curiosity. Who on earth—** Remus swung the door open.

"Hello, Ron," he said. "Come inside?"

"Thank you. Sir." Ron had his hands shoved into his pockets, and Remus would have laid several Galleons on his fingers tapping out complicated rhythms against his robes' inner lining. "I wanted to—I mean, I thought I should—" He stopped and deliberately took a breath, in, then out. "I'm not making a very good showing, am I?" he said with a rueful smile.

"Why don't we start by getting comfortable." Remus closed the door and swirled his wand at the small living room, bringing its two armchairs into conversational distance beside the fireplace. "And then you can tell me what this is about. Nothing's wrong, I hope?"

"No! No, nothing's wrong. Except—well, something *could* be. I suppose. If I muck this up." Ron seated himself. "Which is why I thought I ought to start with you. So I don't muck it up. Because if I do, well..." He shrugged. "Doesn't matter much what happens after that."

**Now he's piquing my curiosity.** Remus sat down in his turn, watching the youngest son of the Weasleys closely. **Whatever is he talking about?**

**And this, my dear, is how we know that you, for all your intuition, are still a man.** Danger was chuckling through her mental words. **Letha and I worked out what he's up to four sentences ago. But I won't spoil the surprise for you. Besides, if he can't get up the guts to say it to you, then it's just as well he doesn't try for it when the reality's on the line.**

Remus's reply was brief and pungent, suggesting precisely the sort of revenge he was likely to take on his wife for leaving him hanging like this. Danger made a suggestion of her own in return, equally cheerful and just as vulgar, and the link closed with a blown kiss on either side.

"Go ahead, Ron," he said aloud, settling back in his chair. "I'm listening."

---

Nearly an hour later, Ron let himself out, still with a whiff of worry about his scent but with a new confidence infused into it. Remus, left alone again, blew out his breath and stared into the fire, feeling all at once very old.

*If he were still the same impulsive, blundering child he used to be—*

**But he's not,** Danger finished in time with Remus's own thought. **None of them are children any longer, say the calendar what it may. And as much as I wish we could have protected them and sheltered them from some of the blows they've taken, would they have grown as strong as they are today if they hadn't had to fight?**

**I know.** Remus called a tendril of fire to his hand, and shaped it into a tall, stately pine. **"Good timber does not grow with ease..."**

**"The stronger wind, the stronger trees."** Exactly. Danger's mental voice hitched once. **Now if only that knowledge stopped it from hurting so terribly that they've been robbed of some of the carefree time they ought to have...**

"But should they?" Remus spoke aloud without taking his eyes from the flames as the door opened behind him. "Carefree time is wonderful, but can't it also be seen as care~~less~~ time? Time that could have been spent better if they did care for something, as now they do? It's a terrible shame that they have to live in fear, to fight and hurt and even die. But no living thing is entirely free of care. And even if we'd managed to keep them totally sheltered from the world, sooner or later that shelter would break, and they'd be so horribly unprepared for what came pouring in on them."

"So, as ever, it's the fine line we have to walk." Danger seated herself on the arm of Remus's chair and passed her hand over his fiery tree, decking it out momentarily for Christmas before it vanished into the air. "Giving them as much love and joy as we can, and supporting them as they face the difficulties of the world around them, without either smothering them or leaving them out in the cold." She sighed. "And here we are, hoping and praying to have a blood child of our own, to start this process all over again. Does parenthood come with a built-in Memory Charm, do you

think?"

"Possibly." Remus reached around to pull his wife down into his lap. "Or perhaps we've simply made up our minds that the joys outweigh the pains."

"Not to mention how much fun the process of baby-making can be. Though it's a difficult art to master. One must keep in training." Danger pursed her lips, looking thoughtful. "Come to think of it, I don't have to be anywhere for a while. Would you care for a practice session?"

Remus chuckled. "I thought you'd never ask."

A flick of his wand conjured a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the doorknob, and the follow-on wave shut the door with a solid *thump* .

---

Harry sat on a ledge halfway up one of the rock pillars of Sanctuary, surveying his small kingdom and finding it good.

*Well, not really mine. But I can at least claim fairy godfather to it.* He sketched an image of himself in the air before him with fire and added frivolous little wings, such as might be found in a Muggle fairytale book. *And it's nice to see things working like they should. For once.*

Indeed, Sanctuary hummed with activity on this sunny summer afternoon. On a flat patch of grass out of the way of traffic, Neville and some of his best artilleryists were holding a potion piece practice for Muggle adults, some of whom were interestingly good with such items already. In the open-air arena, Beedle the Bard was being creatively reinterpreted for a giggling audience of intermixed Muggle and magical children (Harry's ear had caught a familiar-sounding list of euphemisms for death being applied to Babbity Rabbity's Cackling Stump, winding up with "This! Is an Ex! TREE!"). Fang was drowsing under the sunlit Gryffindor crest, his fur patterned in red and gold, making him look like Padfoot in Harry's hazy baby memory.

From the direction of the kitchens, Harry could smell a most savory odor, and wondered who was in charge of dinner today. A large number of the Muggles who'd sought shelter in Sanctuary cooked either for their own families or for restaurants, and had shown a great deal of interest in keeping themselves busy in their accustomed manner, with the result that the house-elves' workload had been reduced quite a bit (not that the house-elves were terribly happy about this, the workaholic race being what it was) and meals in Sanctuary had expanded from the usual Hogwarts fare to incorporate a number of dishes not often seen on the tables in the Great Hall.

*I hope they're sharing the recipes. That curry last night was fantastic, and the pasta dish the night before was just as good. Who'd have thought bacon, eggs, and cheese would go so well with noodles?*

Reshaping his fire into a Snitch, Harry caught and released it several times before allowing it to dissipate. He'd have his hands back on the real thing one of these days very soon, since as surely as Hogwarts students were Hogwarts students, there would be pickup Quidditch in Sanctuary,

though the Bludgers might be a bad idea when playing in an enclosed space filled partially with Muggles.

*I'll ask Padfoot. He'll know the spells to keep them off the spectators if anybody will.* Deciding there was no time like the present, Harry scanned Sanctuary's main cavern until he caught sight of his godfather's silver-laced black hair, then began to descend from his perch.

*Wonder what the other side is doing on a pretty day like this?*

---

Alecto Carrow giggled to herself as she finished yet another preliminary sketch for the maze she was designing for the proper punishment of naughty children at Hogwarts. It was a shame that the Dark Lord's plan to unseat Minerva McGonagall as Headmistress hadn't worked out, but his control of the Ministry had done something almost as good.

*And who'd have thought that fool Fudge would put anything in place that would be useful for us? But he did, oh yes, he did.* She set her quill down in its holder to pick up and gloat over the gleaming badge sitting to one side of her desk, her fingers stroking lovingly across its engravings. *Hogwarts High Inquisitors. That's what we'll be this fall, Amycus and I, Hogwarts High Inquisitors. Which means we have the power to punish anyone, at any time, for any reason, and not even the mighty Headmistress herself can stop us!*

Being Inquisitors might even work out better than being the true power at Hogwarts, Alecto reflected, picking up her badge and crossing to the outside door of the suite she shared with her brother (slob that he was, though the house-elves managed to keep up with the worst of the clutter). All the precious parents would think, because Mealy-Mouthed McGonagall was still supposedly in charge, that their dear little lambies would be perfectly safe at Hogwarts.

*I'd pay money to see their faces when they realize what they're getting back. Or not getting back, if we decide that's what's needed.* Alecto giggled again, turning her badge so that the sunlight glinted off it. *We can always call on the Ministry to intervene in cases of unfit parenting, after all! And once we do...*

She closed the fingers of her free hand with a broad grin. "Ours," she breathed, imagining she held lives in the palm of her hand rather than nothing but air and sunlight, lives she could allow to continue on sufferance, or snuff out as easily as she had little Pritchard's.

*But once we have things going the way we want them, no one'll try to run the way he did. Not once they know it's impossible. Not once we've got all the families properly segregated, held in different spots, and constant communications between them.* She squeezed her fist tight, her grin broadening even further. *One gets away, the rest die within the hour.*

Coming up with these plans, and presenting them to the Dark Lord for review and assignment to the teams of witches and wizards who would make them a reality, was the highlight of her work as a Death Eater, and Alecto didn't see how anything could be expected to top what she was doing now.



"Unless it's overseeing the whole plan as it works, of course," she murmured aloud, staring out into the sunny afternoon but seeing the blackest night, with quiet weeping and groans rising up to her tower window as she read through lists of couplings, births, and adoptive parents by candlelight. "And one generation of forced breeding's all we'll need, really. Once we've raised those children up in the proper pureblood way, given them a taste of what real power's like, how good it is, they'll never even *think* of straying from what we tell them's true, and there we are." She began to giggle again, and couldn't stop herself. "There we are! With the world we ought to have, the world we deserve—the world where we're on the top, and they're on the bottom, and it'll stay that way, for good!"

"So sure?" asked a light, teasing tenor.

Alecto whirled, her hand going to her wand pocket—

Which was empty.

"Looking for this?" asked the young man standing in the center of her sitting room, twirling her wand between his fingers. "You might want to invest in a bit of security. An alarm spell, perhaps. I understand there's a shop in Diagon Alley which sells quite a good line."

"Who are you?" Alecto advanced on the stranger, glaring at him. "How did you get in here?"

The young man chuckled and dodged nimbly to one side, whisking the hem of his dark green robes out of Alecto's clumsy grasp and landing on his toes beyond her reach. "Magic," he said, beaming all over his face. "Along with the fact that I have, let us say, a certain affinity for this house."

"Yes, I can see as much." Alecto scowled. "Not like you've got 'Malfoy' written all over your face or anything."

"I do?" The stranger affected an astonished look. "However can that have happened? Perhaps that trick quill my lady slipped me the other day...no, that only exploded. Rather messily, yes, but I don't think it wrote anything in particular on my face."

"That's not what I mean and you know it!" Alecto shouted, making another grab, which her unwanted visitor eluded as easily as he had the first. "What are you, some bastard brat of Lucius's? Or *are* you Lucius, having a little game with me, hmm?"

"My dear Miss Carrow." Balancing on the balls of his feet, the young man looked down his nose at her, quite unaffected by her bellowing. "Do you really believe Lucius Malfoy could do this?" Tucking her wand up his sleeve, he performed three cartwheels in place, then sprang upright breathing barely faster than when he'd started. "Or this?" Leaping straight up into the air, he spread his legs out as wide as they would go and touched his toes with his fingertips. "Or—*this*."

A brilliant flash of light erupted where he stood, and Alecto yelped and threw up her hands to cover her eyes. When she had finished blinking furiously to clear her tears away, her strange visitor was gone. Only her wand remained, lying askew on a slightly scorched section of floor,

along with a small slip of parchment.

Alecto had to count to ten several times, once backwards and once in French, before she could trust herself to advance to where her property awaited and pick it up, along with her bizarre visitor's parting gift.

*You may call me Dafydd, it read, in old-fashioned flowing handwriting. Expect your next visit at whatever time seems good to me.*

---

Evanie Pettigrew seated herself a bit awkwardly on the window seat, turning her face into the light and breathing deeply of the soft summer breeze. Peter had laid a Safety Charm over the window, so she wouldn't fall, and fresh air and sunshine were good for both her and the baby.

*I need to enjoy it while it lasts. It won't be summer forever. She closed her eyes against the glare, leaning back into sun-warmed stone. The long days do mean Peter gets back here to me before it's quite dark, but they also mean a lot of the higher-ranked Death Eaters go out to enjoy the grounds as well, and we don't dare go anywhere they might see us, so mostly we stay in. Which is lovely in its own way, and I do have the house-elves to talk with when Peter's not here, including the shy new one who wears clothes, but sometimes I think I'd be willing to do something desperate for a chance to talk to another human...*

A brush of wind past her face made her exclaim and open her eyes.

"Will I do?" asked the young woman now standing in the center of the room.

Evanie didn't quite gasp, but that was only because sheer surprise had taken her breath away entirely. *Who—and how—*

Mastering herself, she laid an arm protectively across her stomach, hoping the movement would distract the stranger from her slow reach for her potion piece with her other hand. "Who are you?" she asked, once she had enough air in her lungs to do any such thing. "What do you want with me?"

"I want to be your friend." The young woman, no older than twenty if Evanie was any judge and with a full head of striking red hair, smiled charmingly. "Your thoughts sound like you need one. And I promise, I don't bite, except when people deserve it."

"My *thoughts*?" Evanie's fingers wrapped around the potion piece's handle, then released it. Anything that could read her mind would probably not be vulnerable to a squirt of sleeping potion in the face. "But—where did you come from?"

The young woman pivoted on one foot, her arms spread for balance, her diaphanous pale blue robes fluttering around her. "Out of the everywhere, into the here," she chanted, coming to rest facing Evanie once again, then sobered. "Truly, how I come and go is something I'm not permitted to tell you. But I am here, and as real and human as you are. And if it's talking you want, that's one

of the things I do best." Perfectly at home, she sank into a tailor's seat on the floor and rested her elbows on her knees, gazing up at Evanie. "So. Where should we start?"

Evanie laughed shakily. *My teachers always did tell me to be careful what I wished for—and I suppose when there's magic involved, that's doubly and triply true!*

"We should start with the most important thing, of course," she said, letting go of her potion piece and stroking her hand instead along the drowsing form of little Annette Selene Pettigrew, for whom Brekky, Levvy, and their new friend Echo had tentatively predicted a birthdate of the fourteenth of September. "What is your *name*?"

The young woman smiled again, her green eyes softening as at a happy memory.

"Call me Amanda," she said.

---

Sleeping in Remus's arms, Danger dreamed of a laughing voice calling out words to her.

*My kin have found new games to play,  
Your enemies to disarray;  
Be glad in those whose hearts you hold,  
And to the end, fight brave and bold.*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 49: His Wife's Husband (Year 7)

Before the war, Brian Li had held a vision of secret agents harvested mainly from the novels he'd borrowed from the local Muggle library, filled with beautiful women, glamorous travels, rich foods, exotic drinks, excitement, intrigue, and danger.

The reality, as he'd come to realize, was very different.

For starters, there was mud. Mud had seldom made an appearance in his favorite books, but he seemed to spend a great deal of his time involved with it, whether that meant crawling through it, falling into it, or having it thrown at him. Quite often, there were other aspects to the mud than simple ordinary dirt, which took on an extra dimension when his heightened senses came into play. Being able to smell dung more clearly, and in smaller amounts, on his person and clothing was far from a blessing in his line of work.

Rich foods, exotic drinks, and glamorous travels had all been conspicuous by their absence, as a few snatched mouthfuls of bread and cheese, a strong mug of tea, and a trudge from one spot to another in the rain or a swift Disapparition to avoid the angry mob were far more likely to occur. As for excitement, intrigue, and danger, they were far more enjoyable when they were safely ensconced on fictional pages than when one was undergoing them in one's own personal and irreplaceable body.

However, in one aspect of secret agent work, the novels matched exactly with Brian's own experience. There had indeed been a beautiful woman involved from almost the very beginning of his mission, and she had, to his surprise, first befriended him, then started to help him with his work, and now was doing as much of it as he did or more. Not to mention that her feelings, if he were reading her right, had long since moved beyond the bounds of friendship. He knew his own had.

*Though this is one time I'm just as glad we don't live in a novel.* He spared a moment from his careful observation of the werewolf camp in the small, sheltered valley below them to glance over at Corona Gamp, busily murmuring notes to her Dicta-Quill as she gazed through a pair of Omnioculars. *Whenever an agent in a novel falls in love with a beautiful woman, she's inevitably working for the other side. Which means she's just setting him up to betray him and break his heart.*

*I don't think I have to worry about that with Corona.*

Of its own accord, his hand dropped back to an inner pocket of his robes, where a small box had been lingering for several weeks. Every time he thought the moment might be right, something came along to spoil it, and had since the middle of June. It was now nearly the end of July, and if he didn't get the chance to ask his question soon...

*Then I'll live with that, rather than rush it and frighten her into saying no.* Firmly, he drew his

mind back to the task at hand. *We need to concentrate on what we're doing to win the war first, and our personal lives second.*

*No matter how frustrating I find that.*

He returned his attention to the werewolf camp, to one werewolf in particular whose strutting walk and well-fed look made Brian suspect the other might be a Death Eater, or at least trusted by them. Giving the most dominant lycanthrope at any given location access to extra food, which he (as usually it was) could keep for himself or dole out to those who pleased him, was one of the Death Eaters' best tactics for controlling the smaller settlements.

*Until we arrive.* Brian checked his wand and his piece, sensing rather than seeing Corona do the same. *At which point, their tactics are no longer valid.*

*It's difficult for even the most threatening male to keep his control over his pack when he's swathed from head to toe in a cocoon of his own hair, or shrunk into a smelly, screaming baby.*

With a mental chuckle, he began the slow process of climbing down from his treetop perch without betraying his position.

The sooner he and Corona toppled the vest-pocket tyrant below them, the sooner they had a chance of finding a quiet moment in which a man could with decency ask his lady to marry him.

---

"So this is being seventeen?" Harry stretched his hands above his head, brushing his fingertips against the cave ceiling. "Funny. Doesn't feel much different from being sixteen."

"That's what I said yesterday," remarked Neville through a mouthful of toothpaste at the sink in the corner. "Ron?"

Getting no answer, he turned to look, as did Harry. Ron was sitting on the edge of his bed, staring down at something small in the palm of his hand.

"Ron?" said Harry after a moment of silence.

"What?" Ron jumped and looked up, shoving whatever had so fascinated him into his pocket. "Oh. Right. Er, many happy returns, Harry."

"Thanks." Harry frowned. "You all right? You've been quiet lately."

"Who, me? I'm fine. Just...thinking."

"Don't hurt yourself," said Harry, dodging the expected, half-hearted punch as a matter of habit. "Anybody notice what didn't happen last night?"

Neville rinsed his mouth and spat. "We never went upstairs," he said, motioning two levels above his head to indicate the place he meant. "Wouldn't you think they'd want to celebrate this birthday

most of all? Your coming of age—and mine, but I'm not the one who's supposed to be doing the vanquishing here. That's all you."

"Rub it in, why don't you." Harry made a face. "But you're right about one thing. I'd have thought we'd barely get a chance to fall asleep before we'd be there. Wonder why we didn't?"

"Maybe because they have guests?" Ron leaned against the wall. "And we're not allowed to see them until Halloween, but try keeping Hermione from going to look for them if we're there. Or your parents, any of them."

"That makes sense." Harry grumbled under his breath. "Mind you, that's not to say I *like* it."

"Sounds like most of this war." Neville rinsed the sink out and stepped aside for Ron to have a turn. "All the more reason to get it over with as fast as ever we can. The more we play around with those Manor Den plans, the more I want to get my hand in there."

"We'll work on making the current tenants an offer they can't refuse." Harry snickered. "There's a stone house north of here that ought to suit them if they're looking to relocate. Stark rugged cliffs, ocean views from every window, and the neighbors aren't noisy at all..."

Ron nearly choked on his toothpaste.

---

Sirius waited outside the entrance to the boys' dormitories, trying not to look as though he were lurking. The box in his back pocket felt larger than it ought to be, but he knew that was a figment of his imagination.

*Even Moony wouldn't have messed with something like this.*

*I don't think.*

Finally he heard the trio he wanted, chuckling together, something about a house from the fragments he could catch. He set it aside to ask later and hailed his godson as he stepped through the arched doorway, Ron and Neville a step or two behind him.

"Oi! Birthday boy!"

"That's birthday *man* to you," Harry returned readily, and Sirius grinned and strode over to pull his godson into a roughly returned hug. They weren't much different in height any longer, he realized with a pang, nodding to Ron and Neville as they went on their way. He'd known that for a while, but it held a new weight today.

"So I suppose you know what you ought to be getting," he said when they let each other go. "Small and round and goes tick-tick-tick-tick..."

Harry screwed up his face as though wearing a monocle. "Ve have vays of making you tock," he

growled in an atrociously bad accent.

"Sense of humor bred pretty damn true," Sirius muttered, and pulled the box out of his pocket. "Many happy returns, Greeneyes. This's from all of us who've been lucky enough to have you as a kid."

"All?" Harry accepted the box carefully, his eyes widening. "You mean—"

"Go on and open it," Sirius urged, waving a hand.

After an instant's hesitation, Harry did just this.

The gold watch which lay on the box's padded interior was engraved at each of the cardinal points with an image of a Snitch, the wings extending around the watch's rim in both directions. As Harry picked it up, the golden hand whirred twice about the face and came to rest on "Time to eat", and the interior dial under the words spun until it stopped on "breakfast". Harry laughed, then turned the watch over, looking at the words engraved on the back.

Sirius had no need to see what was written there. He'd read it first after rescuing this very object from its current owner, who had been enthusiastically chewing on it (he thought one or two of the teethmarks might still be there).

*To James, from Lily,  
on our anniversary.  
For whatever time we have.*

"He lost the one his parents gave him when they had to scramble out of a safehouse," he said quietly, watching Harry's eyes travel across the lines of text. "One of those three times they defied His Evil Darkness. Lily gave him this to remind him that no matter what happened, she didn't regret marrying him, didn't regret you, didn't regret a single damn thing." His throat tried to close, but he fought it back open. "So, now it's yours."

Harry turned the watch back over, stroked his finger across its face, and slid it carefully into a pocket of his jeans, all without looking up.

A moment later, Sirius found himself being hugged again, even tighter than before.

"Hey, now, kiddo," he murmured when the slight, distinctive shaking of the frame in his arms registered to him. "Take it easy or you'll set me off too."

"Sorry." Harry seemed to be torn between laughing and crying. "It's just..."

"Yeah. It sure is." Sirius held his godson tight, letting his mind range with wonder from the sweet little boy he'd been to the strong and able man he'd become. And if a tear or two fell onto his shoulders or into Harry's hair, that was nobody's business but their own.

*I hope you two can see him today, wherever you are,* he thought towards James and Lily as he



remembered them best, from his last visit to their cottage a few days before Halloween, James turning his face funny colors to make Harry laugh, Lily trying to scold him and failing because she was laughing too hard herself. *I hope you see how well he's turned out. He is, and he has, everything I think you would've wanted for him.*

*Now here's hoping he can stay alive to enjoy it.*

---

Severus withdrew his stirring stick delicately from the potion in his cauldron, careful not to jostle it or even to breathe on it.

*Trust Lucius to find something this motion-sensitive in its early stages. But that should change, in just a few seconds—*

With a suddenness he never tired of seeing, the potion flashed over from a clear, brilliant ivory to midnight blue.

"There," Severus said aloud, letting out his breath. "That will hold."

*And will require at least two days of simmering before its next ingredient is added.*

Going to his window, he undid the charms he'd laid on it to make sure he wasn't disturbed, then opened it, both to air out the workroom and to signal to anyone who might be watching that he could now be approached in safety.

*One anyone in particular.*

It continued to baffle him why Lucius Malfoy's owl-girl should have taken so strong a liking to him, unless more of her human mind remained than she displayed in her everyday behavior and she recalled him dimly as someone her Pride had taught her that she ought to be able to trust. More baffling still was the liking he was beginning to find in himself for her. She was curious, a bit heedless, and seemingly as innocent as the creature whose form she could take on.

*But she does not need to be told anything twice, especially not "Leave that alone". She sees magic innately and avoids things which are dangerous. And since as far as I can tell, she has no more memory than an owl for spoken words, she is a safe listening ear for certain of my troubles.*

*Still, I am careful not to voice all that I feel to her. She may yet repeat some of my talk to Lucius, and he to the Dark Lord.*

A flutter of white wings in his window brought a brief smile to his face, though it was gone by the time the human girl in her gray robes and black cloak dropped to her feet inside the room. "Good morning!" she chirped, then sniffed the air. "New potion?"

"Yes, one your..." Finding his tongue uneasy with the word 'master', Severus tapped his ring finger.

"Ahh." Starwing smiled, caressing her red-stoned ring. "*Him* . He gave you?"

"Yes, he gave me the instructions and asked me to prepare it. It is for his work." Severus nodded towards the wooden chair in a corner of his workroom. "If you wish to sit down, please do."

"Thank you." Starwing bobbed a curtsey and untied her cloak, seating herself on the chair and pulling her sewing kit and a spool of black ribbon from her pocket. "Stitch, stitch, stitch," she chanted under her breath as she threaded her needle and stuck it through the cloth to hold it, then snipped off a length of ribbon and began to sew it to the cloak. "Stitch, stitch, stitch..." Her needle came back through the fabric a bit too fast, and she squeaked. "Ouch!"

"Hold still," said Severus swiftly, scooping up the healing potion he kept on the countertop and a square of clean cloth, then crossing the room to her side. He was just in time, as the fingertip with the bright bead of blood now adorning it was about to enter Starwing's mouth. "No, give me your hand—" He glowered down her offended pout. "Stop that. Do you want to make yourself ill?"

"No." Starwing hissed at the touch of the healing potion on her lacerated finger. "*Ouch*. "

"Yes, it stings, but only for a moment. And now..." Severus whisked the cloth away, rather like a Muggle conjurer, he thought with an internal smile.

"Ooh." Starwing held up her finger, admiring its pristine skin. "Thank you," she said, smiling across at him. Then her eyes dropped to his left arm, with which he was steadying himself on the seat of her chair. "Ouch," she said softly, lowering the finger to touch the inside of his forearm, then meeting his eyes again.

"Yes," Severus agreed, despite the small voice at the back of his mind asking him what, exactly, he thought he was doing. "Ouch."

The sadness in the owl-girl's eyes deepened, until Severus could have sworn her look was one of sympathy. "Make it better?" she suggested, pointing to the cloth he still held in his other hand.

Severus surprised himself with a laugh, brief and humorless but still a laugh. "I hardly think that would work. Not when even my most powerful—" He cut off his words, appalled by what he'd been about to admit.

Starwing continued her stitchery for a moment or two, then looked up at him again. Her recently healed finger traced firmly across her mouth.

"You will not speak?" Severus raised his eyebrows. "Not even if your *master* orders you to tell him what I have said?"

"Pfft." Starwing waved this possibility away airily. "He never asks."

"Somehow, I can believe that of him," Severus murmured. "He has been more mindful of late than he once was, less likely to do exactly what pleases him without thought for the consequences, and yet I find I can believe that he allows you to go where you like when he has no need of you, and

never asks you where you have been or what you have done, so long as no one has harmed you or threatened you..."

Tucking the cloth into his pocket, he got to his feet. "I experimented upon the Dark Mark, long ago, when I was...uncertain about which side of the war I truly wished to join," he said, watching Starwing's needle flash back and forth through cloth and ribbon, up, down, up. "I thought, in my youth and pride, that surely I could remove it if only I studied enough about similar markings throughout history." His mouth twisted to one side in memory. "I was wrong. The Dark Lord has added a portion to the spell that he, and only he, can alter or remove."

He pulled back his sleeve to expose the marking, which Starwing studied with interest. "You see the serpent," he said, tracing its curve in the air above his skin with a finger. "If anyone tries to interfere with the spell, that serpent awakens and becomes real. It begins to tear free of the flesh around it." The searing pain of that memory set his teeth on edge even now. "I was able to channel my panic long enough to use a diagnostic spell, to discover how the snake could be controlled. The answer was even understandable, and quite simple. I would either stop meddling with the Mark, at which it would become dormant again, or I would need to convince the snake that it should obey me." His smile held nothing of joy or amusement. "In its own language."

Starwing pursed her lips, then produced two hissing words in quite a creditable imitation of Lord Voldemort speaking Parseltongue. "That?" she asked, beaming.

"Yes. Precisely." Severus returned his sleeve to its usual position. "But I do not have that gift. No one living does, except the Dark Lord himself, and Harry Potter. Neither of whom I think would be interested in convincing the serpent with which I was, quite willingly, branded all those years ago that it should not bite me, and inject me with a venom which would—not kill me, no. That would be far too easy." Needing the emotional release of movement, he strode to the far wall, then back again. "No, the venom of the Mark's serpent is instead a sort of Portkey. One which works from inside the body—which cannot be pleasant, I would think—and which transports its victim to the feet of the Dark Lord, wherever he may be."

"Oh." Starwing smoothed a wrinkle out of her ribbon. "Why?"

"For punishment, I would assume. Or humiliation, which can be a punishment far worse than pain or payment in goods or gold." Severus began to tidy away the ingredients he had used in his brewing so far today. "Or perhaps the Dark Lord meant it also as a precaution, in case one of his Marked ones should stray. Unless magic more powerful than his intervenes, he literally cannot be stopped from summoning them. They will come when he calls, whether they will or not."

"Okay." Starwing nodded wisely. "Thank you."

"You are welcome." Severus sighed. "For whatever small portion of the story you may have understood. Why I tell you these things..."

*Because you listen, his mind finished, as the owl-girl smiled and lowered her eyes to her sewing again. Because you give at least the impression that you care. Because I must tell someone these*

*things, or I will lose all control, and all chance at making a difference for the side of the war I truly do believe in.*

*Even if you are, in yourself, a symbol of one of the other side's purest triumphs.*

He continued to rerack his bottles, in time with Starwing's quiet humming from the other side of the room.

---

Peter Pettigrew stopped with his hand halfway to his doorknob. He had soundproofed the door to all other ears, but to his, it might as well not be present, and he could hear with utmost clarity the sound of not one, but two, women laughing.

*I know Evanie talks with the house-elves sometimes, but how—*

Cutting off his wondering before it could waste more time, he transformed into Wormtail the rat and vanished into, apparently, solid wall.

*Appearances are so deceiving.* He grinned to himself, rat-style, as he scurried along the narrow tunnel he'd hollowed out, then laid an illusion over, within a few days of his and Evanie's arrival in these rooms. Even should one or several of his fellow Death Eaters decide to block the door and lay Anti-Apparition on the room, either to frighten him or in a serious attempt to hurt him, they would be unlikely to check for truly tiny entrances and exits.

*Despite the fact that all of them know what I can do.* Had he still been human, he would have cast his eyes up to heaven. *How they ever got as far as they did the last time, as they are this time, with as stupid as they are—but I know how.* A tiny sigh escaped him. *They're ruthless fanatics, fighting against people who have standards, and a few of them are very intelligent indeed. Psychopathic, but intelligent. They do most of the directing, and the rest just follow along. And if I had one of the smart ones trying to trap me—*

Then, Peter concluded, stopping a few feet short of the rat-sized entrance to his rooms, he might well be in deep and certain trouble.

*Which is why I make sure to keep a low profile. The less they think of me, the better.*

But the order of the day now was not thinking, but listening. Crouching low and swiveling his ears forward, Peter concentrated.

"So you are married," said Evanie, laughing through her words. "I thought that looked like a wedding ring! But it's so plain. Just gold, without a stone or anything."

"We wanted them to match what the picture shows," said a strange woman's voice, though its cheerful liveliness struck very distant chords in Peter's ear. He might, he thought, have heard it a long time ago—

*But why do I feel like it was mine, somehow?*

Baffled, he shook off the thoughts and kept listening. The stranger was still speaking. "To make sure everyone knew who we were. Everyone who needs to know, that is. You wouldn't know, but that's because you don't walk around the house, and because we didn't want to frighten you. But your husband's come home early—no, he isn't there," she added as, Peter was sure, Evanie looked around at the door. "He came in a different way, and he'll tell you who I am, but please don't be frightened when he does? I said I wanted to be your friend, and I do. Even if I am a little unusual."

"And I want you as a friend, Amanda," Evanie began, "but—"

"No buts." Peter heard the squeak of a chair as Amanda rose to her feet. "Now, do like I asked you, please?"

"All right," said Evanie slowly, and began to count. "One, two, three, four, five—and she's gone," she finished, sounding equal parts dejected and baffled. "Peter, are you really there?"

Peter hurried out of the other end of his tunnel and retransformed, startling a gasp from Evanie. "Goodness! So you heard—I hope it's not going to cause any trouble, but she just *appeared* one day, and she seemed lonely too—and don't you dare get that look on your face," she added in a sharper tone. "Just because I occasionally wish I could see a few other people does not mean you can get rid of me."

"What I wish I could do is get you to safety." Peter glanced around the room, noting the open window, the two teacups on the table, the few lingering strands of hair on the back of the chair which was usually his. "You and the baby. Once she's born, will you at least consider it? We're already in contact with the other side, and I could slip you out through that weak spot I found in the wards." He saw the indecision on Evanie's face and decided to apply a little gentle pressure. "I'd be less likely to lose my focus and get into trouble if I knew you two were safe."

Evanie glared at him. "That's playing dirty."

"It's also the truth."

"Which is the only reason I haven't smacked you for it." Evanie heaved a sigh. "All right. I'll consider it—consider it," she repeated, raising a finger. "But only once Annette is born, and only if you promise me you'll come for us as soon as the war is over."

"If I can, love." Peter slid his arm around his wife and held her close, breathing her scent in, praying he could be strong enough to trade the daily comfort of having her nearby for the daily relief of knowing she, and their child, were safe, no matter what happened to him. "If I can. Now, your friend?"

"How did I know you were going to get back to that." Evanie chuckled dryly. "Her name is Amanda. She's really quite pretty, red hair and green eyes, but her skin isn't that milky fair you so often see with redheads, she's got a bit more color than that..."

"Hang on." Peter freed his wand hand, drew his wand, and concentrated on a memory, then sketched a picture frame in the air and thought hard about a nonverbal spell James had taught the other Marauders a few months after they'd left Hogwarts. Evanie made a gratifying sound of wonder as a rush of color filled the frame, steadying down into the face of the young woman called Amanda from the library wall mural. "Is this her?"

"However did you—yes, it is." Evanie's tone changed markedly between the two halves of her sentence. "Peter, what is that? I mean, where it is truly, where you saw it?"

"It's a painting, down in the library, a mural. It was covered with wall paint and dirt, I had to clean it off. And if Lucius is to be believed..." Peter flicked his wrist, vanishing the small picture. "It shows his ancestors, who lived somewhere round about a thousand years ago."

"A thousand years?" Evanie's hands closed tightly around his arm as she looked up at him wide-eyed. "Peter, have I been having tea with a ghost?"

"Not a true ghost, no. You'd be able to tell. They can't eat or drink, for one thing. Completely insubstantial. And they have no color in their bodies—they're silver, all over. Whereas your visitor..." Peter rubbed one silver finger along the back of the chair, then held out the few shed hairs for Evanie to see. "Clearly has color, and substance, to her."

"Yes, she does." Evanie gathered the red hairs between her own fingers, rolling them into a loose ball. "So what is she, then?"

"I don't know." Despite himself, Peter chuckled. "Perhaps I can find a way to ask Lucius. There might be an answer in one of those old books he's so fascinated with these days. She mentioned a husband? Does he have a name?"

"He does." Evanie frowned. "It sounded a bit like David, but not quite..."

"Dafydd." Peter nodded. "That fits too. So the second son of the Beauvois, and his wife, are coming and going as they please in Malfoy Manor. And she sounds like a bit of a seer, if she knew I was there while I was still inside the wall."

"She is." Evanie sat down in her chair once more and absently began to stack the teacups and plates onto the tray they'd arrived on. "Sometimes, just for fun, she'll tell me things, little things that are going to happen in a moment, like a magpie is going to fly past the window, or the house-elves are going to give us strawberry preserves for the scones today, and she's never once been wrong."

"Well, all right then." Peter ran his flesh hand across the chair, fancying he could still feel the guest's faint warmth there, then sat down. "I don't suppose I could get some tea as well?"

"Not if you don't *ask* for it, you can't." Evanie sighed exaggeratedly. "The *nerve* of some people! Coming home at half past four and wanting *tea!* "

Peter laughed, and stored the moment away in his memories to revisit when times were bad. He had no doubt that would come soon enough.

*7 August, 1997, at 4:30 in the afternoon...*

---

Ron muffled a yawn behind one hand as he approached the curtained-off alcove where he, Neville, and Harry slept in the boys' side of Sanctuary. His strategy session with some of the older DA members and Red Shepherds, regarding a Death Eater hideout they thought they'd spotted along the eastern coast, had run longer than anyone had anticipated, but the ideas had been flowing well, so he'd ignored the house-elf messenger he was sure had been sent with a nagging note from his mother around half past nine, telling him it was time for bed.

*Probably should read that at some point. He fingered the still-tied scroll in his pocket. But later. Right now, it is half past eleven, and I'm about ready to fall over and sleep for twelve hours straight...*

He came around the last pillar of rock and stopped short.

Ginny looked up from her book and put her finger to her lips, beckoning him closer.

Ron glanced around, making sure there were no lurking brothers ready to play a trick on him, then started forward again, feeling a slight *pop* pass over his body at the third step.

"Zoned Silencer," Ginny said softly. "We wouldn't have heard each other from where you were at all. Ron, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question." Ron checked his watch again. Its hands spun to the same conclusion as before. "It's late, Gin, you ought to be in bed—"

"What's today?" Ginny interrupted, her voice a bit too casual for the flush Ron could see beginning to paint her cheeks.

"It's a Sunday." Ron tried to cudgel his tired brain into working. "Second Sunday in August. The tenth, it's the tenth—hey, your birthday's tomorrow. Many happy returns. A little early, but still counts."

"Yes, it does." Ginny smiled, with more of Lynx visible in the expression than usual. "And what happens on my birthday, Ron? What am I allowed to do?"

"What are you allowed—" Ron began, hoping the act of repeating the question would give him time to come up with the answer.

In the middle of speaking, he glanced up at the curtain hiding the beds, and suddenly everything fell into place.

"Oh," he said, before simple shock robbed him of all other speech.

"Yes. Exactly oh." Ginny glanced at her own wristwatch. "In twenty-seven more minutes, I'll be sixteen. Which means even Mum can no longer say I'm too young to—"

"Please," Ron managed to croak, raising a hand against the flood of truly appalling images. "I don't need details." After a few deep breaths, and under protest, his brain began to work again, though he still had to shy away from exactly what was going to be happening in that same twenty-seven minutes. "Suppose you'd rather I be somewhere else, then?"

"If you don't mind," said Ginny coldly, then softened. "I'm sorry, Ron, I thought you'd been told. We sent a house-elf with a note—"

Ron grinned sheepishly and dug the scroll out of his pocket. "You mean this?"

"You didn't even read it?" Ginny glared at him.

"I thought it was from Mum!" Ron unrolled the scroll and glanced down it, noting with a small smile that it had already been heat-spelled for him. "New room for the night for me and Neville, huh? Permanent, or are you two moving into, er..."

"Married quarters?" Ginny finished when he faltered. "I don't know yet. We'll talk about it. Later."

"Yes. About that. About later." Ron seized his courage in both hands, reminding himself he was a Gryffindor. "Ginny, will you do one thing for me?"

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "Depends on the thing."

"Little thing." Ron indicated its size with two fingers. "Just—wait. A bit longer than midnight. Tiny bit. Say, fifteen minutes?"

"Why?" The word could have been one of Fred and George's ice sculptures from the Hufflepuff Halloween Extravaganza.

"Because if your watch is fast, and you're not *quite* sixteen when it, y'know, happens, when you and Harry..." Ron shook his head, moving swiftly past these troubled waters. "Whatever. You know, you just *know*, that Mum is going to find some way that's *my* fault. So if you could just wait that extra fifteen minutes, so there's no possible chance that it wasn't your birthday yet..."

Tapping her fingernails together, Ginny considered this. "Five minutes," she counter-offered.

"Ten," Ron said immediately.

"Done." Ginny swiped two fingers across her cheek, Ron mirrored her movement, and they shook on it. Then, realizing what they'd done without thinking, they both started to smile.

"They really have changed us," said Ginny, casting a glance over her shoulder at the curtain



behind which Harry lay sleeping, a glance that shot heat through her entire face. "For better or for worse."

"Better." Ron squeezed his sister's hand gently and let it go. "Most of the time, anyway."

"Yeah." Ginny started to pick up her book, then paused. "Ron?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm glad you went out to the orchard that day."

"Me too." Ron got to his feet and turned to walk away, ordering himself not to look back.

He was two steps out when the idea struck him.

*The orchard. That's it.*

Setting worry about Ginny aside for the moment, he pulled the scroll from his pocket again. Ideas often settled down for him while he was sleeping, so the sooner he found where he was bedding down tonight and let what Hermione called his subconscious mind sort out this latest brainstorm, the better.

*There's no hurry, anyway. I've got more than a month to think about it...*

---

Harry blinked awake and squinted at the clock, which sensed his eyes on it and obligingly brightened to allow itself to be read.

*Eleven past midnight. Wonder what woke me? Can't have been a bad dream, I don't remember anything, and the room hasn't got any fear-scent in it, actually smells quite nice in here—*

He turned over and discovered the source of the enticing aroma.

"Good morning, Harry," said the person sharing his bed with him, smiling smugly.

"Mmm." Harry tried to wrap his brain around the circumstances behind Ginny being in his bed, Ginny looking at him just that way, Ginny starting to snuggle up to him—

His hand brushed against her, and he froze.

"You're...not wearing anything," he got out after a long moment.

"Aren't I? That's funny." Ginny glanced down at her slender body under the bedcovers. "And here I was just thinking you were overdressed. It's my birthday, Harry. I'm sixteen. And do you know what that means?"

Harry's mind, groggy as it was, finally connected the last dot, and he started to smile in his turn.

"Why don't you tell me?" he asked, starting to pull off his pajama top.

"Words are so overrated." Ginny twined her fingers through his pendant chain, the touch of her skin against his sending little shocks of heat through his body. "Why don't I show you, instead. Pants, off, now."

"Working on it." Harry yanked the top over his head and tossed it into a corner of the room. "You could always help me, if you're so impatient."

"Maybe I will." Ginny's fingers slid down to his hips, then inward, but Harry had been waiting for that move and captured her hands before she could touch the part of his anatomy at which she'd been aiming.

"None of that, now," he said, giving her as stern a look as he could manage on short notice. "Absolutely no tickling."

"Aww." Ginny pouted. "But you're so funny when you squeak."

"Maybe later." Harry started to wiggle out of the pajama bottoms. "After you have your wicked way with me."

"What makes you think my way is wicked?" Ginny batted her eyelashes. "Why can't my way be amazing and wonderful instead?"

"Good question." The pajama bottoms came free of Harry's legs, and he shoved them to the edge of the bed with a foot. "Let's find out."

Two pendant chains tangled as lips met in a hungry kiss.

---

Much later, Ginny woke slowly, parting the snarled mess of her hair to glance around. Harry was still asleep beside her, his arm curved across her protectively, *lovingly*, she thought, and let all the new meanings that word had taken on warm her inside yet again, but something in the room had definitely changed—

She sighed as she caught sight of the difference. "You," she said, trying her best to generate an angry glare, though that was hard with the taste of Harry's kisses still on her lips and her blood still humming from what they'd discovered about one another. "I knew you'd do anything to tease me on my wedding night, but I didn't think even you could manage to come back from the dead!"

"Didn't think I'd be keeping an eye on you, ickle Gin-Gin?" George Weasley shook his slightly glowing head. "I'm disappointed. I thought you knew me better than that. Tell Harry he'd better treat you right, or I'll find a way to haunt him. And tell everyone else I love them and not to do anything crazy." His face went still for a moment. "Not that it'll likely help, but who knows? It might."

"I will," Ginny whispered, feeling herself begin to slide back into sleep. "And I love you too."

"I know, Gin." George blew her a kiss just before her eyes closed. "I know."

---

"Harry," a voice whispered, drawing him out of sleep. He opened one eye almost reluctantly—it was so comfortable to lie here with Ginny warm and limp beside him, her breathing soft against his shoulder—

Both eyes shot wide open of their own accord. James and Lily Potter were standing beside his bed, their forms misty and translucent, both smiling down at him with the same intense love he knew he'd felt at the Department of Mysteries.

*Only this time I don't have to lose it.*

"How—" he began.

"You'll have to work it out, but it shouldn't be too hard," James cut him off. "We can't stay long, but you opened the door, so we figured we might as well walk through it." He swayed a bit in place, soothing the dark-skinned little boy who slept in the backpack he was wearing. "Give you our love, and our blessing, even if it is a trifle late."

"Take good care of Ginny, and your Pride," Lily added, her eyes sparkling. "All of them."

"Don't ever give up," James took over again. "Not even when things seem impossible. Remember answers sometimes come from the last place you'd think to look."

"And tell Sirius, we can, we do, and you are." Lily went to one knee beside the bed. "Everything we ever wanted for you, and so much more, Harry. So much more than we could ever have dreamed."

"Am I dreaming this?" Harry reached out, but stopped short of trying to touch his mother's hand. "Will I wake up and you'll be gone?"

"This time." James swayed in place again. "But we'll see each other again. This is only your second turn, and you're due three. Don't forget to call us, though. We can't come unless you do."

"Stop confusing him." Lily shook her head. "Honestly. You'll know what to do when you get there, Harry," she said with a smile. "Don't worry too much."

"I try not to." Harry managed a smile. "Hurts my head."

"Attaboy." James grinned. "Take care, now, Harry. We'll be back."

"We love you," Lily whispered, standing up. "So very much."

"Love you too," breathed Harry as his eyelids dropped shut once more.

Lying in the space between the sleeping Potters on the mattress, their two sets of pendants glowed ever so slightly, illuminating the two pieces of the dull black stone in their gold-wire cages.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 50: Partners and Leaders (Year 7)

Harry squinted into the box Moony was holding out to him, trying to see what was within it, masked by tongues of Gubraithian fire. "It's a letter," he said finally, looking up. "What about it?"

"It's a letter addressed to you," said Moony, closing the box and sliding it back into the desk drawer in the War Room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. "From Albus. He didn't want you to know about it until you were seventeen, unless there were some dire emergency. Which, thankfully, there hasn't been."

"So, now you know it exists," Danger picked up the thread, in the manner Harry had come to expect from his Pack-alphas through the years. "But you're to open it under only one of two conditions. Either once you've made definite contact with Alexander Slytherin's Heir, or..." She gestured to herself and Moony. "If both of us are dead or dying."

"Cheerful," muttered Harry. "Do you think that's likely?"

"I certainly hope not, but those were the conditions laid out in our letter." Moony dusted off his hands. "Do you understand, Harry?"

"Yes." Harry scuffed his foot against the carpet, first against the nap, then with it, watching the fibers stand up and lie down, changing the color and pattern as they did. "Why does growing up have to be so much no fun at all?"

"Oh, I think parts of it are some fun at least." Danger winked. "Or haven't you and Ginny been enjoying—"

"Gah!" Harry clapped his hands over his ears and fled, Moony and Danger's commingled laughter following him down the corridor towards the stairs to the basement kitchen.

*Sometimes having Pack-parents is more trouble than it's worth.*

Dobby looked up from polishing the stove as Harry burst through the door. "Harry Potter, sir," he said with a small smile. "Does Harry Potter need anything?"

"No, just running away from the insanity." Harry sat down in one of the armchairs by the fire, watching Dobby fuss around the stove, simultaneously conducting the dishes in their ballet of washing themselves with occasional waves towards the sink. "How're you holding up?" he asked. "With Echo being gone, I mean. You know we're keeping an eye out for her, for anything we could do."

"Yes, sir, Dobby knows." Dobby nodded without turning around. "But Echo is a good girl and will keep her own eyes out as well, for ways she can stay safe. And besides, Lucius Malfoy *knows* what Dobby and Winky would do to him if Echo is hurt." The verb came out in a growl. "And besides

the second time, once Harry Potter or his Pridemates have killed Lucius Malfoy, then the Malfoy line will be ended and Echo can come home." Now he did turn around, and smiled at Harry again, rather more toothily. "So Dobby has nothing to worry about, really, sir."

Harry wished he shared this confidence, but nodded nonetheless.

---

The werewolf stood, chest outthrust, and watched as two of his people hauled a third one forward. The female was filthy, her wiry red hair snarled and matted, her face smeared with grime, but still she glared up at him with a spark of defiance in her gray-green eyes.

*We can't have that, now, can we. Good thing we won't much longer.*

The werewolf smirked at her, thinking gleefully of the plan given to him by his liaison with the Death Eaters (fastidious little prick that he was, but still, scent and manner both proclaimed him an alpha predator, and such must be deferred to). A terror campaign did no good, the man had pointed out in his casually high-class way, if no one knew about it to be terrorized.

*So we spread the word around that we were making an example, here, today, and look at the result.* The werewolf let his eyes travel across the ring of jeering, leering males which had gathered around the female, both from this camp and from several others in the area, and felt his own lust begin to rise. *We've let our females get away with far too much until now. From this day on, if any of them get ideas, we'll all come together to put them in their place. Remind them where they belong, and who they belong to.*

*Anything else is just too...human.*

"Right!" He clapped his hands twice, quieting the crowd somewhat, though the comments and snickers directed at the kneeling female continued in an undertone. "We all know why we're here, so let's get to it! Queue up, boys, first come first served! And remember..." He grinned widely. "We're here to enjoy ourselves, so make her yell nice and loud for us now! This's our world, not anyone else's—"

"Then why're you taking orders from the Death Eaters?" a voice rang out clearly.

"Who said that?" The werewolf peered around suspiciously, hindered by the two or three dozen males below him who were doing the same thing, and the females who huddled on the periphery, attending this gathering because they'd been warned not to fail. "Ought to know better, if you've been here a while. We don't take orders from anyone! We may take...suggestions," he let the pause drag on for several seconds, until the level of snorting and elbowing below him was as bawdy as he wanted it, "but not *orders*."

"That's not what I heard," called another voice from a different direction. "Heard you take orders from Lucius Malfoy."

"Heard he's got you sitting up, rolling over, and begging," a third voice chimed in. "Him and his

dear Dark Lord."

The werewolf had barely drawn breath to reply to these ridiculous lies when the female in the center of the ring sprang to her feet, her eyes suddenly alight. From within her ragged clothes, she snatched out what appeared to be a Muggle child's toy, a *water balloon*, if he remembered the stories properly—well, that made sense in some ways, she'd been a Muggle until the previous full moon, but where—

The balloon impacted the ground at his feet and burst, splashing him with a substance which was definitely not water.

He got two steps forward, intending to begin the chastisement of this unnatural bitch himself, before his knees buckled and he pitched forward onto his face, the other males around him similarly falling where they stood or dropping to the ground with their hands clasped behind their heads in response to hazily heard shouts and spellfire.

His last thought was to wonder, dreamily, what type of potion could make the female's hair appear to be turning a brilliant shade of pink.

---

"Ugh." Tonks held out her arms, allowing Charlie's Extra-Strength Extra-Gentle Cleaning Charm to travel along the length and breadth of her body. "That was definitely one of the dirtiest things I have ever done. One of the best, mind you," she added, glaring at the unconscious forms of the male werewolves crumpled on the ground all around her, "but still. *Ugh*."

"At least we were able to stop it, this time." Brian glanced up at the Werewolf Registry scroll Lee Jordan was holding for him (liberated from the Ministry, compliments of Percy, some months earlier), then back down at the werewolf he was examining. "We've come to several camps too late, since they don't always advertise what they're planning to do. And then, we don't always have the help we had today." He glanced to one side, where Corona, Maya, and the young woman they'd freed from a dilapidated shack a few hours before, leaving Tonks behind in her place, had the female werewolves gathered in a circle and were taking it in turns to make their explanations. "Thank you for it."

"Our pleasure." Charlie finished the spell with a flourish and handed Tonks the robes he'd been holding on his opposite arm. "And if you're looking for a place to take this lot..." He prodded one of the unconscious men with his toe.

"As it happens, yes." Brian got to his feet, brushing dirt off his hands. "We've established a central safehouse for the women, those who're ready to accept help. Which should be most of them, after today."

"I'd certainly hope so." Tonks fastened her robes and checked her wand's draw from its arm holster, then slid it away again. "Whereabouts? Or shouldn't you say?"

"Probably better not to mention it aloud," said Lee after exchanging a look with Brian. "But..." He



drew his own wand and beckoned Charlie and Tonks closer, then sketched two pictures on the air. One was a waterfall with the entrance to a cave behind it, while the other was a boy's face, dark-haired and determined.

"Ah." Charlie nodded. "Got it. And how's..." His look at Maya needed no further explanation.

"She's thrilled that it had *something* good come out of it." Lee snapped his wrist, vanishing the pictures. "Especially for girls like she could have been, if it weren't for her uncle and aunt and cousins."

"And you." Tonks prodded him in the shoulder. "Don't go forgetting about yourself, now."

"You were saying, Charlie?" Brian spoke up before Lee's embarrassed grimace could turn itself into words. "Something about what we might do with the men? Clearly we can't let them run loose, they're terribly dangerous as they are, but I'm not sure how we could effectively guard them without tying up more of our resources on that than we can afford."

"Which is where my work comes in." Charlie grinned. "As long as we make sure none of them's left with a wand, my supervisor said we can house them in a couple little valleys in one of the dragon preserves. Too narrow for the dragons to get into, but if any of them try to leave..." He pursed his lips and blew. "Roast werewolf, a la carte. Doubt they'd even try to get out on the full moons, with that many big predators on the other side."

"They can ship in food, same process they use when there's not enough prey for the dragons," Tonks added, "and there's a stream or two for water. Caves along the walls for shelter." She looked down at the prostrate rows of bodies, her face twisting in disgust. "Suppose we can give them some straw for bedding if we have to, but I'd like it better if they had to sleep on bare stone. It's no more than what they were making Alexandria do, and the others." The pink-haired head bobbed towards the young woman she'd earlier been impersonating. "Can't even properly call them animals, animals don't do that sort of thing, not to their own kind..."

"Easy, love." Charlie squeezed her shoulder comfortingly. "This lot's been stopped, at least. And I'd bet you plenty of the men didn't like it, but they were afraid to speak up in case they were the next ones to get punished."

Tonks sighed between her teeth. "Damn you, dragon-boy," she said on the end of it. "Why do you always have to make me *think* about things?"

Charlie wiggled his ring finger in her direction. "Said I would, didn't I? Along with a load of other stuff, but I wasn't paying much attention to it all. You were too beautiful."

"So," said Brian hastily before Tonks could respond to this (though the pink of her hair was deepening steadily in what he suspected was her form of a blush). "We'll interview each of the men separately, find out whether they would have gone along with this voluntarily or not, and assign them to a valley based on that. To keep the ones who just got swept along with it all from becoming the next victims of this same sort of bullying."

"And let the bullies fight it out for who's top dog, and who has to knuckle under." Lee looked down at the werewolves coldly. "I wouldn't shed too many tears if most of them ended up as dragon bait before the war's over..."

---

"Why are you helping us?" asked one of the older women suspiciously, looking from Maya to Alexandria before finally settling on Corona. "What's in it for you?"

More than a year of traveling with Brian, and her last few months of talking personally with the women whose lives were bounded by the werewolf camps, informed Corona's answer better than she could have dreamed in the life she'd once lived. "Mainly we're stopping them," she said, nodding towards the unconscious men who were being checked over by Lee, Brian, Charlie, and Tonks. "They're dangerous to wizards and Muggles both, so we're taking them out of play. But it's no good removing one danger and letting another one slide into its place."

"The difference being," Maya put in, "that they're dangerous because they *want* to be, and you'd rather just find a way to live in peace. We assume."

Slowly, the woman nodded. "What's she got to do with this?" she demanded, jerking her chin towards Alexandria. "I'd seen her here, thought she was just one of the newly-turned, that they were planning on teaching her a good hard lesson, pounding it into all the newer ones' heads that there's no way out, no way back..."

"They were." Alexandria eased her seat on the hard ground, wincing a little as the half-healed bite on her left leg twinged. "But I got luckier than anyone has a right to be. And now we all have a chance at that same way out they didn't want us to have. A place to be safe, to learn to live with who and what we are now, and how to fit ourselves into a world that doesn't like us very much." She waved a hand around herself, encompassing the squalid little camp with its tumbledown huts. "I don't know about you, but even 'doesn't like us very much' looks awfully good after this."

"It isn't free," Corona added before the woman could speak again. "There will be work we'll ask you to do. But you'll have your choice of what it is, and none of it will be impossible or demeaning."

"And we'll teach you how to defend yourselves, and your new home." Maya's teeth flashed as she grinned, and a few of the women straightened their shoulders or lifted their heads in interest. "So that nothing like this has a chance to happen again."

"But before we get into any of that." Corona looked the older woman in the eye. "I don't think I caught your name."

The woman looked momentarily stunned, and a soft inhalation ran around the circle. "Barbara," she said after a few seconds. "Barbara Thompson. And you are?"

"Corona Gamp." Corona extended her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Barbara."

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the twitching of Maya's fingers. They had formed, momentarily, the hand-sign (of which Corona could read only a little, but this was one of them) for *Nicely done*.

---

"A good day, I think." Brian checked his watch to be sure the rice on the back burner of the stove wasn't overcooking, then stirred the thin-sliced vegetables in his pan, enjoying the scent of the spicy sauce he'd added. "Exhausting, yes, but this is the kind of thing I always hoped I could do with my life. Making a true difference, even just to a few people."

"And I was never taught that I could make any kind of difference at all." Corona finished slicing the piece of beef they would share and portioned it into two heaps, a small one to be cooked thoroughly for her and a larger one to receive the barest possible searing for Brian. "Pureblood children are meant to do precisely what their parents did, no more, no less. Unless it involves putting their inferiors more firmly in their place." She smiled a little. "If I had known what *my* place would become, I wonder if I would have dared speak to Sirius as I did."

"Corona." Brian snapped off the heat beneath the two pans and turned to face her, his heart beginning to pound. "We've never talked about what might happen. During the war, or after it. I've always assumed you were here because you wanted to be. But if you're not, if you would rather do your work from somewhere else—"

"Do you want me to go?" Corona had her head bowed over her hands as she scrubbed them at the sink, her voice so low that Brian could barely hear her over the water flowing from the faucet.

"No! No, of course not, I've never wanted that..." Brian swallowed hard, reminding himself of all the times he'd faced down larger, stronger, better-armed opponents without feeling half this much panic. "In fact," he said, forcing calm speech from his suddenly numb lips, "I was trying to ask the opposite."

"The opposite?" Corona shook the excess water off her hands and reached for the towel. "I'm sorry, Brian. I don't understand you."

"Then let me be a little clearer." Brian slid his hand into his pocket and found the item he'd been holding onto for nearly two months. "You're the most wonderful woman I could imagine. Except that I didn't have to imagine you. You're real, and you're here, and I love you."

Slipping the velvet-covered box from his pocket, he opened it, and watched her eyes widen in shock.

"I don't want you to go, Corona," said Brian Li, dropping to one knee in front of the woman he loved and holding out the ring his sister had helped him pick. "I want you to stay. Forever. Please, say you will?"

---

*Dear Su,*

*Tell Dad and Mum to expect us for their blessing sometime next week.*

*Brian*

*P.S. You so much as think 'I told you so' and I'll duck you in the koi pond.*

---

Corona stood at an upper window, gazing out into the warm summer night, one finger gently caressing the five tiny stones in the ring she now wore, set in a curve which mimicked the Corona Borealis, the Northern Crown, after which she'd been named.

"He's a good man, Mother," she whispered into the darkness. "He's kind, and he loves his family, and he likes to laugh. He'll take good care of me, Father, and I'll do the same for him. Just as we have been doing, these past months and years."

*And I would speak to Elladora, but even in this moment I doubt she would hear me. Either from fear of what my Brian is, or from jealousy that he is mine and not hers. Which makes very little sense, that she could feel both those emotions at the same time, but I know my sister and I do not doubt that both feelings live somewhere in her heart, even though trying to maintain them would be enough to make my head spin—*

But although she had long since lost any fear she might have felt of Brian, her head was indeed spinning, Corona realized distantly, as clouds of mist seemed to billow up inside her mind. What had she just been thinking? Something about her love? Her love, and her sister... so strange, that he should prefer her, when Elladora was older and should have been married first, but then, he had never had the chance to meet Elladora, and that was hardly fair...

And then she knew nothing more at all, until she awakened on her bed, still fully dressed, to the singing of birds in the first faint glimmers of the dawn.

---

Midway through the morning, an owl landed beside Lord Voldemort and offered him a slip of parchment which made him frown.

"Trouble, my lord?" asked Bellatrix, looking up from the maps of magical potential which Lucius had unearthed for her perusal. "What can I do?"

"Nothing, nothing." Voldemort waved it off. "A small setback in one of our areas of attack. Though I will need to speak to Lucius shortly, if you could have him fetched, my dear Bella." His eyes gleamed as she blushed like a schoolgirl. "And it confirms a far more important item is still at my command. A weapon within the Order of the Phoenix, unaware even of its own existence, but ready to my hand when I shall give the word." His fingers contracted slowly around the slip of parchment, crumpling it and smearing the ink. "To destroy, once and for all, an enemy who should long since have ceased to trouble me, and simultaneously to strike a devastating blow at the foundation of Harry Potter's confidence..."

---

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" said Harry, standing in Professor McGonagall's open office door. She hadn't yet moved up to the Head's office, and Harry wondered if that was because she still half-expected, as Harry himself sometimes did, to see Dumbledore strolling into one of the Sanctuary gathering areas for breakfast with Fawkes on his shoulder or talking gravely with the small children of Sanctuary, magical and Muggle, as they fed crusts of bread to the fat orange and black fish which had once been Death Eaters.

"Yes." McGonagall finished reading the scroll in front of her, signed her name at the bottom, and allowed it to roll up again. "Come in, Harry. Close the door."

Harry frowned, making sure to allow the expression full play only in the moment his back was to the Headmistress. *Have I done something? I didn't think I'd done anything...*

"You're not in trouble," McGonagall added before he'd turned around again. "I simply need to ask you a few questions."

*Idiot.* Harry rolled his eyes at himself and crossed the office to have a seat. *She's got as good a nose as Neenie or Lynx, remember? And she's had it a lot longer, so she knows how to sort things out.*

"I somehow doubt that you and your Pride will be returning to Hogwarts next week, given that Amycus and Alecto Carrow will be joining the staff," said McGonagall when he was seated. "I can write the timetables for teaching so that they have little or no chance of encountering your parents, but students are another matter. Have you given any thought to where you will base yourselves?"

"We were thinking Headquarters, Professor." Harry controlled his sigh of relief that he wasn't about to face a 'why your schooling is important' lecture. "You do know Meghan's coming with us?"

"I expected nothing else. But your absence leaves me in something of a quandary." McGonagall tucked away the scroll she'd been reading. "Given that some of my best candidates for Head Boy, and my leading one for Head Girl, will not in fact be enrolled at Hogwarts this fall."

Harry felt his eyes widen as her meaning sank in, and Professor McGonagall's scent developed a distinct tinge of amusement. "The things we remember," she said as if to herself, sitting back in her chair. "A cool November evening, a house in a Muggle neighborhood in Surrey, and Albus Dumbledore telling me that he wanted a certain little boy to grow up without any artificially inflated ideas of himself. Without becoming, as he put it, a pampered little prince. And here you sit, shocked that you and your siblings and friends could be considered for important duties." A tinge of sorrow touched her smile. "I only wish he were here to see it."

"I do too, Professor." Harry drew his wand and levitated the box of tissues on the corner of her desk nearer to her. "And I wasn't surprised about Neenie, or about Neville or Ron. Ron and Neenie are prefects already, and that's usually a requirement, isn't it? And Neville's sturdy, he doesn't crack, and everyone knows that. But I get into trouble a lot, usually by talking out of turn or getting impatient and doing something I shouldn't. Running the DA's suited me mostly because I

do know how to fight, and that's only because I've been training for it, one way or another, my entire life."

The thought of the DA meshed with what McGonagall had been saying, and Harry sat up a little straighter. "Do you need to know who might be a good Head Boy and Girl for this year, Professor?" he asked.

"I was hoping you had some recommendations, yes." McGonagall dabbed at her eyes, then vanished the tissue. "Since one of the first criteria, this year, is that they must be ready to defend the school and their fellow students, both by magic and by guile."

"I think I might know just the right pair." Harry didn't bother to hide his grin. "And nobody will be able to say you're showing favoritism, either..."

When they were finished, Harry started for the door, when Professor McGonagall's soft cough brought his head back around. The Headmistress of Hogwarts was standing behind her desk, looking at him intently.

"You have your father's grace in motion, and his speed and power with his wand," she said quietly. "And your mother's precision of casting, and her indomitable strength of heart. But Harry—and you will not hear me say this often, so listen carefully—you are not your father, nor your mother, nor any of the people who have raised you. Each of them has given you something, but you have chosen what to make of those gifts, and what you have made is a unique and admirable young man. I am proud to have had you as my student, and I look forward to seeing who you will become next."

"Thank you, Professor." Harry bowed to her, as deeply as he would to his own parents or to Professor Dumbledore, and hurried out of the office before she could see or smell what her words had done to him.

*She's almost as bad as Padfoot that way. At least they both hit me with it in private...*

---

Harry stepped out of the Sanctuary kitchens the next day only to be confronted by Blaise Zabini, who wordlessly held up a small and sparkling item.

"Congratulations," said Harry, keeping his grin entirely internal as he looked at the Head Boy badge. "What about it?"

"Since when am I..." Blaise seemed to run out of words, and looked from the badge to Harry and back again.

"The best choice?" Harry waved Blaise over to a pair of the boulders which had been left in strategic spots around Sanctuary for sitting on. "Since you're a founding member of the DA, already a prefect, and passed all your O.W.L.s with E's or O's. Not to mention you already know how to work well with the Head Girl. Who has almost exactly the same qualifications, so you can't

exactly say either of you doesn't deserve it."

He saw Blaise starting to draw breath for further argument and sat forward, cutting the taller boy off before he could begin. "I'm not coming back to Hogwarts this year," he said quietly. "If I were, we both know that badge would probably be mine. But I'm not, and it's not, and I want it in the best hands possible." He pointed. "There they are."

Blaise let out a long breath, and reached up to pin the badge to the shoulder of his robes. "I hadn't thought of it quite like that," he said, sitting back once the catch was in place. "It seemed like a joke, or a prank, not a serious appointment. Perhaps I'm a little too Slytherin for my own good."

"You can't be too Slytherin to suit me, so long as you're aiming it at the Carrows," Harry retorted, making Blaise snicker. "Just hold things together until we're ready to go after Voldemort, all right? It shouldn't be longer than a couple of months now. Get the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs to keep their heads down, and don't let the Ravenclaws or Slytherins outsmart themselves. And hang onto this." He pulled a square of parchment from his pocket and unfolded it. "It'll help you a lot."

"It will?" Blaise asked dubiously, looking at the apparently blank surface before him.

"If you know how to use it." Harry grinned and drew his wand, touching it to the parchment's center. "I solemnly swear," he said, pitching his voice to carry only so far as Blaise, "that I am up to no good..."

---

Hermione lay sideways in an armchair in her bedroom at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, a book about Horcruxes facedown in her lap, the window open to the early autumn breeze. Her eyes rested on a glass globe on a shelf across the room, silent and quiescent at the moment, though she knew if she shook it once, snow would begin to fall inside it and sweet music would arise from it.

*What would you say to me today?* she wondered, watching the ever-laughing face of her twin, caught in that moment of joy as she loved to remember him. *What wishes would you have for me on my seventeenth birthday? What would you think of everything we've been doing, for that matter?*

"We've set up housekeeping here without too much of a hitch," she murmured aloud. "Which we're hoping means the Manor Den will work out when we get our chance at it, but time will tell. We've been out to check three more Horcrux spots—nothing yet, but that means it *has* to be in one of the last two, and we'll never stop being grateful you remembered how we could find those. And we're keeping the doors open and the candles lit for the Order members and the Red Shepherds, if and when they're able to stop here, which isn't any too often these days..."

Shutting her book and setting it aside, she got up to pace restlessly across the room. "It's not going well, Fox," she said, shaking her head. "Professor Burbage, from Muggle Studies, she disappeared in the middle of the summer, and we got a message from one of our spies in the Death Eaters just before the start of school that said she'd been killed. So Danger's the full-time professor there now, and she's having to keep two lessons going at all times, one that's what Muggles are really

like and one that will satisfy the Carrows if one of them pops into her classroom. She says the second ones make her want to throw up, but she doesn't have a choice, because you know Alecko Carrow would just *love* to teach Muggle Studies."

She shivered, hugging herself, and turned on her toes to continue pacing. "And then there's Moony. They've put out a notice that he's a dangerous werewolf, that he's to be brought to the Ministry for questioning on sight, it's a horrible risk for him even to be at Hogwarts, but where else can he be when Danger's there? And I know, I know, he could stay down in Sanctuary, but he told Professor McGonagall he'd teach Defense, so that's what he's doing. He's teaching Defense. Only to the students he doesn't think will give him away, with Padfoot there to take over the instant he's needed, and with a house-elf nearby at all times, but still. He's teaching Defense. And I'm terribly afraid that it's going to get him killed, or worse, captured..."

Her eyes blurred momentarily with tears, until all she could see of the snow globe was a small, sparkling sphere, like the one Meghan had found in the Room of Hidden Things, that Harry now kept in his sock drawer. That globe had a barren mountain peak inside it, Hermione recalled as she dug into her pocket for her handkerchief, one with a distinctive jagged cliff overhanging its rocky slopes.

*I wonder if it's a copy of a real place, or just the artist's imagination? Not that it matters. But it seems like a strange thing to dream up to put inside a snow globe. Most of them are a little fantastical, distanced from reality, either an idealized past or a time that never was at all...*

She stopped beside the shelf and stroked the glass of her own globe tenderly. "Only this one was real," she whispered. "And I have it to remember always, even if I don't have you any longer."

*And you would be the first one to tell me to stop sniveling and get out of this room and go see what the Pride has dreamed up for my birthday.* With a smile, Hermione blotted her eyes once more and kissed her fingertips, patting them against the globe. *So I will.*

"Love you, Fox," she murmured, turning to leave the room. "Now and always."

A swirl of wind brushed against her cheek an instant before she closed the door behind her.

---

Ron stood back from the table where Hermione's birthday presents were piled, his fingers pleating restlessly at the lining of his pocket, beside a tiny bag with a drawstring closure. He could almost see her already, exclaiming for joy over *The Lord of the Rings* in a single volume, bound in red leather, her gift from Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha, and the matching copies of *The Hobbit* in green from Meghan and *The Silmarillion* in gold from Harry (from whom he'd had the color report). Mr. Moony and Mrs. Danger had bought her a chatelaine watch with a two-sided face, so that she would have both the magical and the Muggle time, and Ginny had sculpted a clever series of stacked pots into which Neville had transplanted miniature, sweet-smelling roses.

*And I...am giving her insanity. Or rather, asking her to share it with me.* He resisted the urge to loosen the collar of his robes. *This can't be a good idea, I should wait, I should come up with*



*something else for today, I can't do this—*

"Wotcher, Ron," said a cheery voice from behind him, bringing him around with his wand in his hand.

"Don't *do* that," he snapped at Tonks, who raised an eyebrow at him, rather higher than ought to be physically possible. "And don't do *that*, either," he added irritably, pointing at it.

"What crawled into your robes and died this morning?" Tonks frowned, restoring her eyebrow to its usual place. "I thought you'd be happy—whole day to spend with Hermione, all by yourselves, except for me and Charlie keeping an eye on the wards at the Burrow, making sure no Death Eaters or Ministry warts get any bright ideas..."

"Who said that was still on?" Ron kicked at the wall moodily. "Why would Hermione want to spend a day with me, anyway? I'm nothing special, she'd probably rather have the time to read and study, she gets enough of me as it is. Let's not bother telling her, all right? She can have the day to do whatever she wants, and I'll just...I don't know."

Tonks glanced once to each side, then leaned in. "You," she said conspiratorially, "have one of the worst cases of nerves I've ever seen. This is more than just a birthday surprise, isn't it?"

"You mean it shows?" Ron checked over his shoulder to be sure no one was coming, then extracted the little bag from his pocket and showed its contents to Tonks, who whistled softly. "Yeah," he said, restoring it to its place. "Exactly. And I'm scared to death, because she always does the smartest thing, and the smartest thing here—"

"Would be for you to try and let a few of those nerves off, because she'll see it on you from a mile away," Tonks interrupted, tugging gently on one of Ron's ears. "And for you to go out with her just like you planned, and do exactly what you were going to do. It's a good sign that you're nervous, it means you know this isn't anything to be fooling around with, but you'll hate yourself in the morning if you don't go for it."

"Promise?" Ron managed a sickly smile, and Tonks grinned at him and pulled him into a sisterly hug.

"Promise," she said into the same ear she'd tugged a moment before. "And my money's on you. Ickle Ronniekins."

---

"Why in the world were you and Tonks dueling this morning?" Hermione asked Ron as they left the front door of the Burrow, stepping out into a comfortably cool autumn day like a hundred they'd shared before. "I mean, yes, we could all see it was just a Silly Duel, you were both laughing and you'd put her in high-heeled shoes while she turned your hair white, but even a Silly Duel starts somewhere..."

"It's not important now." Ron's hand wrapped naturally around hers, as he glanced over and

smiled. "Many happy returns, by the way. Er...she did put my hair back, didn't she?"

"Yes, she did." Hermione hid a smile, since one narrow streak of white remained over Ron's left ear which she wasn't bothering to mention.

*Mostly because I like how it looks. It'll fade by tomorrow, I'm sure, but for right now it makes me think about the future beyond tomorrow. About peace, and happiness, and all the years we'll have as the Pride, to grow and learn more about what that means when we don't need it to mean a group of Warriors...*

"Thank you for knowing what I'd like for my birthday," she said, squeezing Ron's hand gently. "We may not be able to get away from the war altogether, but one day when we don't have to think about it will make both of us stronger afterwards."

"Don't mention it." Ron shortened his stride to accommodate her as they began to climb the hill towards the orchard. "Do you remember, all those years ago? It was snowing then, but this is right about where I think I was..."

"When I first saw you. Though I didn't know it was you, not then. I just knew it was a boy, about my age, who wasn't one of my crazy brothers." Hermione looked up at the trees, feeling a surge of nostalgia. "And then I saw Fred and George, sneaking up on you, and I couldn't let that happen, not without trying to do something about it."

"And you yelled at me to get down, and I did." Ron ducked a little, making her giggle, as they reached the shade of the first tree. "You snowballed them back, and told me how to get up in the tree with you..."

"And the rest is history." Hermione reached up and touched the branch she'd been sitting on that day. "It seems like so long ago. More than half our lives, and so much has happened since then. I can't even imagine what my life would be like without you, Ron. You, and Ginny, and your parents, and your brothers, but especially you."

"Thanks." Ron kissed her lightly, then cupped his hands with a smile. "Want a boost?"

"Oh, why not." Grinning, Hermione stepped into the offered hands, and pushed off the ground as Ron hoisted her into the air, swinging her leg over one of the higher branches of the tree as she might mount a horse. "You always do know what I like."

"I try." Ron leaned against the trunk of the tree, watching her ascend. "You know something, Hermione? When I think about that day at the orchard, when everything changed for me, when I finally got real friends of my own, I think of Harry and Draco, sure, but I think of you first. Because that's how it happened. You were first. And you know something else? That's what you deserve."

His tone, his scent, his pose, all studiously casual, caught Hermione's attention, and she stopped where she was, three branches up, looking down at him between the autumn-browned leaves. *What*

*is he talking about?*

"You deserve someone in your life who'll always think of you first." Ron had his hands shoved into his pockets, his eyes fixed on the end of a nearby branch. "Someone who pays attention to you. Who does know what you like, and maybe goes a little out of his way to get it for you. Who thinks about you first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and a good bit of the time in between. And..." He grimaced, one shoulder rising in a shrug. "I just don't know if I can be that person."

Hermione gripped the branch between her hands tightly, her breath vanishing as though someone had punched her in the stomach. *This can't be, it just can't be what it sounds like—not even Ron is so tone-deaf as to do this to me today—*

"Like I said, I don't know." Ron pulled his right hand free of his pocket, something small and sparkling between his fingers. "But I'd sure like a chance to try."

Holding up a gold ring with a single clear stone set prettily into it, he met her gaze at last, his blue eyes as clear and hopeful as she had ever known them. "Hermione, will you marry me?"

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 51: Lives and Deaths (Year 7)

Movement from within the orchard brought Charlie's head around. "What—" he started to say, staring at the distant figures of his youngest brother and said brother's girlfriend.

"Eyes front, dragon-boy." Tonks tugged at her husband's robes until he returned his attention to her. "We're supposed to be guarding them, not spying on them."

"But—" Charlie glanced back once more. "She just jumped on him. Out of a tree. What in Merlin's name—"

"Remember the day I jumped on you?" asked Tonks mock-casually, letting her hair shade towards Weasley red. "Not too far from here, as it happens. Somewhere in that direction." She nodded towards the Marauders' Den. "We'd been invited over to celebrate Remus getting custody of Hermione, and you were nervous about something, and so was I..."

Charlie nodded warily. Then his eyes widened. "Wait. No. You don't—you can't mean—they're *kids* still! They can't possibly—"

"Ron was seventeen in March, and Hermione's that today," Tonks interrupted, flicking Charlie's ear lightly. "They're young, but they're not stupid. And they've grown up hard and fast these last couple of years, what with the war going on. Besides, even without a war, we were pretty sure what we wanted by the time we were their age. Why couldn't they be?"

"Because..." Charlie grumbled under his breath. "Because a lot of reasons that make no sense, really," he said finally, kicking at a loose clod of dirt. "Because I remember getting to hold Ron when he'd just been born, and him sneaking into my bedroom and getting bit by my dragon models when he was three, and trying to fly off the roof with the broom Mum uses to sweep out the kitchen when he was six, and thousands of other things like that." He smiled a little. "Wonder if Mum knows about it yet."

"She probably knew before they did." Tonks cast one fond look over her shoulder and grinned before turning back to Charlie. "So, how about those Cannons?"

---

Ron was rather proud of himself. He'd managed to get all the words out in the right order, to say everything he'd planned on without stumbling, and even to produce the ring at the proper time, despite the pounding of his heart and the dampness of his palms. Now all he could do was wait.

*She's—angry*, he finally had the leisure to identify, looking up at the face so well-known and loved. *Why would she be—*

Even as he watched, Hermione's features underwent an eye-blurring ripple of emotional colors, and her leg swung back over the branch she'd been straddling. Her hands rose to shoulder level,

her weight shifted forward, and—

*Uh-oh.*

Ron got his arms up just in time to stop Hermione from slamming bodily into him, and even so they both collapsed to the ground, Hermione with her hands planted on his shoulders, Ron with his around her waist.

"Ow," was all he got out before Hermione started shaking him.

"You absolute *git!*" she half-shouted, though her tone was somewhat spoiled by the laughter lurking on her face and in her tone. "I thought you were breaking up with me!"

"What?" Ron ran back over his little speech in his head and flinched. "Er...oops?"

"Oops." Hermione glared at him, but the corners of her mouth kept twitching upwards. "*Oops*, he says!"

"So who do I usually check things like essays with, to make sure I'm not saying something I didn't mean?" Ron demanded. "You, that's who! And I couldn't exactly ask you about this one, now could I?"

"That'd certainly be novel." Hermione shook her head, the last of the anger fading from her face with the motion. "'Neenie, would you mind looking over my marriage proposal for me? Oh, and by the way—'"

"Yeah, about that." Ron sat up, releasing Hermione to show her the item he was still holding between two fingers. "Are you going to answer, or just beat me up some more?"

"Well, beating you up is quite a lot of fun." Hermione laughed a little, then sobered, looking up into Ron's face. "Really and truly, Ron?" she asked softly.

"Really and truly, Neenie." Ron reached out for her hand with his free one, finding it exactly where he'd known it would be. "I need you. I want you. And I love you."

"Then..." Hermione drew a deep breath and briefly closed her eyes. "Yes, Ron," she said, opening them to give him the brilliant smile that sent his heart into spirals every time he saw it. "Yes, I will." She held out her left hand, and Ron, hardly daring to breathe, slid the ring into its proper place. "But let's get the war over with first, shall we? And our last year of school? I saw how mad Ginny went, trying to plan her wedding while studying for O.W.L.s, and I haven't the slightest interest in doing the same thing with my N.E.W.T.s!"

"Fair enough. Gives us plenty of time to figure out the guest list and all of that." Ron gave the ring a pat before releasing it. "Care to have it at the Manor Den, once we're settled there?" He tossed the question out carelessly, and watched Hermione go very still, regarding the small, clear stone in its simple setting which now adorned her finger.

"Yes," said his fiancée again after a few moments, lifting her eyes once more to his. They blazed with a fierce and fiery glee, one Ron hadn't realized how much he'd missed seeing in her since the late spring of this year. "Yes, I'd like that very much." Her lips curled back in a predator's smile. "Ginger Malfoys. Malfoy-bloods, at any rate. I wouldn't take that name if you begged me on bended knee." The smile softened. "Now, Weasley, on the other hand..."

"Got that," said Ron, holding up her right hand, which he still had cupped in his left. "What d'you want me to do with it?"

Hermione blinked once, then started to laugh. "Ron, you're *horrible!* "

"Learned from the best." In default of any specific instructions, Ron lifted the hand to his lips and kissed it once, then used it to tug its owner closer to him, until they were sitting comfortably side by side with their backs against the tree, his arm tucked around her. "It looks good on you," he added, seeing the way Hermione's gaze kept sliding back towards the ring.

"Thank you." Hermione chuckled. "Patting yourself on the back a bit, there, aren't you? Or did you have help picking it out?"

"Sort of." Ron waited until she turned to look at him. "Mr. Moony gave it to me. It was his mum's."

Hermione's eyes widened once more, and she laid a finger reverently on the stone before pausing in that pose. "Why would he do that?" she asked, her attention still seemingly all on the ring but an undercurrent of something dangerous trickling into her voice. "When did he even have a chance?"

Grateful she couldn't see him swallow, Ron took a moment to compose his thoughts and get his words in order. *This could make or break things just as much as the actual question—have to get it right, or I'll be paying for years...*

"I went and asked him, a while back, if he thought this would be a good idea," he said at last. "Not just today, not just here, but doing this at all. Because I knew I wanted it, and I was pretty sure what you would say, but we're not just ourselves, are we? There's other people around both of us, other people we love and don't want to hurt. Families and friends, and even more than that. The Pride, for both of us, and the Pack for you. Especially your Pack-parents." He laid his hand, palm up, at the edge of Hermione's vision. "I wanted to find out if they thought this could work. You and me, for life. Because what you have with them is pretty special and important, and the last thing I'd ever want is to hurt that or mess it up."

"And what if Moony had said no?" Hermione turned her head to look at him, her expression cool and challenging. "What if he had told you that he didn't think I was old enough, or that you were, or maybe that you weren't good enough for me?"

"Do you mean what I'd've *wanted* to do, or what I'd really have done?" Ron countered, and saw the quick leap of laughter in her eyes. "Or both?"

"Both. In that order." Hermione covered his hand with hers. "Since the question didn't come up, so it's purely an academic problem now."

"I'd have *wanted* to tell him to go to hell, and try and convince you to elope with me today," Ron said frankly. "But I probably wouldn't have. Either part, in that case, because if I said something like that to him he'd know better than to let me near you afterwards, and because you wouldn't do that to your Pack."

"Oh, I don't know." Hermione giggled. "If Moony tried to keep me away from you, I might. But then, if you were still the way you used to be, rushing into everything without so much as taking a single breath to think about it..."

"Then he'd be right to tell me no, or not yet. But I still hope I'd be smart enough not to say anything about it to his face." Ron let the fingers of his free hand weave themselves into Hermione's soft and tangled hair, and enjoyed the humming warmth through his blood when she nuzzled her head against him in response. "What I *would* have done, if he'd said I shouldn't...I don't know. Begged, maybe. Or asked him what I'd have to do to change his mind. But none of that happened. He said it sounded like a pretty good idea to him, and gave me his mum's ring when I said I didn't have one yet, because he thought you'd like that best." The enormity of the act, and the simplicity with which it had been accomplished, turned his breath choppy and stole the words from his mouth. "And now you're really...I mean, we're actually..."

Disentangling her hand from their clasp, Hermione reached up to cup his face, turning it towards her. "I love you, Ron Weasley," she said. "And once the war is over, and we've finished school, the entire world is going to know it. As much of it as we care to invite to the Manor Den, that is." Her eyes drifted, refocusing far away and sad. "Though there'll always be the people who should have come, and can't. George, and Luna, and Fox..." Her lips worked. "I wish we had some way to tell them about this."

"Me, too." Ron drew her close to offer his shoulder, as she had done for him more than once already in this war, and caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye. He looked up, squinting a bit to make out the form riding the wind currents above them. Then he smiled.

"Neenie," he said, nudging her and pointing. "I think they may know already."

Hermione lifted her eyes to follow the line of his hand, and drew in a long breath of joy.

High overhead, a soft-pinioned snowy owl circled on the updrafts of a breezy autumn day.

---

Evanie Pettigrew turned restlessly on her bed, trying to find a position in which she could lie comfortably. The fourteenth of September had come and gone, and she was now nearly a week overdue.

"I can't blame you for not wanting to come out, baby," she murmured towards her child, "but this is getting ridiculous. Your father and I would like to meet you, you know—"



A sudden stab of pain through her midsection made her gasp, cutting off her words.

There might, she realized with the few bits of her mind not devoted to holding back a scream, be a reason why her daughter was so unwilling to be born.

---

In the library, Peter dropped the stack of books he was shelving as his wedding ring cooled perceptibly on his finger.

"What in the world?" Lucius appeared at the opening between the two bookshelves as though he'd been conjured there, looking irritated, though whether at the noise or at the disrespectful treatment afforded to the books littering the floor around his feet Peter couldn't tell. "Are you ill?"

Starwing peered around her master's side, and her eyes widened. "Yes," she said before Peter could respond, speaking with certainty. "Yes. Ill." One small hand spread wide and planted itself against Lucius's shoulder, pushing him a step or two to one side. "Go."

"What in Merlin's name—" Lucius began, staring at the girl.

"No." Starwing shook her finger under Lucius's aristocratic nose, glaring daggers at him. "You, quiet." She turned her attention towards Peter. "You," she said imperiously, gesturing towards the library door. "Go."

Lucius looked from one of them to the other, then shrugged his shoulders. "You heard her, Wormtail," he said. "Be on your way. Though you and I, young lady," he added in a low tone as Peter hurried past, "are going to have a serious talk..."

Peter's last glimpse of the library, as he shut the door behind him, was of Starwing sticking out her tongue at Lucius. Even with his all-encompassing fear, it made him smile weakly, and he wished he could have seen it under other circumstances.

*When Evanie isn't in danger for her life.*

Dropping into Wormtail's form, he darted into one of his own personal shortcuts, scurrying upwards and crosswise through the walls, forcing himself to stay alert for possible booby-traps. If he fell prey to some vindictive scheme of his fellow Death Eaters, there would be no one left to save his wife and daughter.

*There may not be any way you can save them now, his fear whispered at the back of his mind. What if you've been found out? Your little love nest pulled apart, your lady handed over to someone who can "appreciate her properly", your baby girl passed along to someone like Alecto Carrow, with all her plans for the future of the wizarding race...*

Wormtail bared his small, sharp teeth and bounded over one of the gaps he'd purposely left in his walkway, in case anyone thought to send an Imperius-controlled animal in here after him. *You'll have to fight me first, he vowed silently. And you'll never see me coming—I know how to strike*

*from behind, no one better...*

At last, he squeezed out of the final tunnel and into his own rooms. Evanie lay on the bed, her eyes closed, breathing in short gasps. Sight, sound, scent, all reported her alone, but Wormtail's nose twitched as he caught the sharp, metallic smell of blood.

*She doesn't look hurt, though—could it be...*

A new fear assailed him, and he leapt upwards into his human form, hurrying to her side and going to one knee as her eyes wavered open. "I'm here, love," he said, catching her groping hand in his. "What is it? What's happened?"

"The baby." Even speaking seemed to cost Evanie terrible effort, as her fingers squeezed tighter on Peter's with every word. "Something's wrong—a tearing pain, and a burning, and she's barely moved since it began—"

"Don't panic." Peter knew he was speaking as much to himself as to his wife, but a bit of the fear faded from Evanie's face as she heard him say the words, and he stroked her sweat-damp hair out of her eyes, bending to kiss her. "I'm here now. She's going to be all right. Do you trust me?"

"Yes." Evanie smiled a little, then winced. "Oh, God—"

"Lie still if you can." Peter reached under the pillow and extracted Evanie's potion piece, turning the cartridges until he found the one with the white patch on it. "Here, drink some of this. It will help. Weren't you going to call your house-elf friends when things started?"

"Yes, but..." Evanie obediently swallowed a sip of the healing potion, and exhaled in relief. "There. Yes, I was, but they're only used to ordinary births, and this—*oh!*" It was almost a shriek, as her free hand fisted tight and her other closed crushingly around Peter's. "It's getting worse, Peter, something's *wrong* —"

A loud *crack* behind him had Peter whipping around, his wand in his hand, his heart pounding even faster than it had been. *I know I placed Anti-Apparition on these rooms, if it's been broken we're all as good as dead already—*

"Easy, now," said the fair young man standing a few paces back, raising his hands with supple grace. "We're friends."

The red-haired young woman who'd arrived with him didn't bother speaking, instead hurrying across the room to the bed and Evanie, whose eyes had widened at the new arrivals. "Amanda?" she breathed, reaching up. "But I thought—"

"You need help," said the young woman, smiling down at her. "We've come to help you. Move, please," she added to Peter, drawing her wand. "I know something of Healing, and you would only be in the way."

Numbly, Peter backed away as ordered, and the gray smoke of a Privacy Spell fell between him

and his wife. *What is going on—*

He looked back at the young man who stood at his ease, half a smile on his slender face, and recognized some of the answer in the features of that same face.

"Beauvoi," he said, pushing disbelief aside as best he could. "Dafydd Beauvoi."

"Well spotted, sir." The young man bowed, his antique robes rippling with the movement. "And you know, or have heard of, my lady Amanda already. As she said, we've come to help, as much as we can. But." His gray eyes darkened in sympathy. "I fear it may not be enough. A burning pain, and a tearing, in a woman about to give birth...such signs are not good." He drew out a chair from the table and pushed it towards Peter. "You should prepare yourself. I am sorry to tell you this, but it is very likely that this day your Evanie will die."

A curious sensation of being split into two distinct halves swept across Peter. One part of him, near the back of his mind, curled itself into a small, compact ball and began to mutter furiously in clear and rapid thought. The other, further forward, seemed barely able to think at all without tremendous effort.

"The baby?" he asked thickly, his lips numb. "Will she—"

"The child may well live, but it is too soon to know with any certainty." Dafydd motioned towards the chair. "Please, sit. You will do no good to anyone if you collapse."

Stiffly, Peter groped for the chair, and had to swallow against a surge of loathing as his eyes fell on his silver hand. *This is my fault—if I'd kept my mouth shut when I first saw her, or made her go back when I still had the chance, or if I'd just made better choices altogether—*

"Will you tell me your thoughts?" asked Dafydd, sitting down sideways on the other chair and leaning against its back. "I can see they trouble you, and I would like to help you, if I can."

"Why?" Peter looked away from the too-knowing gray eyes, staring at one of the floorstones instead. "What have I ever done for you?"

Dafydd chuckled. "You might be surprised. And in any case, not all of life is about payment and repayment. Some gifts are given freely." His voice softened. "Gifts such as love."

"Some gifts are given foolishly." Peter hunched his shoulders. "Why she ever decided to love someone like me—I curse everything I care for, she should have known better—"

"Perhaps she should, but she did not. And love is subject to remarkably little decision. But you have your ideas backward, my friend." Dafydd's tone of calm certainty brought Peter's attention back to his face, with its pointed, patrician features and its faint marking under one eye, as though a dagger meant for an overhand strike had caught him with its tip there long ago. "You think that you have shortened your lady's life by loving her. But I tell you now that *my* lady has Looked beyond this world, and in every timeline she could See where you made a different choice,

whether you spurned lovely Evanie and sent her away, or whether you never met her at all, she lived in sorrow and died in pain, and her death came upon her sooner than this day."

"Sooner?" Peter stared uncomprehendingly at the other man. "But that doesn't make any sense—"

*It does if the Lestranges had claimed her the day she was first captured, instead of you, the back portion of his mind spoke up, unbidden. Or if you'd forced her to go back to her old life to "keep her safe", and they'd gone out and found her the way she was afraid they would. Even if she'd never been captured at all, the Muggle world isn't the safest place to be anymore, is it? How do you know she wouldn't have died in a raid, or been bitten by one of their half-tame werewolves, or snatched for some of Alecto's mad plans about breeding?*

"If I'd never been—who I am, though," he answered both Dafydd and himself, flexing the fingers of his right hand with their silver gleam, then brushing them across his left forearm. "If I'd never done what I did. Never betrayed my only friends in the world, and killed twelve innocent people to try to cover it up, and brought a power-hungry maniac back to life—"

"So why did you?" Dafydd might have been making light conversation at an evening party. "Can you tell me?"

"Because I was afraid." The words seemed too large for his mouth, and left Peter momentarily lightheaded when he'd spoken them. He wasn't sure he'd ever said them aloud before, not even to Evanie, though he was certain she somehow knew it. "I was afraid for my life. And look where it's brought me. Year after year of—existing. Barely living at all." An unwilling laugh broke from him. "Some times worse than others, of course. And some, as little as I deserve it, better. And now..."

The back of his mind chose this moment to spread its conclusions before him, and Peter nodded slowly as he took it in. "Now, it's over," he said, feeling the weight of his decision settle across his shoulders. "If Evanie dies, so will I."

"So certain?" Dafydd tapped his fingers against the top rail of the chair. "You have no magical link between your life and hers, such as an old friend of yours shares with his wife."

"She's my balance. My sanity." Dimly Peter wondered where all his fear had gone, why this moment brought him nothing but a sense of purpose and a vast, strange relief. "I have to be the perfect Death Eater every second I'm outside these rooms, and the only way I can do that any longer is to know she's here for me to come back to. If she's gone..." He shook his head. "I don't have the strength to carry on without her. I'd do something stupid, accidentally, on purpose, it doesn't matter—I'd be found out, and the Dark Lord would have my every secret out of me before he was done. And I know things now that other people's lives depend on."

"So you do." Dafydd's gaze flickered for an instant across his left hand, ornamented with a plain band of gold, before he returned his attention to Peter. "You could seek asylum, if you wished. Take the child and go to some stronghold of the Light. You have been helpful, and she is helpless. They would take you in."

"And then what?" Peter pulled his sleeve back, hissing as the tips of his silver fingers burned coldly across the Dark Mark branded into his skin. "Lead him straight to his favorite enemies? Give him a puppet he can control within their doors, or let him see through my eyes and learn their secrets? Don't tell me he couldn't do that, any of it. I'm sure he could if he tried."

"Oh, he could indeed do all of that through the Mark you bear, if his power were not blocked from it by a greater one." Dafydd rubbed his own left forearm, his eyes grave. "He could even use it to strip the magic from your soul to strengthen himself, and kill you most unpleasantly in the process. But I digress from your point, and find myself forced to agree with it. If you cannot stay, and you will not go, only one route remains open to you."

"I'll have to make him angry." Peter got to his feet and began to pace, flexing the fingers of his left hand absently. "Furiously angry, enough that he forgets to think, that he simply wants me dead. If he has even a second to think about it, he'll realize what I must have been up to—once a traitor, always a traitor, after all—and he'll keep me alive to question me. Which is what I'm trying to avoid." He rubbed his thumb along the abnormally cool curve of his wedding ring, thinking over the things which angered Lord Voldemort above all others.

"I should destroy something," he decided aloud after several moments' thought. "Something important to him, something he counts on. If I knew the proper spells for it, I'd go after that nasty snake Inferius of his, but I don't, and I won't exactly have a chance to do any research—" He stopped even as the word passed his lips. "Oh," he said softly, beginning to smile as he turned back to face Dafydd. "I've got it, and it's *perfect*."

"I see you have thought of what I was prepared to suggest." Dafydd's tone had warmed into humor, matching Peter's own bizarre sense of lightheartedness, and he was resting his chin atop his rail-propped arm, the fingers of his other hand pleating patterns in the fabric of his robes. "May I ask perhaps an impertinent question?"

"Go ahead." Peter spread his hands wide. "I've got nothing left to hide."

"You caused deaths." The words were spoken with quiet deliberation, neither blaming nor absolving but stating facts. "Some directly, at your own hand and wand, others indirectly, by betraying information given to you in confidence. Do you regret those actions, those deaths? Are you sorry for them?"

"For all the good it does." Peter grimaced, glancing towards the unmoving grayness of the Privacy Spell. "How Evanie can love me, knowing what she does, I've never understood."

"The heart of a woman is one of the greatest mysteries of the world. But we are speaking just now of the heart of a man. Your heart, Peter Pettigrew." Dafydd's relaxed pose hadn't changed, but Peter had the sense that the other man could have met an attack from any direction without a trace of warning. "Do you feel remorse for betraying James Potter and Lily Evans to their deaths, for allowing their son Harry to be trapped in a prophesied future, for killing twelve innocent people in such a way that Sirius Black would be blamed for their deaths and for yours?"

"Why does it matter?" Peter turned to look out the window, surprised in some distant corner of his mind that the afternoon was still sunny and warm. This conversation belonged to a cold and rainy night, or an evening thick with a stinking, smoke-filled fog. "I did what I did, and I can't go back and fix it, nothing can do that—"

"Then you have nothing to lose," Dafydd interrupted calmly, "by answering the question."

Peter laid his left hand against the cold stone of the wall, and for the first time in more years than he wanted to count allowed certain faces to rise fully from his memory. "Every day," he whispered, seeing again the gleam of James's eyes as he snagged the Quaffle from the air, the swing of Lily's hair while she swooped her wand through a complex charm motion, the lines of Sirius's face when he threw back his head to laugh. "Every hour, every minute, every breath I take. I was supposed to be a Gryffindor, brave and strong and noble, and instead I fell apart the first time I was ever tried. And James and Lily died for it, and so did all those people on the street that day—Sirius, Remus, Aletha, Harry, all of them suffered because of me—"

Suddenly furious, he wheeled to face Dafydd. "Why are you asking me this now?" he demanded, jabbing a hand towards the Privacy Spell. "When it can't possibly matter anymore, when the last good thing in my life is about to be taken away from me? Why bother finding out whether I feel or don't feel remorse? Being sorry doesn't change things, don't you understand that? It doesn't change things!"

"It changes you." Dafydd got smoothly to his feet. "But I understand your anger, and our time grows short. So I will ask you only one more question. If you were offered forgiveness for what you did, would you take it? No quibbles about possibility, please," he added with a slight smile as Peter opened his mouth to make this very point. "If it could be offered, and it were, would you accept? Could you allow it? Though think before you answer," he continued without pausing. "Think of what you have done this last year and more, with your lady at your side, and what you will do today, and why. But set that aside for now." He motioned towards the Privacy Spell. "It is time."

Even as Peter looked towards the bed, the smoke around it dissipated. Evanie lay where she had, very pale and still, but now her arm curved protectively around a small, blanket-wrapped bundle lying by her side. Amanda stood by the bedside, her green eyes filled with sadness, her hand beckoning him closer.

"She is very weak, but you have some time yet," she said softly when Peter was close enough to hear her words. "And your daughter will live. We can place her in the house-elves' care for now, and ensure that she finds a loving family once the war is over..."

"Yes. If you would." Peter swallowed all his questions, all his confusion, and instead turned to his wife, going once more to his knees beside the bed. "Evanie," he said quietly, touching her chilled hand. "I'm here, love."

Eyelids fluttered, then lifted. "Peter," Evanie breathed, and managed a smile, turning her head painfully to focus on the dark-haired child who lay beside her. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Let me see." Peter gave his daughter a careful examination, surprised by how quickly his heart rose when the tiny mouth twitched as he placed a kiss on it with a fingertip, when the miniscule fingers closed tight around one of his larger ones. "Yes, I think she is," he said when he was finished. "But then, with such a lovely mother, what else could she be?"

"Flatterer." Evanie sighed. "Peter, I'm s—"

"Hush," Peter interrupted, placing the same finger across his wife's lips that he had used to touch his daughter's. "No apologies for things you can't help."

"Same to you." Evanie smiled again, and squeezed his hand weakly when he took hers. "I love you so much. No regrets?"

"Not about you." Peter leaned in to lay a kiss on her lips, feather-light. "Never about you. I only wish..."

"I know. So do I." Evanie's eyes slid shut, as though she no longer had the strength to hold them open. "Stay with me?" she whispered in a thread of a voice.

"I will. I am." Peter lifted their conjoined hands to her cheek, and discovered he was weeping only when his vision blurred. "Don't be afraid."

"How can I?" Evanie managed the faintest of smiles. "You're here."

Her chest rose and fell, once, twice, three times, and did not rise again.

"Don't go far, love," Peter murmured. "I won't be long."

For a few moments, he sat with his wife and daughter, and mourned for the dream of what might have been. Then, lifting Evanie's lax hand and kissing it, he laid it down on her chest, and took his child into his arms.

"Your name is Annette Selene," he told her, cherishing how impossibly light she felt in his grasp, how her face wrinkled up at the sound of his voice. "Whoever your mummy and daddy turn out to be, they're going to be lucky people to have such a beautiful little girl for their very own, and they're going to take the best care of you." He looked up at Amanda, and at Dafydd as the other wizard came to stand beside his wife. "And she doesn't need to know where she comes from," he said challengingly. "Her mother's name and who she was, yes, but there's no need to tell anyone about me. It's better that way."

"It would also be wrong," said Dafydd before Amanda could speak, his voice low but burning fiercely hot. "Children should always know the names of those who loved them and made sacrifices for them. It will not be public knowledge if you do not wish it so, but the child herself will know your name when she grows old enough, and honor you for doing right."

"As we do." Amanda curtsied deeply. "And in token of that honor, I offer you a gift. You may ask me any question you like, and I will answer it as fully as I may." She smiled, her lips curving in

secret satisfaction. "Which can, in some cases, be very full indeed."

"Well." Peter swayed back and forth where he stood, treasuring the tiny life within his grasp, so soon to belong to another but for these few precious moments, all his. "There is one thing I've always wanted to know. It might even be useful for what I intend to do next..."

---

Lucius strolled into one of the lesser drawing rooms where three or four other Death Eaters were taking their ease, Starwing stalking behind him with a decidedly petulant expression on her face. "A small difference of opinion," he explained to his colleagues, "over the proper treatment of the hired help. Her will occasionally attempts to reassert itself, and always at the most trying of times."

With a disdainful sniff, Starwing plopped herself down on a chair in the corner, pulling off her cloak as she did so. Lucius waited until she was well engrossed in sewing yet another black ribbon onto it, then drew up a chair for himself and joined the conversation taking place, a discussion of whether it would be better to revoke the Statute of Secrecy and take over the Muggle world openly or to maintain the status quo and conduct a series of silent terror campaigns. The proponents of each side were making their points with vigor, and Lucius was just about to add his own say when the first muffled *fwoomp* drifted in through the window.

"What the—" Sandy-haired Connor Barton, closest to the window, got to his feet, staring at the expanse of grass outside. "Is that Wormta—"

He squawked in surprise and terror as a blazing comet of parchment shot through the window and struck him full in the face, sending the other Death Eaters leaping up with shouts of alarm. Lucius beckoned to Starwing, and the two of them left the room at a run, bursting out one of the side doors just in time to see Peter Pettigrew tossing a final armful of familiar-looking scrolls onto the enormous bonfire he'd lit in the middle of one of Malfoy Manor's somewhat overgrown lawns.

"My notes." Lucius's hands fisted by his sides, and an observer (of which there were now quite a few, as the flames and the shouting were drawing Death Eaters from all over the house) might have noted his lips drawing back in the snarl of the predator for its insolent prey. "Every spell, every potion, every plan for an amulet or talisman, which I have spent these last three months looking up and compiling, except for those few I had already handed over to Severus..."

Starwing tugged her master's sleeve and pointed. Lord Voldemort himself had materialized silently several feet from the enormous fire, with Severus Snape by his side. Lucius closed the distance between them swiftly, genuflecting briefly when the Dark Lord's red eyes fell upon him. "My lord," he said, rising. "I had no idea..."

"Later," Voldemort cut him off, staring coldly at the fire and raising his voice to carry. "Let us see what our ridiculous little rat has to say for himself."

"Not too much, *my lord*," Wormtail called from his place by the fire, the scorn in his words as withering as the flames he'd started. "Only a prediction. A little story, about how you'll live



forever. We all know you want to, and I'm here to tell you that you will." He laughed aloud, drawing his wand from inside his robes. "But perhaps you won't like what you see..."

He flung the brittle rod of chestnut onto the fire, and the flames erupted in a geyser, forming themselves, high above his head, into the figures of children, boys and girls a bit too young for Hogwarts. Dressed warmly, as though for late fall or early winter, they trundled a wheelbarrow down an invisible street, laughing and chattering amongst themselves.

Sprawled in the barrow lay a grotesque mockery of humanity, a figure made from straw-stuffed robes with a squashy turnip for a head and limp parsnips for hands, the robes themselves smeared with dirt and slime. Slits had been cut into the turnip for eyes and a mouth, but no attempt at a nose or hair had been made.

The eldest of the group, a sturdy girl who had the wheelbarrow's shafts in her hands, nodded towards the front, and two of the smaller children, twins by their appearance, skipped forward, holding out their hands in supplication. "Knut for the voldy!" they piped together. "Knut for the moldy voldy!"

Gasps of shock and outrage rippled through the crowd of Death Eaters as the fiery figures vanished. Severus frowned, still looking at the place where the children's faces had been. Lucius growled under his breath, and Starwing hissed and hunched her shoulders as though she were mantling her wings. Lord Voldemort himself reacted not at all, unless it were to narrow his eyes even further than usual.

"There's your immortality, *my lord*," said Wormtail, his eyes gleaming feverishly in the light of the fire as it began to burn down. "As a rotting, stinking nuisance, and a figure of fun for children."

An instant later, no one stood beside the flames at all. A naked pink tail whisked into the tall grass and was gone, the smallest of ripples indicating a flight towards the trees at the edge of the property.

"My lord," said Lucius, his voice half-choked with rage. "May I?"

Lord Voldemort turned to see what was meant, and saw the white owl called Starwing balanced on her master's wrist, her wings already spread and her eyes, like his, mad with hunger for the hunt.

"Do it," the Dark Lord commanded.

Leaning back, Lucius whipped his arm through a powerful thrust, flinging Starwing high into the reddening afternoon sky, before her own strong wings beat the air to lift her higher still. The tiny ripple in the grass moved ever further from the house, as the flames burned lower in the circle Wormtail had cleared for them—Starwing floated silently above the watching Death Eaters, circling tightly on the updraft from the fire before settling into a long glide outward—

Almost faster than eye could follow, she stooped, plummeting to earth with her wings and talons

outstretched. The white-feathered head whipped down, the sharp black beak struck savagely—

The lifeless form of the human Peter Pettigrew exploded out of that of Wormtail the rat, less than twenty yards from the treeline. A moment later, the girl called Starwing got to her feet beside him and spat blood into the grass, wiping her mouth on her sleeve.

Her face held not a trace of expression.

"So end all traitors," remarked Lord Voldemort, and turned to Lucius. "How long to reproduce what was destroyed?"

"Six weeks, working alone. Which I intend to do." Lucius bared his teeth briefly towards the flames. "Clearly taking an assistant has drawbacks which outweigh the benefits."

"I somehow doubt you knew he was so unstable as this when you requested him." The Dark Lord regarded the bonfire for a moment. "Have the most important items ready in a month."

"My lord." Lucius knelt fully this time, and rose only when Lord Voldemort had Disappeared. Severus Snape remained behind, looking closely at Lucius, even as most of the other Death Eaters, deciding the show was over, began to find their own ways indoors. At last the two men faced one another in the red and golden light of evening, Starwing picking her way back through the grass towards them, the hem of her robes held daintily clear of stems and flowers.

"You play a dangerous game," said Snape at last.

"How kind of you to notice." Lucius held out a handkerchief to Starwing, who accepted it and blotted the last few traces of blood from her lips. "But then, you know me, Severus." He smiled lazily. "I've always been rather fond of danger. Come along, Starwing—bath and fresh clothes for you, my dear, as soon as Echo can manage them..."

With one glance over his shoulder at the crumpled body which had been Peter Pettigrew, Snape followed the two inside, and closed the door firmly against the night.

---

The wizard sat alone in the calf-high grass, watching the stars come out overhead. He was sure it ought to bother him more than it did that the body of a man lay nearby, but a body couldn't hurt anyone.

*Especially not when it used to be mine.*

He chuckled a little at the idea, and continued to watch as the sky darkened moment by moment, revealing star after twinkling star. It wasn't something he'd spent much time doing in recent years, though he could recall evenings with his friends in school, atop the Astronomy Tower or, daringly, up some of the taller trees in the Forbidden Forest.

*When it wasn't full moon, and we weren't out romping through those trees all night long...*

"Good times," remarked a voice, and another figure sat down beside him, revealing itself, in the dim light of the stars, to be a man about his own age, messy-haired and bespectacled. "Never appreciate them while we've got them, do we?"

"No, we never do." Peter Pettigrew leaned back on his hands, both now made of the same material, though 'flesh' was no longer a word which could be used to describe them. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Why not?" James Potter shrugged. "I'm dead, you're dead..."

"I'm the *reason* you're dead."

"One of the reasons," James corrected, holding up a finger. "And didn't you just get done saying you were sorry for it, a couple hours ago?"

"That doesn't change it." Peter looked away. "That doesn't change any of it."

"You're right," said James lightly. "But then, neither does anything else, does it?"

"No." Peter brushed a finger back and forth through the stems of grass. "It doesn't."

They sat in silence for a little while.

"Funny thing about hate and anger and all of those things," said James when the last few sparks of red had died away from the western horizon. "They hurt the person who's feeling them more than they ever do the person they're supposedly all about. Did you know that?"

"No." A suspicion began to creep through Peter's mind. "Prongs, what *are* you doing here?"

James grinned. "What do you think?"

"You can't be—" Resolutely, Peter stopped himself. "You don't mean it," he finished instead.

"Merlin's bones, you *have* grown up some. Used to be you'd fall for that one every time." James snickered. "'You can't be serious!' 'Of course I'm not Sirius, he's over there...'" He sighed a little, sobering. "Wormtail, we could sit here all night talking about who's to blame and by how much and what we all deserve or don't. Or we could get right down to what I actually came here to say. What's your pleasure?"

"Go ahead." Peter sat up straighter, twining his hands together in his lap to keep them from shaking. "I'm listening."

"I'm proud of you." James smiled at the startled expression Peter wasn't quite able to repress. "No, I mean it. I'm proud of you. You figured it out, Peter. Straightened out your priorities and balanced what you did wrong, as best as you could. No, don't argue with me," he cut off Peter's half-formed protest. "You got me and Lily killed, and killed a load of other people, trying to save your own life way back when. But just now, you deliberately got *yourself* killed so Moldy Voldy,

and I should add I've not laughed that hard in *years* , wouldn't have the chance to pick your brain and use that information to kill yet another load of people, including some we both would far rather stayed alive a while longer. Yes?"

"Yes," Peter acknowledged, "but—"

"No buts." James shook his head. "That's called getting it right, Peter. Even if you did do it mostly because you had nothing left to lose. There's still fourteen people, at the very least, who would have died tonight if you'd made any other decision." He cocked his head to one side. "I'd have to say that puts you dead even. Pun slightly intended. So." Getting to his feet, he held out his hand. "You going to come?"

*"If you were offered forgiveness for what you did, would you take it?"* Dafydd Beauvoi's voice rang inside Peter's head as he stared, for some fraction of forever, at the hand so impossibly extended to him. *"Could you allow it?"*

"Yes," he said at last to both questions, and laid his hand in James's. "Yes, I will."

"All *right!* " Grinning, James hoisted Peter to his feet and engulfed him in a rough hug. "Come on, then. Let's go home." A gesture cleared away some of the fog that had swirled in around them, revealing two feminine figures waiting patiently nearby, one with red hair, the other with brown. "All of us."

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From a window without a light, she watched, as the two souls met and embraced at the edge of the forest, as their companions closed in behind them from both directions, as the whole collection vanished in a flare of invisible brilliance.

"Goodbye," she whispered, and blew them a kiss, leaving behind a smear of warm red on her fingertips.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 52: Locked and Barred (Year 7)

Curled around her stuffed lion, thumb tucked against the ring now ornamenting her finger, Hermione dreamed.

A pale-blond little boy, his gray eyes beginning to lose the frightened look with which Hermione remembered them best, made faces at himself in a mirror and giggled at them as he scrubbed his hands in a sink which had politely lowered itself to his height. When he had finished rinsing off all the foam, he turned off the water and reached without looking into the little alcove beside the sink for a towel.

"Mew?" inquired something within the alcove, and the little boy jumped, then giggled again.

"Neenie!" he protested, as a calico kitten unwound her slender length from among the folded washcloths and bars of soap. "You're not a towel! What are you doing in there?"

The kitten gave a soft, musical trill and stood up on her hind legs to wash the tip of the little boy's nose with her raspy tongue.

"You're silly," said the little boy with certainty, as he dried his hands on the towel the kitten had been using for a mattress, transferring bits of black, orange, and white fur to his fingers in the process. "Should we have lunch out on the balcony today? I like to look at the trees, and watch the horses flying above them, even if they are a little scary with all their bones right under their skin like that." Draping the kitten around his shoulders like a furred scarf, he left the washroom, chattering away to the accompaniment of her purring. "And someday, when we don't have to stay inside all the time because it isn't safe to go out, we can go exploring in the trees and have adventures..."

Hermione awakened smiling, though her view of her bedroom ceiling at Headquarters was just the least bit blurry.

---

Pomona Sprout looked up from the tray of kitchen herbs she was checking for health (part of an upper-level class relating magic to food, for which she'd had house-elves as guest lecturers once or twice) as Alecto Carrow stormed through her office door without so much as the courtesy of a knock.

"Where's Murrow?" demanded the other witch, her eyes narrowed further than nature had made them. "When I get my hands on him—"

"Do sit down, Miss Carrow," Pomona said coolly, waving her wand to conjure a chair. "Who are you looking for?"

"Don't play the fool with me." Alecto plumped down in the chair, scowling. "Fifth year named

Murrow, one of your precious badgers. Going about the school scrawling all kinds of gibberish and nonsense on the walls. 'MAPT', if you please. What the bloody hell is a MAPT?"

"I believe it's a new student organization." Pomona patted soil in place around the roots of the tiny, vigorous parsley seedlings on her tray and moved on. "Though I hadn't the slightest idea Murrow was involved with it. As far as I was aware, it was an outgrowth from last year's Defense Association—"

"And just as much against the rules as that ever was," Alecto cut in. "Disbanded now, isn't it? And a good thing, too! Merlin only knows what would have come of teaching *that* sort how to fight. Thought we'd stamped it out when Potter and his lot took French leave at the start of the year. I suppose his godfather'd know more about where Potter is than he pretends to..." For a moment her face was thoughtful. It looked like hard work. "But never mind that. It's all in capitals, this MAPT thing. Means it stands for something, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so." Pomona pinched off a soft-furred leaf of sage and folded it in half, releasing its spicy aroma to the air. "Though your guess would be as good as mine."

Alecto's eyes narrowed still further, though Pomona would have thought that was impossible. "Now you see here," she said, leaning forward in her chair and glowering. "If I find out you're making game of me, that you've got something up your sleeve, that you're helping these magophobic morons play their sick little games with these innocent children we're supposed to be guiding along the proper paths—"

Pomona choked, and held up a hand as she tried to catch her breath. "Beg your pardon," she wheezed when she could speak again. "The sage—a bit stronger than I'd thought." Setting down the leaf, she pulled a handkerchief from her pocket to wipe her streaming eyes. "Can you tell me what you mean by magophobic?" she asked from behind the momentary cover of the cloth. "I haven't heard the term before."

"Ah, that's new." Her countenance lightening somewhat, Alecto sat back. "Word they're promoting at the Ministry, to mean the sorts of people who're afraid of the real potential of magic. I mean, they've got to be afraid of it, don't they? If they weren't, then they wouldn't go around insisting Muggles and wizards are the same. It's not logical!" Warming to her subject, she began to thump one broad fist into her opposite palm as emphasis to her words. "If you've *got* power, you ought to *use* power, or why would you be born with it in the first place? And obviously you're meant to be in charge of the ones who *haven't* got it, and keep them in line, where they ought to be. That's all there is to it. You see what I mean?"

"Perfectly." Pomona folded up her handkerchief and put it back in her pocket. "I'll have to remember it. But as for Murrow, I'm afraid I'd need something a bit more definite. As things stand, you *think* he's going around the school and writing on the walls, which you *think* may be for the purpose of advertising an illegal student organization, whose name you're not even sure about, let alone whether or not it exists. Can you tell me who saw him doing this, or how else you might have come up with his name?"

"Information received," said Alecto primly. "From a good, loyal, pureblood student."

"I see." Pomona nodded once. "I'll find Murrow's timetable, then, and have a word with him after his next class, about respect for his surroundings and obedience to proper authority. Is that all, Miss Carrow?"

"Send him to me when you're done with him," Alecto commanded, heaving herself upright out of the chair. "I'll have a little something to tell him myself." Her face wrinkled up in its thoughtful expression again. "Half-blood, isn't he?"

"I couldn't say." Pomona pulled open a drawer of her desk and began to rummage inside it. "Close the door gently when you go out," she said over the sound of rustling parchments. "The African Violent doesn't care for being jarred."

When she had counted to forty-seven after the decided *thud* of door against frame (which had, as she'd expected, agitated the potted Violent to such an extent that fisted leaves were now swinging wildly about and thumping against walls, masking any other sound from ears which might be listening), Pomona cleared her throat, keeping her eyes carefully away from a screened-off corner of her office. Behind it, she knew, lurked a young wizard in her own House's colors, probably looking as sheepish as was possible for such a tall, broad-shouldered fellow to look.

"I haven't seen you," she said briskly. "None of your teachers have, and none of them will, either. Officially, you've run off. Unofficially—well, that's up to you. I'd keep that club of yours as just initials for the present, though. They can make what they like out of 'MAPT', but if it got around what that actually stands for—" She shrugged her shoulders. "They're fools, and sooner or later they'll know it. But I'm not losing students to that kind of foolery if I can help it." Pulling a bottle of firewhiskey from her bottom drawer, she set it on the corner of her desk. "I'll be back in a few minutes," she said, and stepped into the small loo which had politely attached itself to her office some years ago.

When she returned, the level in the bottle was slightly lower than it had been, and the Violent's tendrils were withdrawing, the plant settling back into its pot with an air of satisfaction. The door of her office had been left ajar, as if to demonstrate its occupant's innocence in the matter of one Timothy Murrow and the organization known to its members as Muggles Are People Too, a worthy offshoot of the still extant, if once again secret, Dumbledore's Army.

Smiling to herself, Pomona picked up where she'd left off, flexing the stem of a sprout of rosemary to test its strength and scent.

If Alecto Carrow thought she was going to lock up Hufflepuffs on Pomona Sprout's watch, for doing nothing more than fulfilling the ideals of their House about loyalty and fair play, she had another think coming to her in decidedly short order.

---

High in the mountains, a small exploring party toiled upwards, leaving behind them a trail which would have been baffling to any tracker of wildlife in the world, for while it was just within the



bounds of possibility that a wolf and a lynx might be keeping company, there should certainly have been no dainty deer hooves overlapping the predators' pawprints. Nor should those little hooves have sunk deeper at the front than at the rear, as though the deer had a passenger riding on its back.

*But then, we never have made sense to just about anyone.*

Wolf lifted his nose to the breeze and took stock of the smells around him. Cold rock, ice, frigid water, a few hardy plants here and there, a hint of hawk-musk high above where Redwing circled, and the clear, comforting waft of Lynx on his one side, Pearl and Captain on his other. No human scent was anywhere to be found, fresh, stale, or long-gone.

*Which either means this isn't the right place, or it is right, but the last time someone was here was so long ago that every trace has washed away. And given how long the Horcrux we're after has been missing—since Letha's father died, so before any of us were born—that's entirely possible.*

"Break time," he announced, standing up as Harry and prompting the rest of the abbreviated Pride to resume their own human forms, Ginny holding up her arm as a landing spot for her brother. "Shame Hermione couldn't come. She'd love the view."

"She wouldn't have loved the climb." Meghan rolled her shoulders, wincing. "I need to go for more runs in deer shape. I'm not as strong as I thought I was."

"Sit down." Neville spread his cloak across a handy rock. "I'll rub your shoulders. How close are we, Harry?"

"Let me look." Harry pulled one of the maps with the intersecting circles from his pocket, unfolded it, and tapped it three times with his wand, near one of the only remaining intersection points that had not been crossed off with a red X. Ginny and Ron came to look over his shoulders, and Harry hastily added the heat-rune to one corner of the paper so Ron would be able to see the markings, before tapping the intersection point a further two times, enlarging the landmarks on the map with a rush of ink.

"We're here," said Ron almost as soon as the lines had settled into their new places, tapping his finger against a small crook in the mountainside. "Looks just like that from above."

"So the place where we're going is..." Harry frowned at the map, then scanned their surroundings. "Am I looking at this thing the right way?"

"Go like this." Ginny rotated her hands ninety degrees counterclockwise.

"Got it." Harry performed the same operation with the map, and nodded as the landscape around his feet and the symbols on the parchment lined up properly. "So that means we need to keep going, a bit more to the right—"

He looked up to see the place he was describing.

High above the Pride towered a lofty, jagged cliff.

"We have to go up there?" Meghan stared at the height of the mountain peak. "That's really high. Maybe should we come back another day with broomsticks?"

"But how are we going to get them here?" Neville sat down beside her. "Only small things, pocket-sized, can go with us when we change forms, and broomsticks aren't exactly that. And unless you get the fancy portable ones, you can't shrink them. It interferes with the magic."

"One of you could Apparate back to Headquarters and get them, maybe," Ginny suggested. "It'd be a shame not to give it a go, after we're already here..."

About to add his own two Knuts' worth to the conversation, Harry found his attention caught by Ron. His friend was turning his head first to one side, then to the other, as he might have done in hawk form, gazing intently at the mountain all the while. "Something funny up there," he muttered almost under his breath. "Something I've seen before."

"Magic?" Harry turned the wheel on the sidepiece of his glasses which would change his vision to something similar to Ron's. "Some kind of safeguard, a standing spell?"

"Mm-hmm." Ron held up his hands around the mountaintop, roughly shaping a globe. "You see it?"

"Not yet—wait, now I do." Harry twiddled the wheel a bit further. A spherical glimmer of light did seem to cloak the distant peak, as though someone had cast a massive Shield Spell over the top of the mountain. "But I think they're right," he added, nodding towards the three other members of the Pride. "We're not getting up there unless we fly. And I know you have wings, but you're not going after that thing alone," he overrode the beginning of Ron's protest. "If there's one safekeeping spell, there could be two, and I don't fancy standing here and watching you get killed or captured or possessed." Spinning the wheel back to its former position, he rubbed his eyes, which had started to sting. "Still, there's one piece of good news."

"What's that?"

"Nobody'd put that powerful a spell on a place unless something was there worth guarding, would they?" Harry grinned. "Looks like we finally found it."

---

Hermione sat in one of the window seats at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, with a mess of tattered scrolls and grubby scraps of parchment spread out around her. She would have liked to be out with her siblings and friends on their continuing Horcrux-hunt, but her other role as liaison between the younger and older echelons of the war against Voldemort meant she sometimes had to stay behind and deal with some of the boring bits.

*Like organizing all the notes about what the DA and the Red Shepherds have done with the Order's help, and who's been in charge of what. It isn't very interesting, but it does need to be kept up to*

*date, or how would we know who might need help where or when?*

She added three scrolls to one of her piles, then reached for another handful of parchment, neater than most, a phenomenon explained to her satisfaction when she spotted Percy's handwriting on the topmost sheet.

*We have a lot in common, Percy and I. Even more than before, now that he's found his adventurous side. But then, if I'd grown up with my dad and mum thinking I was a Muggle, if I hadn't had the Pack-parents to challenge me and Harry and Fox to bounce off and Pearl to watch after, I might have been just the same sort of rule-bound and timid that Percy used to be.* She frowned, checking the dates on the sheets of parchment. *Except I wouldn't ever have put following the rules ahead of doing what's right, even for a little while.*

Under her breath, she laughed. *At least, I hope I wouldn't!*

About to set aside the documentation of one of the Red Shepherds' many successful forays into the labyrinthine world of the Death Eaters, she paused. A tiny drawing of two interlocked flowers ornamented the second-to-last page in her hand, clearly sketched by the document's author in an abstracted moment, probably while he was trying to come up with the right way to phrase something. One of the blossoms was recognizable, even without its color, as the scarlet pimpernel from which Percy had taken the punning name of his little band of companions. The other, she decided after a moment of examination, might be meant for a daisy.

*The sort they call a "marguerite". And that was the name of Sir Percy's wife, in the story of the Scarlet Pimpernel. She was brave and determined and beautiful, with golden hair and blue eyes, and he loved her even though she couldn't always do everything that he could...*

Swiftly, Hermione bundled the pages out of sight under the proper pile, grimacing a little as her eyes fell on her engagement ring. She hated keeping secrets from Ron or the rest of the Pride, but this secret wasn't hers to tell.

*Though even if they both make it through the war, Percy still might keep what he feels for her locked up in his heart. He'd think he was somehow barred from loving her because she loved his brother first, and he'd never see that George would have wanted them to be happy.*

Sighing, she leaned back against the padded side of the window seat. "Sometimes," she said to the empty room, "life just isn't fair."

Her pendants warmed briefly, as if to agree with her.

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Tonks fought back a yawn, grimacing to herself. The worst part of stakeouts, in her opinion, was always the problem of staying sharp while one was waiting for whatever was going to happen.

*And in this case, we can't even be sure it will happen. One chance sentence overheard by one of our undercovers about a 'delivery', to 'the big place down by the docks'. Three different spots they*

*could have meant, and any number of things that could be arriving—could even be people, we know the Death Eaters like to use Muggles for toys, and some of those same nasty sods are also rich and lazy enough to get other people to do their dirty work for them...*

She stiffened. Below her post, concealed among a summer's worth of overgrown weeds on a remote hillside, the door of the crumbling warehouse she'd been watching was opening. Two men in robes stepped out, each levitating one end of a long wooden box—and might that box be jiggling just a bit on its own, as though it held something living inside it?

Tonks leaned farther forward, trying to get a better look.

Under the hand and foot on which her weight rested, the loose ground around the weeds' roots shifted.

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Ginny swallowed a yip as her pendants spiked hot and cold almost in the same instant. Judging by the sudden wobble in Ron's flight pattern, he'd felt the same thing.

*Not now, she thought fiercely towards the magic which infused the metal, gripping her broomstick's shaft tighter between her hands. Not unless we can do something about it. We've got our own work ahead of us.*

Slowly, as if grudgingly, chain and medallions lost their chill, and Ginny blew out her breath and leaned forward to catch up with the rest of the Pride, who were darting up and down, side to side, along what seemed to be an invisible wall.

"It is like a Shield Spell," Meghan was saying as Ginny came into earshot. "Only it's mixed with something else." She reached out and laid her hand against a region of the air which looked the same as the rest of it, but which resisted her push. "There might be a weak place or a door, somewhere we can get in, but I don't know how we'd find it. Unless you can see it?" She craned her neck back to look up at Ron and Harry, both hovering above and behind her. "If you can see where the magic is, can you see where the magic isn't?"

"We can try—but hold on." Harry removed his glasses and squinted at them, then put them back on. "You did the spells on these," he said to Ron, tapping a finger against the black frames. "Think you could do another few like them? Not all the spells, just the one like you've got, the one that lets you see heat and magic?"

"Probably." Ron twisted his wrist once or twice, as if remembering the movement involved in a spell. "Yeah, I think so. But the spell has to go on something, and we don't have any other glasses out here."

"We can," said Neville, drawing his own wand. "Three pairs, Harry?"

"If you don't mind. We'll have the best chance if we can all see it together." Harry leaned back a little, and his Firebolt turned and skimmed behind the group towards Ginny, his fingers starting to

move as soon as she looked at them. *Come talk to me. Tell me what's wrong.*

"How did you—" Ginny began, then pulled out her chain and tossed it towards Harry, who ducked under it smoothly as he pulled up beside her. **How did you know?** she asked silently, at the same time allowing herself an instant of pleasure in the appreciative hum filling his mind at the sight of her. **I didn't think I was making it that obvious.**

**You weren't.** Harry held out his hand, and called a small globe of flame around it when Ginny had put hers into it, bathing them with warmth. **But when you and Ron both jump at the same time, and my pendants go off for you being upset a second later, it doesn't take much to figure out somebody's in trouble. Do you know who?**

**Not yet. I haven't had time to look.** Ginny did so now, and frowned at the faint glow emanating from both sides of her first pendant. **Let me think. It's not Dad or Mum, and it's probably not Bill, he's still in France with Fleur, helping train some of the older students at Beauxbatons, the ones who've been trickling over a few at a time to join the Order or the Shepherds. So that leaves Fred, Percy, Charlie, and Tonks—**

The pendants' light flared as the final name was spoken. Ginny hissed under her breath, her hand tightening around Harry's. **I knew it, I knew something was wrong—she's been found out or spotted or captured, and we can't do anything—**

**We can get word to the people we've still got on the inside with the Death Eaters,** Harry broke in, squeezing Ginny's hand in reply. **They'll do whatever they can. And Tonks isn't stupid. She'll do whatever she can to stay alive, until we can get to her, or someone over there can help her escape.**

**I hope so.** Ginny exhaled a shaky breath. **And none of that changes what we came here to do, does it?**

**No,** said Harry shortly, and ducked out of the chain, cutting off Ginny's impression of his seething anger at this fact. "But that doesn't make it easier either," he said aloud, handing the chain back to her. "That holiday Padfoot was talking about a while back sounds pretty good to me right now. Spend a few months camping out together, with nobody knowing where to find us, nobody depending on us to run impossible risks and save the world, our biggest problem deciding on where to go tomorrow..."

"Sign me up." Ginny blew her husband a kiss. "But after we're done with all of this, not before. How're they coming?" she called aloud to Ron.

"Nearly done." Ron whipped his wand through three small spirals and tapped it once against the conjured glasses, identical in frame to Harry's, which Neville had handed to him. "There. One down, two to go. You want these, Gin?"

"Why not." Ginny guided her broom alongside Ron's, accepted the eyewear, and unfolded the earpieces to place it on her face. "Oh, I see it now. The air sort of sparkles, all along here. So a

doorway or a weak point would be wherever it isn't sparkling?"

"Or if the sparkles look different anywhere," said Ron absently, his attention on the second set of glasses he was enchanting. "Hold on till I'm done here, and then we can decide which way we're all going."

"How about Pearl and I go left, and you three go right?" Neville suggested. "That way we'll meet on the other side, and if there's any way inside here at all, we'll find it."

"And if there isn't a way, we'll make one," Meghan finished, making a rude face at the spell beyond which resided the last of Lord Voldemort's Horcruxes. "Because that's what we do."

"We could always raid Percy's stash if we have to," murmured Ginny, looking down the curve of the magical shield at the place where it touched the mountainside below. "He probably wouldn't have thought to continue the spell below the ground, and if the ground's not there anymore, neither would the spell be."

"That's what the Red Shepherds always say, isn't it?" Ron handed the second pair of glasses to Neville. "When in doubt..."

"Semtex," chorused the other four members of the Pride, and Harry conjured a small fireball in midair, mimicking an explosion.

Ginny laughed with her friends, and felt a bit of her fear lightening. The war was far from hopeless, and even Tonks's peril wasn't beyond redemption yet.

*But I wish I knew where she was, and what's happening to her...*

---

Severus Snape was just descending a back staircase at Malfoy Manor when he heard the commotion in the entrance hall.

"Hang onto her, dammit!"

"Bloody hell, she bites!"

"Don't let her—yowch, you little vermin!" This was followed by a resounding slap, and a three-part curse in as many languages, delivered in a virulent contralto Severus thought he might recognize.

*Though how she came to be captured is more than I can guess—or perhaps not, given her vaunted lack of coordination. Odd that it never showed itself in a battle situation before today...*

Moving swiftly through narrow doors which nevertheless showed no signs of dust or disuse (the house-elves now resident at the Manor would never have allowed such things to accumulate), Severus arrived in the entrance hall just in time to see Nymphadora Tonks Weasley forced onto

her knees, her face contorted in a snarl which showed no signs of fear but the flickering of her hair through all the colors of the rainbow giving that the lie.

*And who could blame her, with two of my supposed compatriots holding her arms behind her back and one with his wand's tip against her throat?*

"You dirty little half-blood twat," snarled Walden Macnair, the mustache of which he was so proud bristling with what Severus was sure Macnair considered righteous anger. "I'll teach you to interfere with your elders and betters—"

He yelped like one of the animals he'd once been in the business of destroying as a bolt of red light struck him in the hand, flinging his wand high into the air.

"You'll teach her?" said Lucius Malfoy lazily from halfway up the grand staircase, as Starwing, beside him, stepped to one side and caught Macnair's wand in her palm. "How strange. I would think her abilities in that line were sufficient without further tutelage."

"You're not wanted here." Macnair took a step towards Lucius, thrusting out his chest. "Go on, get lost."

Lucius arched one pale eyebrow. "You amaze me more and more, Macnair. The last time I had occasion to look, this house, these grounds, were mine. Which makes me, after the Dark Lord, of course, the final authority on who is and is not wanted here."

"If you think," Macnair began heatedly, "that I'm going to knuckle under to some pompous, overbred little *Squib* —"

A screech of rage interrupted him mid-sentence as Starwing brought her wand slashing down. With a sound like a slamming door, Macnair was flung backwards and upwards across the entrance hall, his mustache and hair erupting into furious growth. By the time he had reached the rafters, he was cocooned in black fibers like an outsized, wriggling pupa.

"My dear," said Lucius mildly to Starwing, laying a hand on her arm. "Do let him breathe. The Dark Lord has need of all his followers, even the most foolish."

Starwing sighed. "All right," she said with a note of petulance in her voice, and waggled her wand from side to side. Macnair gasped, wheezed in air, and began coughing, as the cocoon of hair around him wove itself around and among the rafters, holding him in place. Below, Lucius flicked his fingers at the two remaining Death Eaters, who hastily released Tonks's arms and backed away.

"Very good." Lucius descended the last few steps to the broad landing at the base of the staircase, Tonks eyeing him warily from where she knelt on the polished wooden floor. "Come with me, my dear," he said to her, his tone that of a finished gallant inviting a naive debutante to dance with him at the first ball of the season. "Don't worry about them. They won't bother you again."

The expression on Tonks's face suggested she was restraining her incredulity by the thinnest of margins, but she got to her feet and started forward.

"Ah." Lucius held up a hand, halting her. "Before I forget. Which of your illustrious captors has your wand in his possession?"

Slowly, Tonks pointed to the Death Eater who had been holding her right arm. Lucius snapped his fingers at the wizard, and after a bemused interval, the Death Eater produced the named item from inside his robes and levitated it over to Lucius.

"Excellent." Lucius pocketed the wand, then beckoned Tonks towards him once again, taking her arm when she had ascended the three steps up to the landing. "I will explain your duties in the household once we are out of the reach of prying eyes and ears," he told her. "After all, how I provide for my less fortunate relations is no one's business but my own." Silvery eyes slid to one side and found Severus in the shadow of the staircase. "Is it."

Holding in an impulse towards riotous laughter, as inappropriate as it would have been cathartic, Severus merely shook his head in agreement.

"Quite right." Lucius clucked to Starwing, who fell in behind him and Tonks, and the strange little trio ascended the stairs and disappeared into the darkness of the corridor above.

---

Tonks had thought nothing could override the terror shaking her from within, but confusion was now bidding to do exactly that. She'd known from the moment the wrought-iron gates opened where she was, though she'd never seen the place with her own eyes. Still, to have Lucius Malfoy pop up and claim her as a relation, escort her away from the Death Eaters who'd brought her in—

*It could be good, or it could be bad. And if it's bad, it's going to be very, very bad.* She matched her pace to that of her escort, noting bits and pieces about him with the still-functioning corners of her brain. He was favoring his right leg, which tallied with what she'd heard about his werewolf bite; he seemingly still hadn't recovered from Draco's magic-draining, given what Macnair had said, and that Luna had done his wandwork for him...

*Yes, Luna.* Tonks glanced behind her as unobtrusively as possible, taking in the young witch in her gray robes and black cloak, eyes on the carpet in front of her. *Is her mind really gone, or is she just putting it on, waiting until she can hit back? Maybe, if she is, and if we work together—*

"Here we are," Lucius announced, stopping in front of a set of double doors. Luna drew her wand and murmured an incantation Tonks didn't catch, and the doors unlocked with an audible click and swung wide. "Please," he said, releasing Tonks's arm and stepping back one pace to bow to her. "Be welcome in this, our humble abode."

Managing somehow to keep her face straight, Tonks stepped into the room, looking around. It was lavishly furnished enough, with two armchairs facing a French door onto a balcony and a table between them, a writing desk against one of the wood-paneled walls, and a long sofa against



another. Through a half-open door to her right, she could see a canopied and curtained king-sized bed, a tall wardrobe in one corner, and a vanity with a padded seat in front of it. Something about the vanity was odd, though—she took one step in that direction, trying to put her finger on it—

"Hold still," said Lucius sharply, and Tonks froze. A moment later, she felt the collar of her robes given a quick tug, then released. "There," said the elder wizard in a tone of satisfaction. "You looked like you'd dressed in the dark. However did you come to be so disheveled?"

"Lost my balance on a hillside." Tonks bit off her words before any unflattering epithets pertaining to her host could attach themselves. "Ground was loose."

"I see." Lucius brushed at her shoulders, and Tonks heard the patter of gravel and dirt on the floor beside her. "Quite a mess you made of yourself in your tumble. Not that you could have known that, in these rooms." He chuckled under his breath. "My dear Starwing, although obedient, is not terribly bright, and she inevitably mistakes her reflection for another young lady bent on stealing my affections. To that end, I have had my house-elf cover all reflective surfaces in these rooms. And speaking of which—Echo!"

Tonks turned around quickly, just in time to see the little house-elf who'd been missing from the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix for the past few months materialize in the center of the sitting room. "Yes, Master?" she said meekly, then caught sight of Tonks and fell silent, her hands going up to her mouth.

"You know this witch, I believe." Lucius waved a hand in Tonks's direction. "She will be joining our happy little household. Whatever has been occupying your time lately, to the extent that you are sometimes several seconds behindhand in coming when you are called..." His glare made Echo shrink back with a whimper, and Tonks clenched her fists, reminding herself that starting a fight wouldn't help. "That work now belongs to her, and you will fetch her whatever she needs to complete it. Within reason, of course. As for the rest of her accommodations, sleeping, eating, and the like..." He waved a hand airily. "Use your own judgment. Only see that she doesn't go outside the house, or off the grounds, without permission. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," Echo whispered. "Right away, Master." Scurrying around Luna, who was regarding her with the wide-eyed uncertainty Tonks had noticed in post owls around house-elves and small children, she stopped beside Tonks and held up one tiny hand. "If Mistress would please to grab on?" she said softly.

"Just a moment." Lucius's voice arrested Tonks in the act of closing her own hand around Echo's fingers. The last of the Malfoys was regarding her with a strangely intent gaze. "Try not to fall down any more hills, little cousin," he said softly. "I might not be there to save you next time."

Tonks was still staring at him when Echo's hand closed around hers, and the luxurious room winked out of existence around them, to be replaced by a moment later by a smaller, shabbier one with far less in the way of furniture. Setting this aside to be examined more later, Tonks went swiftly to one knee, catching hold of Echo as the little house-elf's face began to crumple.

"Easy now," she murmured, remembering what her mother had once told her, that comforting another person was very nearly as good as being comforted yourself. "Easy now, I've got you. It's going to be all right."

*I hope.*

Rather than dwell on this any longer, Tonks took a look around. Her first impression, that this room was almost barren of furniture, was borne out by this longer examination. Practically the only items visible were a small and sturdy table with a circular bundle of blankets beneath it, a much-mended rocking chair, and, situated directly beneath the single barred window—

*Well.* Tonks whistled under her breath. *I think I know what's been taking up Echo's time lately.*

"Her name is Annette," said Echo shakily, lifting her head from the crook of Tonks's elbow and turning to regard the cradle. "Annette Selene. She's not even a month old yet, and her parents died the day she was born. Their friends asked me to take care of her, and I have been, but it's *hard*, Mistress Tonks, especially when nobody else can know about her or she'd be in terrible danger—"

"Oh, like that, is it?" Tonks craned her neck to get a glimpse of the tiny, round face, relaxed in sleep, with a few wisps of brown hair straggling across the small forehead. "I don't know much about babies, but I bet I can learn. Feed them when they're wet and change them when they're hungry, right? Or is that the other way around?"

A tiny smile flickered on Echo's face. "You're silly, Mistress Tonks."

"I do what I can." Tonks fished in her pocket for a handkerchief and held it out to Echo. "And you don't have to keep calling me your Mistress all the time. I'm not."

Echo blew her nose decidedly. "Yes, you are," she said through the weave of the cloth. "Or I wish you were."

"I'm sure you do, but I don't see..." Tonks stopped as Echo shook her head in tiny, frantic jerks. One slender finger slid down Tonks's arm and rested for an instant on her wedding ring, then was snatched away.

*Something to do with Charlie? Charlie, and my being Echo's mistress—well, I know Winky belongs to the Weasleys, but I still don't see—*

And then she did, and it was all she could do to restrain her grin.

"You think that could work?" she asked, trying for as casual a tone as possible. "Since your dad was officially freed and all, he never accepted any new contract anywhere, but your mum did?"

Blotting at her eyes, Echo nodded. "But not yet," she whispered. "Not until he forgets. You take care of Annette, and I'll take care of him, and then, when he hardly even remembers you're here..."

"Sounds good." Tonks grimaced. "Though Charlie's going to go spare, imagining everything that *could* be happening to me. I don't suppose we can get a message out to him that I'm safe, more or less, and he's not to get himself in trouble trying for some grand heroic rescue?"

"I can try." Echo's ears twitched, and her head turned towards the cradle an instant before a fretful cry arose from it.

"Nice trick," said Tonks, getting to her feet. "All right, show me how this is done, would you?"

"It's not too hard." Echo pattered beside Tonks to the side of the cradle, where Annette Selene was squirming in time with her tiny, unhappy wails. "First, you pick her up, and make sure to support her head—yes, just like that. Next, you see if her nappy's wet, and it probably will be, so we've got to change her, and then we'll see if she wants something to eat..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 53: Flight of the Nymphs (Year 7)

"Do you realize how lucky we are?" asked Aletha, reclining in her chair with tea in hand.

"How so?" Remus inquired from his spot on the hearth, which would have been distinctly uncomfortable for almost anyone else in the world, since the first week of October had brought a series of chilly days to Hogwarts and the house-elves had lit a correspondingly large blaze in the kitchen fireplace. "Still having each other, despite all the odds against it?"

"There's that. But I was thinking of where we are, and how we're situated. Also despite all the odds." Aletha reached out a foot to nudge Sirius, who obligingly passed over the small plate of pastries from which he'd been snacking. "Thank you. What I mean is, His Evil Darkness holds the Ministry, two of his favorite blood bigots have Inquisitorial powers at Hogwarts, a reign of terror is supposed to be spreading over the land—"

"And here we sit in the castle kitchens with the house-elves pampering us outrageously," Danger finished, running a handful of flames down her hair in lieu of a comb. "As if everything were perfectly normal."

"Exactly." Aletha took a sip of her tea. "Though even for wizards and witches, 'perfectly normal' is a stretch when you're sitting there doing *that*."

"Oh, I'm sorry, did you want some?" Danger held out a chunk of her fire, looking impossibly innocent, in the style of Meghan when she had been sent to distract the Pack-adults from the misdeeds of the older cubs. The imitation was so perfect that neither Sirius nor Aletha could help laughing, and several of the house-elves glanced over tolerantly at the humans by the fire before returning to their work.

"I thought we'd decided a long time ago," said Sirius when he'd caught his breath, reclaiming the plate of pastries. "This *is* normal, or as close as we're going to get." His eyes darkened. "A lot closer than some right now. I wish we could get a bit more about Tonks out of whoever's inside the Death Eaters—and who is it, anyway, Moony?" he demanded irritably. "I'd think you could at least tell me!"

"What makes you think I know it myself?" Remus wove a finger around the fire that licked happily at his sleeves, and it swirled upwards into the form of an owl. "I get letters from an anonymous correspondent, written by DictaQuill, I'd imagine. They never use the same owl twice, and usually I don't even see the bird. It must have instructions to leave the letter on my desk when I'm not around."

"That doesn't seem safe." Aletha set her teacup aside, frowning. "How do they know their letters are getting to the right person?"

"Because." Danger grinned. "Anyone else who got them would think they were the biggest bunch

of nonsense ever written. And as far as the actual wording of the letters goes, they'd be right. But do you remember how we used to write invisible ink messages in lemon juice when we were little, Letha?"

"Of course!" Aletha laughed out loud. "How could I forget?" Then she sobered, looking intently at Remus and Danger. "But then, they *know*," she said slowly. "Whoever they are, they know about you."

"What am I missing here?" Sirius frowned. "Lemon juice, invisible ink—"

"It's a Muggle trick, the sort of thing you do for fun when you're little." Danger wrote with her finger in midair, flames following her every movement. "If you write a message on paper with lemon juice, it disappears when it dries, but heating up the paper turns the juice brown and makes the message appear. And the only way to get the real message out of those nonsense letters we get from our anonymous correspondent is to set the parchment on fire, and watch it appear and disappear almost at the same time."

"Huh." Sirius tore his chosen pastry in half. "Wouldn't have thought most of the Death Eaters had the brains to think of that, or knew that much about Muggles—only that's not what's got you worried, is it, Letha?" he finished, setting both halves of the pastry aside. "Because for somebody to know they could send a message like that to us and it'd be safe..."

"They'd have to know what Remus and I can do." Danger flattened her hand and watched the flames swarm around it. "And we haven't exactly told the world, have we?"

"No." Remus brushed his finger across her palm. "But we have told Severus Snape."

"You think it's him?" Sirius shredded a bit of pastry between his fingers. "I would have thought he'd stick with the messenger-Patronus. Though I suppose if he's got more to tell you than one of them can say, a letter'd be the wisest idea. But then why all the secrecy? We know about him. I can see him taking precautions on his end, but why on ours?" He grimaced before the words were fully out of his mouth. "Unless we've got another damn spy in among us."

"Or what if Severus recruited a spy of his own, someone on the Death Eaters' side who secretly sympathizes with us, and told them just enough that they could send you messages?" asked Aletha, watching the firelight play across Remus's face. "He wouldn't necessarily need to have explained about the fire powers. Possibly he claimed that you use some kind of charm, maybe a variant on a Flame-Freezer, to reveal what's written there?"

"That would make sense." Remus spoke in the absent tone Aletha had come to associate with his attention being turned mainly inward, and Danger's eyes, though half-lidded, were swirling slowly with color. "It would explain...*almost* everything." He and Danger exhaled in unison and looked up, signaling the end of the colloquy for now.

"And the things it doesn't, don't need explanations," Danger took over the thread of the conversation, shaking her head to disperse the flames which had crept into her hair. "At least, not

yet. Not until the war is over and you pick the first spot where we'll pitch those tents, Sirius."

"How come I have to pick?"

"It was your idea, wasn't it?"

Sirius grumbled under his breath. "Why'd you have to fall for a girl who makes *sense* all the bloody time?" he asked Remus.

"Same reason you did." Remus nodded to Aletha, who blew him a kiss. "Because they're the ones worth having. Now, if I'm not mistaken, some of us have essays to mark..."

---

Charlie Weasley sat at the same window where he'd once looked out over a world temporarily barred to him, due to his ferocious hexing of his twin brothers when they wouldn't stop teasing him about his "girlfriend". Smoothing out the slip of parchment inscribed in Remus Lupin's handwriting which had become crumpled in his grasp, he read for probably the thousandth time the words which had allowed him to take a full breath for the first time in days.

*Tonks is alive and as safe as possible. She may be able to escape but will have to wait until the time is right. Do not attempt rescue without talking to us as this could endanger our people on the inside.*

Shutting his eyes, Charlie rubbed his thumb against his wedding ring, wishing it were enchanted like the pendants Ginny and Ron wore. "Stay safe, love," he whispered, and found himself half-laughing through the words at their utter futility. The witch he'd married had based her entire life on defying danger. "Don't take stupid chances," he amended. "But if you get a good one..."

---

"It was just a stupid chance," said Tonks ruefully, sitting in the rocking chair with Annette dozing in her arms. "Some dirt that was looser than I thought it was going to be. And all for nothing, anyway, that box I saw them carrying was empty."

"Better empty than that it had someone in it." Echo continued folding clean diapers, her tiny hands moving briskly along the white cloth. "Then you would have been captured, *and* you wouldn't have been able to help them."

"Can't argue with that." Tonks looked down at the little face nestled against the crook of her arm and sighed. "You're awfully cute," she said. "I wish I could keep you. But I don't think it works with babies like it does with dogs, where you just bring them home and feed them and they're yours..."

"She doesn't have anybody else," said Echo quietly, her head bent over her work. "Except for me, and I don't count."

"Now just hold on a second!" Tonks caught herself just in time to keep from shouting it, and

Annette's face still began to wrinkle up in preparation for a wail of protest. Quickly, Tonks went back to rocking, and made sure the little girl was well and deeply drowsing before she returned to her point. "Who said you don't count? I'm pretty sure she would have died if it weren't for you, and that counts for plenty."

"I didn't mean that." Echo looked up and smiled, a truer smile than Tonks had seen on the young house-elf in the five days they'd shared this chamber, unwilling guests of the Death Eaters. "*He* hasn't tried to make me think like that, like a 'proper' house-elf, not as long as I don't talk back to him." For a moment, the smile trembled. "He would, if I stayed here. If I always had to do what he wants, and never say anything. And if I didn't have my friends." Now the smile was replaced by a deepening of color which Tonks thought might betoken a house-elf blush. "Some of them are very brave, and that helps me be brave. But what I meant was, she's a human, Annette is, and she needs humans to grow up with. And I'm..." She shrugged. "Not."

"Are any of your friends?" Tonks continued rocking, despite Annette's limp weight against her arm. The motion, she'd found, soothed her as well as the baby, taking her mind off where she was and what might happen to her at any time. "Human, I mean. There've got to be some people around here who aren't actual Death Eaters, who just got caught up or dragged along or what have you."

"Some of them are, but it's too dangerous for them to take care of a baby." Echo spun her fingers at the diapers, sending them lofting across the room to the changing table. "They have to be ready all the time, ready to be even more perfect Death Eaters than the real ones, or ready to run and hide and stay out of the way of the ones who might see them doing anything else."

"All of which you'd think I'd have realized for myself." Tonks shook her head in mock-chagrin. "Fine Auror I am. But then, kicking down the doors is usually more our style than hiding behind them and listening. And speaking of which..." She slowed the chair to a stop and looked at Echo. "You're supposed to bring me things I need to do the work you brought me here to do, within reason," she said as calmly as she could manage. "Yes?"

Echo tucked her arm across her chest, canting her head to peer sidelong at Tonks. "Yes, Mistress," she whispered in a perfect imitation of some of the shyer house-elves at Hogwarts. "Yes, I am supposed to be doing that."

"Lighten it up before I laugh," Tonks mumbled without moving her lips, then raised her voice again. "All right. The work I'm supposed to be doing is taking care of this little girl. Right?"

"Yes, Mistress," Echo repeated, dropping some of her postural tricks so that she now resembled the more cheerful of the Hogwarts elves. "That is being right."

"Perfect." Tonks leaned back in the chair and smiled. "If I'm going to take care of her the best way I know how, especially in a house full of Death Eaters, I'm going to need a weapon. Getting me my wand back probably wouldn't qualify as 'within reason', but I bet you can find me something that will, can't you?"



Echo's blue eyes lit with glee. "Yes , Mistress," she said with a decided little curtsy, and vanished with a quiet snap.

"And there's the Echo we all know and love," Tonks murmured, half to the sleeping Annette, half to herself. "Now I just need to hope being married to Charlie is enough to counteract whatever Malfoy's got on her so I can free her and she can get us all out of here..."

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"Wizardspace," said Hermione, opening her eyes. The Pride was sitting in a circle on the floor of their denning room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, keeping quiet so that Hermione could have a chance to examine the memories of the hiding place for the final Horcrux and the tests her Pridemates had run on the mysterious shield around it.

"Wizardspace," Harry repeated. "You're sure?"

"Just about." Hermione nodded. "We can check with Percy and everyone who did the Red Roads if you like, they'd have more experience than I do, but all the diagnostic spells I could see you doing are pointing towards its being wizardspace."

"But wizardspace just makes things larger on the inside than the outside." Meghan's brow furrowed. "It has to have a *thing* to work on. Doesn't it?"

"Usually." Hermione cupped her hands as if holding a ball. "But this is the other half of the spell from the one we usually see. Most often, when we want wizardspace, we reach out into some other world where the space isn't being used and borrow a little piece of it, to connect to the thing we want to make larger on the inside. Whoever did this spell—and probably it was Voldemort himself, I don't think he'd have trusted anyone else with a secret this big—reached out into *this* world for his space that wasn't being used."

"But it would still need a thing to work on, like Meghan said, wouldn't it?" Ginny was running her pendant chain through her fingers, pausing to stroke the gold-wire cage with the engraved black stone which Dumbledore had given her and Harry as wedding gifts. "A doorway."

"And that's the problem." Neville's hand closed into a fist and tightened until his knuckles showed white. "That doorway could be anywhere. Hell, it could be *anything* . And there's no way in or out of a wizardspaced area other than the doorway, unless the person who cast the spell is good enough to make one on the spot. So we're further *back* than we were."

"Maybe not." Ron's voice was absent, but the rest of the Pride nonetheless turned to look at him. He was sitting with his eyes closed and his fingers working together, hooking across and releasing one at a time.

"Maybe not, why?" Harry prompted after several seconds of silence.

"Hmm?" Ron's eyes popped open. "Oh. That. Well, there has to be some kind of link between the place we found and the doorway into it, or otherwise the spell wouldn't work. Usually we can't see

that link, because it's into a whole 'nother world, but with both pieces in this world, couldn't we find it and follow it?"

Harry looked suspiciously from Ron to Hermione and back again. "Did you do something to him?" he asked his sister.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Smiling smugly, Hermione removed Ron's pendant chain from around her neck and handed it back to her fiancé, who leaned over to kiss her cheek. "When do you think it will be safe to go back and start tracing that link?"

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Severus Snape turned around from bottling his latest potion and discovered he was not alone.

"Mistress Amanda, I presume," he said, sketching the slightest of bows towards the slender red-haired figure standing beside the window of his workroom. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"You *are* imperturbable." Green eyes sparkled with amusement. "I hadn't quite believed what I was told, but I see now it was nothing but the truth."

"Truth is always to be valued." Severus glanced at the window. "Would you mind opening that? I would do it myself, but I have the feeling that you might not appreciate my reaching for my wand."

"I have no reason to mistrust you," said the young witch gravely, drawing her own wand and using it to undo the simple Locking Charm Severus had placed over the window, then tugging the window itself open with her long-fingered hands. "But your caution is appreciated. I have come for two purposes. First, to speak words to you, and second, to ask you a question. Which shall I do first?"

Severus shrugged one shoulder. "In whichever order you please."

"Very well." The witch half-closed her eyes and began, in slow and sonorous tones, to speak.

"When the serpent's child a consort brings home  
"And the lion's son shall fall,  
"By this shall ye know that the hour has come  
"For the greatest triumph of all;  
"And if some who are sworn have gone into the night,  
"Their cause may falter and fail,  
"But if twelve stand strong in the circle of light,  
"The darkness cannot prevail."

*Words, she said.* Severus indulged himself in a brief glare of fury, since the green eyes had closed fully at some point during the hateful recitation. *Words to predict the failure of all I have ever truly wanted, and the triumph of those I would give my life to destroy. Or—could it be—*

Pushing aside hatred, hope, and speculation with equal force, he composed his face to neutrality as the witch called Amanda opened her eyes to gaze at him again. "You will make sure those who should hear my words, do," she said with surety. "Now, my question." A smile flickered on her lips before her serenity returned. "I will ask it three times, and three times only, and if you do not give me an answer, it will never be asked again. From whom could you accept a command to forgive yourself for the wrongs you have done?"

For an instant, everything froze. Severus could have counted the motes of dust hanging in the air, the flame-colored hairs on his companion's head, the bits of white fluff dotting the dark fabric of her robes—

With a wrench, he pulled himself back to normality. "By what right," he demanded hoarsely, "do you ask that question?"

"By the right of one who speaks as she must, for she cannot be silent." Amanda bowed her head, as if her words were a ritual. "For the second time, I ask. From whom would such a command be acceptable to you?"

A single harsh laugh broke from Severus. "You see into the future," he said, circling a hand to indicate the words already spoken, which seemed still to hang on the air like portents of things to come. "Would you have me believe you cannot see the past with equal ease? Why ask me this, when it can never be?"

"Many things are possible, in such times as we live in." The witch smiled slightly. "And I ask you this question for the third and final time, not because I need to hear the answer, but because you do. Who, Severus Snape, could command you to forgive yourself for your sins, and be obeyed?"

Severus turned away from the figure too much like, and too much unlike, the one now dominating his thoughts. Gripping the edge of his workbench, he battled bitterly against the storm inside him, until he thought he could speak with some vestige of calm.

"If anyone had that right," he said finally, "it would be..." His throat attempted to close in grief, but he forced it back for long enough to speak the name. "Lily."

"So it is spoken, and so it is intended," murmured the silvery voice behind him. "And so let it be done."

When Severus was able to look around again, his visitor was gone.

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Bellatrix Lestrange stood just inside the doorway of a small, dusty room in Malfoy Manor, looking at the long-gone evidences of what it once had been. Bench-like seats in neat rows facing the front, three steps up to a narrow dais, a rectangular space for a table in its center and a speaker's podium to one side...

"Where once there were two," she breathed, "now let there be one."

"Dreaming your dusty dreams, Widow Lestrage?" asked a cool voice from the shadows on the dais, which rippled once and brought forth the slim figure of a young wizard, looking down on Bella with disdain. "Praising the unknown hand which gave you that title, so that you can bear one you like better?"

"So it's you." Bella sidled a step or two, squinting at the stranger in his antique robes. "Your picture doesn't do you justice."

"I'd say I'm flattered, my lady, but I know too much about you." Dafydd Beauvoi leaned against the podium, seemingly at his ease, but his eyes were hard and his muscles never relaxed. "So your precious Master has finally decided to reward your faithfulness as you believe it deserves."

"My Master is obeying the words of a prophecy," said Bella stiffly. "Assuring his triumph, and the final downfall of those foolish enough to stand in his way."

"Because that worked so well the last time he tried it." Dafydd shook his head, a faint smile curving his lips. "Still, if he thinks taking you as his consort—purely ceremonial, I have no doubt—will bring him success in his endeavors, who am I to stand in his way? Only hear this, Bellatrix Black Lestrage." Between one second and the next, the young loungeur was replaced by the cold-eyed warrior, and Bella took an involuntary step back, fumbling for her wand. "This house once sheltered those Heirs of the Serpent who used their gifts in the service of wisdom and of life. If you think, in this place, to join your hand and your wand with that Heir of the Serpent who instead seeks folly and death—"

"Yes, what?" Bella thrust the words into the conversation as her hand closed on her wand's grip. "What will you do to me, revenant? Haunt me and whisper empty words in my ear? Try to frighten me to death?"

"Frighten you to death." Dafydd repeated the words musingly, as though he found some strange amusement in them. "No indeed, serpent's lady. Your death I do not desire, nor would I work towards it. Wars are ugly when kin slay kin. And yet." The smile which spread across his face now was anything but faint. "Should you wed your Dark Lord under this roof, under no other roof will you ever rest your head again, and what he seeks, you shall have." He bowed fluidly. "Much good may it do you both."

His slender fingers flicked out, and a pillar of flame erupted at his feet, blinding Bella for a critical instant. When the orange and purple afterimages had cleared from her vision, he was gone. She growled under her breath, then shook off the mood with a laugh.

"Was that meant to be a threat?" she wondered aloud. "What my Master seeks, I shall have—a *threat*?"

Turning in circles, she threw her head back to the ceiling, cackling gleefully. "Immortality!" she cried, spreading her arms as wide as they would go.

The word echoed back from the vaults and pillars, only to be drowned by her ever-increasing

laughter.

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With a whizzing sound followed by a solid *thock*, the block of wood hanging on the wall developed a green-stoned dagger in its center. Echo jumped up and down and clapped her hands, and Annette, in her cradle, gurgled in what Tonks chose to believe was approval. "Not too shabby, is it?" she asked, as Echo called the dagger back with a wave of her hand. "I've tried to keep in practice. You never know when a Muggle weapon might be useful. Though..." She weighed the dagger on her palm as Echo passed it to her. "This one isn't exactly Muggle, is it."

Echo shook her head. "I stole it from *him*," she said, her lips pulling back in an expression which hit somewhere between sneer and hiss. "Master Draco would have wanted you to have it. It ought to be used for good things." Her voice began to tremble. "Not bad ones. Not like—"

"Hey, now." Tonks went to one knee and gathered Echo into a gentle hug. "None of that. It's going to be okay, remember?"

"Well now, let's see here," wheezed a rough voice from the other side of the room.

Tonks spun as Annette began to wail. The baby was thrashing back and forth, perilously close to dislodging herself from the grasp of a squat, lumpen witch who was peering at her like a piece of meat. "Not bad lungs," she said critically. "Decent color. Probably healthy. Can't be certain of the blood, of course, but she'll do for supporting stock—"

She broke off with a yelp as several inches of goblin-wrought silver buried itself in her upper arm. Echo flung out her hands, magically catching a howling Annette three inches from the floor, and Tonks blinked for the first time since she had realized they weren't alone.

"That," she said shakily, "was a little too close."

"Yes." Echo scurried across the room to cuddle the shrieking baby into something resembling calm (surreptitiously bestowing a kick on the crumpled and unconscious witch beside her), then pulled off one of Annette's tiny socks and levitated it over to Tonks. "I think we should try it, Mistress Tonks. I think we should try it *now*."

"With you all the way." Tonks pulled her cousin's dagger free of the strange witch's shoulder, wiped it on the rough black cloak, and dropped it into her pocket. "Right then. Echo, this is for you..."

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Charlie got to his feet with a sigh. Sitting here in his room at the Burrow and brooding himself to pieces wouldn't bring Tonks back to him any faster.

*I'll go back to our flat and have a shower—security's decent there, and it's loads more private than here or Headquarters—and then I'll head over there and see if I can't get hold of Percy or Remus to talk about going in after her. There's got to be some way of doing it that won't tell the Death*

*Munchers who gave us the information.* He snorted a laugh as a thought occurred to him. *Borrow that golden egg Harry got at the Triwizard Tournament, maybe, toss it onto the roof at Malfoy Manor, and bring in a flight of Common Welsh Greens to tear the house apart fighting over who gets it...*

Still chuckling under his breath, he Disapparated, feeling first his parents' wards, then his own and Tonks's, brush his skin as he made the journey between his two homes. Fully materialized, he yawned once to pop his ears, shook his head to ensure everything was still attached, and was reaching for the clasp of his robes when the sound of splashing water, along with a noise which could loosely be called singing, caught his attention.

*The hell? Dropping his hand to his wand instead, Charlie started towards the flat's tiny bathroom, moving at the pace he used to ensure sleeping dragons stayed that way. Who breaks into a flat to have a shower? And the wards didn't feel any different than usual... weird. Either I'm losing my touch, or whoever this is, they are excellent. Good thing I've got the drop on them...*

The bathroom door was sitting on the latch. Cautiously, Charlie eased it open, sizing up the figure behind the translucent shower curtain. *Witch, not wizard. Decent size for a witch, but still. Naked, so no wand, and she probably won't think to do more than scream—this shouldn't be too hard—*

"Freeze!" he yelled, yanking the curtain back.

The witch in his shower did indeed scream, and accompanied the noise with a well-aimed gut punch, pulled at the last possible second, but still hard enough to send Charlie staggering back a pace and into the wall. His thoughts raced as his lungs struggled for air.

*She's here—but she can't be here—it's got to be some kind of trick—*

"What the hell was *that* for?" Tonks yelled back, shutting off the water and glaring at him, her hair flushing from the white of shock to a red as vibrant as Charlie's own. "Can't a witch get a shower in her own damn flat around here?"

Charlie managed to suck in a breath. "What happened to 'Hi, honey, I'm home'?" he wheezed, before he stumbled forward and grabbed hold of her as tightly as he could. Since she was clinging to him just that hard, it wasn't too difficult.

"You're alive," he mumbled, hoping she would mistake the catches in his voice for getting his breath back rather than what they actually were. "You're *here* ."

"I'm wet," Tonks pointed out, but Charlie shook his head.

"Don't care," he declared, and scooped her into his arms. "Merlin's boxer briefs, you're *home*, you're *safe* —" He stopped halfway out of the bathroom as yet another unexpected sound caught his ear. "What's that?" he said carefully.

"What's it sound like?" Tonks countered.

"It sounds like a baby." Charlie set his wife on her feet. "This is going to be a long story, isn't it?"

"Not that long." Tonks raked her hair into its usual pink spikes, then grimaced as she looked down at herself. "Would you mind—"

"What—oh, right, right." Charlie Summoned a towel from the rack, and Tonks quickly rubbed herself dry and pulled on a fresh set of robes from the closet nearby. The crying in the other room had calmed to the occasional fretful wail, the sort of sound Charlie remembered from his childhood as Ginny not quite willing to settle down yet, and Tonks darted out of the room and returned a moment later with the source of the noise in her arms.

"She followed me home," she said, enlarging her eyes and batting impossibly long eyelashes at Charlie. "Can we keep her?"

"Knock that off." Charlie came to Tonks's side, looking down at the brown-haired bundle she was holding. Big blue eyes gazed solemnly back at him, seeming to size him up as a potential source of cuddles. "Who *is* she?"

"I don't know exactly." Tonks rocked gently on the balls of her feet, a move so familiar to Charlie's eye from his mother that it twisted his brain into knots to see his wife doing it. "She was there, at Malfoy Manor, hidden away. Echo said her parents died the day she was born, and one of our spies got hold of her and gave her to Echo to take care of—oh, Echo's here too, I was able to free her from Malfoy and she Apparated us out," she added, and Charlie turned his head to smile at the little house-elf who was waving at him from the doorway. "Go tell your parents you're okay, love, we're good here for a while."

"Yes, Miss." Echo disappeared with a little pop, and Charlie shook his head again, trying to get his thoughts to settle into any kind of coherent order.

"What's her name?" was the first thing out of his mouth when they did. "The baby, I mean."

"Annette Selene." Tonks sat down on the edge of the bed, and Charlie joined her there, letting his arm slide around her waist. "Echo never said who her parents were, if she even knows it herself, so I haven't got the faintest idea what her surname is..."

"Sure you do." Charlie waited until Tonks lifted her head to look at him, then grinned. "What's wrong with 'Weasley'?"

The light that kindled behind his wife's eyes told Charlie his impulse hadn't been wrong. "You mean it?" she asked, but her arms were already tightening around Annette as though denying the child to anyone who might want to snatch her away. "We don't know anything about her, or where she comes from..."

"Same place all babies come from. The gnomes brought her." Charlie chuckled at Tonks's groan. "What, your mum never told you that?"

"My mum was a Healer. She thought I needed to know the exact biology of it, in every last detail, the very first time I asked that question." Tonks winced as a flush of mortification stained her cheeks. "Cured me of asking her things for the next three years, that did. But Charlie." She met his eyes squarely. "You're really sure about this?"

"Finders keepers, right?" Charlie stroked a finger across Annette's cheek, irrationally thrilled when she turned her head towards his hand. "You found her. We're keeping her."

"Yeah, but..." Tonks had the look of a woman bringing up a point against her will. "What's your mum going to say?"

"My mum?" Chuckling under his breath, Charlie scooted back on the bed, tugging Tonks with him. "You mean the person who started asking how soon she could expect her first grandchild at our wedding reception?"

"Right." Tonks laughed. "Almost forgot about that."

"And this isn't just a *grandchild*. " Charlie held out his arms, and after an instant's hesitation, Tonks laid the baby in them. "This is a *granddaughter*. Add that to you and Echo being back safely? Mum's going to be over the moon."

Looking down at the precious life in his arms, Charlie felt again the sensation of soaring that he'd first experienced on a certain day at Hogwarts, when he'd looked across neat rows of conjured theater chairs to see a perfect duplicate of himself already in his seat, and realized that the woman he loved was ready to love him back again.

"Annette Selene Weasley," he said under his breath, and bent down to kiss his daughter's soft cap of hair. "Welcome home, baby."

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"All right, everyone, gather 'round," said Remus in his best professorial tones, ushering his Advanced Defense students to the railing of the balcony overlooking the entrance hall. "In just a moment, we will see an excellent illustration of the fact that Dark potions are not to be taken lightly." He smirked at Aletha, who rolled her eyes at him. "Pun intended."

"Am-y-cus!" The plaintive voice rang out over the entrance hall, and Amycus Carrow, who had taken a single furtive step out of the Great Hall's doors, groaned in disgust. "Am-y-cus, where are you—Amycus!"

Alecto Carrow emerged from the stairway to the dungeons, beaming so widely the sides of her mouth seemed to be in danger of cracking open. "I found you!" she caroled, and pounced on her brother, hugging him tightly. "Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha!"

"Gerroff me!" Amycus grunted, trying to shove Alecto's hands away. Alecto only cackled and hung on tighter.



"As you can see, Miss Carrow is suffering from the effects of the Imprimatus Potion," Remus continued gravely as his students scribbled briskly on hovering scrolls or muttered to DictaQuills, glancing up every now and then to get a better look at the little drama taking place below. "It has stripped her of her human powers of reasoning and implanted in her an unshakeable devotion to the first person she saw upon awakening from the potion trance, namely, her brother."

"Gerroff me!" Amycus finally managed to dislodge Alecto's grip, and quickly Stuck her to the floor before she could grab him again. "And *stay* there!"

"But..." Alecto's eyes filled with tears as her brother stamped across the entrance hall and vanished through one of the doors. "But...Amycus..."

Aletha leaned over the railing and waved her wand, creating a shower of silvery dust around Alecto, who gasped in awe as it cascaded about her. "Ooh," she crooned, snatching at bits of dust. "*Shiny.*"

"The effects of the potion are, sadly, quite permanent," Remus concluded. "And when one considers that the Imprimatus is not in fact classed as Dark magic, that it inhabits the gray area between Light and Dark, where a wise wizard walks cautiously if at all..." He shook his head, then glanced around at the sound of the bell. "Homework, two and a half feet on another potion classed as neither Light nor Dark, and under which conditions, if any, you would consider it suitable for use," he said quickly. "Professor Black can help you with your research if necessary. Class dismissed." As the students scattered, he held out his hand to Aletha. "Going my way?"

"Does your wife know you pick up strange women like this?" Aletha inquired, and grinned at his rude noise. "Can you take us both, Kady?"

"Yes, Mistress Letha," said Remus's left leg, and the corridor blurred around them and reformed into the Defense teacher's quarters, where Danger looked up from a scroll and Sirius from his typewriter to wave hello. "There you are being!" chirped the house-elf, sliding out from under Remus's robes, where she had claimed the right to ride while he was teaching. "I is coming back in an hour, Master Remus?"

"Two hours," Remus corrected. "That demonstration was for both my higher-level classes, so I don't have the one that meets just before lunch."

Kady nodded and vanished, and Remus sat down beside Danger, claiming his welcome-home kiss, as Aletha found a seat for herself on the other side of Sirius's table. "What's got you so interested, love?" he asked.

"A bet we've got going." Danger nodded at Sirius. "What we found the most unusual about what happened to Tonks, and what it might mean."

"And you're betting on...which of you we agree with?" Aletha hazarded. "I'm a bit hazy on why Dobby and Winky weren't off to Malfoy Manor to tear Lucius into shreds the instant Echo got back."

"Ha!" Danger pumped her fist in the air. "One for my side! But I have the answer right here, as it happens." She fluttered the scroll in her hand. "Hermione asked Dobby about that this morning, and she liked the answer so much she sat right down and wrote it to me." Flattening the parchment, she began to read.

"Dobby reminded me that house-elves can sometimes sense things about their families, like what kind of babies will be born, or when and how some members of the family might die. Echo was enough of Lucius's house-elf, before Tonks took over and freed her, to know that much about him, and she says that not only is his time to die very soon, but he will die in terrible pain and helpless anger, betrayed by his own treachery, and knowing that his death serves a cause he hates and hastens the downfall of his beloved Master. Dobby and Winky don't think they could do any better than that, so they aren't going to bother."

"Damn," said Sirius, almost reverently. "House-elves are poetic little buggers when you let them go, aren't they?"

"Some of that may have been Kitten," Remus pointed out. "All right, Sirius, what was yours? Not what Lucius called her right at that last second?"

"Matter of fact, it was." Sirius grinned. "Should have known you'd catch that, Moony. 'Little cousin', when she's *not* his cousin—well, she is, but only very tenuously, same way all the purebloods are each other's cousins, and by marriage she's his *niece*. That's a lot closer of a relationship, and it's what he *should* have called her. Only he didn't." He shook his head. "Not sure what to think about that one."

"Give them the rundown," said Danger, setting her letter aside. "We were talking about it earlier," she explained to Remus and Aletha. "He's got three theories, but he won't tell me one of them."

"Because it's not a theory." Sirius waved a hand at her. "It's a wild-ass guess that flies in the face of a whole bunch of things we already know. I'm sorry I even mentioned it. But whichever of the other two's right," he went on, widening his focus to include his other listeners, "it gives us a whole new level of hard if we come up against Lucius on the battlefield. We've got to catch him alive."

"Why?" asked Aletha, leaning back in her chair and clasping her hands across her knee. "Well, apart from the obvious aspect that I certainly wouldn't want to interfere with that lovely fate Echo mapped out for us."

"Because either he's totally lost it and can't even remember his own family tree, in which case we might have a fair chance of disentangling Luna from him because he wouldn't be able to fight us off, or he's playing a double game and he's the most dangerous thing out there, not barring Voldemort." Sirius tapped his fingers against his knees, his usual mannerism of concentration as he herded his words into line. "Think about it. What he wants, what all the purebloods want, is magical supremacy. Wizards and witches on top, Muggles and the rest of the thinking world on bottom, and that's the way it stays. Right?"

"Pureblood wizards and witches on top," Remus corrected. "Otherwise right."

"But that's the point." Sirius leaned forward, his eyes intense. "The blood purity stuff's a load of hogwash. It's stupid. The purebloods are inbreeding themselves out of existence, and I think Lucius knows that now. I think, honestly, he's known it for years, or why'd he bond Draco and Neenie way back when? And if he's finally caught onto that—if he's willing to dump the blood purity idea and declare everyone who has magic equal to everyone else, but automatically superior to everyone who doesn't—it would explain his calling Tonks 'cousin', placing her on a level footing with him, claiming her as part of a larger magical family..."

"He'd get a lot of the people who're undecided right now with an idea like that," said Remus. "People who like the idea of taking control and running things to suit themselves, but who have a few too many Muggles in their family trees to be safe in the Death Eaters' world. And if he could find some way to convince Muggleborns not only that this new world is where they belong, but that they should scorn the families they've left behind, even lord it over them because of that accident of birth..."

"Merlin's wand." Aletha exhaled slowly. "And the worst part is, kids of an age to start Hogwarts would be prime for that sort of ideology. I know I was desperate to be taken seriously when I was eleven. Give them a few years of that, and a free rein with magic at home to back it up—" She shook her head. "I'm with you. If Malfoy's worked *that* out, he's just become our biggest threat."

"But why do we need him alive, then?" Danger asked. "I'd think it would be wiser just to kill him. The movement ought to die with him."

"Would it?" Remus gazed into the fire. "If he's got enough brains to work all this out, wouldn't he also have enough to start recruiting some of the other Death Eaters to his own cause? Especially after a scare like he's already had, with Draco. He doesn't believe he's immortal anymore, so he'll have set up failsafes, in case he dies before the work is finished." He looked back at Sirius. "Is that what you were thinking?"

"Almost to the letter." Sirius grinned. "Nice to know I wasn't totally off base."

"No, I think you're right on. And I think you've officially scared me." Remus sighed. "All right. The word goes out as soon as I can spare a minute to get to Headquarters. Lucius Malfoy to be taken alive if at all possible."

"What *is* your third theory, though?" asked Danger curiously. "Or wild-ass guess, whatever you want to call it."

"Would you do me a favor and forget I ever mentioned that?" Sirius groaned at Danger's firmly shaken head. "Merlin, these witches! Fine, all right, I'll tell you, but not today. You want to go through with that camping trip after we get the war over with, right? I'll tell you my wild-ass guess the day we pitch that first tent. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Danger wafted a kiss across the room on a tiny blossom of fire to brush against Sirius's

cheek. "And now for something completely different. What are we doing for lunch?"

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 54: There All Along (Year 7)

"She married him?" said Ron with an expression of horror. "She actually *married* him?"

"That's what it said." Harry flattened his palms, and letters of fire rose from them to hover in the air. "Neenie and I both sat in on the meeting. Plus Snape sent a Patronus confirming it, in case we had any doubts."

Ron flopped over backwards onto the cushions of the den room, making a noise which could best have been described as a strangled howl. Hermione, beside him, glanced over at Meghan with a wide-eyed expression of concern. "Is he..." she whispered with exaggerated care.

"It's an attack of bad mental images," Meghan decided after several seconds of looking intently at Ron, who had rolled onto his stomach and was holding a pillow over his head, groaning and thrashing as though he were trying to smother himself. "Like being around dementors for too long, only it's seeing instead of hearing."

"So he needs chocolate." Ginny started to stand up, but was forestalled by Neville, who produced a wrapped bar from one of his pockets and tossed it neatly to her. "Thanks, Captain," she said, handing it over to Hermione. "Is there anything you don't carry around with you?"

"DA grenades." Neville pantomimed something shattering to pieces. "You know, those balls made of spell-glass the artillery fill with some of the same potions we use in our pieces? I sat down on a pink one a month or two ago without realizing, and..." His face flushed slightly. "Well. It's a good thing it was just Pearl and me up in the shooting gallery."

"Thank you for sharing." Harry avoided Meghan's eye, which was difficult as she was grinning at him, and cleared his throat. "So. Voldemort wants to live forever, doesn't think he'll need heirs, isn't interested in women, men, or little furry animals as far as we know. But still, he married Bellatrix. Thoughts?"

"It's the prophecy," said Hermione immediately. "It has to be. The serpent's child taking a consort. Voldemort thinks he's the only possible Heir of Slytherin—he doesn't know what we know, about Alex's line, about Amanda's amulets—so he thinks the 'triumph' in the prophecy has to be his, and all he needs to achieve it is take a consort, which he's done, and make the lion's son fall. Which he wants to do."

"But it didn't just say he had to take a consort. It said he had to bring a consort home." Ginny frowned. "Where would Voldemort think of as home? I didn't think he lived anywhere in particular."

"If he's still thinking in terms of being Slytherin's Heir, there's only one place he'd consider home." Harry circled his hands in the air, and the fiery letters writhed into the outline of a familiar, multi-turreted shape. "Hogwarts."

"Of course." Ginny nodded. "And the rest of it fits right into his ideas. Kill you, take over the castle, and bring Bellatrix into it like some kind of conquering queen. He'd love that. They both would."

"And it fits what we heard about the cornerstone, too, Harry." Hermione waved her wand, and the same picture that Professors Jones and Kettleburn had conjured up some months previous appeared in the center of the Pride's small circle, rotating slowly. "With Heirs, Consorts, and Champions. Only he doesn't think any of the other Houses matter." A backwards flick of the wand, and the contingents of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw vanished, leaving only Salazar Slytherin, with his wife Therese on one side and the faintly smiling form of Emrys his Champion on the other. "This is what he wants. All he wants. Forever. Except..." She paused in the midst of swirling her wand about the portrait, changing Slytherin's smug face to that of Voldemort and Therese's haughtiness to Bellatrix's. "Who would his Champion be?"

"Who do you think?" Ron sat up, chocolate in hand, and scowled at the tiny figures floating in midair before him. "Almost have to be Malfoy, wouldn't it, after everything he's done for His Dark Lordliness? Bet you he's got plans for us, too. Same sort of thing he did to Luna, and keep us around the Manor to play with. His own little human menagerie."

"Terribly sorry to disappoint him," said Ginny in a lofty society tone, lifting her nose in the air. "But my plans for the future are rather different."

"You and me both." Harry swiped his own wand through Hermione's picture, dissipating it. "Besides, how's he going to use the Imprimatus Potion on us when Tonks nailed Alecto Carrow with Draco's dagger, and then brought it home and gave it back to us? I know, I know, he could always make the potion for himself," he added before Hermione could object. "Or have Snape do it for him. But he won't have enough time. Halloween's not that far away."

"That's if we win," said Meghan quietly. "If we don't, he'll have all the time in the world."

"Hey." Neville slid an arm around her shoulders. "You know better than that. They're not going to win."

"I know." Meghan laid her head against Neville's side. "But I don't like the second line in that prophecy. And how come it's different than all the ones Danger's had?" she asked, sitting upright again, though still accommodating her posture to Neville's embrace. "Danger's are always in couplets, two rhyming lines, then two more, then two more. This one has every other line rhyming instead. And the meter's different. Back and forth, instead of every line the same."

"Maybe different people put things differently?" Ron offered. "Trelawney's prophecy was just a bunch of jumbled-up sentences, not rhyming at all."

"Makes sense." Harry nodded. "And don't worry too much about me, Pearl. There's lots of different ways to 'fall'. We're checking out that mountaintop where the Horcrux is hidden the next few days, aren't we? There's probably some trap-spell there that's going to knock me off my broom, and somebody'll have to dive down and save me. You'll see, that's all it's going to turn out

to mean in the end."

"I hope so." Meghan shivered a little, then shook her head. "But what about those last four lines? Don't they mean we can't win if all twelve of us, Pack and Pride, aren't here? And we aren't." Her eyes welled up, and her voice quivered once. "We never will be again."

"No." Hermione's voice was calm, perhaps a bit too calm, Harry thought uneasily. She was sitting quite still, and a strange little smile was quivering on her lips. "That's not what it says. It only says that we *may* lose if some of us aren't there, not that we definitely will. It's the other way around that we get a guarantee. If all twelve of us *are* there, and we've all stayed true to our oaths, then Voldemort can't possibly win."

"But there's no way we could all be there," Ginny objected. "Unless..." She glanced upward, almost involuntarily. "Do you think..."

"Could be." Harry laid the palm of his hand against his pendants, feeling the slide of metal on metal under his robes. "Fox never went back on a promise in his life. If anything, he's been the most faithful of us. And Halloween's the time, if any, when someone could cross over. So—" He shrugged. "Maybe?"

"Maybe's better than no." Ron brushed his fingers against Hermione's hand, and kissed the top of her head when she leaned against him. "But how about we talk Horcrux-hunting for a while. We've got to get in there and kill off that brooch before Halloween, or killing the Dark Snarker once and for all won't take."

"Don't forget the snake," Ginny began, then laughed. "What am I talking about? We've got friends in Dark places. If we have some way for them to get out afterwards, *they* could kill the snake."

"And that's doable, so long as we could get them one of these." Harry pulled his Zippophone from his pocket. "One that Moony or Danger or I had worked on beforehand, anyway. Ron, remember those experiments we did on these a while back?"

"Experiments—oh, right!" Ron's face cleared of its momentary confusion. "When we were checking to make sure I was right about it hooking directly into whatever fire you call with it. Which I was," he added to the rest of the Pride. "Anyway, we did everything short of actually trying it out—going through with it would destroy the Zippo, and we haven't got enough of them for that—but we're just about certain that if Harry, or Mr. Moony or Mrs. Danger, told it to, one of those things could blow itself up into a one-time Floo fireplace. Big enough for people."

"How—oh, no, never mind, I get it." Neville shaped a small sphere with his hands, then swiftly expanded it, making a soft *whoosh* with his mouth. "When it explodes, that scatters the fire and the Floo powder, but the person with the fire powers is controlling the explosion, so it surrounds you like it would in a fireplace that's hooked up to the Floo Network. And since the Zippo *is* hooked up to the Floo Network..."

"You'd spin through the fire and come out the other end just like always," Meghan finished.



"That's brilliant!"

"As long as it works," said Ginny doubtfully, looking at the Zippo in Harry's hand. "What if it doesn't?"

"You'd burn to death, or vanish into smoke, or get impossibly splinched. Something along those lines." Ron shrugged his shoulders. "I'll take my chances with that against facing an angry horde of Death Eaters any day."

"It'd be better than what they'd do to you. Faster, and cleaner." Hermione looked away, into the distance. From the shift in her scent Harry was sure she was seeing again the desolation in the corridor under Hogwarts, the formless pile of ashes which was all Lucius Malfoy had left the Pack to bury. "Will you set mine up like that, Harry? Give it those commands, and a code word that I can use to trigger it?"

"Sure. And yes, Pearl, yours too," Harry said before Meghan could do more than open her mouth. "Set them for here, or Hogwarts, do you think?"

"Hogwarts kitchens," Hermione decided after a moment's thought. "Even if the castle was taken over, the house-elves would help us, and we could get to the Den from there."

"Got it." Harry nodded briskly. "Remind me of that later, Neville?"

"I will." Neville pulled quill and parchment from another pocket and made a note. "But weren't we just talking about something else? Having one of the spies inside the Death Eaters kill the snake, after we take care of the brooch?"

"Trust you to pull us back into formation." Ginny blew a kiss across to Neville, and stuck out her tongue at Meghan's growl. "So as long as the Zippo-Floo works, they could get away, but we'd have to get them something to do the killing with, unless they were good enough with their wands to control Fiendfyre."

"Right." Harry frowned. "Only there's something else we'll have to take into account. Nagini's a Horcrux, yeah, but she's an Inferius too. That might mean we have to treat her differently. Neenie, would you see if there's anything in the books about that?"

"On it." Hermione squeezed Ron's hand once, then scooted back a few feet and selected a single book unerringly from the center of a fat stack. The rest of the Pride disposed themselves to listen as Ron cast a map of the mountaintop, with its shimmering shield, in front of them. They were entering the final days of the war, and success or failure would likely hang on details.

*And it's going to be success. I won't stand for anything else.* Harry laid his fingertips lightly against his pendants once more. *I owe too many people too much for that.*

*Even if Meghan's right about what it means that I'm going to 'fall'.*

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"...so the colony in the waterfall cave is progressing very well," Brian Li wrapped up his report, glancing once more at the colorless witch who sat to Remus Lupin's right, murmuring words to an equally colorless DictaQuill. He was positive he'd seen her somewhere before, but even her scent was eluding recognition. "And most of the other colonies with whom we've been in active contact are maintaining the status quo, keeping the Death Eaters believing that the werewolves will fight for them, when in actuality they'll come to our side when we need them."

"Even the Muggles among them are ready to fight," Corona added, stroking her engagement ring in the little mannerism which made Brian smile every time he noticed it. "The potion pieces work even better for them than for ordinary Muggles, because werewolves are by nature magical creatures, and werewolves who feel themselves to be in control of their lives also gain a certain amount of control over the magic which infuses them."

"Fascinating." Remus leaned over to say something quiet to the witch, who nodded and moved her DictaQuill from one scroll to another. "Not an area I thought would ever be explored, not in our lifetimes, anyway. But then, Muggles who become werewolves have historically died quickly, from one cause or another." His eyes, blue with only the faintest trace of brown today, went momentarily bleak. "Once the war is over, perhaps we can put some effort into solving that problem. Was there anything else?" His smile banished any trace of sadness from his expression. "Other than my congratulations, of course?"

"I thought you might notice that." Brian smiled, and squeezed Corona's hand before reaching out to shake the one Remus was offering him. "No, nothing else terribly important. Except that I'm hoping there's nothing urgent enough to send us back out into the field right away. We're both very tired."

"I can gratify that hope, as it happens." Remus pressed Corona's hand in turn. "All is quiet on the western, and eastern, fronts at the moment. Miss Ropes, if you could get those notes to the proper places right away, please?"

The colorless witch nodded and got to her feet, mumbling a few words as she passed Brian and Corona which were probably intended for a well-wish. Brian frowned and followed her passage with his eyes, trying to track down that indefinable sense that he ought to know her...

"So," said Remus briskly, bringing Brian's attention back to him with a start. "You're officially off duty for the next three days. Possibly longer, if nothing comes up. What are you going to do next?"

"Eat something I didn't have to cook beforehand, and won't have to do the dishes after." Brian shook his head, dismissing his suspicions with the gesture. If he hadn't recognized Miss Ropes, he probably wasn't meant to. "Love, what about you?"

"I think I'll go and lie down, if you don't mind." Corona smiled, her eyes absent and a little dreamy. "As you said, love. Very tired."

"Of course." Brian leaned over to kiss her cheek and watched her out of the room, then turned back

to Remus. "I'm worried about her," he confided to the older man. "She's been falling asleep in the middle of the day, or going off into these abstracted fits. Never when we're in the field—it's always in the safe houses, or in transit somewhere—but still, I can't help wondering..."

"I'll ask Aletha to check on her as soon as there's time," Remus promised. "But I wouldn't worry too much. It's probably just fatigue, and accumulated stress. She didn't grow up intending to live this kind of life."

"I hate asking it of her." Brian sighed. "All I want is for us both to come out of it alive. We'll get married, find a cottage somewhere, settle down. Grow a garden, watch the stars at night. Help those Muggles who become werewolves, yes, and witches and wizards too. We could change things, Remus. Wipe out those filthy camps forever and give those people their lives back. If we just get the chance!" He realized only when his abused hands registered their protest that he was clenching his fists so tightly his fingernails were cutting into his palms. "I don't care what I have to do, what I have to endure, so long as we get our chance!"

"And that," said Remus with a slight smile, "is why we *will* win. Because I find it hard to imagine a Death Eater with that kind of dedication to anything but his own selfish interests." He got to his feet, nodding to the door. "Join me for lunch? I happen to know Danger's got some beef hidden in the back of the icebox that barely had a chance to get acquainted with the roasting pan..."

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"So remind me." Tonks spread her arms and turned in place, regarding her highly boring self at every possible angle in the three-paneled mirror she'd conjured up. "Where'd you get 'Miss Ropes' from again?"

"You'll laugh." Danger chuckled herself as she filed scrolls in their proper pigeonholes in the War Room. "Harry and Hermione came up with it. Because when you said you might as well go by 'Dorene' for a first name, since hardly anybody would think to put that together with 'Nymphadora', that made them think of Theodore Nott, and from there we played word association football..."

"To get Nott, knotted, ropes." Tonks snorted in disgust. "Do I really have to be named after that rabbit-faced little brat?"

"It's only for a little while." Danger finished her job and waved her wand at the desk, encasing it in a thin shield of flame. "But whoever's on our side among the Death Eaters—and I wonder sometimes if there isn't more of Luna left in Starwing than Lucius knows about—in any case, our nameless friend warned us that there's a spy here among us that even they don't know, and asked us to keep it dark to everyone except family that you and Echo had escaped."

"Yes, but Brian and Corona?" Tonks shook her head, her muddy brown eyes troubled. "I've worked with them, Danger. Fought with them. If they wanted me out of the picture, they've had half a dozen chances at me. And no one would ever have known it was anything but bad luck or an accident."

"In which case, you'll reveal yourself once we get this war over with, and we'll all have a good laugh about how unnecessary it all was. But right now?" Danger tilted her head, regarding Tonks from the top of her mouse-brown head to the soles of her thick, practical shoes. "Right now, you're Miss Dorene Ropes to everyone except your dad, the Pack, the Pride, and the Weasleys. Better safe than sorry."

"Says the woman who's not wearing the ugliest set of robes in the history of creation," muttered Tonks.

"I will point out you chose your own wardrobe for the role."

"Oh, sure, bring *logic* into it."

---

Severus had been strolling through the gardens of Malfoy Manor (significantly less overgrown than they had been once, but still pleasantly wild) for almost an hour before the sound of singing caught his ear. The wordless, wandering melody led him to a more open bit of garden than most, where Starwing perched on the edge of a fountain, crooning to herself, her inevitable sewing in her hands.

"Hello!" she chirped when she saw him, spreading out the cloth in her lap as though to show it off. "Come, see! Almost finished!"

"Is it really." Humoring the girl, Severus seated himself across from her, angling his head to catch the faint glints of sunshine reflecting off the black ribbon with which the black cloak was decorated. "And what will it be, when it is finished?"

Starwing held out a small, imperious hand, and seized Severus's when he extended his own tentatively. "Feel," she commanded, and drew his fingers along the edges of the ribbons, outlining the amorphous shapes for him. "Pretty witches," she informed him, tracing two slender figures at the bottom of the cloak. "And rawr!" She formed her free hand into claws and bared her teeth in what might have been meant as a roar, while the hand holding Severus's stroked its way around a broad shape with a wide head, sewn on the middle of the cloak. "And then..." She beamed, and led Severus's fingers along a sinuous piece of stitchery along the border, not quite finished, judging by the needle sticking in the cloth nearby. "Best part," she said firmly.

"Of course it is." Severus reclaimed his hand and sat back, watching Starwing as she resumed her work, humming under her breath once more.

*Two witches, a lion, and a serpent. It could be indicative of the Hogwarts Houses, if she could not find models for an eagle and a badger. The one is certainly an item in heraldry, but it is usually complicated and would be difficult to reproduce in ribbon, while the other is rare enough that a pair of female figures might have served as a compromise...*

A rustle in the bushes nearby warned him an instant before Lucius stepped through, bringing a burble of happiness to Starwing's lips. "Look, look!" she urged him, springing to her feet to spread

the cloak as wide as her arms would go. "So close now!"

"I see it, my dear." Lucius came to Starwing's side and ran his fingers across the cloth, nodding sagely. "And I do remember my promise. When your stitchery is done, then you will have your reward."

"Yessss," Starwing hissed, the sound trailing off into a breathy sigh as she wriggled all over with glee, then sat down again with a fluff of skirts, snatching eagerly at her needle. Lucius shook his head and took a seat on a nearby bench.

"Imitative to a fault," he remarked, watching Starwing's busy fingers move. "She hears the Dark Lord speak to the snakes, so naturally she believes she can do the same." His eyes moved to Severus's face, and held there. "Often, in the evenings before bed, she mimics the movements of someone brewing potions. Very quick, efficient little darts of the hands, with no wasted time or effort."

"Do you disapprove?" Severus asked bluntly, fighting to mask his cold fury at the careless mention of one of the uses Lucius made of this girl.

"Disapprove—not in the least." The pale lips curved slowly upwards in a smirk. "You, unlike so many of our compatriots, would never think of offering harm to someone so impressionable as my Starwing. She is always cheerful when she returns from her sojourns with you. I could hope for nothing better."

"Why did you kill Peter Pettigrew?" Severus tossed the question into the momentary silence, bringing Starwing's eyes up from her work with a little sound of surprise.

"Was it not enough that he had proved himself a traitor twice over, and destroyed work which took me months to complete?" Lucius massaged his right hand with his left, regarding his fingernails carefully. "Not to mention that the Dark Lord wished him destroyed, and surely the first task of all Death Eaters must be to obey the Dark Lord's wishes."

"Where is your house-elf, and Nymphadora Tonks?" Severus pressed on. "And how did Alecto Carrow just *happen* to be struck down with the same potion you used to subdue Luna Lovegood to your wishes?"

"Why, Severus." Lucius leaned back on his bench, silver eyes gleaming. "I begin to think you suspect me of something. The house-elf, little Echo—yes, I admit a bit of a blunder there, I did not recall in time the other half of her heritage, the mother taken in by the Weasleys, and as foolishly devoted to them as the father was to my dear, departed Draco. So pretty Nymphadora was able first to subvert her to the point of providing a weapon, and later to steal her away from me altogether, though I have no desire for that to be known too widely." Long fingers tapped idly on the back of the bench. "I could, if I wished, ask how *you* learned of it, but I refrain. If the Dark Lord does not know by now where your loyalties lie, on his own head be it."

Severus chose a simple nod as the best answer to this, mostly because he feared that if he opened

his mouth he would be unable to control himself any longer.

"I am surprised sometimes by how much pleasure I take from the simple fact of my returning to the Manor," Lucius mused, looking around him lazily. "The satisfactory conclusion of the war cannot come soon enough for me. Not that I grudge the Dark Lord houseroom, of course, but some of his followers are rather a mixed blessing to host." The pale eyebrows arched, inviting Severus to share the joke. "To see the Heir of Slytherin take that place which is proper and deserved will be the greatest joy I can imagine. And then to return here, to a quiet life with my darling girl..." He smiled at Starwing, who giggled and blushed as she wiggled her fingers in a return wave. "I think we will be very happy. Very happy indeed."

"Only your two selves?" Severus asked, surprised by the levelness of his voice. "Or will you invite others to keep you company?"

"Far be it from me to condemn my dear lady to loneliness." Lucius got to his feet, as Starwing tied off her thread and tucked her needle into its pouch at her waist. "I shall bring as many of her friends of the Pride here to join her as can be...persuaded to come." He chuckled under his breath. "The young ladies, certainly. Quite aside from the fact that one of them is my legal heir, variety is the spice of life."

Gripping the edge of the fountain where he sat, Severus watched the pair walk away. He had seldom felt so strong an urge to introduce one of his fellow Death Eaters to a cauldron filled with boiling acid.

*I can only hope the house-elves' summation of his fate was a true one, and that it takes place as soon as they seem to think it will.*

*If it does not, I may politely request the loan of some of that interesting substance Percy Weasley's mad band stockpile in such quantities...*

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Silence reigned in the den room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, where six Warriors lay facedown on their broomsticks, hovering above an enormous map. Wand in hand, eyes closed in concentration, Hermione was tracing the line of connection between the mountaintop where Voldemort's last Horcrux was hidden and the doorway into the wizardspace spell guarding it.

*Headed for London. Again.* Harry crossed his fingers behind his back, hoping. Twice before they'd reached this stage of the spell, only to have it break apart into fragments before they could home it in sufficiently. *Come on, Neenie, you can do it—we can't search the entire city, just hang onto it for a little longer—*

Hermione's wand jumped in her hand. She yelped and dropped it, and the line of light she'd been drawing vanished. "It happened again," she said tiredly, leaning down to pick up her wand. "Like running into a brick wall. I'm done." A snap of her wrist reduced the map to its original size, small enough to fit on the top of a table, and she slid off her broomstick and sat down limply on the floor. "Finished. No more."

Harry blinked, feeling a bit like the world had just swung through a dizzying arc of movement. The rest of the Pride, he noted in a sidelong glance, seemed to share his bewilderment. "What?" he said after a long second when no one else seemed interested in speaking.

"You heard me." Hermione thrust her wand into her pocket and stared fixedly at the floor. "I'm finished. I'm not playing this game anymore. Why did we ever think we could fight a war? We're going to lose, and we're going to die, and I'm tired of pretending we're not."

"Come on, Hermione, don't be like this." Harry swung his leg over his Firebolt's handle to dismount. "It's not that big a deal if you're losing the trace. We can pick it up again."

"No, Harry, we can't." Every word was sharp-edged and bitter, slicing into Harry's ears like a poisoned knife. "I can't, and I'm not going to keep trying. This is too much for us. If you want to go on playing shining warrior of the light, the magnificent Chosen One who fights evil, you do that, but I'm through. Do you understand me?"

"I understand you're tired and frustrated." Harry battled his rising temper, clinging to it by fingernails and teeth. Getting angry back, he reminded himself desperately, wouldn't solve anything. "The spell isn't working right, hasn't been for a while, and that's rough. We can stop for an hour or two if you need a rest—"

"A rest?" Hermione shot to her feet, her face contorted, her lips peeled back from her teeth. "You think I need a rest? I think you need to wake up and face the facts! It was all very well to play soldier when we didn't have a real enemy out there, but now we do, and he *kills* people, Harry. He kills people as easily as we would swat a fly. He's older than we are, he's smarter than we are, he knows more magic than we do, and we're not going to beat him. And I'm tired of pretending we are!"

"So you're just going to give it all up because it's a little bit too hard for you?" Harry shouted back as his control shattered. "Oh no, my spell didn't work, better pack it in and run away? What kind of Gryffindor are you?"

"The kind who probably shouldn't have been. Who only was because she didn't want to disappoint *you* ." Hermione's hands curled into fists. "I wish I'd never met you, Harry Potter! What are you good for, anyway, except getting people killed who care about you?"

"Takes one to know one," Harry shot back. "Who was the reason we got tracked down in Hogsmeade? It wasn't me! No, it was you, you and—"

"Don't finish that sentence," snapped Ron, stepping in front of Hermione to glare at Harry. "Not unless you want to eat it."

"Go right ahead." Harry rose onto the balls of his feet. "Take a shot. I'll wipe the floor with you, just like always."

Ron cocked his arm, preparing to shake his wand free of its arm holster. "In your dreams, hero-

boy—"

"*Knock it off!*"

Harry jumped as Ginny materialized between him and Ron, wand out and ready. Behind her, facing Ron, stood Neville with potion piece in hand, a slight hum warning it was armed. Meghan, glancing worriedly towards the rest of the room, was murmuring to Hermione, who had sunk to the floor, arms over her head.

"I am the alpha female of this Pride and I am *not* putting up with any more of this—and don't you even start with me, Harry Potter," Ginny snarled as Harry took a breath. "Your authority ends at the point when you start behaving like an idiot, and that threshold's about a mile behind us right now. We are *finished* here, and everyone is going to break it up and go to our separate corners and cool down for a while. Is that understood?"

"Understood," Harry ground out after several false starts, his throat as dry as sandpaper. Behind Ginny, he could see Ron's grudging nod to Neville, and Hermione, on the floor, allowing Meghan to hand her a tissue. "I'm using the bedroom."

"Fine by me." Ginny stood back, her wand's tip now pointing downwards, but Harry had no doubt it would come back up and onto target fast enough if necessary. He turned and strode towards the door, clenching his teeth so hard his head ached from it.

*Though maybe that's from Hermione crying like a baby.* One final glance over his shoulder showed him his Pack-sisters now huddled together in the far corner of the den room, Hermione sobbing onto the shoulder of Meghan's robes, disjointed words audible here and there. Harry growled under his breath as he made out the sense of what she was saying, and channeled his anger into mounting the steps to the next story of the house two at a time.

"Wants to climb inside her snow globe, huh?" he muttered savagely, storming into his and Ginny's bedroom and slamming the door, then kicking the chest of drawers for lack of a better target. "Wants to snap her fingers and go back in time to when life was easy. Sorry, doesn't work like that." Pacing back and forth across the floor, he flexed his fingers, wishing for something to tear into shreds. "Does she think she's the only one who's sick of this damned war? Does she think she's the only one who's tired of it all? Who doesn't want to keep fighting, keep hiding, keep wondering every second of every day who's going to bleed or die next? I wish I *could* stuff her in that snow globe—she'd be more use in there than she is out here!"

He slammed another kick into the chest of drawers, which creaked in protest, its top drawer sliding open. With an exasperated sigh, Harry started to close it, when a glint of curved glass caught his eye. Slowly, he reached inside and pulled out the snow globe Meghan had discovered in the Room of Hidden Things at Hogwarts, with its jagged mountain peak inside.

*But not just any mountain.* Harry turned the globe in his hands, feeling his breath start to come fast. *A little more—a little—there!*



Setting the globe on the top of the chest of drawers, he backed away, narrowing his eyes to shut out the setting of his bedroom. *More mountains in the background, air so cold it burns to breathe, a couple tiny Warriors on broomsticks—*

"Yes," he whispered, as anger fled to be replaced by a wild exultation, and his pendants heated in response. "Yes!" Shooting his arms into the air like a Quidditch referee signaling a successful goal, he spun in place, barely stopping himself from jumping up and down. "That's it, that's it, that's *it!* We've *got* it, we found it, we're going to win this war after all—"

"Harry!" Ginny shoved the door open, Ron behind her, both with their wands out and ready. "What's wrong? We felt the pendants go—"

"Nothing's wrong." Harry waved them both into the room, and shut the door behind Ron with his own wand. "Something's right. Something's absolutely, perfectly right. Look at it. *Look* at it!"

"It's a snow globe, Harry," said Ginny worriedly, frowning at him. "I've seen it before."

"Not like this you haven't." Harry beckoned for her to stand where he'd been standing. "Squint a little. Pretend you're on your broom, you're outdoors."

"Why would I—" Ginny began in doubtful tones.

"Merlin's bloody broomstick!" Ron burst out, staring at the globe. "*That's* why Neenie kept losing the link!"

"Right?" Harry gestured broadly around himself. "Because we were using a map, and you can't trace something on a map into a place that's been made Unplottable—"

"Like Headquarters." Ginny looked around at them, her eyes bright with wonder. "And the doorway's here in Headquarters. It has been all the time!"

"Dad's car!" Ron snapped his fingers, half-laughing through his words. "When we first looked at that damn thing, when we were trying to figure out if it was a Horcrux or not, I said the only magic I could see on it reminded me of Dad's car—"

"Because they're both doorways into wizardspace," Harry finished. "Undetectable Expansion Charms. Only there's got to be another spell on this one, no one could possibly climb inside that thing the way it is."

"Let's have a look." Ginny plucked the globe off the chest of drawers and ran her hands over the glass. "Nothing here, but what about..."

She flipped it over and reached for the smooth wooden bottom of the stand.

Her fingers passed through apparently solid wood like so much smoke.

Harry jolted. Faint but unmistakable, his scar had twinged with pain.

"Was that—" Ron began, his wand tracking around towards Harry.

Ginny spat a single syllable and jerked her hand back. "It was, wasn't it?" she said, fear and anger mingling in her eyes. "Some kind of watchdog spell, to tell Voldemort if someone's playing in his toy box. And I set it off."

"How were you supposed to know that?" Harry shut his eyes for just long enough to take a deep breath and let it out again. "But we've just run out of time to mess about. We've got to get in there and grab the Horcrux before Voldemort realizes who's got hold of it, or we're through. Ron, would you grab the brooms?"

"On it." Ron turned in place and Disapparated.

"Gin, we'll need you to be backup." Harry held out his hands for the globe, and ran his wand along the inside edge of its missing bottom when Ginny had surrendered it, concentrating on a two-word charm Moony had taught him the previous year. A moment later, without fanfare, the globe began to grow, and Harry bent down and set it on the floor before it got too big for him to hold. "Stay here and keep track of us, and call for help if we need it."

"Isn't that what these are for?" Ginny asked, dangling her pendants in midair.

"Usually, yes. But not this time." Harry cupped his own pendants in his palm and concentrated on what he wanted, feeling the metal warm, then cool, then settle back to body temperature. "I'm shutting mine down, and I'm asking Ron to do the same thing."

"Excuse me?" Ginny's voice went icy. "What right do you have—"

"The right of somebody who saw Hermione getting into one of her moods a little while ago, and made her worse instead of better." Harry tapped his wand against the globe, stopping its growth just in time, as it was now taller than he was. "She'd be the first one coming in after us, and as off-balance as she is, she'd more than likely get herself killed. I'm not doing that to her, or to Ron."

Ginny grimaced, but nodded. "Tune yours to mine," she said, holding her chain out. "I'll know if you're all right or if you need help, but it won't go out as a general broadcast."

"Sounds good." Harry wrapped his chain around Ginny's and gave this command mentally, as Ron Apparated back into the bedroom, his own and Ginny's brooms under one arm, Harry's Firebolt under the other. "We'll go in, grab the brooch, and shoot straight back," he said, accepting his broomstick and hanging it in midair. "Nobody's going to have time to stop us. Pendants off, Ron."

"Right." Ron pressed the heel of his hand to his chest. "Ginny's our backup?"

"It's like you read my mind."

"Be careful out there." Ginny claimed her broom, and a quick kiss on the cheek, from Ron, before pulling Harry into a brief, tight embrace. "I love you."

"I know." Harry winked at her, then mounted the Firebolt and kicked off. Leaning forward on the handle, hearing Ron take up wingman position behind him, he shot through the brown wall that was the false bottom of the snow globe. The cold beyond almost staggered him, but he summoned a shell of invisible fire, surrounding first himself, then Ron, as they flew towards the slopes of the mountain peak.

"How're we going to find it?" Ron called over the rushing wind of their flight. "It could be anywhere out here."

"Got that covered." Harry drew his pendants out again, concentrated for a moment on what he wanted from them, then half-turned to show them to Ron. One of the red jewels gleamed with an eager light. "Remember how you found Ginny our second year?"

"Just like playing Hot and Cold." Ron grinned. "Let's go ice a Horcrux."

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Remus had just finished marking an essay on the subject of "The Unforgivable Curses: Is the Name Warranted?" when an amorphous silver cloud shot through the wall of his Hogwarts quarters.

*"Harry is vulnerable,"* it breathed in a harsh, unidentifiable whisper. *"Voldemort will go himself. Unless he can be stopped..."*

**Who in the world**— Danger began as the Patronus dissolved.

**I don't know. But I doubt it's a lie. A lie would be more specific.** Remus drew out his pendants and pressed a fingertip to the carving of the young wolf. **Nothing. Which means he's told his set not to respond.**

**Which means he is off doing something dangerous and stupid,** Danger grumbled, coming in from the other room. **Can't trust that boy for a second...** She stopped, looking more closely at Remus. **What is it?**

"Voldemort has to be stopped." Remus spoke aloud, using the words as a way to shield his mind. He had understood, in one flashing second, what was to be asked of him, and could only count himself lucky that Danger had not been following his thoughts as closely as she sometimes did. "If he kills Harry, we have no way to win this war. Which means there is quite literally no price too high to pay for Harry's survival."

"What are you—" Danger paled, and Remus thought that even without the link between them he would have been able to feel her shock, her horror, her absolute rejection. "Remus, no. No!"

"You know better than that, love." Remus got to his feet, absently tucking his quill into its holder. "It's the chance we've always taken. The price we swore in our own blood to pay, if it were needed."

**Oh, God.** Danger was beside him, in his arms, so abruptly she might as well have Apparated there. **I know, I know that, but somehow I never thought...**

**Who would?** Remus drew her close and pressed his face into her hair, breathing deep of the scent of her, the one woman he had ever loved, the one with whom his soul was joined. **Talk to Letha. She and Meghan may be able to find some way to undo the symbiosis. Promise me, love.** Pulling back, he looked into her eyes, knowing their whirls of brown and blue would mirror his own precisely. **Do what you can to live.**

**I will.** Danger stretched up to press her lips to his, a tear burning from hot to cool where it touched his cheek. "Go," she whispered aloud when the kiss was finished. "Quickly, before it's too late."

Stepping into the center of the room, Remus took hold of his Pack-pendants and closed his eyes. One red jewel, years ago, had led him to the Shrieking Shack, where Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew had hidden his cubs. Two red jewels, here and now, would take him to the Master of those men, to save one of those selfsame cubs.

*Fire*, he commanded the jewels, and fire there was, burning hot and strong around him, roaring like his Animagus form as it burned away all obstacles in his path. Then it ebbed and died, and he opened his eyes and allowed himself a small smile. He was standing in the entrance hall of Malfoy Manor, with a pair of passing Death Eaters gaping at him open-mouthed.

"My name is Remus Lupin," he said. "I believe your Master wants to see me."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 55: Choice and Compulsion (Year 7)

The broad and bare-raftered hall where Lord Voldemort liked best to hold court, built by some long-ago Malfoy with grandiose and slightly barbaric ideals, was all but empty, inhabited only by a few of the inner circle of Death Eaters. Antonin Dolohov and Walden Macnair, the latter looking distinctly odd without the mustache which had been sacrificed to free him from the Hair-Growing Jinx a few weeks earlier, were discussing how it would be best to house Muggles once their happy band finished claiming the position to which their magical births entitled them. Macnair, by the fragments that were audible, favored herding them into sties like pigs, or at best building them rough stables like horses or cows, while Dolohov thought it might be more galling for the Muggles to be given houses finer than anything they could ever have built for themselves.

*A constant reminder of their status as compared to us. Subordinate, in many ways subhuman. The iron fist is satisfying, but the velvet glove amusing.* Lord Voldemort sipped at his favorite drink, an excellent white wine with just a hint of snake venom blended into it, and considered the conundrum. *I will see if they have come to any conclusion by the time we are ready to put such things into action.*

On the other side of the hall, Lucius was reading yet another of his dusty volumes of history, while his girl Starwing worked diligently at her everlasting stitchery. Lord Voldemort smiled and lifted his glass a fraction of an inch to them, toasting the most complete victory his followers had yet been able to score over Harry Potter and his precious Pack and Pride. The reports from his spy within the Order made for gratifying reading.

*The children vanish for hours, even days, at a time, and appear frustrated and exhausted when they return. The adults try to comfort them and receive cold dismissals or harsh words. But then, what can you expect from an existence built on such a misty intangible as love?*

*Though perhaps I should not entirely dismiss love.* He glanced to one side, where Bellatrix honed her favorite knife on a leather strop, humming tunelessly under her breath. *It has its uses, when properly directed. And when it is frustrated, when it warps and twists back on itself, it can be very useful indeed. Without love, surely I would never have been able to obtain that so-useful spy in the first place.*

*Now if only the circumstances would arise when I could put my particular plan for that spy into use—*

With the usual perversity of the universe, the thought had no sooner crossed his mind than a most unpleasant sensation shrilled down his nerves, one which he had not felt for many years and had hoped he would never feel again.

The doorway to the hiding place of one of his cherished Horcruxes had just been breached.

"My lord?" Bellatrix, ever alert to changes in his mood, looked up from her work. "What is it?"

"Let me see." Drawing his wand, Lord Voldemort cast the non-verbal, three-part spell which would allow him to see the surroundings of that doorway, and the person or people who had triggered the alarm he had set on it in what he had considered a ridiculous abundance of caution. Even should someone like Dumbledore, meddling fool that he had been, discern the existence of a Horcrux reached through Hogwarts, even should some incantation or potion which detected such items be used, neither the Muggle-made globe nor the benign wizardspace spell binding it would react. And who, out of all the thousands of items in the Room of Hiding, would seize on such an insignificant thing?

The faces which came into focus with the solidification of the scry answered that question handily, though they did nothing to improve Lord Voldemort's mood.

*Harry Potter and his favorite little blood traitor. I should have known.* He hissed something in Parseltongue so obscene that the Inferius of Nagini, curled on her dark green pouf, stirred uneasily at the sound, and Starwing gave a little mew of distress, huddling against Lucius.

"My lord," said Dolohov, staring at the boy and girl speaking silently, urgently, within the scry. "Does this show the truth?"

"The truth, and a vital threat to my power." *To my life.* Lord Voldemort snarled under his breath as the taller, male blood traitor appeared on the scene, clutching broomsticks. *They are luckier than they have any right to be. But luck runs out, and theirs is drawing near its time...*

"How can they be stopped, my lord?" asked Bellatrix, sheathing her knife. "Is there some way to reach them, instead of only looking?"

"There is, though I will need a few moments to cast that spell." Lord Voldemort chuckled, his bad mood dissipating somewhat at Bellatrix's look of wide-eyed shock. "Even I have my limits, my dear Bella. Though I hope to surpass them once my plans come to fruition."

"If I may be excused, my lord?" Lucius rose to his feet, tucking his book under his arm, and motioned for Starwing to put her needle away. "I would be less than helpful in a duel or an ambush, and I assume you will want to have proper lodgings prepared for our...guests." His grin was vicious. "Something suitably cozy in the dungeons, perhaps."

"Ever thoughtful, Lucius." Lord Voldemort waved the last of the Malfoys on his way. "Off with you."

Turning to the nearest blank wall, the Dark Lord prepared for the working which would allow him and his most trusted, most faithful Death Eaters to enter the hidden world surrounding a far-off mountaintop, and finally, after nearly sixteen years, finish the work he had begun in a cottage in Godric's Hollow.

*Destroying the last credible threat to my rise.* The first segment of the spell went into place, setting up a framework through which those entering the wizardspaced area could pass. *What could be more sensible than killing an enemy before he can fight back?* The second stage outlined

the exact location to which his followers would be transported, along a narrow path winding up the mountain. *Only little Harry had more protection than I realized at the time.* The third portion established congruency between Malfoy Manor and the mountaintop, specifying that anything passing between the two would leave the one and arrive at the other with minimal time lag and no change in its physical properties. *Facing him alone this time will be crucial.*

Sealing the work, he stepped back and spoke the three words in Parseltongue which brought it to life. The circle he had outlined on the wall filled with writhing smoke, rumbled like the promise of distant thunder, then cleared, as though it were an unusually shaped window, to show the path which led up the mountain towards the place where his Horcrux waited.

"Two of them flying, my lord," Macnair reported from beside the scrying spell, pointing at the indistinct forms of Harry Potter and the youngest Weasley brother, both leaning forward to get as much speed as possible out of their broomsticks. "Looks like they left the girl on guard."

"Pity." Lord Voldemort sighed. "I have so enjoyed the thought of allowing Harry to watch while Lucius works his will on charming Ginevra. Ah well, young Ronald will have to do. I seem to recall a report from Bartemius that he was more than usually susceptible to the Imperius..." He smiled at Bella, who was giggling and clapping her hands in glee. "Yes, my dear one, yes, you will have your turn with him. But first we must catch him, and Harry along with him. And for that—Antonin."

"My lord?" Dolohov stood up straighter, looking eager.

"I believe you have a score to settle with the Weasley family." Lord Voldemort gestured at his gateway, snapping his wand at the scry to shut it down, since two spells with constant magical needs were draining even to him. At the same time, he worked the small magic which would seal off the original entrance to the wizardspaced area. Having rescue come for these two was no part of his plans. "Do what you will, only take them alive—and remember, if you will, that some of them use animal form and may have the advantages of such even as humans. We follow in force as soon as we are assembled."

"Gladly, my lord!" Wand in his hand, Dolohov strode forward and ducked through the portal, swinging his leg and robes over the side, then working two or three spells over himself, the last of which seemed to be something between a Disillusionment and a partial transfiguration, shrinking his stature even as his form melted into the colors and shapes of the mountain.

"Excellent." Lord Voldemort turned to his Consort. "Your arm, if you please, Bellatrix."

Bella cackled under her breath as she pulled back her left sleeve, revealing her pale forearm, which she laid across the armrest of Lord Voldemort's throne, Dark Mark uppermost. Her eyes shone with anticipated pain and pleasure as her Master's long finger descended towards the Mark —

"My lord!" Patroclus Nott exploded out of thin air in the middle of the room, startling everyone. "My lord, I apologize—this is not the way I should approach you, but in the circumstances—" He



pressed a hand against his chest, wheezed in a painful breath, and continued. "My lord, I was walking through the entrance hall with Pierson when a wizard Apparated in, through all the security, through all the wards. Somehow he bypassed everything, and he asked to see you, my lord—and with your standing orders about him, should he ever be captured—"

Lord Voldemort's hand curled into a fist unbidden. *I have given standing orders about a very few people, and one of those cannot be here in Malfoy Manor when I have only just seen him flying towards a mountaintop with his friend in tow...*

"My lord, I know the man. I would not make a mistake." Patroclus straightened his shoulders, clearly conscious of the momentous news he bore. "It is Remus Lupin himself!"

A hot, brilliant explosion of glee burst in Lord Voldemort's chest, but was quickly swamped by a cold wave of planning, of determination. *I must take every precaution, now that my most dangerous enemy has come here of his own free will.* Swiftly, he wove the wandless magic which emanated from his core, from his most prized identity, and which would deny that same enemy any chance to use his own wandless powers. *He has walked into the trap. I must close it so tightly, so fiercely, that his will also aids my Killing Curse, and flings him out of the land of the living with no chance of return.*

*His death, and the damage it will cause to his beloved Pack, will seal my victory with certainty, and leave me to rule undisputed over the wizarding world forever.*

"You left Pierson to guard him, I presume, Patroclus?" he asked the Death Eater, who nodded. "That will do for now, but another has a prior claim. Go and find Lucius—he should be in the dungeons somewhere—and let him know who has come to visit us."

"Yes, my lord." Patroclus bent his knee and vanished in the act of straightening.

"Macnair." Lord Voldemort turned to face the wizard so named. "If you would seek out Miss Elladora, and tell her that 'the time is now'—she will know what is meant." He smiled. "Then gather up half a dozen of our best fighters and assemble with them in the north antechamber. This portal will await you there." He gestured to the gateway, still showing nothing but a deceptively peaceful mountain path. "When you see Dolohov's signal, enter through it and give him whatever assistance he may need in securing our young enemies. Remember, we want prisoners, not corpses."

"My lord." Macnair made his genuflection, a bit more clumsily than Patroclus had, and Disapparated with a loud crack. Lord Voldemort circled his wand three times around the gateway spell, concentrating on where he wanted this end of it to reappear, and with the tiniest of popping sounds it vanished, sliding through wizardspace until it reached the north antechamber, then reanchoring itself into the stones of one of the walls there.

"What of me, my lord?" Bellatrix sounded plaintive, but Lord Voldemort knew his Consort from of old. That little-girl voice masked an unholy joy in seeing her enemies brought low which could almost match his own. "What task do you have for me?"

"A very simple one, dear Bella." Lord Voldemort stretched out his hand, and Bellatrix laid her own in it. "Keep me company, while we wait for Elladora to do her portion of the work. Once she reports success with her first task, then, and only then, will we ask Lucius to bring our guest to us." He smiled at her, and enjoyed her demure giggle in return. "I see you understand. All things in their proper time."

*And this is the proper time for the destruction of Remus Lupin. For all that he is and was, all that he stands for, to come crashing down in ruins. Only thus will I and mine ever rise to our destined places of greatness...*

---

Danger climbed the stairs from the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, slowly. Down the main floor corridor, the door of Aletha's workroom was closing, which suited her perfectly. She wanted only one person in her arms, in her heart, just now.

Hermione sat in the window seat in the front room, gazing out at the overcast London day, one hand loosely cupped against her breastbone. Danger could see a faint flicker of light between her little sister's fingers, and had no doubt Hermione was cradling her pendants close to her heart.

"Why?" The word hung in the air between the sisters.

"Because he had no choice." Danger closed the distance and stood beside Hermione, not reaching out but ready to accept either an extended hand or a swung fist. "Someone he loved was in trouble."

"I thought he loved me." Hermione continued to stare out the window, but the fingers of her cupped hand were slowly squeezing tighter. "I thought he loved you. Leaving us alone isn't the kind of thing you do to people you love." Her eyes, reflected in the glass, shifted until she was looking at Danger through their two reflections. "And without him, you'll die, won't you? And then I'll *really* be alone."

"If that's how you want to look at things, yes, you will be." Danger spoke as unemotionally as she could manage. "Of course, Aletha and Meghan might find a way to break the symbiotic bond. Then we'll be alone together."

"They *might* ." The words held traces of snarl in their depths. "And what if they don't?"

"In that case, yes, I will die." Curiously, Danger discovered, the thought held little of the panicked fear it once had for her. "I'll miss you more than I can say, if that happens. I'll miss spending those quiet mornings with you when we're the only ones up and we can talk about anything, and watching you discover for the first time a book I've loved since before you were born, and having you coach me through the tricky bits of a spell you understand so much better than I do. I'll miss being there the day you finish Hogwarts, the day you start whatever work is yours in the world, the day you and Ron are married." She sat down on the bit of window seat beside Hermione's feet. "Do you believe me?"

"How should I know?" Hermione's shoulders hitched as she turned her face away. "How should I know anything?"

Gently, Danger laid her fingers against Hermione's arm. **You know I love you**, she said silently. **You know he loves you. That we always have, and we always will. No matter what life throws in our way, no matter how far we are separated or for how long, we will never stop loving you.** She smiled a little. **Even when it doesn't feel like it.**

Hermione shuddered once, then crumpled over her knees as her tears caught up with her at last. Danger moved in to draw her near, to hold her close, and Hermione pressed her face against her sister's shoulder and sobbed, hard, tearing sounds that made Danger's throat ache in sympathy. It would be so easy, so breathlessly simple, to give in to her own anger and sorrow, to curl up in a ball and wish the world away, to reject any help held out to her and follow her love into the darkness...

*Except that he goes to shelter one of the children we both swore to protect, and I would go only because I thought I could not live without him. How can I know that, if I haven't tried? And will I relieve my own pain by further wounding my brother and sister, my cubs and theirs?*

**No**, Hermione murmured in the silence of their minds. **You wouldn't do that. Not if you could help it.**

**I could think about it.** Danger shifted her sister to one side, then quickly dried the wet spot on her robes with a brush of flame before letting her settle back where she had been. **I have thought about it. It will hurt, Neenie, it will hurt me terribly to be without him. But it would also hurt me terribly to be without all of you, and to see how much my going would hurt you in turn.**

**There aren't any perfect answers in this world, are there?** Hermione laid her face against the warm place on Danger's robes and glanced up at her, as a much younger Hermione had used to do before she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. **When even the best thing possible sometimes hurts so much you can hardly stand it.**

"No," Danger whispered aloud. "No, there aren't."

Gently closing the connection between herself and her sister, she opened the one between herself and her beloved, absorbing the first rush of the fear he held under rigid control, drawing off its drowning depths to leave his mind free to work. He sat, she noted, in a small antechamber with paneled walls, a Death Eater glancing fearfully at him from its other side. *Does Voldemort—*

**Oh, he knows I'm here**, Remus assured her. **He's worked an area-effect spell to keep me from burning the place down, taking him with me. Now he may be trying to frighten me by making me wait. I'm only hoping—**

**That he isn't making you wait so he can flourish Harry in front of you?** Danger finished. **So do I, love. So do I.**

Their shared grief and terror threatened to engulf her, and quickly she sought through her memories for the moment she wanted. She was walking back and forth across Aletha's front room in London, in the house they had not yet begun to call the Marauders' Den, singing softly to the tiny girl she held in her arms, soothing her sister to sleep before she and her new husband went out to steal and save the other child on whom they had a claim. Remus sat nearby, following her with his eyes, his face and form flickering between the man he was now and the one he had been then—*so young*, Danger realized with a pang, *we were both so young, and so certain about what we were doing—if we had only known where it would lead—*

"Lives aren't meant to be lived in reverse," said Remus quietly within the dream-memory. "I wouldn't have it any other way." His crooked Marauder's smile flashed out. "Well. Maybe one that left me alive. But what must be, shall be."

Danger only nodded, and went on with her song.

---

In the workroom, vials and beakers lay open, scattered, across the bench, their contents having been emptied into the smallest cauldron available. Now, drop by drop, a final ingredient was being added, one which made the mixture in the cauldron seethe and bubble with every addition.

The hands controlling the spoon from which this oily-looking substance fell, sheathed to the elbows in dragon-hide gloves, trembled in time with their owner's shaky breaths, the dark droplets weaving a drunken pattern on the surface of the potion below. Once, indeed, the hands wavered so far that a drop of the black substance fell not into the cauldron but onto the surface of the workbench, though the brewer of the potion hardly seemed to notice this.

When the spoon was empty, it was set hastily aside, and the mixture in the cauldron stirred three times, counterclockwise, before it was poured off into a specially treated jar, very tall and narrow, in which a slender, shining dagger already rested.

Just beyond the glass wall of the jar, a teacup-sized crater in the top of the workbench testified to the spot where the dark oil had fallen.

---

Harry twisted one of the wheels on his glasses slightly, changing his vision to match what he knew Ron could already see. The air here, within Voldemort's wizardspace spell, was filled with low-grade currents of magic, but ahead of them, growing ever larger, was a pulsing speck of power entangled in thick and shining ropes like those involved in an Unbreakable Vow.

"You see it?" he called back to Ron, returning the wheel to its original position so that he could see the deep blue of the sky above them and the greens and grays of the mountainside rushing past alongside and beneath their two broomsticks.

"Been looking right at it." Ron nudged his broom up alongside Harry's Firebolt. "Maybe you didn't have to use your jewel after all."

"We didn't know we'd be able to see it, and this gives us a little extra certainty." Harry held up his pendants and turned them back and forth, watching the red light fade every time he moved the medallions out of a straight line between him and the distant spark of power. "Rather be safe than sorry, especially this close to finishing."

"True." Ron frowned, his attention caught by something on the mountain below them. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" Harry turned his head, but saw only the same stony landscape he'd been noticing idly the entire way.

"Something warm. Alive." Ron started to change his grip to pull back on his broom's handle. "Maybe we should stop."

"Probably just an animal." Harry waved his friend on. "The wind's in our favor, so if there was a person down there, I'd have their scent already. It's just us, and the faster we go, the safer we are. Come on."

"Didn't look right for a person anyway." Returning his hands to their usual places, Ron leaned forward over his handle once again. "Kind of squat and weird-shaped. Wonder if long-standing magic on a place can change the animals?"

"We'll ask Hermione, once we're back and she's speaking to us again." Harry grinned a little at Ron's non-committal grunt. "Going to be a lively place, the Manor Den, isn't it? Good thing it's big enough we can stay out of each other's way if we have to..."

---

Antonin Dolohov exhaled a breath of relief as the two boys zoomed past him, Potter's dismissal ringing through the still, cold air. His Master's warnings about their animalistic senses had clearly not been idle ones.

*But I took them seriously, and so here I still am. Able to finish a job I once began.* He frowned, troubled by a passing thought. *How the Weasley boy can see, though—I was certain the spell I used had no counter, no possibility of any healing—*

He dismissed the question from his mind, as unworthy of further thought at this time. What mattered was finding and safeguarding his Master's treasure, and securing his two young enemies for transport back to Malfoy Manor.

*And then I can have my answer, straight from the blood-traitor's mouth.* He grinned, continuing up the mountain at a trot, trusting to his spells and the young fools' raptness on their destination to keep him from being spotted. *Take some time undoing what's been done, make sure it never happens again, and after that—*

The Dark Lord, he was sure, would hear no complaints against the wizard who had brought him Harry Potter.

Ginny stiffened as her pendants shot from cool to icy. *Just stay that way*, she willed them, gripping her broomstick's handle tightly. *Stay that way—*

After three seconds in which they did just that, she exhaled in relief. Neither Harry nor Ron was dead already, nor would they be before she could arrive.

*But if they're in trouble, then someone else is in there with them. Which means I'm going to need one more piece of equipment.*

Even as she locked the bedroom door behind her, Ginny wished she had pushed her thoroughly illegal Apparition lessons a bit harder. It was, after all, now impossible to Trace anyone doing underage magic, since the spell-breaking year had succeeded.

*Still, it doesn't take that much longer to—* she leapt over the banister to the corridor below and pounded along it to the head of the next flight of stairs—*run down there, though up is going to be—* another vault, another noisy landing—*a bit more of a problem—*

"What on earth?" The door to the room Hermione and Meghan shared flew open, revealing Mrs. Danger and Hermione, the latter's face tearstained but both with their wands out and steady.

"Ginny, what's—"

"Harry's in trouble." Ginny quickly signed 'Horcrux' to Hermione, touching the tips of all her fingers together, and got a shocked-looking nod in return. "I'm sorry, I *can't* say anything else—"

"I understand." Mrs. Danger smiled a little. "Maybe more than you know. We have our own plan for keeping Voldemort's eyes off him, but he'll probably need you as well. I'll be upstairs in my room, love," she told Hermione, and turned in place to Disapparate.

"What do you need?" Hermione asked bluntly. "Harry's got the dagger, he can kill it if he finds it, but how did he get out of here—"

"No time to explain. You'll understand when we're back upstairs." Ginny raced for the top of the final flight, Hermione a stride behind. "He's been followed, and I have to go after him. It's broomsticks, you probably shouldn't come—be my backup, though, watch after me and come in if things go *really* wrong—you and the others, wherever they've got to—"

"Shooting gallery, where else?" Hermione frowned as Ginny pulled open the door of the War Room. "What are you after in here?"

"I'm good, but I'm not good enough to take out Death Eaters by myself." Popping open a chest in the corner with her wand, Ginny rummaged for a second, then held up what she'd been looking for in triumph. "Unless they never see me coming."

"Good thinking." Hermione held out her arm. "I'll take you back up—your bedroom?"

"Yes." Ginny latched on, and gritted her teeth through the compression of Side-Along-Apparition, before letting out a breath of relief as they materialized safely beside the much-expanded snow globe. "It's inside here, this is what's guarding it," she said rapidly, mounting her broom, then pulling on Harry's Invisibility Cloak (which he had left in the War Room in case it was urgently needed by someone going out on a mission, with the sole proviso that he got to cast three unopposed spells on anyone who lost or damaged it). "This is the way into the wizardspace, so you weren't doing the spell wrong, it was just getting lost when it got *here* ."

Hermione pressed a hand to her mouth, holding in what Ginny suspected was a slightly mad giggle, then held up a finger. "Don't leave yet," she said, and drew her wand, murmuring a three-part spell. Ginny had to bite back a little cry of surprise as the Cloak's edges whipped up, surrounding the front and back of her broomstick as well as her feet, and tucked themselves neatly inside the main body, disappearing entirely.

"There." Hermione let her wand slip back up her sleeve. "Now they can't see you from any angle, and it'll open just enough to let your wand tip out, or let you walk if you have to land. Hurry and get there. I'll get Neville and Meghan, and we'll tell our pendants to 'listen' for yours. And Ginny—please be careful."

"As much as I can be," Ginny promised, and kicked off from the floor as Hermione Disapparated, flying straight for the bottom of the snow globe, the bottom she had seen Harry and Ron pass through like it wasn't even there—

The handle of her broomstick bounced off it, sending her momentarily out of control. She pulled up an instant before she would have hit the far wall, and indulged under her breath in a few expressions of which her mother would not have approved.

*Just in case I was wondering if Voldemort's tumbled to our being after his shiny. He's sealed this thing off. I can't get through it—I might be able to send my pendants through, and if I had a dagger like Harry's, I could get that through—*

The thought of her pendants, and of the Pack-cubs' daggers, circled back suddenly and brought a broad grin to Ginny's face. She reached inside her robes, brought out the golden chain she'd worn so long she barely noticed it any longer, and stroked her finger along the one jewel which was different than the others.

*Beautifully, beautifully different.*

Gliding forward again, she held up the green jewel she'd been gifted when Alex had made her a secondary Heir of Slytherin. "Put this thing back the way it was," she told it. "Just long enough to let me in, and then just long enough to let the three of us out on our way back. Can you do that?"

The jewel flashed twice, and Ginny snorted a laugh. *Why am I not surprised it uses the same codes we do.* "Go ahead, then," she said, and smiled as another thought came to her. "And once I'm through, one of you red ones, show me where I'm going, all right?"

*Since Ron found out what they do when he was looking for me, it seems only right I should use one to go looking for him.*

A bright green flare told her the Slytherin magic was complete, and she leaned forward, sending her broom shooting straight for the now-intangible bottom of the snow globe.

*The Lynx is on the prowl.*

*Death Eaters, beware.*

---

Ron shielded his eyes with a hand as he and Harry pulled up their brooms beside the palm-sized cloak pin hovering lazily in midair, ten feet away from a mountainside path which terminated in a cliff at least two hundred feet high. Like the memory-pictures they'd seen of the Horcrux, it was shaped like an eagle on a shield or coat of arms, all sharp corners and stark lines, and it was made from metal with a shiny coat of enamel over the middle (he'd have to trust Harry on the 'bronze and blue' part), but what clinched it for him was the sour, roiling look of the magic permeating the thing. The locket they'd found at Headquarters, and the cup Harry and Hermione had brought home from Gringotts, had looked exactly like that.

*Before Kreacher and little Pearl got to stab the hell out of them with Harry's dagger, that is. Maybe I can get a turn on this one.*

"This is it?" asked Harry, the Firebolt hovering neatly beside the pin.

"This is it. Check it with your jewel, if you want."

"Not that I doubt you, but..." Harry lifted his pendants towards the pin, and the red jewel's light flashed triumphantly before going out.

"Better safe than sorry," Ron finished, frowning at the ropes of magic surrounding the pin. He wasn't a theorist, but that looked like more than just levitation spells. "There may be something on it, though. A trap, like that potion Kreacher talked about, in that cave down by the sea."

"Great." Harry scowled. "Maybe we should've waited for Hermione. She'd know how to tell. But we're here, and we probably don't have much time, so..." He shrugged. "Just go for it?"

"I guess." Ron backed his broomstick away a few feet, and drew his wand. "Ready when you are."

Harry reached out, his fingers spread as though he were chasing a Snitch. "In three, two, one—"

His hand closed around the pin.

The ropes of magic flared painfully bright and lashed out. One slapped upwards and across Harry's face, snapping his head back and sending his eyes rolling upwards.

Two more whipped around and slashed *through* the broomsticks, and Ron yelped as he felt the



magic in his fail.

Everything seemed to slow. He had time to watch Harry's graceful arch backwards, off his now-useless broomstick, as limp as he had been in their second year when he'd nearly died.

*He'll die now. Unless I do a spell and save him.*

The pin was still nestled against Harry's palm, sliding towards his sleeve, clearly caught by the same magic that governed the arm holster for his wand.

*But I'll only have time for one spell. And I'd be too close to the ground to transform and pull up.*

Harry's glasses had gone somersaulting off his face with the force of the blow, and his pendant chain seemed to float over his shoulder, independent of the body wearing it.

*Him or me—it's him or me—*

Ron started to raise his wand, and then stopped as another image from that same year suddenly burned golden in his mind.

*Or maybe it's not.*

Everything snapped back to real time as he yanked his own pendants free of his robes with his left hand, Summoning Harry to him with his wand. Latching onto his friend's limp form, he focused fiercely on what he wanted, then hurled a loop of chain upwards toward the top of the cliff as his yellow jewel pulsed with a vibrant glow.

He only had one shot at this.

*Wrap us up*, he willed the chain, and watched and felt it obey, loops of metal winding around him and Harry, cradling them as he'd once seen Harry and Ginny cradled and lifted out of a pipe in a Hogwarts bathroom. *Hold us together, protect everything—don't let us break our necks—and then, up top there—*

The jerk as the chain caught around a bit of rock at the top of the cliff knocked the breath out of Ron, but he wouldn't have cared if it had broken half his bones instead.

*I did it—I did it—we're both alive, we're getting out of this, and we even got the Horcrux—*

Then they began to swing.

*Oh hell—we were out from the cliff when we started falling, and we didn't move any closer to it in between—*

Ron just managed to twist the bundle of himself and Harry so that he hit the rock wall first.

The familiar, throat-tightening snap of a forearm bone registered with him in the instant before his

head caught up with his arm.

Darkness descended.

---

Harry sucked in a breath as consciousness returned. He hurt all over, but he was alive and mostly undamaged, he could smell Ron next to him in nearly the same condition, and he could feel the pointy-cornered shape of the brooch Horcrux tucked into his sleeve.

*That still doesn't answer where we are, how we stopped falling, or why Ron's breathing into my ear, but the important things are sorted. Except...* He wrinkled his nose and wiggled his ears, then growled under his breath. *I'm going to have a hell of a time getting us out of here if I can't see. Oh well, get my wand out, do an area spell to make the glasses light up so I can spot them, then Summon them and go from there—*

From a long way above him, someone laughed, a deep, menacing chuckle.

*Or not.* Harry went as limp as he could manage while still trying to get his wand out of his sleeve. It wasn't easy, with his right arm jammed against Ron's limp body. *You can wake up now,* he thought towards his pendants, which obligingly chilled around his neck, confirming his suspicion that Ron's hand on the Weasleys' clock would be pointing straight up, towards "mortal peril", at this very moment.

*And Ginny will probably be coming in after us any second.*

*I hope she brings backup.*

---

"What a nice little package." Dolohov laughed again, removing the spells he'd used to disguise himself to this point. The two boys were still unconscious, tangled together in whatever Weasley had used to stop their fall—some kind of magical chain, he thought, and remembered vaguely hearing Lucius driveling on about enchanted necklaces the Death Eaters might do well to copy, if they could find the spells.

*It looks like we'll have the chance to study one up close.* He tapped his foot against the links of chain where they had seemingly melted into the ground. *Though we might have to come here to do it, if we can't get this loose...*

"Worry about that later," he said aloud, leaning over to peer at the lump of metal, robes, and wizards dangling below. "Right now, have to haul them up, tie them down, and send for he—"

The spell hit him squarely in the back, tearing his wand from his hand and shoving him two stumbling steps forward.

The ground ended a step and a half in front of him.

The last thing Antonin Dolohov ever saw was the tumbling glory of his killer's mane of red hair, as she leaned over the cliff to watch him fall.

---

Ginny knelt beside the cliff, hands flattened against the ground, keeping her eyes fixed on her husband and her brother rather than the horrible, impossible mess beneath them, the mess which had, a few seconds before, been a human being.

*The person who blinded Ron. Who would have tortured Percy. Who was about to drag Harry off to hand him over to Voldemort.*

*I didn't have a choice.*

All the statements were true, and none of them slowed her breathing or made her stop wanting to be sick.

"Ginny!" The voice from below was hoarse, but she would have known it anywhere. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, Harry." Swallowing her nausea, she peered down, and managed to grab hold of a shaky equilibrium when his green eyes, looking distinctly odd without their usual frames, met hers over a strand of chain. "You? Ron?"

"We're okay—well, Ron's knocked out and I think his arm's broken, but nothing critical. I'm just sore all over, though I'll have Pearl or Letha take a look at me anyway. And we *got* it, Gin." Harry waggled his right hand. "It's in my sleeve."

"Fantastic." Ginny swung her legs around to sit down, keeping ears and nose alert for any approach from behind her. "Need me to find your glasses?"

"Please." Harry squinted at her. "Unless we should get out of here faster than that?"

"I don't think so." Ginny swallowed again before pronouncing the name. "Dolohov said something about *sending* for help—well, he was saying it when I Disarmed him. So that probably means he didn't have anybody right with him. And Mrs. Danger said something about having their own plan to keep Voldemort from noticing we were in here, so we probably have a minute or two." Drawing her wand, she held it out in front of her. "*Spectaculem revelio* ."

"Sounds good—hey, there they are." Harry aimed his chin to one side, where Ginny could see the sparkles of spell residue. "She didn't happen to say what it was? The plan?"

"Didn't have time." Ginny shot a nonverbal *Accio* at the glasses, and caught them as they zoomed into her palm. *Oh, yuck. These are all smeared with—*

Her stomach tried to turn over as she registered what, exactly, they were smeared with.

*All smeared*, she corrected firmly, and whisked a Cleaning Charm over them before she had time to think about it again.

"How bad is it?" Harry called up to her.

"You won't believe it." Ginny set the glasses carefully on the ground beside her. "They're not even scratched."

"You're kidding."

"Would I lie to you? Don't answer that," Ginny added before Harry could say anything. "I'll get you up here now."

Ron regained consciousness about two-thirds of the way through the levitation, though most of what Ginny could hear from him, in the intervals between her absolute concentration on the spell, was either groans or swearing. When she finally deposited her messy ball of metal and Pridemates on the ground beside her, she was unsurprised to find her hands shaking and her robes damp with sweat all over.

"You did it, Gin." Harry reclaimed his glasses, then slithered carefully out of the grasp of the pendant chain to pull her into a hug, as Ron started reeling it in between more bouts of half-muttered cursing. "You saved us."

"I killed him." Ginny let herself sag against Harry's shoulder, let herself for this one moment be as weak and trembling and frightened as she had wanted to be this entire time. "I killed him from behind. I didn't give him any chance at all."

"You think he would've given us one?" Ron asked, glancing up. "It's a war. We have to take the shots we can. And I know." Unexpectedly, he smiled, looking into her eyes with full understanding. "That's not going to help right now. Not a whole lot does. But you stood up, Ginny, you stood up and you did what you had to. And that means we're alive."

"Not just alive." Harry shook his wrist, and a bulky, bronze pin slid out of his sleeve to rest in the palm of his hand. "We've got it. And I'd appreciate it if one of you would carry it," he added, holding it out to Ginny. "It burns a little."

Ginny plucked the Horcrux gingerly from Harry's hold, and after a moment's thought slid it into her pocket, then sent two lines of stitching around the pocket with her wand, sewing it closed and tacking fabric to fabric. Harry, who'd drawn his own wand once he had his hand free again, had finished splinting Ron's arm by the time she looked up. "That should hold until we get back," he said, standing up, then holding down his hand for Ron's good one. "Think your broom can carry three?"

"It'd better." Ginny got carefully to her feet, and elected to Summon her broom rather than walking over to the spot where she'd left it. "And once we're out of here, we can kill that thing, and then we'll find out just what exactly Mrs. Danger meant by distracting His Dark Lordliness..."

Patroclus Nott sighed as he heard the echoing footsteps moving unhurriedly along the dark, damp, stone-lined hallway. Plucking one of the unlit torches from the holder beside the top of the stairs, he lit it with his wand, then hurried down the stairs. "Malfoy!" he called aloud. "He's waiting for you!"

The pointed, aristocratic face which turned towards him looked somewhat bemused, as though wondering who Patroclus could be addressing, and Patroclus had to bite off a groan. "Are you out of your mind?" he demanded instead. "Hurry! He's called for you! He wants you to help him decide what to do with a prisoner!"

The silver-gray eyes lightened, as though these words had snapped Lucius out of whatever trance or dream he'd been walking in, and he smiled unhurriedly. "Who is it?" he asked, starting to pick his way among puddles of water towards Patroclus.

"Oh, you'll love this." Patroclus chuckled, certain for once of his ground. "Remus Lupin has finally come to pay us a call."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 56: For I Have Sinned (Year 7)

The gray and brown of mountain stone, illuminated with the wash of green light from Ginny's Slytherin jewel, gave way before the triple-loaded broomstick to the familiar walls and carpet of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and Harry let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Some part of him had been certain Voldemort's magic would override their own, trapping them in the tiny slice of world he'd sealed off with his wizardspace spell.

*Or at least that he'd send more than one Death Eater after us...*

He pushed the thought aside in favor of planting his feet to hold the broom still so that Ron could dismount with Hermione's help. Meghan was waiting, perched on the broad bed in the center of the room with her wand in readiness, and Neville stood a few steps behind her, his potion piece in his hands. Its tip was pointed at the floor for the moment, but Harry knew it would have come up onto target very quickly indeed if anything besides Neville's Pridemates had attempted to exit the snow globe.

*And since most Shield Spells are magic-specific, they won't do anything about getting squirted in the face with a shot of knockout potion. Though if this war goes on much longer, the Death Eaters will start compensating for that, with all the Muggles who carry pieces now...*

"Can I put this back the size it was?" Hermione asked, pointing at the snow globe. "It's scaring me."

"Please, go ahead." Harry swung his leg over the broom, leaving Ginny in sole control of it. "There's nothing left inside there we need. Right, Gin?"

Ginny ran her fingers across her pocket and nodded, and Hermione swirled her wand three times around the snow globe, which shrank rapidly back to its original proportions. When it sat on the carpet no higher than Harry's ankle, she bent and picked it up, setting it atop the chest of drawers, then turned to face Harry. "I'm sorry," she said without elaboration. "I was frustrated and tired and angry, and I let it get away with me."

"Like I've never done that." Harry grinned a little. "And usually you're the one smacking me upside the head and telling me to get over myself. I think we were overdue to swap roles."

"Probably." Hermione returned the smile, though it wavered oddly on her lips. "Pridemates, then?"

"Pack and Pride both," Harry agreed, frowning internally at the spike of pain through Hermione's scent at the first word spoken. "What's wrong, Neenie?"

"In a minute." Hermione raised her wand again and cast a Shield around the snow globe, adding a flourish or two which Harry recognized as making it a physical barrier along with a magical one. "Just a precaution," she said, sealing off her spell with a twist of her wrist. "Because I assume *that*

—" She nodded towards the eagle-shaped brooch now lying on Ginny's palm. "—is what we're after?"

"I hope so." Ginny deposited the brooch on the metal tray Neville had just conjured at her feet. "Thanks, Captain. I'm not sensitive to them myself, but I'm not about to try that little performance all over again, so this had better be the genuine article."

Neville brushed a finger across the enameled surface of the brooch, then pulled his hand away rapidly. "That's it," he confirmed. "Not trying to criticize, Harry, but why didn't you kill it as soon as you had it?"

"Long story. But mainly I didn't want to do anything to it while we were still in there." Harry glanced back at the snow globe, sitting innocently on its wooden perch. "Like Hermione said, just a precaution. But we're back now. So." He drew his dagger and weighed it on his palm. "Ron, Ginny? You both took more hits in there than I did. Not to mention saving my life one time apiece."

"This sounds like a story we're going to *have* to hear once we're done here," said Neville, disarming and holstering his piece, as Ginny accepted the dagger from Harry and Ron wrapped his newly-healed hand around hers. Brother and sister knelt side by side, exchanged one fierce and flashing smile, then stabbed downwards with all their combined strength, plunging silver into bronze.

The Horcrux shrieked as the venom from Harry's dagger flooded it, tarnishing and twisting the metal, blistering the enamel like paint in hot sun.

Across from Harry, Meghan gasped, swinging her arm up to point. "Look, look!"

Harry turned to follow his sister's finger, and felt his heart shudder in his chest. The snow globe, too, was writhing and deforming, crumpling in on itself as though it were made of parchment rather than wood and glass. As he watched, it shrank down to the size of his fist, then disintegrated into a shower of splinters, in the same instant that the Horcrux behind him gave one last howl and stilled into a mass of mangled metal.

*And if we'd still been in there with it—*

"That's what I was afraid of," said Hermione shakily, sitting down on the edge of the bed and accepting Meghan's tight, shivering hug. "It's like the cavern by the sea that Kreacher told us about. Even if you found the Horcrux, even if you destroyed it, Voldemort would want to make sure you never got away. And even when you have..." She looked up at Harry, her eyes, her scent, the stillness of her posture as good as shouting she had news he wouldn't want to hear. "Moony's gone, Harry," she said quietly, Meghan's hand creeping across to clasp her free one. "He knew you were in trouble, and he went out to find Voldemort. To keep him distracted, pull his attention away from you. It's probably the reason you're alive."

Ginny paled and shut her eyes, relinquishing the dagger to Ron, who scowled and jabbed its tip



repeatedly into the misshapen mess which had once been Rowena Ravenclaw's brooch, muttering under his breath the same curses he'd used to keep his mind off the pain of his broken arm. Neville met Harry's eyes levelly, his expression one of understanding, coupled with his readiness to hold things together if they could be held.

*Though I'm not so sure about that.* Harry nodded fractionally to his friend, then let his mind whirl away through its dizzying circle of thought. *We survived one hard hit with Luna and Fox, but can we pull it back together after this? Can we still be a Pack without an alpha, and is the Pride going to make it without the Pack? And what's going to happen to Danger? It'll shatter Hermione if she loses both of them so soon after Fox, and I'm not so sure how well I'll do myself...*

A tiny hitch in an indrawn breath pulled Harry out of his own head, and not, by the looks of things, a moment too soon. "Ginny," he said, softly, urgently, hurrying forward to her side, accepting his dagger from Ron and resheathing it mechanically before pulling her into his arms again. "Ginny, this *isn't* your fault. No more than it's mine. No more than it's anybody's except Voldemort's. Please, Gin, you've got to believe me."

"Trying," whispered Ginny against his shoulder. "I'm trying, Harry, I am." Her arms wrapped around him and held, and some of the shuddering through her chest eased. "But it's hard, it's so hard, when I started that spell off in the first place—"

"And then you came in after us and saved us," Ron interrupted, bringing Ginny's face around towards him. "Dolohov would've been hauling us in front of his bloody Master right now if not for you. Instead of which, we're alive, we're free, and we got away with the Horcrux, so there's only the snake left to kill before we can go after Voldemort his own self. And that's because of you, Ginny." He tugged on a bit of her hair, making her hiss between her teeth at him, but Harry could feel her breath smoothing out against his side. "That's what you did today."

After sticking out her tongue at Ron, Ginny leaned into Harry again, shutting her eyes with a little sigh. Harry held her close, letting his fingers tangle in her hair, releasing the warm floral scent he'd associated with her even before his Animagus abilities had sharpened his nose. On the bed, Meghan had her own eyes closed and her head resting against Hermione, their two chests rising and falling in tandem. Neville, who'd sat down on the other side of the bed, was only about a second off their rhythm, a difference which disappeared even as Harry watched.

*Breathing together.* Harry turned his attention inward, and found his own breath pattern matching itself to Ginny's without his mind having been consulted at all. *Like we're about to do some big piece of magic. Something important, something necessary.*

*Now if I only knew what it was—*

And then he did.

"I have to go in," he said, his voice drawing the Pride's eyes to him. "I have to be there too."

"Be where?" asked Meghan, sitting up. Then a little cry ripped out of her, and she sprang to her

feet. "Harry, *no!* "

"Not like that!" Harry held up a hand, surprising himself with half a laugh. "Pearl, calm down! I'm not going to go dashing off anywhere trying any stupid, gallant rescues. I mean, if we *could*, if we had a gnome's chance in a jarvey's nest of making it out again, that'd be one thing, but we don't. We'd be throwing our lives away for nothing. But if Voldemort's that interested in Moony, there's got to be a reason why, and we ought to know what it is. And that I can do."

"How—" Hermione began, then cut herself off with a little noise of understanding. "Walking," she said, tapping her head. "You'll walk there, and you'll need as much magic as we can pull together to get you through the wards. There are sure to be some against ghosts and spirits, if they've guarded the Manor anywhere near as carefully as they should have."

"We are talking about Death Eaters, aren't we?" inquired Neville dryly, sparking a muffled snicker here and there around the room. "Being careful is not exactly their cup of tea. But there's something you will need to do, if you're going through with this," he said to Harry. "Stay out of sight, inside the walls if possible. There's someone at Malfoy Manor who can see you, and who probably wouldn't be smart enough anymore not to give you away."

Harry nodded wordlessly, feeling Ginny's silent growl reverberate through both of them at the thought of what had been done to Luna. *It won't last much longer*, he pledged mentally as the rest of the Pride started disposing themselves around the floor in whatever positions they found comfortable. *We won't let it last.*

*Today is the twenty-ninth of October. Two days from now, we will have won this war.*

*No price that is honestly ours to pay can be too high for that.*

*Even if some of them feel an awful lot like it.*

---

Remus looked up as the door to the small side chamber opened. The gray-robed young woman on its other side gave a little cry of pleasure and ran to him, her black cloak streaming out behind her. He had just enough time to stand up before she threw her arms around him. "Hello!" she crooned to him, hugging him tightly. "Hello, hello!"

"Hello to you too." Remus returned the embrace, and stroked a hand down Luna's hair. "It's nice to see you."

"Ah—" Luna pulled away as Remus's fingers left her hair to land on her cloak. "No," she said firmly, glaring at him. "*No touching. No fire.*" A tiny, secret smile played across her lips. "Not yet ."

"May I touch, if I promise not to use fire?" Remus asked, feeling Danger catalog the 'not yet' in the back of her mind for future investigation.

"All right." Luna unhooked her cloak and sat down on the floor, spreading it across her lap. "Finished," she said proudly, gesturing to it. "All finished!"

Kneeling beside her, Remus ran his fingers across the near-invisible figures crafted from black ribbon. Before long, he began to smile, and by the time he had finished, he was hard put not to grin like Moony the Marauder.

**All finished, indeed,** commented Danger. **I think a certain set of stories may need some serious revision—pun fully intended.**

**I think they do. But...** Remus looked up again at the second opening of the door. **Not now.**

**Agreed.** Danger withdrew, pulling so far back that Remus could barely sense her himself. **I love you,** came her last whisper, before her sense in his mind went almost totally quiescent.

"Starwing," said Lucius Malfoy coldly, standing framed in the doorway with his pointed features set and still. "Enough."

Luna scrambled immediately to her feet and fastened the cloak once more around her neck, then looked back at Remus with a smile. "See you again," she said, dropping a little curtsey, and skipped to the door, where Lucius moved aside to let her by.

"Await me here," he told her, pointing to a chair against the opposite wall. "And you, Pierson, you may go."

The Death Eater who had been keeping watch over Remus nodded hard and wasted no time vacating the room, leaving the two wizards alone as Lucius stepped into the room and shut the door. Remus got to his feet unhurriedly and found his balance, standing quietly, waiting. It was not his place to make the first move in this game.

"So," Lucius said at last. "The great Remus Lupin deigns to enter my humble home, for only the second time in his life. To what do we owe the honor?"

"To my overwhelming curiosity, let's say." Remus leaned back on one heel. "I could hardly stand not knowing why such an insignificant person as myself should be the subject of so much scrutiny by your lord and master, and finally it struck me that the simplest way of finding out was to question the source. So..." He shrugged. "Here I am."

"Insignificant." Lucius lingered over each syllable of the word. "How interesting. Albus Dumbledore's hand-chosen successor, the leader both of the Order of the Phoenix and of Harry Potter's beloved *Pack*, the only werewolf ever to have custody of a child granted to him, still considers himself insignificant."

"Some beliefs take a lifetime to alter." Remus thought he could have counted the threads in the weave of his robes under his fingers, so acute were his senses at this moment, and so fascinating the stories they were telling him. "Though truly, nothing you mentioned changes my significance

very much. I took a strip from Albus's scroll and kept two of my closest colleagues well acquainted with the affairs of the Order, so either of them could step into my shoes there at a moment's notice. As for the other little items you brought up—my being an alpha, a friend, a husband and a father—"

"You *dare* speak that word in front of me." Lucius snarled, his mask of civilization dropping away to reveal the predator's face beneath. "You *dare!* "

Remus let his eyebrows ascend slowly, a warning to those who knew him that lines were very near being crossed. "I was unaware any daring was involved. Would you care to make yourself clearer?"

"Don't play the innocent with me." Lucius shoved over the chair the Death Eater called Pierson had been using, sending it clattering to the floor. "You may be able to salve your conscience that you never intended what occurred, you may even be able to disclaim responsibility for the act itself, but you, *you*, Remus Lupin, are still every inch responsible for what *I* have become." He slammed the sole of his foot into the chair, shoving it into the far wall of the room with a crash. "Does *that* give you a bit more to go on?"

"Not particularly—ah, wait." Remus held up a finger as the vague flicker of thought in the back of his mind coalesced into Danger's voice, murmuring information to him. "I think I do understand now. The idea that a werewolf who bit another, who infected and turned that person, was to be considered the new werewolf's 'sire'. I admit I've always considered that more a matter of tradition than any sort of magical bond between the two—certainly I never felt any filial urgings towards Fenrir Greyback..."

"You were bitten as a child, and immediately given a great many competing emotional cues, which overrode the establishment of the siring bond." Lucius spoke stiffly now, standing very still, as if he regretted his earlier outburst. "My own case was rather different. Can you imagine my experience, I wonder? Can you conceive of being torn out of the world you love and thrust into a living nightmare, changed against your will into something you loathe and despise, with nothing to do, day and night, but think bitterly about those who are responsible for that change? And now—to see you standing here—" He turned away, breathing through clenched teeth. "I could kill you," he said softly, his back to Remus. "We are alone. It would be easy."

"I doubt that." Remus circled to one side, setting his feet down gently, so as to make no sound. "Killing, even out of necessity, feeds the monster within, gives it new life." He allowed himself a small smile. "But then, I would imagine you know that already."

"Who better?" Lucius raised his head to face Remus, silver-gray eyes narrow and dark with a bitter, boundless fury. "I imagine you think it of me already, so let me set the record straight, here and now. With these two hands and the words of my mouth, I killed Draco Black, I destroyed Luna Lovegood. They are gone, vanished, beyond all human recalling. And I regret nothing. I would do the same again. Again and again, a hundred times or a thousand, I would make the same choices I have made already once. But you have no way to comprehend that, I'm sure." Without moving from his place, he managed to convey the impression of drawing back the hems of his robes.

"You, who speak of monsters, cannot possibly understand what I am."

"You are a man." Remus spoke levelly, calmly, giving every word its due weight, keeping his eyes on the tall, slim wizard before him, hiding every trace of his well-worn grief. "A man who has chosen his own side in this war, in accordance with the principles of his heart, and who fights with his every weapon to ensure that side will win, no matter what the cost. That I understand perfectly. As for my son and his lady—" He had to stop and take a deep breath, to keep his voice from betraying him. "They were very young, but they entered this war with full knowledge of what they did and what they risked. I could never be anything other than proud of them."

"So sure." Lucius shifted his gaze to look over Remus's shoulder, his eyes unfocusing until he seemed to stare back through time. "So confident. What if I tell you that your unworthy child died whimpering in terror, begging me for mercy? That his last words were a curse upon you and your saintly wife, along with everything you stand for? Will your understanding, your certainty, your pride survive even that? And do not tell me I lie," he added before Remus could say anything. "My sins are many, but I have never found it necessary to tell falsehoods about my own flesh and blood."

"I believe you." Remus nodded slowly. "All I can say is that fear and pain do terrible things to people. Especially inflicted by those we ought to be able to trust."

"There speaks the father." Lucius sneered the familial title, imbuing it with contemptuous disgust. "There speaks the man who runs away from his children to protect them, who saves their bodies by mortally wounding their hearts. But what is this, waiting for him? Why, another cub for his Pack, here at the end of all things!" His harsh, brittle laughter echoed emptily from the stone walls, as Remus watched in silence.

"What shall this unworthy cub do for his father, his alpha?" asked Lucius thoughtfully when his amusement was over, pacing a slow circle around Remus. "Play the long-awaited prodigal, beg your pardon for my wrongs? But that would scarcely do, when I have already told you I regret nothing. Ah, I have it!" With mocking grace, he sank to one knee before Remus. "I shall ask your paternal benediction! If it please you, of course. If *I* please you." Folding his hands, he bowed his head over them, his silver hair falling in a curtain around his face. "Bless me, Father," he murmured.

Remus took a single step forward and laid the pads of his fingers against the nape of the slender neck.

Lucius stiffened, but did not otherwise move.

For the space of two heartbeats the tableau held. Then the door creaked once. By the time Luna peered into the room, Lucius was on his feet facing the doorway, his face composed, his hands and shoulders relaxed. The entire conversation might never have happened.

"He calls," the young witch announced, her voice as calm and clear as her master's manner. "You come?"

"Of course, my lady." Lucius gestured for Remus to precede him. "If you will, sir," he said grandly. "It does not do to keep the Dark Lord waiting."

---

In a place which was not a place, a little boy huddled in a big chair, staring up at a number of cinema-like screens mounted to the wall above him. "I don't like this, Neenie," he said to the kitten who lay on the desk beside him, washing a paw. "Fox said nothing else was going to go wrong, but this doesn't look right at all. I wish we had a father, or a mother, to take care of us..."

"Mew," Neenie agreed uneasily, swiping her orange paw across her white-nosed face. "Meow mrow?"

"I don't know." Draco reached out and lifted the kitten down into his lap. "Just wait, I guess."

Neenie purred her approval, and began to tread her paws back and forth in time. Draco winced and folded over his robes to cushion the spot where her claws were prickling, then returned his attention to the topmost screen, which showed a grand, bare-raftered hall.

---

Danger lay curled on her broad bed, her eyes closed and her consciousness linked only dimly to her body. In mind, in soul, she stood far away with the man she loved, a silent observer in the back of his mind as Lord Voldemort unhurriedly looked him over from head to toe. The fear that reverberated through their bond, rather than cycling back and feeding on itself as it once had, now flowed away into unimportance, for the sacrifice had been worthwhile. Their cubs were alive, and on their way safely home.

*All of them.*

"So," said Voldemort, snapping Danger back to the moment at Malfoy Manor. "Remus Lupin. We meet in person at last."

"At last." Remus stood seemingly at his ease, but Danger could feel the control and readiness in his muscles, in his breathing, and added her own touch of calm and focus. The longer they could play this out, the more likely it was that an opportunity for escape would arise. "Yes, I admit that's intrigued me ever since I heard about it. That you had some reason to particularly want to meet me, to speak with me. I'd hardly thought I was worth so much attention."

"So modest, is he not, my dear," Voldemort murmured to Bellatrix, who giggled behind her hand. "But then, he has been badly informed." The red eyes returned to Remus. "Tell me, Remus, what do you know about your family? Not your immediate parentage, but your ancestry. Have you ever explored your wizarding background thoroughly enough to discover your connection to this very manor?" His hand described a graceful circle around them. "Or would that be a surprise to you?"

"I knew about my connection to the Beauvoi family, yes." Remus smiled a little as a memory-scene from the previous Christmas flashed across his mind where Danger could see it. The Pack sat in a half-circle around Alexander Slytherin, examining his rendering of an ancient mural

depicting three couples. "Two brothers and a sister who were contemporaries of the grandchildren of the Hogwarts Founders. Owain, Dafydd, and Angharad. I descend from Angharad Beauvoi and her husband." He glanced back to where Lucius stood silently at his shoulder. "My generous host here, if I have matters correct, can claim descent from Owain and his wife, but Dafydd Beauvoi's line died out in the early seventeenth century."

"So it did." Voldemort leaned back in his throne, a Dark Lord at his ease. "All the better for me, as it simplified my task considerably. A secondary line of Slytherin, especially one so notably *good* ..." His thin lips pursed around the word, as though even to speak it brought a foul taste to his mouth. "Hardly a thing which a properly ordered world requires. But you say nothing more of your own illustrious ancestors, Remus." One slim fingertip traced a pattern on the armrest of the throne. "I begin to think you truly do not know. That Albus Dumbledore has kept this from you, as he kept so much."

"Kept what from me?" Remus frowned a little. "How could anything about my family tree possibly matter so much as to be kept a secret?"

"Ah." Voldemort's sigh was a sound of pure satisfaction. "You *are* unenlightened. I could have hoped for nothing better. Allow me to rectify that." He drew a deep breath, gazing into the distance with much the same expression as Bellatrix, though her eyes rested on him. "Dafydd Beauvoi wedded the disowned granddaughter of Salazar Slytherin, as you doubtless have learned. But he was not the only member of his family to marry in higher circles than their birth should have deserved." His gaze slid down to rest on Remus's face. "The wizard from whom you take your surname. Angharad Beauvoi's husband John. What do you know of him?"

"Only that he earned the nickname of 'the Wolf' for the way he tended his family with love in peacetime, but fought like no other on the battlefield." Remus met Voldemort's eyes unflinchingly, Danger submerging herself beneath the shield of their bond, into which she knew Voldemort would never willingly intrude. "Why?"

"Because John the Wolf," said Voldemort with deliberation, "inherited his warlike gifts from his grandfather. A wizard of whom you may, just possibly, have heard. One Godric Gryffindor."

**What?** Danger blurted silently, as shock froze Remus momentarily in place, as Bellatrix sat up straighter with a sound of interest and Lucius exhaled slowly in surprise. **But that would make you—**

**It's a trick,** Remus cut her off swiftly. **He's trying to rattle me, to throw me off, by saying whatever he thinks will shake my confidence. That doesn't make it true.**

**No, it doesn't.** Danger caught her breath, pressing a hand against her pounding heart to calm herself down. **He could sit there and tell you anything. That he's going to transfigure Bellatrix into a tree to amuse you or that you're the prophesied savior of all the werewolves in the world. I'm sorry, love.**

**Don't be.** She felt his smile warm the back of her mind. **You're the only reason I'm able to do**

**this at all, and you know it...**

---

"That's quite a claim," Remus said aloud to Voldemort, as Danger slipped back to her silent watching. Neither of them mentioned the well of cold fear at the center of his chest, around which her wolf-form lay curled like a guarding dragon. "I hope you'll forgive me if I find it rather hard to believe."

"Because you never knew anything about it before." Voldemort tapped his fingertips together. "Because you believe that if any such inheritance were yours, surely you would have been told, and trained in the gifts which are your heritage."

"To put it bluntly, yes." Remus nodded once. "The Gryffindor gifts are crafting magical artifacts and control over fire. I admit to some skill in the one, but I had nothing to do with the other until I was almost thirty-three years old."

"Because that gift, as was the practice in your family, was magically bound when you were an infant, to prevent disasters." Voldemort spoke each word with finicking exactness, his expression and tone that of a chiding teacher to a painfully slow student. "No doubt you would have been told of your identity, and your power revealed to you, when you were a child of seven or eight. If your parents had been more certain of your emotional stability, or less concerned with keeping your childhood as carefree as they possibly could." His eyes gleamed with amusement. "If I had never interfered in your life."

"You—" Remus caught himself before more than that one word could slip past his guard, though Lucius's fingers closed warningly around his upper arm and Bellatrix rocked in her chair, clapping her hands and crowing with laughter. "So there was more to that attack than just my father's bad luck in provoking Greyback," he said once he had pulled himself under control. "You started much earlier than we ever realized, destroying perceived threats before they could fight back."

"The Heir of Godric Gryffindor, in direct line of descent, could have been far more to me than merely a *perceived* threat." Voldemort stared coldly down at Remus from his height. "Especially one with a reasonable sum of intelligence to match his courage, and the gift of inspiring loyalty in those around him."

"Why not just kill me, then?" Remus twitched his shoulder forward. Lucius released him, but remained within his peripheral vision, standing as still as a marble statue which lived only when its master willed it so. "Kill *us*, I should say. My father and me. Two murders, three if you bothered with my mother, and the Gryffindor line would be extinct. No further threat to you."

"Your father knew who and what he was, and had laid wards around his home and his person accordingly." Voldemort's tone held a certain amount of respect, grudgingly given and much resented, perhaps, but respect all the same. "At that point in my life, I could not overcome them. Besides, I found such great amusement in the path I did take." He laughed under his breath. "With one word, one request, I ended all possibility of the Gryffindor line's continuance, for your parents would never dare have another child when you would be a constant danger to it, and you



yourself, as a werewolf, could sire no children when you grew to be a man. But more, far more than that, Remus Lupin, I ensured that you were dealt a wound which would never heal." Long, slender fingers curled into a fist. "A wound not to your body, but to your soul."

"The werewolf curse." A night at Grimmauld Place leapt into Remus's mind, his lupine body curled snugly around his Kitten while his human mind and soul cuddled hers in a dreamscape far away, telling her a story of betrayal and madness and vengeance. "That its victims' human minds will be drowned in the beast every time their bodies transform, and that they will therefore be outcasts forever, feared and hated for a part of themselves they cannot change or control." He looked up at Voldemort, keeping his eyes and voice level with an effort. "I can see how that fate would appeal to you, for someone you considered your hereditary enemy."

"And yet, you overcame it." Voldemort glanced at Bellatrix, who drew her wand and sent a spell through one of the side walls. Lucius turned his head to watch it go, and Remus sensed more than saw the other wizard's thoughtful frown. "First with the help of your friends, and later and more completely, after my regrettable setback involving Harry Potter, with that of your charming wife. Not only that, but you became a father to little Harry, to Lucius's Draco, to your wife's young sister and your dear friends' daughter. You shepherded your Pack through their days of hiding, and emerged triumphant in time for your children's education to commence. In short, Remus, you reclaimed your birthright." He shook his head, his expression almost playful. "Surely you could not expect me to allow that to continue."

"May I ask how you intend to stop it?" Remus inquired, feeling Danger come alert in the back of his mind.

"You may." Voldemort laughed again, and above him Starwing the owl fluttered her wings uneasily. "I have a spy within your Order, one whose task, though it incorporated the gathering of certain information, has always been primarily these three things. First, to mix a poison so deadly that it kills not only its victims, but also any Healer who tries to save them. Second, to coat the blade of a dagger with this poison, for the fastest possible administration. And third—"

Danger sat bolt upright as the door of her bedroom slammed open.

**NO!** Remus began to raise his hand, to blast fire towards the witch now advancing on his wife with a gleaming blade in her hand and a mad grimace twisting her face, but Voldemort's coercions choked off his magic and Lucius caught his physical arms at the elbow from behind, pinioning him before he could fight back. **Danger, don't let her get near you—she's the spy, the one we've been looking for, stop her—**

**I don't want to kill her, Remus! There has to be something we don't know!** Danger rolled to her feet, her muscles slow and stiff after so long in the same position, and cast a wall of flame between herself and her attacker, then bolted for the door, fumbling out her wand—

Corona Gamp, howling like a demon, leapt through the fire and sliced her dagger clumsily down the outside of Danger's arm, leaving a trail of freezing pain in its wake. Ignoring the flames as they licked at her robes, her hair, her skin, she changed her grip on the dagger's hilt and shakily

lifted it for the final blow—

Danger brought her wand around and Disarmed Corona, sending her flying backwards into the opposite wall, as Sirius and Aletha slammed through the bedroom door, but darkness was starting to creep up and over her vision, waves of pain washing through her body as the poison spread, threatening to drag her away—

Voldemort was laughing, laughing as though he would never stop. "So falls the mighty Pack," the Dark Lord mocked. "Just as all enemies of the great House of Slytherin eventually must fall."

Dimly Remus felt Danger make one final effort, some last twist of magic, then purposely let go, falling endlessly into the darkness. Her voice breathed into the back of his mind, a whisper across unimaginable distance.

...love...you...

And then there was nothing.

---

"What. The. Hell." Sirius slashed his wand across Corona's unconscious form, putting out the flames which had already devoured half her robes and blistered her skin horribly, then did the same for the remains of the rug which had once covered Remus and Danger's bedroom floor before casting a shield around the murderous-looking dagger sticking in the wall. "This makes *no* sense—"

"Sirius." Aletha's voice rang with urgency. "Come here."

"What's wrong?" Sirius hurried to her side. "Can't you help her?"

"Watch." Aletha reached down for Danger where their Pack-sister lay crumpled on the floor, blood oozing from an ugly gash down her arm. "When I try—"

Her hand passed through Danger as though one or the other were made of smoke.

"I repeat. This makes no sense." Sirius caught sight of a fitful gleam against Danger's chest, and sighed. "Well, a little more sense now. But why she'd use up her Slytherin jewel just on making herself intangible—"

His fingers brushed against her skin, and he jumped. To him, at least, Danger was as solid as she had ever been.

"All right," he said resignedly, gathering her into his arms to lift her onto the bed. "It's official. This makes less than no sense at all."

"Or maybe it does." Aletha shut her eyes, then opened them again with a different focus, staring hard first at Danger, then at Corona. "I'll explain in a minute," she said when she was finished,

getting up. "Corona needs my help, and you need to find out what was on that dagger. And then head off whatever's about to happen outside, please?"

"Got it." Sirius wove his wand through the correct motions to set up a second-level diagnostic spell on the greenish-black stain he could see along the dagger's blade, then left it to draw its conclusions and stepped out into the corridor, turning to face the noise of concerned Order members hurrying up the stairs.

*I just wish I had something to tell them, other than "the world's gone off its head and so have half the people I thought I could trust"...*

---

Voldemort's triumphant laughter ringing in his ears, Harry peered out of his hiding place in an alcove of Malfoy Manor, keeping his head in line with the wall to minimize his chances of being spotted by Starwing, girl or owl as she might be at the moment.

*Owl, he noted as the flutter of white feathers above him caught his eye. And there's Voldie and Bella, both thinking this is just the funniest thing they've ever seen, and then...*

Lucius Malfoy, as perfectly turned out as though he'd spent the last hour primping, stood in the center of the room. His expression as he looked at the sandy-haired man who slumped in his grip, eyes half-shut and breath coming too fast and too shallow, was studiously blank, neither gloating nor disgusted but simply empty.

*I'd almost think he'd been hit with the Imprimatus instead of Luna. Harry clenched his teeth, growling under his breath. Wish he had been.*

Ducking back into cover, he pulled out his pendants, as insubstantial and faded-looking as his walking self but faithful copies of the ones worn by his body back at Headquarters. The carvings of the wolf and the lion glowed with the sickly light he had expected, but the dog and the winged horse were unperturbed, as was the deer on the next pendant.

*It didn't work, then.* Harry let out a breath of relief. His internal debate whether to stay at Malfoy Manor or dive back to his body and warn Meghan and Letha about the poison meant for any Healer who tried to help Danger had been brief, but terrifying. He'd finally been swayed towards staying by his knowledge that his Pack-mother and -sister had both their pendants and their Ravenclaw magic to warn them, along with his certainty that even the Pride's combined magic had barely sufficed to sneak him through the wards once, and definitely wouldn't do so again.

*And I have to see what happens.* Tucking his chain back inside his robes, he leaned out once more. *Someone's got to know.*

*It might as well be me.*

Nothing had changed while he was checking his pendants, Harry noted. Voldemort and Bellatrix were still chortling over the fulfillment of their plan, Malfoy stood as stone-faced as ever, and

Moony still hung limply in his grasp, his eyes moving rapidly behind their lids—

With no more warning than that, Harry's blood-father smiled, the same warm and joyous expression that featured in a thousand of Harry's memories. Planting his feet firmly on the stone floor, he lifted his head and straightened his back, turning his hands outward to grip Malfoy's arms at the wrists. "You," he said, the word cutting easily through Voldemort's laughter, "are a fool."

"Am I?" Voldemort drew his wand from his pocket to run its length through his fingers. "How so?"

"You think you can destroy what I am by killing her, and me." Moony shook his head pityingly. "But she is safe now, somewhere you can never come. With those who need her, just as she has always been. Somewhere I will join her, very soon. And we can never truly die, she and I. You see, we have four children." His eyes never wavered, but somehow Harry knew his presence had been noted. "The ones they love make eight. The ones they've trained make dozens. And the ones they'll teach make hundreds, thousands, even millions. As long as any one of them lives, so will we." His voice rose, ringing from the walls like a trumpet call to victory. "And you can kill, and kill, and kill, but you will never kill us all."

"Perhaps not." Voldemort rose to his feet, his voice like slivers of ice down Harry's back as he aimed his wand. "But I *can* kill you."

Moony only smiled again and closed one of his hands more tightly around Malfoy's wrist as Voldemort spoke, as the green light gathered at his wand's tip and the sound of rushing wind filled the chamber.

*"Avada Kedavra! "*

Someone screamed.

---

Bellatrix sat up very straight as Lupin collapsed, her eyes widening in shock.

"You," she breathed under the sound of a grief-stricken cry. "*You!* "

Yanking her wand free of her pocket, she brought to mind the worst curse she knew. The Full Reversal would turn back the blood in its victim's veins and trap the air in his lungs, strangling him on his own breath even as his heart shattered within his chest.

*Fitting punishment for the worst traitor to our cause who ever lived.*

She took aim, drew breath, and spoke. "*Reverso—* "

Something struck her on the back of the head.

A spurt of magic, half-formed, spat forward from her wand as she crumpled in her throne.

His head hurt. His arms hurt too, and his legs where Ron's chain had pinched him, but his head more than anything, right down the line of his scar. He felt dizzy and wobbly, too, like he'd been riding too long on a broomstick Danger had pranked.

He moaned a little, thinking of Danger. He wanted her. He wanted her to slide into this bad dream and smile at him and hug him tight and wake him up.

*Because that's what she did for me, every time. And I have that to hold onto, no matter what.*

Why didn't Danger come? Why didn't she love him anymore?

*She does. She always has. Even when she's not here, her love is.*

It was dark, and he was alone.

*But I don't have to be alone anymore.*

Harry opened his eyes.

*I know how this story ends.*

He stood in the main floor corridor at number four, Privet Drive, gazing into the cupboard under the stairs. Inside, in the cot, lay not his own small self but the scab-covered, child-sized monstrosity which had been Lord Voldemort before his restoration at the graveyard two years ago. It whimpered slightly as it panted for air, its red eyes fixed pleadingly on Harry.

"I wish I could help you," said Harry, and discovered as he spoke the words that he meant it. Some fates were too terrible to wish onto anyone. "But I can't. You see, this isn't the sort of door someone else can open for you." He waggled the cupboard door back and forth under his hand. "You have to learn how to open it for yourself. And the people who taught me how to do that..." He shrugged. "You just killed them."

Stepping back, he swung the door shut.

As the latch clicked into place, the corridor dissolved around him, and reformed into the hall at Malfoy Manor where he'd been a few brief seconds before. In the middle of the floor, a pile of black robes and a tangle of silver hair over sandy brown marked the spot where—

*Can't think of that yet. Still have to get home.*

Turning away, Harry looked towards the dais. Voldemort and Bellatrix lay draped across one another in a grotesque mockery of sleeping love, Bella's wand dangling loosely from her fingers, Voldemort's still possessively clutched.

*Here's hoping he won't wake up until his creepy little self gets out of the cupboard.*

*I knew I should have locked it when I had the chance...*

Movement from the shadows behind the dais drew Harry's eye. A small, slender figure in a deeply hooded cloak stepped forward, gazing directly at him. "*Harry Potter,*" it said in a voice which registered to Harry's ear somewhere between Siss and Sangre. "*It is good to see you.*"

Catching himself before his mouth could drop completely open, Harry instead used the movement to begin speaking, in the language in which he'd been addressed. "*Are you the younger Heir of Slytherin whose coming was foretold to us?*"

"*I am.*" The figure bowed. "*And I am in need of your help. My Consort and I must leave this place at once, and with us the body of your blood-father. He carries with him a small item which may help, if you will give of your magic to make it work as we desire.*" The tip of a wand emerged from the cloak's folds, and Moony's Zippophone rose up from the tangle of bodies in the middle of the floor, hovering in midair as the Heir walked unhurriedly over to receive it in one small, pale palm. "*Will you make this thing destroy itself, but carry us in its destruction to safety?*"

Harry frowned. "*How did you know they can do that?*"

The Heir laughed softly. "*I know many things.*"

"Of course you do," Harry muttered in English. "Slytherin, Wolf. Prophecy." Shaking off his confusion, he nodded. "*Go ahead and open it,*" he said, switching back to Parseltongue. "*I will tell it what to do, but you will have to tell it the destination, since I am not here in my body.*"

The hooded head nodded in its turn, and a slender thumb flipped back the Zippo's lid. Harry concentrated on the green flame which arose. "*Spread out and surround those three people,* he told it, looking hard at the trio before him. "*Take them safely onto the Floo Network, and safely off it again wherever you're told. Got that?*"

At the fire's eager flicker of assent, he pointed to the Heir, who gave the Zippo a little toss. An instant later, it burst open, scattering green fire in a broad cloud around the three people Harry had told it to transport.

"*Whenever you're ready,*" Harry called, and turned to the silver cord which connected him to his body. As he tugged on it, sending himself flying homeward, he heard a voice calling out behind him in English.

"Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!"

---

Neville took his first full breath in what felt like days when Harry twitched, coughed, and opened his eyes. "Back," he croaked, cleared his throat, and tried again. "I'm back. I'm all right. Moony's...not. But the Heir found us. Just like Alex said."

"What?" said three people at once.

"Younger Heir of Slytherin." Harry shoved himself to his feet. "Been undercover with the Death Eaters, with Consort. They're coming here right now. Bringing Moony with them. Come on, they're traveling by Floo so we'll need to meet them in the kitchen..."

Hanging back, Neville bent down to Meghan's ear. "Go get your dad," he murmured to her, and Meghan nodded hard and dashed away towards the knot of chattering adults at the other end of the corridor.

*Because when Harry says they're bringing Mr. Moony home, he means they're bringing his body. And I think Mr. Padfoot would be the right person to deal with that.*

Being the practical one of the Pride, Neville reflected as he thumped down the stairs, wasn't always a blessing.

Somehow, even the house-elves had deserted the kitchen at this crucial moment, leaving it empty except for the Pride, who were finding seats along one side of the long table. Harry was just gesturing to the fire as Neville stepped through the swinging doors, bringing it out of the fireplace in a long green arc, in which there appeared three distinct whirling forms, one upright, two horizontal—

Harry snapped his fingers, and one slim person in a swathing black cloak stepped nimbly out of the central pillar of fire. The other two died away, revealing in one case what appeared to be another bundle of black cloth with a hint of silver somewhere about it, and in the other—

*I didn't want it to be true, but I guess it is.*

Neville heard a little snuffle behind him, and reached around without looking to draw Meghan to his side. Mr. Padfoot was beside her, and sighed between his teeth, going to kneel beside the still form of Mr. Moony. "This is not what I signed up for, you know," he said conversationally, taking his friend's limp hand in his. "We were both supposed to survive the damn war. Watch these kids light the world on fire, spoil the hell out of their kids, get old and crotchety and drive everyone mad. Together, Moony. We said we'd do it together." He sighed again, lifting Mr. Moony gently into his arms as he went first to one knee, then got his feet under him and rose. "But then I guess war spoils an awful lot of plans, doesn't it." He looked up at Harry. "You know where to find us if you need us."

"Yeah." Harry nodded as Mr. Padfoot turned in place and vanished, carrying Mr. Moony with him. "We know."

Beside Neville, Meghan hummed in her throat, the way she did when she was confused by something. "Where's Hermione?" she whispered. "I know she came in with everyone else, I saw her when I got here..."

"Where's the Consort?" Neville whispered back, noticing for the first time that the black-and-silver bundle was missing from the floor, leaving only the upright black-cloaked person, with whom Harry was now talking in low, urgent hisses of Parseltongue.

"I don't know." Meghan twisted her hands together. "And I don't know if I like *that* , either."

Neville looked up to identify what *that* might be.

Across the room, Harry had the Heir's left forearm cradled in his hand, and was tracing a curve across it with his finger.

Meghan bared her teeth once. "Dark Mark," she said, softly, but the words brought Harry's head around anyway.

"We were actually just talking about that," he said, waving Neville and Meghan closer. "One of them's got it, and we need to block it off before Voldemort wakes up from his little nap and goes looking for it. He used some of the magic of being an Heir to make it, which is one of the reasons it's so powerful, but it also means that Heirs of *all* the Houses, working together, can stop him from finding it." He winked at the Heir, who nodded matter-of-factly. "You two in?"

A swift step back was Meghan's reply. "It could be a trap," she hissed at Neville. "How do we know Harry's not being possessed, or controlled, or something? How do we even know who the Heir *is* ?"

"Hang on, Pearl." Neville repeated on himself the motion Harry had used a moment before with the Heir, trying to recall why it felt familiar. *What—or who—*

And then he remembered, and could hardly stop an incredulous laugh from surfacing.

*It can't be—but if it is, wouldn't that be just perfect?*

"Meghan," he said, looking towards Harry and his companion. "Is there any kind of blood connection between me and the Heir? Look carefully. It'll be really faint, if it's there at all."

"I'll give you really faint," Meghan grumbled, but she blinked her eyes into her Healing sight and looked. Once, then twice, and again—

Neville grinned when he felt her go rigid with shock against his side. "There *is* ," she breathed, her silver eyes dropping back to normal focus and gazing up at him in amazement. "There *is* one, but *who—*"

Then her hands went up to cover her mouth, and Neville nodded at the answer he could see in her awestruck expression.

*Sometimes things really do work out the way you wanted them to.*

Hand in hand, they went forward to join their magic with their fellow Heirs.

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Sitting on the bench beside Ron, Ginny fidgeted. She was beginning to feel a trifle left out.



*Hermione's disappeared with the Consort of Slytherin, and doesn't that just sound dirty seven ways from Saturday. Harry, Neville, and Meghan are doing their little ritual with the Heir of Slytherin, which would sound really dirty if I didn't know it was Alex's Heir instead of His Evil Lordship. And Ron...*

She sneaked a glance over at her brother. *Maybe Meghan didn't heal him quite as well as she thought she did.*

Ron, for the past ninety seconds, had been unmistakably chortling to himself. The sound grew louder every time he looked in the direction of the black-cloaked figure pressing slender palms against first Harry's, then Meghan's, then Neville's, then repeating the cycle again, and it neared proportions of cackle when Ron lifted his gaze to the brilliant orb of light which had begun to spin above the four sets of busily interchanging hands.

"What is so funny?" Ginny hissed, but Ron only shook his head and pointed. Ginny looked back just in time to see the shining sphere dart away to one side and vanish with a tiny pop, and all four Heirs let out a sigh of relief.

"There," said Harry, rolling his shoulders. "That should hold for—twenty-four hours, you said?" he asked the cloaked figure, who nodded. "So that gives us a full day to get set up for the ritual you said you'd figured out to get the damn thing off permanently—"

"All right, that's enough," said Ginny loudly, bringing everyone's eyes to her. "Who *are* you? Since everyone seems to know except me," she added in the direction of Harry, who had the grace to flush.

Unhurriedly, the figure raised long-fingered hands to the hem of the black hood and lowered it to rest on cloaked shoulders. "Hello, Ginny," said the younger Heir of Slytherin with a smile. "I told you I'd see you again."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 57: The Younger Heir of Slytherin (Year 7)

"Why, Draco," crooned a gloating feminine voice in the darkness. "How simply lovely to see you again."

"Draco Black is dead. I killed him to keep myself alive." The words emerged with the flat cadence of a fact too often recited, an attitude to which the speaker held tight. There might, despite the momentary weakness which had finally betrayed him and the deadened senses left over from the magic that had struck him, still be some chance of survival. "Use any potion, cast any spell. You will see I speak the truth."

"Will I?" the witch wondered, a breathy giggle threading through her words. "How clever of you to find a way to fool such things. You must tell me how." Her giggling escalated until she could barely speak. "But you will. You will indeed. You'll take me through *everything*, won't you."

The whisper of a blade sliding free of its sheath sent a chill down his back. "You'll take me through it all," the witch repeated, her voice suddenly cold and hard. "Since you may have tricked your words into falsehoods, but blood never lies. My blood, your blood, combined and properly spelled. If you are who you have seemed to be all these months, they shall tell me one answer, but if you are the man you deny, they will give me another..."

Fear attempted to close his throat, but he forced it back open. If this was the end, if he could brazen it out no longer, he would still deny his enemies the final satisfaction of seeing him cower. "Take my blood, then," he spat. "Much good may it do you."

"Oh, it will," the witch purred, and giggled again at his hiss when the swift sting of a blade scored his face, reopening his already scarred cheek. "Have you anything to say, any grand declarations to make, before I work my magic and expose you for who you are?"

"Just one." He pressed a hand to his chest, pulling together his courage for this final stand of defiance, then pushed himself upright and squared his shoulders. "My name is Reynard Beauvoi, and your bloody Dark Lord can kiss my arse and—"

Blue fire erupted in front of him, cutting off his final word. Then his eyes adjusted to the sudden light, and he made out the features of the witch who sat across from him, passing the blade of her silver dagger through the flames.

Shock held him frozen just long enough for the fire to die down, and for a small, warm hand to wrap possessively around his.

**Die?** suggested a mind-voice he had thought he would never hear again. **Like you did—or rather like you didn't?**

"Neenie," he breathed aloud, before his throat squeezed shut for an entirely different reason than

before.

**That's my name**, the younger witch informed him tartly. **Don't wear it out.**

**But I thought**— He bristled as he realized why he'd thought what he'd thought. **Dammit, you tricked me! You played up your voice, you kept it dark, all so I would think—**

**Four months, three weeks, two days, eighteen hours, and thirty-seven minutes**, Hermione shot back. **That's precisely how long I've thought you were *dead* . And you want to call me on the carpet about ninety seconds' worth of payback? I don't think so! Besides.** Her voice softened, losing its stridency, and he felt her shiver run through body and mind together. **I had to be sure. I had to *know* . Because the only thing worse than losing you in the first place would be thinking I had you back, and finding out too late I was wrong.**

**You and your sense-making.** He swallowed hard, twice, three times. **Would you mind if—**

**Oh, yes, of course. I'm sorry.** Neenie's hand tightened around his, and a familiar sinking, swimming sensation washed through and over him. He sank back to the floor, dimly sensing her lying down next to him, as his eyes closed and sleep carried him away—

They stood together in their favorite forested dreamworld, sunlight beaming bright on her joyous face, with its slender marking under her left eye. She stroked her fingers along her jawline, then touched them to his cheek, atop the scar which exactly matched her own.

"Welcome home, Fox," his twin said softly. "I've missed you."

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"*Luna?* " Ginny resisted the urge to rub her eyes, and settled for a surreptitious thump of heel against floor, verifying it was solid and she hadn't been whisked into a dreamworld without her knowledge. "But you're not—"

"I wasn't." Luna held up her left hand, in a motion with which Ginny had become familiar for herself in the past few months. "But now I am."

"The amulet." Ginny stared at the gold ring on Luna's finger with its round red stone, feeling a grin so wide it was practically idiotic spread across her face. "Amanda's amulet, with her blood inside it, to renew her bloodline once the curse was off. It came to *you!* "

"Who better?" Harry's eyes looked a bit brighter than usual behind his glasses, but his smile matched Ginny's own. "Alex did say we wouldn't have to swear the Oath again with his new Heir."

"And I *told* you his Heir could maybe be a girl!" Meghan was practically vibrating with satisfaction. "I told you, I told you, I *told* you!"

"We're gonna wi-in," Ron sing-songed, and Ginny smacked him on the shoulder before launching herself across the kitchen to hug her friend as tightly as she could.

"You're all right," she whispered into Luna's hair, satisfying herself of this fact with her arms, her ears, her nose, as the rest of the Pride closed in around them, all trying to talk at once. "I can't even believe it, you're all *right* —Merlin's cauldron, Luna, you *scared* us—"

"I'm sorry." Luna tightened her hug momentarily in token of her apology. "I never meant to. But once I got there, once I saw what I hadn't seen before—"

"Yes, how about that?" Ginny broke away to hold Luna at arm's length. "Can we *please* get some explanations for all of this?"

"I'd love to." Luna nodded towards one of the chairs beside the fire, and Ginny released her, noting from the corner of her eye Neville drawing his wand. A moment later, the floor of the kitchen was covered with cushions like the ones which usually littered the floor of the den room three stories above them.

*Very like.* Ginny sank onto her own favorite, her fingers brushing across the missing button she'd worried off one day during a Horcrux discussion. *No point in conjuring what you can borrow, I suppose.*

"Even better." Luna plumped herself down on one of the cushions as well and sighed happily, running her fingers through her dark blonde hair, which shone, Ginny noticed, faintly red in the light from the kitchen candles. "I've missed you all, so much. And I am sorry, we're both sorry, about having to frighten you the way we did." She nodded, with a grin, at Ron's sudden intake of breath and Meghan's little squeal. "Yes, that means what you think it does. And if I'm going to tell the story in order, it doesn't start with me—it starts with my Consort, with our Fox..."

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Neenie the cat lifted her nose and sniffed the air. The emotion-scents emanating from the other half of her furry curl were starting to settle into something approaching calm, and her own curiosity could no longer be restrained. Craning her neck around, she nipped the top of Snow Fox's left ear, dodging out of reach of his retaliating lunge with a feline sniff of amusement.

"You're better now," she said, reverting to human form and sprawling across the cushions of the outdoor den she'd conjured for them. "So, start talking."

"Why should I?" Fox asked with a sly smile as he did the same. "You were *mean* to me. Doubly mean, when the last thing I remember hearing is my darling Auntie Bella shouting a spell at me." He grimaced. "I forgot who I was supposed to be for a minute there when..."

"When Moony died?" Hermione finished, reaching across to take her twin's hand. "I would have too. It's all right."

"Wouldn't have been, if it weren't for Luna." Fox grinned briefly. "Knocked my dear auntie in the head before she could get the whole incantation out of her mouth." He shivered. "I don't even want to know what she was intending it to do."

"I can tell you what she did do, intentional or not." Hermione smiled at Fox's hopeful look, and conjured a mirror into the palm of her hand. "You've got a bit more hair still in the waking world, but otherwise..."

Fox stared into the mirror, lifting his fingers to brush reverently along the lines and corners of his face.

*Quite literally, his face.* Hermione didn't bother to hide her smile, as her brother had eyes for little other than his own restored self. *The piece of Bellatrix's spell that hit him must have reversed whatever he'd used to look like Lucius, and then I re-bonded us without using the spell to freeze our appearances.* She ran her fingers down a strand of her own hair, noting its subtle lightening in shade, the slight relaxing of its unrelenting bushiness. *Which means, Fox looks like Fox. The person he always wanted to be, and now the one he can be.*

*For good, this time.*

"Care to tell me what happened with the scars?" she asked lightly, bringing Fox's eyes (still gray, but now a subtler shade than his former startling silver) to her face. "Why mine healed over, but yours seems to have stayed?"

"Did it?" Fox frowned. "I didn't know. Must have something to do with blood—mine changed, yours didn't, so I suppose your half of the bond didn't recognize me anymore? Something like that."

"Your *blood* changed?" Hermione snapped her wrist to dismiss the mirror. "And while we're on the subject, how about you start explaining to me *why you're not dead!*"

"From the beginning?" Fox swirled his hand three times in the air, creating a growing spiral of darkness in front of them, which grew until it enveloped them, plunging them into the twilight of a candlelit corridor under Hogwarts. "Last time we saw each other to know it?"

"Yes, please." Neenie scooted over to within arm's reach of Fox, who promptly closed the distance and pulled her in tight. "And don't leave anything out."

Fox raised his left hand, which now bore, Hermione noticed in passing, a handsome golden band with a red stone ornamenting it, worn on the same finger where her engagement ring rested. "Shan't. Pack honor." A waggle of fingers animated the scene, with the dream-figure of Draco Black pacing at one end of the corridor, hand in his pocket. "So, it begins..."

Draco took a deep breath and smiled to himself. "That's right, Father," he murmured, the very stones of Hogwarts echoing his words into the corridors around him, "come and find me. This is where it ends. Only one of us will walk away this time."

"Indeed," Lucius's voice floated back to him. "And I fully intend that one to be me."

"That might be. And then, it might not." Draco laughed softly. "Either way, you'll never hurt my

family again. I won't let you."

"Won't you?" The smirk carried clearly through Lucius's tone. "And how will you accomplish this feat—when you are *dead*?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Draco laughed again, rising to his toes, deliberately angled away from the spot where his father's voice sounded. In the palm of his hand rested the ball of parchment Harry had enchanted with fire, ready to throw. "If you ask me nicely, maybe I'll tell—"

Lucius stepped around the corner behind him, his wand whipping down through the air, his lips opening to speak an incantation.

Draco spun in place and hurled his fiery weapon, his aim as dead-on as at any Quidditch match, the flame growing brighter as it hurtled down the length of corridor between the two.

"Moony's geas, the one he laid on Lucius a couple years ago," Fox murmured, nodding to the shocked and panicked look on Lucius's face as his wand hand was briefly engulfed by devouring flames. "It's why he couldn't get his spell off in time."

Hermione squeezed her brother's arm in appreciation as Lucius snarled, flinging aside the scorched and useless splinters with which he'd been left, and met Draco's charge with physical force. Robes swirled and twisted, blows were thrown and blocked, until at last father and son stood face to face and eye to eye, hands locked around each other's arms, staring one another down with hatred. The battle continued, Hermione knew, within their two minds, as they warred for supremacy in that arena as well, each trying to use the other's thoughts, memories, beliefs, against him. After a few seconds, Lucius began to smile, and Draco's breath hitched in pain.

"Not my best moment," admitted Fox as Lucius leaned forward, bearing down with all his weight, laughing under his breath while Draco fought to keep from crying out. "He felt me going after his magic, and got his hooks into mine first. Tore it right out of me, just like he'd done before." He winced. "Which hurts like hell, if I didn't say so already."

"You did." Hermione laid her free hand over the back of Fox's, smiling at the free flow of power between their two souls, the wide-open twin bond in all its fullness, as she knew Lucius had never intended for it to be used. "But then how—"

"Watch." Fox gestured to the figures before them as Lucius, his face filled with sneering glee, went to one knee to loom over Draco, who had slumped to the floor, leaning against the wall.

"How will you stop me now, boy?" the older wizard asked gloatingly, reaching out to caress Draco's face mockingly with one hand. Fox shuddered at the sight, tightening his grasp on Neenie's fingers. "How will you stop me from doing just exactly what I want? And what I want most—"

He yanked Draco's chin towards him and stared down into his eyes once more, silver meeting silver, gray locked on gray.

"There," said Fox, flicking his hand towards the image to dismiss it, leaving himself and Hermione in the warmth of their dreamworld summer afternoon. "That's when I understood everything. Why Luna had the vision, why I had to believe it, why it all had to be the way it did. Because of that moment, right there." He lay back against the cushions, closing his eyes. "Because of what Lucius tried to do to me, and what that meant I could do to him."

"Was he trying to dominate you?" asked Hermione doubtfully. "To make you acknowledge he was stronger?"

"In a way." Fox sighed. "He wasn't sane, Neenie, not by the end of it. He was twisted up inside by the way people he considered so inferior, some he didn't even think of as *people*, had beaten him so many times and so badly. Toss in a couple bouts in Azkaban, the second one with the werewolf curse added on, and you do not have a recipe for good mental balance. And he pulled together all that crazy anger and hatred and threw it at me, concentrating on how much he wanted me to *die*. I think..." Opening one eye, he peered up at her. "I think he was expecting that to leave me stunned. Petrified and helpless. Like it would a normal kid my age, who'd never given a passing thought to his own personal death. But that's not what happened."

"Of course not." Neenie snuggled down into the cushions beside her twin. "Because you'd been giving it a lot more than a passing thought, for almost two years now. So he tried to knock you out with that, and failed completely and utterly..."

"And threw himself off balance in the process." Fox nodded. "Like those moves Padfoot taught us in hand-to-hand, where you take the other person's momentum and use it against them. He expected me to be shocked and terrified by what he wanted for me—instead *he* got shocked, because I *wasn't* terrified, and then..."

A twiddle of his fingers brought the scene back to life around them. The two wizards, pale-blond, pale-faced, held one another's silver eyes unwaveringly until Lucius broke the contact he'd initiated, shaking his head like a punch-drunk fighter—

Draco lunged, his hand stabbing out from his side in a lightning-fast swipe.

Lucius hissed in pain, clapping his hand to his calf. "What—" he began, then looked down.

Hermione let out a slow breath of triumph as Lucius raised his hand to the level of his eyes, staring in dawning fear at the dark, coarse, powdery substance covering his palm.

"Forget something, Father?" Draco dangled his green-hilted dagger between two fingers, then lifted it to his lips and blew away the ashes which had moments before been blood. "Game over." Returning the dagger to its sheath, he settled himself more comfortably on the floor. "I win."

"No," Lucius croaked, shaking his head convulsively, horror and pain warring for place in his expression as his leg began to blacken and crumble around the wound inflicted by the silver blade. "No—Draco, please—"



"Too late for that now, Father." Draco's words might have been chipped from flint. "Too late for anything. Well, except for me to tell you what's going to happen now. After all, you're never too old for a bedtime story." He leaned forward, starting to smile, as Lucius whimpered in the back of his throat, staring in terror from his son to the ever-advancing line of black moving up his leg. "Once upon a time, there was a Death Eater named Lucius Malfoy, who had a little accident and lost his magic, so he decided to use his mind instead for a while. He came up with all sorts of plans and ideas for his friends, and his Master was very pleased with him. Very pleased indeed."

Lucius's eyes, which had been clouded with pain and confusion, suddenly cleared with a rush of shock and disbelief, and Draco laughed aloud. "That's right, Father. You're getting what you wanted. I'm going to be another you. Only I'm going to be better at it than you ever were. And while your Master tells me how wonderful I am, while he thinks I'm doing everything in my power to lift him up, I'll be doing everything I can to tear him down, him and all his Death Eaters with him. To riddle their every plan with holes." He smirked. "If you'll pardon the expression."

"You—" Lucius panted, open-mouthed, trying to push himself down the corridor away from Draco, though the lower half of his body was now almost entirely gone. "You'll never—"

"Get away with it? Maybe not." Draco shrugged. "Maybe I'll be found out in my first week and die a horrible death. Maybe I'll do no good for my family and friends. But." He grinned brightly. "Maybe I won't, and maybe I will. And there's no maybe about this one, *Father* ." Hermione couldn't remember ever hearing the title rendered with more venom. "*You will still be dead.*" He chuckled dryly. "Courtesy of your own stupidity, and that little present you got from my *true* father and his lady."

"Lupin." Lucius's voice was garbled, barely audible, the twisted rage in his face robbing it of its last traces of humanity. "Damn them—damn yo—"

The word choked off in his throat as the tide of black surged up through his chest, suffused his neck and head, and raced out to the tips of his fingers. An instant later, the tenuous cohesion of his body ceased, ashes crumbling onto one another with a sound like scrolls whispering together in a bag.

"In terrible pain and helpless anger, betrayed by his own treachery," Hermione murmured, watching Draco breathe slowly and deeply, fighting back his urge to be sick. "And knowing that his death serves a cause he hates and hastens the downfall of his beloved Master."

"Seemed like the proper send-off for him," agreed Fox. "And I hadn't really thought about it up until that point, but it all just fell together right then and there, as I was speaking. He was dead, or going to be, so it couldn't have been him in Luna's vision..."

"So it must have been you, pretending to be him." Hermione nodded slowly. "Which makes everything about it make sense. Except one thing."

"Why Luna never realized it was me all along?" Fox chuckled, leaning back to watch his memory-self hurrying along the Hogwarts corridors towards Letha's office. "I wondered about that too."

Until I got the chance to ask her, of course..."

---

"I can't See when I'm already having a vision," said Luna, raising her hands in front of her eyes like blinders. "They both use the same part of my magic, so when it's busy with giving me a vision, I can't See any of the usual things I can. Including whether people are lying or not." She smiled ruefully. "I should have worked that out a long time ago, because I didn't see *any* kind of animal-shape around the person who looked like Lucius Malfoy, and I ought to have seen one. Either wolf, or fox."

"But then, we wouldn't all have thought Draco was going to die." Meghan grimaced. "Which, I hate that it was a good thing all along, but it was. Because he got himself ready to die, and that's why he lived."

"Exactly." Luna pressed Meghan's hand. "But you have to remember to always call him Fox or Reynard from now on, because he swore an oath that he would never use his old names again. It's how he could tell even Voldemort himself that Draco Black was dead, and it sounded like the truth." She giggled. "And I'm getting way, way ahead of myself. That was after my vision happened, and we aren't even there yet!"

"So, get on with it." Harry leaned back on his cushions, rolling his shoulders luxuriously. "Or rather, *get on with it*," he added in Parseltongue, and Luna stuck out her tongue at him before twirling her wand three times in the air to reanimate the memory scene of a Hogwarts office she'd summoned for the Pride to watch.

"That's something I'd always wondered about," said Ron, watching the figure of Draco as he withdrew a wad of Muggle money and a magical moneybag from the drawers of the office's desk, then selected a handful of vials and flasks from the potions cupboard on the wall. After taking a swig from one of his chosen ones, he began clearing the shelves of the other samples with sweeps of his hand, crushing those which didn't break on impact with short, sharp jabs of his foot. "Why'd he go to the trouble of making all that mess?"

"So nobody could tell what he'd taken, and figure out from that who'd been there." Luna pointed out the vials with her wand's tip. "Two doses of Animagus forcer, a burning potion, the short-term Body Bind he used on Hermione and its antidote for himself, a couple of potions for using while he waited for the vision's time to come, and then the one that really would have given him away." She shot a shower of red sparks at it. "The Aging Potion."

"It was just that simple." Ginny shook her head in disbelief. "All this time we've been hating Lucius Malfoy and wanting to kill him, he's already been dead!"

"Which was the best cover we could possibly have had, Fox and I," said Luna as memory-Draco pulled the door of Professor Black's office shut, then strode away with his pocketsful of potions, his mouth twisting to one side. Clearly he did not relish the next few tasks on his mental agenda. "The Death Eaters saw you grieving for us, and furious with Lucius, and thought everything was exactly the way it seemed to be." She grinned, looking distinctly impish. "People talk a *lot* when

they think you can't understand them!"

"You become just part of the furniture." Neville waved a hand around his head, indicating his own gift of whispering people invisible. "Part of what they expect to see. So rather than change their expectations, they explain away any little discrepancies to themselves. Which is how you got away with only pretending to be under the Imprimatus for so long, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But that's for later too." Luna frowned, glancing up at the image of Draco, which was sprinkling the burning potion onto Lucius's robes, rendering them almost indistinguishable from the remains of the body which had once worn them. "I think we can skip ahead a bit from here. Hermione's already told you what happened in the corridor. Though of course she didn't know who was truly talking to her..."

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"I should have known that was you." Hermione punched Fox in the shoulder as they watched the reenactment of their encounter under Hogwarts. "You quoted *Joseph* at me, the very first thing you did!"

"Guilty." Fox raised his hands in surrender. "Some part of me was probably hoping you'd catch onto it and haul me home by the ear. But most of me knew I had to go through with what I was doing. Not only to avoid a time paradox with the vision, but because we were never getting a better chance to slip a couple of totally unsuspected spies inside the Death Eaters."

"Since no one would dare question a wizard who'd made the two ultimate sacrifices for a pureblood—his magic, and the continuation of his line—but still fought back enough to kidnap and incapacitate a valued member of the other side." Hermione watched the figure of "Lucius" stroll around the corner from her own recumbent self, then slide into the nearest available alcove. "What are you up to now?"

"Getting ready to hide." Fox tapped his fingers against the back of his hand, mimicking his memory-self's motions of counting. "Making sure, absolutely sure, I have everything lined up, because I don't have any backup this time. It's all on me."

Four potion vials sat on the stone floor of Hogwarts, carefully tied into a knotted length of cloth, their lids loose but still fully engaged. The memory-figure raised a fifth beaker to toast them, then drank its contents down.

Hermione laughed aloud as a very familiar shape appeared before her. "Fox!"

"Yes?"

"Not you." She punched him again. "Or yes, you, but you then, not you now. *That's* how you hid. You used the Animagus forcer to turn into Snow Fox and headed out to the Forest!"

"I did, sister-lady, I did indeed." Fox bowed from his half-reclining position. "With the intent, which I carried out, of using the other dose the next day to get back to human form, then changing

my looks with a time-delay brew and taking the Knight Bus to Godric's Hollow to meet up with Luna and fulfill the vision. Which is why I had to be so careful about where I was putting all those potions, because if I'd slipped that vial of forcer inside my robes by accident..." He gulped mock-nervously. "No way back. At least, not any easy one."

"What would you have done then?" asked Hermione, watching the brown fox with its potion-holding sling scuttle out of a secret passage and bound towards the welcoming trees on the other side of the Hogwarts lawns. "To get back to being human?"

"Probably flagged down one of the Pack-parents after Dumbledore's funeral, and talked really bloody fast to convince them this was a good idea. Once I could talk again, of course..." Fox shut his eyes, his face stilling in the way Hermione associated with overwhelming emotion. "I let him die, Neenie," he said softly. "No, not even that. I *helped* ." His lips and throat worked, as though he were fighting once again not to be sick. "I held him still so he could be murdered." A tired, humorless laugh escaped him. "What is it with me and father figures? Padfoot better watch out for himself..."

Changing forms, Neenie insinuated herself onto her brother's lap, and laid a paw on his arm. **Do you want me to go through all the reasons why it's not your fault, she asked silently, or would they not matter right now?**

"Wouldn't matter, but thanks for offering." Fox exhaled shakily. "And you haven't even heard the worst bit yet."

Neenie curled up into a ball and began to purr. **I'm listening.**

"I know." Fox's hand stroked gently behind her ears. "It's just so hard to say it..." Another trembling breath, in, then out. "Neenie, he knew. Moony *knew* . I can't put my finger on when he picked it up, but at some point he worked out who I was." His voice quavered, and Neenie purred louder, letting her love and the sorrow they shared sweep through both of them with the sound. "I *know* he knew before..."

Shaking, he rolled onto his side, holding her close, tears forcing their way past his closed eyelids. **Why?** he demanded, even his mental voice thickened with grief. **Why this, why now, why us?**

Rather than try to answer the unanswerable, Neenie nuzzled his face, then washed away the tear tracks with her raspy tongue. **Tell me how you know he knew,** she said when the worst of the chaos in his mind had begun to calm.

**Like this.** Fox's hand, which had been rhythmically stroking her side, paused long enough to press down three fingers in order, thumb, ring, middle.

**Marauder sign?** Neenie frowned, her whiskers twitching down and back. **I don't understand.**

**You will.** Within the mind-space they shared, Fox brought up a memory. He stood at its center, in his guise as Lucius, holding Moony in front of him, clasping his arms. Moony, one of his small

and patient smiles on his face, had wrapped his own hands back around "Lucius's" wrists. **See that?**

**Yes, I do now.** Neenie watched as the memory came to life, as Moony's fingers pressed down the same code Fox had used to her only moments before, sending a message her father would surely never have intended for Lucius Malfoy. **And you know he meant that. Without a question, without a doubt, without any blame or anger attached. He loved—he loves—you, and me, and all of us.** She cuddled against his chest, purring once more. **And just like I never stopped loving you, I'll never stop loving him either.**

"Like I said before. You and making sense." Fox laughed shakily, his fingers trailing warmth down Neenie's furred back. "Only difference is, I didn't really die..."

**I didn't know that, not for sure.** Delicately, Neenie planted her teeth around Fox's chin, bearing down hard enough to make her point. **And enough strange things have happened in this war that I'm not going to give up hope just yet. Are you with me?**

"Might as well be." Fox sighed, nestling further down into the cushions. Then Neenie felt his senses pop back to alertness. "Wait a minute. 'Not for sure'?"

**Long story.** Neenie cat-snickered. **Tell you later.**

"Oh, come on! You can't leave it there!"

**Watch me.**

Fox groaned aloud. "And to think, I *wanted* to come back to this..."

---

"I can't believe we never saw it before." Ginny shook her head wonderingly. "That vision makes perfect sense, as long as *Fox* is the person you're talking to, and *Lucius* is the one who's dead!"

"Did you love him so much, the one who lies buried here?" Luna quoted, with a giggle. "No, as a matter of fact, I didn't like him very much at all. But we have to go back to the funeral for one second before we get to the vision, because I did something there I don't think any of you saw." A swirl of her wand brought that scene into focus. "While I was putting my letter in the box of permission, I was also taking something out."

Harry squinted at the letter half-hidden in Luna's dainty hand, in the act of vanishing up her sleeve, as he dimly remembered Ginny teaching her how to do. "Is that Danger's writing? Why did—" His eyes widened as a thought raced across his mind. "Merlin's pants. I forgot. How could I forget? Danger's been attacked!" He scrambled to his feet. "There's a spy, someone here at Headquarters, who was supposed to go after Danger with poison, the kind that's not just to kill *her*, but any Healers who try to help her—"

"Harry, calm down!" Luna caught Harry's arm, stopping him before he could Disapparate. "She's

alive, I promise!"

"You're sure?" Harry winced as the words left his mouth. "Never mind, stupid question. Of course you're sure. But *something* must have happened to her, or Moony wouldn't have reacted the way he did." He thumped the heel of his hand against his forehead. "God, *how* could I forget about that?"

"Watching one of your dads get killed, finding the younger Heir of Slytherin we've been looking for, and having a close encounter with Voldemort?" Ginny suggested, tugging him back down to a sitting position. "I'm guessing on the last one, but isn't that usually what happened if the blood-bond between you and Mr. Moony got cut off?"

"Yeah." Harry exhaled. "And this one was *weird*. Tell you about it later, though. So Danger fought off the spy, whoever it was? She's going to be all right?"

Luna closed her eyes. "She was not killed outright, but the poison flows even now in her veins," she said in a distant tone. "And her last waking thoughts were of those she loves, of keeping them safe from the fate she could not evade. She has used the gift of my House to ensure no Healer can touch her, for she knew that to do so would be to invite their deaths along with her own." Opening her eyes, she looked around at the shocked expressions of the Pride. "Those deaths are what Voldemort intended," she said, her voice returning to a more normal cadence. "That with one strike, he would kill not only Mrs. Danger, but Mrs. Letha and Meghan as well. And since he always meant to do this once he'd captured Mr. Moony..."

"Like taking somebody's queen and both their rooks, and a bishop just for good measure, all on the same move." Ron scowled, pounding a fist against an unoccupied cushion. "Bloody coward. Couldn't fight fair if he tried."

"He thinks those are our weaknesses." Neville guided Meghan's hand to the pocket containing his handkerchief. "Believing in fair play and justice, and caring for each other so much, or even at all. But it didn't work the way he intended, did it?" he asked Luna, then grinned briefly at her. "Blood-sister?"

"No, it didn't." Luna giggled. "Blood-brother. Isn't that funny, how even such a silly little thing as that moment on the train those years ago had a part to play!"

"I gave her a bloody nose by accident just before we got to Hogwarts, our second year, her first," Neville reminded the rest of the Pride. "And she scratched my cheek with a butterbeer cap and mixed the blood together, and said that made us blood-siblings. It was supposed to be a joke, but I guess enough of the magic from the Pride-bonding was still hanging around that it actually ended up happening a little."

"And all those connections make us stronger, not weaker." Ginny laid her hand beside Harry's, and smiled when he slid his fingers into hers. "Even when some of them break. What happens now, Luna? Or don't you know?"

"If nothing interferes," said Luna quietly, "Mrs. Danger will not live out this present month."

"All right, then." Harry sat up straighter. "Something's going to have to interfere."

The Pride turned to look at their alpha. "Like what?" asked Ron after a few seconds of silence.

"I don't know yet. But I'm through with sitting back and watching people I love get hurt or killed without being able to do something about it. And Seers don't say things without a reason." Harry looked sharply at Luna, who returned his look levelly. "So you wouldn't have said 'if nothing interferes', if nothing could. Would you?"

Luna shook her head slowly. "All the information you need," she intoned, "is already within your grasp."

Meghan lifted her face from Neville's shoulder, revealing her eyes bloodshot and watery but her lips firmly set. "Can we please hear more of the story, Luna?" she asked, her breath hitching once on her friend's name. "I'm sorry, but I need something good. Something happy. Please." She squeezed her eyes shut tight. "Otherwise I'll just sit here and think, and think, and *think*, about Moony being *dead*, and Danger poisoned and *dying*, and how I can't do *anything* —"

"What would you do, Pearl?" asked Harry, a faint chord of memory chiming at the back of his mind. "If you had the chance."

"That's not nice." Meghan glared at him. "When we already know I *can't*."

"It isn't about being nice. I think it might be important." Harry glanced at Luna, and got only a calm look in return. "Just tell me. What would you be willing to give, or do, if it meant Danger wouldn't die?"

"Anything," Meghan whispered, leaning into Neville's arms and shutting her eyes again. "You know that."

"Yes, I do." Harry leaned across to brush a kiss onto her cheek with his fingertips. "But I'm pretty sure you had to say it anyway." *Remind me later*, he signed to Neville, who nodded. "Now, I'm with you. Let's get back to the story." He sat back on his cushion. "I've got a feeling we're about to hit the really good part."

"I think so." Luna smiled, waving her wand in three tight circles to move the scene along. "But then, I'm biased. So yes, I took Mrs. Danger's letter from the box of permission, and came back later and met my Fox at the grave, and said I would go with him, just the way I'd Seen it happen before. And he walked away with me, until we were out of sight, and then..."

---

Starwing the owl mantled her wings, forcing the wizard on whose arm she perched to stop. Pushing off from her place, she transformed in midair, standing up as Luna Lovegood once more. "I have something for you," she said softly, reaching into her pocket. "Something very important..."

Before she could put her hand on the item she meant, her companion had his fingers wrapped around her arm tight enough to bruise (though she doubted he realized it) and was bending over her so close that the hood of his cloak blocked out the afternoon light, his hungry gaze claiming her as the rightful prize for his victory. She sighed a little, entirely contented to be so claimed, before she closed her eyes and let go her self-restraint, the better to satisfy the ravenous nature of his kiss.

"No fair," she whispered when they broke reluctantly apart. "I wanted to do that to you first."

"Of course it's fair." Draco pulled back and grinned at her, his true face easily visible to her Seer's eyes through the mask of the Aging Potion. "We're in love, and we're off to fight a war. What could be fairer than that?" Worry mounted into his eyes. "Though I still think you're crazy for coming out here, Luna. What if it hadn't been me?"

"Then..." Luna drew his dagger from her other pocket, waggling the blade at him. "I would have done what we always planned on doing. The potion came together perfectly, and now we have it if we ever need it." Reversing the dagger, she held it out to him. "I can think of a few Death Eaters where the Imprimatus might be an improvement."

Draco accepted the dagger, ran a finger along the flat of the blade, and dropped it into his own pocket. "I," he said with a grimace, "can think of more than a few."

"I'm sure you can." Luna giggled, and produced the envelope she'd originally been reaching for. "Here. This is what I brought for you."

"So it is." Draco frowned, sliding his finger under the flap and drawing out the single folded sheet. "Who could—" He stopped as he glanced down the letter at the signature. "Luna," he said carefully. "Did you know this was from Amanda?"

"Yes." Luna nodded. "I didn't know what it was, but I knew who it came from. Why?"

"Er." Draco looked at her sideways, then shrugged. "No reason. Let me see here..." He held the parchment where she could see it. "Seems to be a map. Map of..." He glanced around. "Yep, right where we are. Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Because you know Amanda could See things, like I can?" Luna suggested, tracing the dotted line on the map with her finger. "It shows us where we need to go next. Right into the old part of the graveyard."

"Also not surprising." Folding up the parchment, Draco tucked it away. "My lady, will you walk with me?"

"Kind sir, I would be delighted." Luna tucked Draco's hand through her arm, and they set out together.

The gravestones around them grew gradually more weathered and worn as they walked from



evening into night, until by the shining of the first faint stars they stopped beside the grave to which Amanda's letter had directed them. Luna tilted her head, invoking her power to See the all-but-invisible carvings on the headstone. "William Beauvoi," she read aloud. "Cousin and friend. Here he waits for the curse to end—"

"And a ruddy long time you've been about getting here, too," said an irritable voice, as a shimmer of light solidified over the grave into the form of a slender, scowling wizard with a familiarly pointed cast of face, his robes unfastened to reveal a loose-collared shirt and breeches. "What're you staring at, boy?" he demanded of Draco. "Never seen a revenant before?"

"Actually, no." Draco drew Luna a step back, closer to him. "I've heard one a few times, usually inside my head—that would be your ancestor Dafydd, if I've traced the family tree correctly—"

"You did." William nodded once. "And you're descended from that bloody murdering bastard Lucius Malfoy. What've you got to say for yourself?"

Draco's lips thinned. "That I'm not him," he said deliberately. "That I make my own choices and live my own life, and that includes throwing everything he believed in off the carpet." He smiled suddenly. "Whichever of him you're referring to. Yours, or mine."

William laughed aloud, slapping a hand against his leg. "Well said, young sir! I approve! And what're you doing here, missy?" He swung around to face Luna. "Following your laddie, wherever he may go?"

"Following my fate, and my duty to fight evil by every means I possess," Luna countered. "And if that fate and that duty took me away from him, I would be faithful to them instead of him." She laced her fingers through Draco's. "I wouldn't like it, but I would do it. Because it would be right."

"*Very* well said." William nodded, a grin very like Draco's most puckish expression creasing the sides of his face. "I rather like you, young lady. And I believe this pair will do," he added towards the headstone, where two more gleams of light were beginning to flicker. "Yes, I believe they'll do quite well indeed."

Opening his mouth to ask another question, Draco closed it rapidly instead as the newcomers' forms were revealed. Amanda Slytherin, her face flickering every few moments into that of Amanda Smythe, smiled at him and took two gliding steps forward, William moving respectfully aside for his many-greats-grandmother. "Thank you," she said to both him and Luna, her hands reaching out but stopping short of them. "Without your help, I would never have found my way home."

"You're welcome." Draco shook his head bemusedly. "But what did we do?"

"You reminded me how strong love truly is, and what it's capable of." Amanda glanced back at her Dafydd, who leaned against a corner of the headstone, watching her patiently. "I sustained myself all those years with my hatred and anger, and never once realized how they were eating away at my soul, how near I was to becoming the very thing I professed to be fighting against. Cold, rigid,

ready to condemn and destroy anyone who *might* be my enemy, rather than look back at my own principles and admit there could be faults in them. But then I met you."

Amanda's robes fluttered around her as she looked between Luna and Draco. "You, and your Pack and Pride with you, refused to let war, or grief, or even a vision of death and betrayal break you to pieces forever. Instead you trained, and learned, and used what you felt to make yourselves more ready. You helped one another, and accepted that help, as hard as that sometimes was for you. And where you broke down one day, you built up the next, and refused to hold that failure against one another. Or against yourselves." Her insubstantial eyes shimmered with tears. "Thank you, more than I can say, for helping me to remember that where repentance is true, true love can always forgive."

Luna squeezed Draco's hand. "You're welcome," she said, dropping a little curtsey. "So is your soul healed, then?"

"Yes." Amanda turned in a circle, raising her arms above her head. "Yes, it is. I can finally move on—we can move on," she corrected as Dafydd coughed politely. "Since my love, with his usual pigheaded stubbornness, swore that he would never do so until I could go with him, if it took me a thousand years. Which it very nearly did."

"Ah, but the changes from the world we knew have made for fascinating watching." Dafydd came forward to his lady's side, his hand closing over Amanda's as naturally as Draco's had over Luna's earlier. "And since William's day, I have had the added responsibility of seeking those who might be willing to let our bloodlines be born again in them, who were also worthy of that great honor." He smiled. "I believe that search is at an end. Grandson, if you would?"

"Gladly." William turned to face the living pair. "Draco Regulus Black, son of Narcissa," he said formally. "Do you wish to become a son of the house of Beauvoi? To take that ancient and honorable name for your own, and live so as to bring it new honor every day?" A familiar one-sided smirk crept onto his face. "To destroy forever the name and bloodline of a traitor and kinslayer, who deserves to be remembered only in shame and infamy?"

"I do." Draco spoke the words firmly, without a trace of uncertainty or regret. "But I do have one proviso." He gestured at his face and body. "I will need some way to keep my appearance intact until I am no longer needed as a spy among our enemies. Can that be done?"

"It can, and will," said Dafydd, nodding in approval. "The blood you take will not alter how you look until the effects of your disguising potion are counteracted. Should you need to wear another face for a time, turn the ring until the stone sits against your palm, and only the gold band is exposed. While it lies so, you will bear the face and form of the one whose blood you have taken, mine for you, my lady's for yours." He smiled. "No doubt you can find certain uses for such an appearance, in a household so full of the foolish and superstitious."

"No doubt." Draco nodded his thanks and stepped back.

"Luna Marie Lovegood, daughter of Anita and of Gerald." William turned to her. "Do you wish to

become a daughter of the line of Slytherin? To raise that name to the greatness it has always sought, but walking hand in hand with good rather than with evil? To join the gifts you already possess to the inborn gifts of that bloodline, and become thereby the greatest Seer of your generation?"

"I do." Luna bowed her head, smiling to herself.

"Very well." William gestured towards the headstone, which settled a little with a groaning noise. On its top edge, two small compartments opened, revealing a matched pair of gold rings, beautifully crafted to resemble snakes twined together, red gemstones clasped between their mouths. "Come forward, receive what you have accepted, and be welcomed into your new family."

"Not yet." Luna tightened her grasp on Draco's hand as he started forward. "There's one other thing we ought to do first."

From her pocket, she drew out Mrs. Danger's letter of permission, and handed it across to him.

Draco read through the few lines once, then twice, before looking back at her with narrowed eyes. "You're trying to propose to me, aren't you, Miss Lovegood?" he inquired.

"I have permission too." Luna displayed the note she'd had her father write on her brief trip home. "Besides, it only makes sense. Two rings, three witnesses..."

"A change of name." Draco sighed, looking back towards the grave where they had met. "I might as well go all the way and change the rest of mine. It'll help throw off any spells that might be looking for me." He winked at Luna. "Besides, I've never much liked mine anyway. I've even got a new one in mind already."

"But you still haven't answered me." Luna pulled a long face. "Don't you love me after all?"

Her beloved looked over at Dafydd and William. "It's always going to be like this, isn't it?" he asked.

"Wise beyond your years, young Fox." Dafydd raised an eyebrow blandly at Amanda's indignant huff. "But it does make sense. Rejoining the two lines at their new foundation, so that Beauvoi is the name of the Heirs of Slytherin once again."

"A very fitting name," Amanda added, relenting enough to smile at her husband. "To remind those who love ambition that they must always keep beauty and goodness in their sight as well."

"Well, then." Fox reached over and picked up the two rings, handing the heavier of the two to Luna. "Shall I start things off?"

"If you like."

Fox wiggled his eyebrows at her. "I do," he said, making her smile, and raised her fingers to his lips before continuing. "I, Reynard Beauvoi, formerly known as Draco Regulus Black," he added

with a glance towards the letter of permission where it lay open on the ground, "take you, Luna Marie Lovegood, to be my lawful wedded wife. This day I swear to hold your hand through sunshine and storm, to guard your heart through joy and through pain, and to live my life by your side, forsaking all others, so long as it is granted me to do so. In token of which, before these witnesses, do I give you this ring." He slid the slimmer, more delicate band onto her finger, stopping just before it reached the juncture with her palm.

"I, Luna Marie Lovegood," Luna took up the ritual, "take you, Reynard Beauvoi, to be my lawful wedded husband." The ring on her finger warmed to her touch as she spoke, and pulsed faintly in time with her heart. "This day I swear to stand by your side through good times and bad, to treasure your love through happiness and tears, and to join my life unto yours, forsaking all others, so long as it is granted me to do so. In token of which, before these witnesses, do I give you this ring." She slipped the broad, ornate ring onto his finger, stopping, as he had, before it quite settled into place.

"As you have spoken, as you have intended, so let it be done," said Amanda, raising her hands. "From this day forth, where once there were two, now let there be one." She smiled at Fox. "You may kiss the bride."

Fox smiled back at her, then turned his full attention to Luna. "Going to be a hell of a ride," he whispered as he laced his fingers with hers, sliding their two rings home. "Think it'll be worth it?"

Luna drew a long breath of wonder as she felt Amanda's blood slip into her veins, running swiftly through her body to mingle with who she already was. "It will be," she said with certainty. "*I know*."

Leaning forward, she kissed her new husband, and was kissed by him, with all the love and promise two lifetimes could hold.

When the kiss at last broke off, the Beauvois stood alone by a silent, ancient grave. Above, the stars shone brightly down, twinkling as though they too wished to bear witness to the compacts spoken and sealed in this place.

"Come, my dear Starwing," said Fox, assuming the manner of Lucius Malfoy as though he were swirling on the villain's cloak for a Christmas pantomime with the Pack. "You will hail the Knight Bus, and transform me so that I may ride within your cloak, and together we will return to the home of my ancestors to show the Dark Lord what manner of present I have brought him."

Luna curtsied deeply, burying her giggles under a flood of calm and confident joy, and drew her wand to begin her masquerade without delay. The elder Heir of Slytherin, after all, deserved a chance to greet the newest member of his family.

*Even if he won't know who I really am until it's far, far too late.*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 58: Left, Given, Stolen, Born (Year 7)

Brian Li sat silently beside his own bed, cradling the delicate hand of the witch who lay upon it, her breathing soft and slow. He couldn't remember ever being so angry or so shaken before, not even when a sympathetic-eyed Healer had confirmed his suspicions about the "dog" which had sunk its fangs into his arm on a moonlit night some years earlier.

*But that was all about me. I was the only one who was going to be affected, so long as I took the right precautions.*

*Now, it's about someone I love.*

*Someone I wanted to protect, and didn't.*

"Corona," he said quietly. "I know you're awake."

Corona's muscles tensed. Brian tightened his grip enough to keep her from pulling away, and after one or two tugs she sighed and relaxed. "Who did I kill?" she whispered, a tear welling up from the corner of her right eye. "Why am I still alive?"

"You haven't killed anyone, and you're alive because of Danger." Brian watched the tear begin its downward journey along Corona's face. "She must have been able to see that you weren't yourself. That you were being controlled. Under the Imperius." He wished he could spit, but not all the spitting in the world would rid his mouth of this foul taste. "Cast by your sister Elladora, after we fought the giants last summer."

"I tried to fight." A second tear joined the first as Corona spoke, in small, breathy sentences. "I tried so hard. But the curse was so strong when it was on me. I could only do little things."

"Like what?"

"It made me brew a poison. In Aletha's workroom." Corona tensed again, and her fingers clutched at Brian's. "I couldn't stop it, but I left out one drop of the worst ingredient. And then it made me go upstairs and attack Danger. I couldn't stop that either, but I could move slowly, be clumsy, strike at her arm instead of her heart. I was hoping and praying she would see, she would understand, she would kill me before..." Her words shuddered to a halt. "I hurt her. I know I hurt her. And the poison was meant to kill her, to kill Aletha and Meghan, to break the Pack to pieces and send the Pride out of control—"

"It didn't happen like that." Brian found a clean handkerchief in one of his pockets and laid it across Corona's other hand. "Aletha and Meghan are perfectly fine, and yes, you hurt Danger, but you didn't kill her. There may still be some way to save her."

"Not with that poison." Corona rolled onto her side, facing away from Brian, though he maintained

his hold on her fingers. "Not once it's in her blood. It may not have killed her right away, but no Healer in this world can make her well again now. And it's my fault."

"Is it, now?" Brian surprised himself by achieving a tolerable facsimile of the withering tone his mother had used on him when she'd had enough of his despairing attitude towards his lycanthropy. "Your fault you trusted your sister, and she betrayed you? Your fault you couldn't completely throw off one of the strongest curses known to magic? I wasn't aware I was going to be married to Superwitch."

"You can't still mean that." Corona tried again to pull away. "I was being controlled all the time we were out there together, nothing I said can possibly be true—"

"No, you weren't." Brian held on more firmly than before. "Aletha examined you after she'd finished Healing you, and she says the variant of the Imperius that was used on you was almost entirely dormant. It was only active for very brief periods, and only when you were alone. So nothing that happened while you and I were together could possibly have been affected by it. But." He grimaced, and let the expression bleed into his tone of voice. "That doesn't stop me from feeling that I should have seen or known something. That I should have somehow seen the future, and kept this from happening. Kept you from being used, from being violated, like this. So if you can forgive me—"

"I forgive you?" Corona rolled back over and sat up, staring at him. "What could there possibly be to forgive? None of this was your fault!"

Slowly, Brian nodded, and watched the corollary dawn in Corona's eyes.

"If you want me to go away, I will," he said when the shock had faded from her face enough that he thought she might be able to hear him. "But I mean exactly what I'm saying. If you *want* me to go. Not if you think I *ought* to go, or that you're somehow unworthy of me because your sister abused your love for her and forced you into actions you would never have taken willingly. You fought back against that coercion, and because you did, two of our friends are still alive who wouldn't have been otherwise. Three, if you count yourself. Which I do."

Still holding her hand tightly, he leaned forward a little. "I love you, Corona," he said quietly. "Please, don't leave me now."

---

Aletha sat on the floor in Remus and Danger's bedroom, wrestling with a conundrum.

*Remus...* Her throat tightened even to think the words, but she mentally scowled it open again and continued. *Remus is dead. He died by the Killing Curse, and he had only been dead a few moments when Sirius brought him to me, so his body is undamaged.* She glanced up at the bed, where that body lay, under her best Stasis Spell to ensure it remained undamaged. *And if things had turned out differently with Danger, I would want to restart his heart and his breathing, to keep from overstraining their physical bond while we studied how to break it without harming her. As it is...*

"As it is, I should still do that same thing." She blinked into her Healing-sight, as she had already ten times or more, and studied with a soft hiss the slow ravages of the poison through Danger's body. "There's no point in stressing her system more than need be. She's unconscious, so she isn't suffering, and there may be nothing else I can do for her, but I *can* do that."

*But I wonder if I shouldn't do something else first.*

Beside Aletha on the floor lay the folder of clippings she had once showed the Lupins, the culmination of her researches on possible ways to restore the fertility of a werewolf. The potions she had discovered, though they would be effective, had so many poisonous compounds involved that the only way to administer them safely would be on a body which was shut down, which could have tiny portions of its circulation artificially stimulated for the potions to take effect.

*That is to say, a body which is dead.*

*And I happen to have one of those on hand at the moment.*

*The only question is, should I? When I have no way to get his consent or Danger's? Hermione is their legal next of kin, and empowered to make these decisions now that she's seventeen, so I should probably ask her, but just the simple fact of losing them is going to send that logical mind of hers out of orbit for a while...*

Closing her eyes, she leaned back against the wall, thinking of Remus, of Remus and Hermione, of his startled pleasure when she'd added his name to hers as a birthday present, of his disbelieving joy when he'd been confirmed as her guardian under magical law.

*He thought for so long that he would be the last Lupin. That after he was gone, no one would ever say his name again. That because of what he was, he could never give anything to the future.*

Aletha blinked out of her half-trance, her mind made up.

*This is exactly the sort of gift he would want to be remembered for giving.*

*And I think Hermione will agree with me on that.*

Scooping up her notes and getting to her feet, she Disapparated.

She had potions to brew, and not much time to brew them in.

---

Sirius leaned against one of the walls in the drawing room, staring at his family tapestry without truly seeing it. His mind was busy circling around the fate he'd heard outlined in Corona's shaky voice through his monitoring spell, the fate he and his Pack had dodged so narrowly it made him shiver to think about it.

*Moony dead, Danger dead, Letha and Pearl dead trying to help them. Yeah, I think that would*



*have stolen what's left of my sanity pretty effectively, and what was left of the Pride would've come shooting off the rails right after me. I can see us now, charging out of here hell-bent on vengeance, and the Death Eaters snickering up their sleeves and setting ambush points around Malfoy Manor, knowing all they'd have to do is wait...*

Thinking of that spacious mansion drew Sirius's eyes automatically to the area of the tapestry where his family crossed with the house so named.

*Or where we—used to? He frowned, striding across the room to get a better look. What the hell happened to this thing? It wasn't like this yesterday, or even an hour or two ago—*

Training clamped down around him, controlling his drop to the floor, as he stared at the golden words ornamenting the cloth. Narcissa's name gleamed in its proper place, as it had since Aletha's restoration work the year before, but beneath it, where the brief span of Draco's life had previously been recorded, a new entry now shone.

*Reynard D. Beauvoi*

*Born 1980*

*Twin-bonded 1994*

*Blood-adopted, married 1997*

"Well, then." Unable to stop his grin from spreading, Sirius laid his fingers gently against the name. "Even wild-arse guesses sometimes come off, now don't they?"

---

"How did Fox keep anyone from noticing he wasn't a werewolf?" Neville asked Luna, tapping the side of his nose. "I know Malfoy used to be in charge of the werewolves who looked up to the Death Eaters, after Greyback died."

"I'm such a nargle-brain." Luna laughed. "Imagine me forgetting to tell you that! He used some of the potion he and Hermione helped develop for Corona. The one that makes an ordinary human smell like a werewolf to other werewolves, or Animagi. And when we started running low, he tweaked the recipe a little and gave it to Professor Snape to brew, pretending it was part of a larger project he needed done. Just like the burning potion."

"What did you use that for?" Meghan frowned. "It wouldn't be very safe in a potion piece, because if it dripped it might set *you* on fire instead of the person you're aiming at..."

"Which is why we put it in grenades, and carried those instead." Luna cupped her hands, as though holding the thin balls of conjured glass she'd named. "When we needed to appear or disappear as Amanda and Dafydd, and we wanted to startle people into looking away, we just threw one on the floor. It smashed and flared up—thank you," she added as Harry conjured a burst of flame above her hands, "and everyone was so surprised by the fire that they never noticed us dodging into secret passages, or Echo Apparating us away. And yes, before you ask." She smiled a little. "She did know who we were."

"That explains so much." Ginny glanced towards the door of the house-elves' room. "It never made sense to me that Malfoy could have used what was left of Dobby's bond to force Echo to work for him, when Dobby was freed so long ago. Especially when that also meant breaking through the Fidelius. But if Echo wanted to be there, if she sneaked out of here under her own power instead of being dragged away, then it all makes sense."

"Explains why Tonks could free her, too." Ron cupped one hand around his opposite wrist loosely. "It shouldn't have worked, not if Malfoy'd had any kind of actual bond going on, but he didn't. Because he was dead." He grinned. "I'm not going to get tired of saying that. Lucius Malfoy is dead."

"And Fox isn't." Harry got to his feet. "Is it safe to see that for ourselves, Luna? We won't spook him or anything?"

"No, they're sleeping. Dreaming together." Luna drew her wand and swirled it towards what appeared to be an empty stretch of space in one corner of the kitchen. "I don't think they'll mind."

The air in that corner of the kitchen rippled, as if it were distorted with heat-haze or smoke instead of the Privacy Spell which Hermione had erected, then expertly concealed, while the rest of the Pride was distracted. When the ripples cleared, a pair of human figures lay side by side on the stone floor, cuddled together, hands clasped and eyes closed.

"Ohhh!" Meghan pointed, the fingers of her other hand going up to cover her mouth. "Look at them! The bond, the blood-bond, it worked all the way this time! Neenie's a little bit paler, her skin, her hair, and Fox—" She wrinkled her nose. "Ew," she said, glaring at the long, light-brown waves which haloed her brother's head. "He does *not* look good with his hair like that."

"It was the one part of his disguise Bellatrix's Reversing Curse didn't affect." Luna started to aim her wand, but Harry held up his hand to stop her and flicked his wrist instead. Fire flared around the twins' sleeping forms, then died down to reveal Fox's hair trimmed back to a becoming two-inch clip. Luna smiled her thanks before going on. "He took a separate potion to grow it long, before he took the Aging Potion to change the rest of his appearance. And because I stopped Bellatrix's spell from taking full effect, it only reversed the last magical thing that was done to him, instead of *everything* about him, which was what she intended." Her eyes darkened momentarily, shining ever so slightly green. "It would have killed him. Horribly."

"Why would she have cursed him, though?" asked Ginny, sliding her hand into Harry's. "Didn't she still think he was Lucius?"

Luna shook her head. "She realized who he truly was when Mr. Moony died," she said. "Fox could hold up through an awful lot of things, but not through that. He screamed."

"Who wouldn't?" Ron hunched his shoulders briefly, as though warding off a blow. "Having your dad get killed right in front of you—right in your arms, even—you'd have to be pretty well superhuman not to react to that." He held up a finger. "And speaking of dads, I think mine should probably know about some of this. What with that whole Minister thing he's got going on."

"I'll go with you." Ginny squeezed Harry's hand once, then released it. "How did you want to get there?"

"I was thinking the Red Roads to the Pepper Pot, and then the Vanishing Cabinet through to Sanctuary."

"Sounds good to me."

"And you'll probably want to see your dad too, won't you?" said Neville to Luna as Ron and Ginny disappeared through the swinging door. "Let's go upstairs and I'll send Mum a Patronus, so she can take us past the Fidelius."

"That would be lovely." Luna opened her arms to hug first Meghan, then Harry, before leading the way out of the kitchen, Neville already drawing his wand. "We've been writing letters back and forth most of this time, Daddy and I," her voice floated back, "but we haven't *seen* each other since June, and I'm sure he'll want to run some tests on my ring..."

Harry exhaled a long sigh as his Pridemates' footsteps faded. "Hey," he said to Meghan, beckoning her closer. "How're you hanging in?"

"All right." Meghan tucked herself under his arm. "Just as long as I think about Fox and Luna being alive harder than I do about Moony and Danger being..." Her breath hitched. "Why did it have to happen *now*?" she whispered. "Why, when we ought to be so happy, when we're finally a whole Pride again, did we have to lose part of the Pack?"

"I don't know." Harry looked from Fox to Neenie, his eye tracing the newly-minted similarity in their features, not so much as to make them appear magical copies of one another or confuse those who had known them before, but enough that no one meeting them for the first time would ever doubt their identity as twins. "But I meant what I said before, Pearl. I am sick to death of His Evil Snakiness thinking he can have things all his own way, and I'm not taking this one lying down. Danger's still alive, and Luna wouldn't have said what she did if there weren't something we could do to keep her that way. And as long as Danger's alive, we've got a link to Moony. So we're not giving up yet, you got that?"

"Yes, sir." Meghan's attempt at a jaunty tone was slightly spoiled by the snuffle in the middle, but the smile on her face as she looked up at Harry was real, if a trifle watery. "I'm going to go find Dadfoot and Mama Letha—do you realize they still don't know Fox is alive?"

"It's only been..." Harry checked his watch. "Twenty minutes or so that we've known. But I take your point. We probably should have told them before. Still, now we've got the whole story straight, and we can answer any questions they'll have. Off you go, then."

Tugging one of his sister's braids in his usual farewell gesture, Harry watched her small form hurry up the stairs before returning his regard to his twin siblings. "Not the way I wanted to welcome you home, or find out who Alex's Heir was," he said softly to Fox. "Moony's been killed, Danger's poisoned—"

He broke off as a memory from the summer just past popped into his mind.

*"So, now you know it exists, but you're to open it under only one of two conditions." The voice was Danger's, the surroundings the War Room, and Moony stood by with a box in his hands, filled with the light of dancing flames. "Either once you've made definite contact with Alexander Slytherin's Heir, or if both of us are dead or dying..."*

"Dumbledore's letter." Harry glanced up at the ceiling, as if he could see through it to the main floor of Headquarters. "The one protected by Gubraithian fire, that only Moony or Danger or I could get to. Now I guess it's just me."

*And as much as I hate it, both conditions apply.*

He took the stairs two at a time, pausing only long enough in the corridor above to lay an Imperturbable Charm on the War Room's door, then close and lock it behind himself. If Dumbledore had made such elaborate precautions to keep his letter from being read by anyone else, the information inside was undoubtedly important.

*Now here's hoping it's comprehensible!*

Opening the desk drawer he remembered Moony closing those few months before, Harry extracted the box and flipped it open. The fire inside shone as brightly as he remembered, and twined eagerly around his hand as he reached for the thick parchment envelope.

*Sort of like getting my Hogwarts letter all over again. Only then, I knew what I was getting into, or at least I thought I did. With this, I haven't got a clue...*

When the letter rested safely in his lap, Harry shut the box and set it aside, then closed his eyes, seeking after a moment of focus, the same focus he'd learned to channel when he transformed into Wolf or Apparated to a new place. When his breathing had calmed and his heart beat steadily, he picked up the envelope, slid his finger underneath the flap, and lifted it free.

*Here we go.*

Inside, the expected letter had been wrapped around what looked like a page torn out of a book, which Harry set aside with a brief grimace for what Hermione was likely to say about the abuse of the written word. Unfolding the letter, he found the beginning and started to read.

*My dear Harry,*

*I can start this letter in no other way than with an apology. For all that I have done, or left undone, which has harmed you or your Pack in the years we have spent as companions, I am most deeply and truly sorry. I only hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me when all is known.*

*Some of my mistakes, my wrongful actions, my foolish failures to act, you know of already. Others you may have learned since my passing. But to one particular lie I have committed myself more deeply than any other, in the name of keeping our mutual enemy blind to the truth long enough*

*that he can be defeated.*

*You, as the agent of that defeat, must now learn that same truth...*

---

Several minutes later, Harry was starting to smile as he flattened the folded-up page under his hand, then fitted it against the torn place in one of the books out of the stack hidden safely in the Pride's den. "Luna was right," he said, running his finger along the peaks and valleys of torn paper, which matched exactly. "That page *wasn't* missing by accident."

*But we had to be focused then, focused on training the DA and running the year and finding Voldemort's Horcruxes. If we'd learned something as big and amazing as this, Hermione, and very likely some of the rest of us, would have been distracted trying to figure out every last detail about it, and missed some of the details in the work we were supposed to be doing. And how long would we have been able to resist talking about it, especially to the people most closely involved?*

"But now." Harry drew his wand along the path his finger had already traced, watching the fibers mend themselves with the slightest of magical sparkles. "Now we can know about it, because now we *need* to know about it."

*Or do we?* He closed the book, frowning. *There's no guarantee it's going to work. And it might be the sort of thing where most of us shouldn't know too much. Like the way Fox had to believe he'd die in order to live.*

The thought of further deceiving Pack and Pride left a sour slick across his tongue, but as angry as he'd been at first when he realized what Dumbledore had concealed for so long, Harry found he couldn't fault the older wizard's logic.

*He couldn't even be sure one of these things had happened, and the other one wasn't really his to tell. And yes, he lied about it later on, but I can see why he did, and I'm not all that mad about it, even. A tiny laugh escaped him. I might have been, a couple years ago, but now I'm just so happy for what else it has to mean—*

"Right." His mood deflating, Harry carefully closed the book, then returned the letter to its place in the box of fire. "What else it has to mean. What it means for us, and what we've got to do next—what *I've* got to do next—"

*But I've got some guidance now. Getting to his feet, he Apparated back to the den room above, setting the book on the hidden shelf once more. Some thoughts and reminders about where to start, and what I might need. The rest of it's going to be up to me.*

*Save the Pack, save the world...pretty much doing what I always have. What I was born for.*

Harry arched his back, then dropped into a fighting crouch.

*Snakeface, you are going DOWN.*

Aletha nearly dropped the beaker from which she was pouring at the knock on her workroom door, and saved it only with a last-minute grab by her other hand. "Come in," she called, lacing her tone with the musical sweetness she reserved for people who had annoyed her thoroughly enough that she didn't choose to make it apparent.

"Sorry," said Sirius from behind her, as the door clicked first open, then shut. "I know what it means when the door's closed, but I think you'll want to hear this."

"Want to hear what?" Aletha turned to face her husband, and found a smile tugging at her lips in response to the light in his eyes. "Something good, I take it."

"Best news in the world." Sirius flicked his finger against the top cauldron in a stack to make it ring. "Far's we're concerned, anyway. Voldemort's probably not too thrilled, given how stupid it's going to make him look when it gets out."

"Things which discomfit Voldemort are definitely welcome here." Aletha set down the beaker on her workbench, near the site of the hole Corona's poison had eaten in it, which she'd repaired earlier. "Especially now. So what is it?"

"Remember that wild-arse guess of mine, a while back, about what it could mean when Lucius called Tonks his cousin, not his niece?" Sirius moved the handle of the cauldron back and forth, its hinges creaking in time with his words. "The one I wouldn't explain? Mostly because I didn't want to get people's hopes up. It seemed like a million to one chance."

"Yes, I remember." Aletha set her hands on her hips. "And if you don't get on with telling me this instant, Sirius Valentine Black—" She stopped, a sudden suspicion blooming in the back of her mind. "Wait. You can't mean—"

"He's changed his name," Sirius interrupted. "Probably to beat out any spells searching for him that way. But if you can think of anybody else born seventeen years ago to my cousin Narcissa who'd be likely to call himself 'Reynard'..."

"Reynard." Aletha pressed a hand to her mouth, not sure whether she was fighting tears or laughter. "The trickster, the jokester, from old French folktales, who always wins out somehow. The cunning little fox. Oh, Sirius!"

"Yeah." Sirius pulled her into his arms and held her tight, his own breath catching suspiciously every so often. "He's *baaaack*."

---

"We should probably wake up at some point," said Hermione reluctantly, glancing in the direction the twins used to signify a return to reality. "Everybody else is going to want a turn hugging you, you know."

"Yeah." Fox's mouth twisted to one side. "Everybody else."

"What's wrong?" Hermione sat up, facing him. "Was it something I said?"

"Not exactly." Fox sighed. "It's just...Neenie, I don't know how much good I'm going to be anymore. At, well, *life*. Getting out the door every day, going off and doing whatever, dealing with other people. Especially dealing with other people. Not you," he added hastily. "And not Pack or Pride, I don't think. I can't be sure yet, but the idea of them doesn't panic me. But even people from the DA or the Order, when I try and imagine seeing them again, talking to them..." He shook his head hard, in a motion that would have set Snow Fox's ears flapping. "It gives me the horrors. Which makes no sense, I know. These are my friends, my colleagues, they're not going to hurt me —"

"But the people you've had to call friends and colleagues, for the last half a year or so, they would." Hermione held out her hand, and Fox wrapped his own around it. "If they had ever found out who you really were, they would have had no mercy. Or even if they hadn't known you were you, but they thought taking Lucius down would help them rise up, they would have stabbed you in the back without a second thought. And you knew that, so you could never let your guard down, not for an instant."

"So even now that I'm home, I don't want to let it down with anyone I can't be this kind of certain about." Fox twined his pendant chain around his other hand. "Have I mentioned lately how creepy it is that you understand me better than I understand me?"

"No, my lord." Hermione batted her eyelashes and reverted to her Bellatrix voice. "Not *lately*."

"And *that* is even creepier." Fox gave a brief, heartfelt shudder. "Did you really have to scare me like that?"

"I wanted you to hold still long enough that I could get you with this." Hermione displayed her dagger. "It has the twinning potion in it, so that if you really were you, I could do exactly what I did. But if you really weren't you, if you were Lucius trying to trick us..."

"Then you would have cut him with silver, and done what *I* did, back in June." Fox nodded. "Great minds think alike. Or desperate minds, in my case. All right, waking time it is. Was there anything in particular you wanted to do?"

"One thing for myself. I don't know if you'll want to come." Neenie squeezed his hand and released it. "I need to go see Moony and Danger."

"Yeah." Fox sucked in air through his teeth. "Not yet on that one. I'll need to, and soon, but I can't just yet. Probably find a couple other people somewhere in the house, though, last time I looked we had plenty to go around..."

---

Descending the stairs from the Pride's den, Harry looked down to find his godfather waiting for him in the main hallway. "You know already?" Padfoot asked quietly, swinging his pendants between two fingers.

"About Fox? Yeah." Harry vaulted over the banister to land beside Padfoot. "How do you?"

"Tapestry." Padfoot chuckled. "Damn thing's smarter than I am. You seen him?"

"Seen, yes, talked to, not yet. He was asleep. Dreaming with Hermione, which is probably the best thing for him." Harry leaned back against the side of the staircase. "You hear about Luna?"

"No, what about Luna? Unless you mean he married her, that I do know. Tapestry again."

Harry grinned. "She's Alex's Heir. Amanda's amulet went to her."

"Merlin's typewriter." Padfoot snorted. "Talk about keeping it in the family."

Distracted, Harry frowned. "How would Merlin have a typewriter? They weren't invented for another thousand years or so."

"Bah." Padfoot waved a dismissive hand. "History and all that rubbish."

"Dare you to say that in front of Professor Jones."

"Hestia? No thank you. I like all my body parts exactly where they are. And you're not allowed to tell her I said it either," Padfoot added before Harry could say anything. "Or rather, if you do, I'll deny every word of it." He stopped. "How did we get here again?"

"By way of Merlin's typewriter, I think." Harry sighed, some of his banter-born silliness ebbing away. "I'm so glad to have them back, but it doesn't change what else happened today," he said quietly. "It doesn't change that Moony's dead, and Danger's dying. And that's because I had to go somewhere and get something, and Voldemort found out about it, and Moony found out about *that* and went straight to Malfoy Manor to distract him." He glanced over at Padfoot, seeing only the flat calm of an Auror in his godfather's eyes. "I really did have to. It was our only chance, and it was a thing we *had* to have if we're going to beat him."

"I believe you." Padfoot nodded. "And I don't blame you. Are you blaming yourself?"

"Pretty much." Harry ran his fingers along the wood of the wall, finding the spot where the door to the cupboard under the stairs would have been, if number twelve, Grimmauld Place, had boasted such a thing. "Does it ever stop hurting that people died because of something you did?"

"Do you want the nice answer, or the truth?"

"Truth, please."

"Then, no." Padfoot's hand rested for a second on Harry's arm. "No, it never stops hurting. But you figure out how to live with it, eventually."

"About what I figured." Harry turned to look at his godfather directly. "Thanks. For everything."



"No worries." Padfoot nodded to him, then crossed the hall towards the War Room. Harry waited until the door shut behind him before taking the stairs down to the kitchen.

The brown-haired boy sitting in front of the fire looked around as Harry entered. "My name is Reynard Beauvoi," he announced, getting to his feet, "and this is my house." He paused, as though thinking. "Well. Some of it, anyway." Haughtily, he drew himself up to his full height. "Who're you?"

Stifling a grin as his mind shot to a favorite den-night story, Harry tucked his hands into his pockets. "My name's Harry Potter," he said politely. "Nice to meet you."

Fox's stone-gray eyes widened. "You're Harry Potter?"

"Have been all my life."

"Scar and all?"

Harry freed one hand and flipped back his fringe to display it.

"Cool." Fox nodded approvingly. "You're pretty famous, you know."

"Yeah, I keep hearing that. Something about being a warrior and fighting evil, once I'm grown up." Harry pulled his watch from his pocket and checked the face. "Would you look at that. Could be any day now." Sliding the watch away again, he looked up. "I'm going to need help, though," he said quietly. "You in?"

"Well," Fox drawled. "If I *have* to."

"Sounds good." Harry held out his hand. "Shake on it?"

Fox met the hand with his own, and quick as thinking their grips changed, one, two, three, in the boy-cubs' shake they'd invented more years ago than Harry really wanted to remember...

*Maybe I shouldn't have thought about that.*

"Damn it," he managed before his voice started shaking, and hauled his brother into the tightest hug of their lives. "God *damn* it, Fox, don't you *ever* do that to me again!"

"Same goes, hero-boy." Fox punched him lightly in the middle of the back. "No dying day after tomorrow, you got that?"

"I'll see what I can do—wait, how'd you know about that?" Harry pulled back to look at Fox. "We didn't get that prophecy until after you left the first time."

"See the shiny thing?" Fox held up his left hand, pointing out the ring adorning his finger. "Think about what the shiny thing means."

"Oh, right." Harry paused. "Hang on a tick. Has she been spying on us the entire time you've been gone?"

Fox shrugged. "Everybody needs a hobby."

---

Upstairs, the Lupins' bedroom door creaked once, and Meghan tiptoed in. Why she was being so quiet, she didn't know. It wasn't like Moony or Danger was going to hear her...

*Because it makes me feel normal, she decided, drawing her dagger. It makes me feel like I still need to sneak, the way I would if everything were still all right.*

*Maybe, once I finish here, it still can be.*

Danger's free hand, the one which wasn't tucked against Moony's, lay palm-up on the duvet, the slightly tanned skin of her forearm exposed. Meghan angled the dagger's blade so that its point would find a good-sized blood vessel, to better deliver the payload she intended to all portions of her godmother's body.

*Phoenix tears, she thought clearly, recalling how Fawkes had perched on the end of the white tomb at Hogwarts, how the pearly drops had fallen from his eyes into the goblin-wrought silver and vanished. Phoenix tears have healing properties, and Danger needs healing badly.*

She brought the dagger down with just enough force to penetrate skin, as she'd practiced on dummies at DA meetings many times.

Dagger and hand passed through Danger's flesh as though she were already a ghost, and stabbed instead into the cloth below.

"What?" Meghan yanked her hand back, staring at the dagger. "No. No!"

Again she tried, and again metal and flesh failed to connect. A little sob tore out of her as she shook her head furiously, denying the intolerable situation, and tried again—again—again—

"Meghan! *Meghan!*" Hands around her, arms restraining her, a voice calling her name. She stumbled backwards from the bed, trying to fight her captor, but her eyes were blurred with tears and her legs refused to support her any longer.

"I wanted to help her," she sobbed, pressing her face against the familiar shoulder, accepting the hug as her dagger clattered to the floor. "I just wanted to help her!"

"I know, Pearl." A hand stroked along her braids, and a kiss was pressed to the top of her forehead. "I know you did."

Meghan hiccupped once, and scowled at how stupid it made her sound. "I don't want her to die," she said in what she'd intended to be a firm and angry tone, but which came out weak and wobbly

and sounding far younger than her years. "Oh, Neenie, what are we going to *do*?"

"I don't know." Neenie, too, sounded young and scared, and Meghan couldn't be sure if that made her feel worse or better.

*But I don't want to feel any worse than I already do.* She cuddled in close, and felt Neenie drawing them both backwards to the huge, overstuffed armchair in the corner of the room. *So I'm going to say it's better. Only a little tiny itty-bitty bit better, because the only way it would really be better is if this weren't happening, but since it is happening, at least I'm not the only one who's feeling lost and confused.*

"Do you realize how lucky we are?" Neenie asked, her voice vibrating through Meghan's bones despite its quiet pitch. "We still have Padfoot and Letha, and we have each other. So many people don't have any of that when someone they love...dies." She had to force the word out, and Meghan hissed softly at it. "And I want to hate myself for saying that, because it doesn't help. I want it to help, and I know someday it will help, but today? Today it doesn't help at all." She tightened her hug around Meghan. "Except that it does help, some, to have you here with me."

"Thanks." Meghan settled herself more comfortably next to her big sister, and rested her face against Neenie's robes, letting them soak up the tears that remained on her face. "You too."

A little while later, or possibly a long while, the door creaked again, bringing both sisters' heads around. Letha stepped into the room, carrying a basket filled with bottles, and nodded in satisfaction when she saw them. "Just the ladies I need to see," she said, and set aside her potions to accommodate them both in one broad hug. "There now, I've got you. I'm right here." She kissed Meghan on the top of the head, and Hermione on the side, running her fingers down a strand of brown hair (not quite as brown, nor nearly as bushy, as it had been a few hours ago) when she was done. "And what might this be?"

"Oh." Hermione disengaged, smiling shyly, and laid a finger on the newly minted twin-scar on her left cheek. "I suppose you didn't know—"

"No, Sirius told me our favorite troublemaker's come home. I just hadn't expected you two to get down to business quite so fast, but then you've seldom done anything else." Letha beckoned both the Pack's daughters to take a seat. "And speaking of business, Hermione, I'm sorry to bring this up to you right now, but I need you to make a decision..."

Meghan listened silently to her mother's explanation of what she wanted to do, and what would be involved, letting her sister squeeze her hand as hard as necessary, though once or twice it hurt. When Letha finished, Hermione frowned. "I'm sorry, but I don't quite understand. Why do you want to do this now? When Moony's already..." She swallowed against the completion of the sentence.

"To see if it *can* be done, and if it will work." Letha held out her hand, and after a moment Hermione laid her own in it. "Because if it does, then it can be tried in the living. In those werewolves who want born children of their own, and are willing to take the chance of having

their body's functions stopped for a short period to undergo this treatment."

"It won't hurt him," Hermione murmured, almost to herself. "Nothing can hurt him now. And it would make him so happy, to know he could give that gift to other people like him. People who've been hurt terribly, body and soul, but are fighting back against it, and deserve the chance to have as much of a normal life as they can." She lifted her head and met Letha's eyes. "Yes. Do it."

"Gladly." Letha bent forward to hug Hermione once more, then hefted her basket of potions. "It's a surprisingly quick process, for all the prep work it entails. I should be done in just a few minutes, if you want to stay and help, Pearl. And Neenie, you can stay if you like, or go on down to your den room, Harry left a note on the door asking anyone who saw it to send the Pride that way whenever they finished what they were doing..."

---

Harry and Fox's shared snickerfit, though revived several times through accidental eye contact, wound to a close at last, and the Pack's sons caught their breath sitting side by side in front of the kitchen fire, Harry calling out bits of it to twine around them and keep them warm.

"I've missed that." Fox brushed his hand through the living flame. "I've missed a lot of things. All the everyday little stuff that you never even think about, until suddenly it's gone. And I thought I never would have it again, that I'd get found out as a spy and killed on the spot, or that you'd kill me in battle for being who you *thought* I was, or that I'd have to run and hide after the war because *both* sides were hunting me down..."

"Hey." Harry cleared his throat, bringing Fox's attention towards him. "Didn't happen. Any of it."

"Almost wish it had." Fox leaned forward against his knees, his shoulders rising defensively. "Instead of what did."

"Yeah, about that." Harry tried to keep his tone casual, but couldn't do anything about the nerves bleeding into his scent. "Dumbledore left me a letter, to open if anything like this ever did happen." He chose his words carefully, watching his brother for reactions. "There could be something going on here we didn't know about. He wasn't sure, and he told me not to make any promises either. But there's a possibility..."

"Of what?" Fox's little exhalation could have been either laughter or pain. "Of someone who's dying suddenly getting healed? Of the bloody Killing Curse not working right?"

Harry shrugged. "It happened once."

Fox leveled a glare at him, but dropped his eyes after a few seconds. "I don't know if I want to hear this," he said. "Giving up hope's so much easier." This time the breathy sound was definitely a laugh. "But then, we're the Pack. When did we ever do easy?" Raking back his hair with his fingers, he met Harry's gaze again. "What do you need from me?"

"You have to answer a question. Out loud right now, in writing later. That'll be the binding one."

Harry sat up straighter, holding his eyes on Fox's. "What would you do, and what would you give, to win this war and keep the Pack together?"

After a moment's intense thought, Fox nodded slowly. "I would do," he said with deliberation, "anything that's right. And I would give anything that's rightfully mine."

"And that is why I started this with you." Harry pointed at his brother. "And one of the reasons we've missed you so much around here. Most of the rest of us would have to fumble and stumble around for that kind of language, or we'd forget about it and get ourselves into some stupid bard's tale contract where we have to wait for what we want until lions fly or something like that. You just..." He snapped his fingers. "Like that."

"Well, I am the Consort of Slytherin, you know." Fox pulled out his pendants and displayed the first one. "See? Says so right there. Snake for Slytherin, and B for Beauvoi."

Harry groaned a little. "They've been planning something like this all along, haven't they?" he asked, glancing upwards to indicate which 'they' was meant. "Sneaky bastards that they are."

"This is not news." Fox stroked a finger across the serpentine B. "Do you think Padfoot and Letha would forgive me if I didn't go and see them tonight?" he asked quietly. "I'm a little raw on the parent front yet."

"I think they'll want you to do what you need to do. And if that's holing up with just the Pride for now, that'll be fine." Harry nodded. "I can ask them for you in a little bit, since I need to talk to them anyway."

"How come? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Well, without repeating myself too much for later with the Pride, it's got to do with another couple lines in the same prophecy that gave us Halloween." Harry held out his hand to the fire, and streamers of it rose up in different colors, twisting themselves into the shapes of familiar animals. "*Go unto those whose Oath you swore/ And bargain well to win the war...*"

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Opening the door of the Pride's den nearly an hour later, Ginny sighed in pleasure. Across the room, a brown-furred fox, patching into white here and there along his flanks, was playfully chasing a half-grown doe back and forth, nipping at her legs when he got close enough.

"That's good to see," Ron said behind her. "But don't tell him I said so," he added hastily.

"Don't worry, I won't." Ginny elbowed her brother in the gut to hear him *oof*, then dropped down into Lynx's form and joined the game, bowling Snow Fox over with her first leap and washing his face for him until Captain the demiguise dragged her off by a hind leg. When she squirmed free of his grasp and turned to wash him within an inch of his life as well, he'd gone invisible—

*Which is not the same thing as unsmellable!*

Gleefully, she pounced on the monkey-like form she could scent several feet away, holding him down and washing him visible, a pastime in which Neenie the cat came bounding over to join, while Pearl galloped around them with gusto. Snow Fox grumbled from a short distance away, but made no move to rescue his erstwhile defender, which gave Lynx a moment of pause. *Why wouldn't he—*

The answer hit her squarely in the side, bowling her over in her turn.

*Mine*, Wolf panted into her face, pinning her down with his paws. *Mine, mine, mine.*

*Only until I find something better*, Lynx hissed back, and nipped at one of the paws, startling Wolf into pulling it back and allowing her to squirm herself free. *And until then, you are also mine!*

She dove onto Wolf, sending the two of them rolling through the furball which was the other four mammalian members of the Pride. Ron and Luna, she noted with a flick of eyes to one side, appeared to be laying bets on the outcomes of the various wrestling matches.

*Feathers are great for flying, but not so good for silliness like this...*

Harry's transformation back to human, once everyone had worked their edginess off, called a tacit halt to the roughhousing, and the Pride settled into their usual places for den. Ron and Neville took a moment each to shake Fox's hand and clap him on the back, while Ginny, after a quick scent-check to be sure he was up to it, demanded and got her usual hug. "We've missed you," she murmured close to his ear. "I can't tell you how much."

"Probably about as much as I missed all of you." Fox leaned against her briefly, then squeezed once and released her. "Put together."

"Yours put together, or ours?"

"Both. Or neither. Doesn't matter, I'm back." Fox sat down, his movements careful and precise, which Ginny identified after a few moments of thought as his way of keeping off whatever emotional troubles might still remain to be weathered. "We going to start den here or what?"

"If you insist." Ginny cleared her throat. "Be welcome, *all*, to this den-night," she said, grinning towards Fox and Luna. "We are Pride now. Pride together."

"Pride forever," came the response, more enthusiastic than it had been in the months just past.

*Also louder.* Ginny resisted the urge to rub her ears. *But that could just be because we're all here again...*

"Business before stories?" Neville asked Harry, and got a nod. "Ready when you are, then."

"All right." Harry pulled a Sickle out of, apparently, thin air, and began to work it back and forth along his fingers. "Professor Dumbledore wrote me a letter, before he died," he said after the coin had made two full circuits. "I wasn't supposed to open it until...well, until now. Until the things

that've just happened, happened. So I did, and some of what's in it, I can't tell you yet. But I can give you the general outline." He looked up. "It told me how I can get the last things I'll need to beat him. To beat Voldemort. To win this war, and stop him for good."

"How can we help?" asked Luna into the silence.

"It's pretty simple." Harry winked towards his brother. "Fox and I talked it over already. What you need to do is write down for me—not right this second, tomorrow morning should do fine—write down for me what you'd do, and what you'd give up, to win the war."

Hermione started to bristle, then stopped, touching Ron's hand before he could open his mouth. "You wouldn't ask that unless you needed to," she said. "It's not that you doubt us, or think we'd hold back, but the question and the answer are part of the magic, aren't they? Part of the ritual, the giving and the taking."

"Yes. Exactly." Harry nodded. "But like I said, we can do all that tomorrow, and Fox'll help you put it down right on parchment so it doesn't cause more trouble than it needs to. I just needed to get it out there so you'd know about it. Tonight we've got another little project." He made the Sickle vanish, and instead drew his wand, sketching a symbol on the air, triangle, circle, line. "We need to find the Deathly Hallows."

"Wasn't that supposed to be this big long quest?" asked Meghan doubtfully. "That you had to do for years and years and go all over the world for?"

"It used to be. But Dumbledore said they were all a lot closer than we knew, and we just had to think about ourselves." Harry gestured to his sisters, then his brother. "The Pack-cubs, specifically, and the way we became that. Whatever that means."

"It's not too hard." Luna tilted her head, looking at each of them in turn. "Don't you see, you all came to your Pack a different way. Hermione was left to Mrs. Danger to take care of, and Harry, you were stolen out of your cupboard, and my Fox was given by his blood mother, and Meghan was born in the Pack. Four cubs, four different ways."

"Only three Hallows, though." Neville shrugged. "Born's probably the odd one out there. Hard to see how it would apply to a wand or a cloak or a stone."

"We'll get back to it," said Ron hastily, though Ginny suspected her brother would have been just as happy to permanently table the subject of childbirth and other related issues. "So, one of the Hallows was left behind, inherited, sort of. Another one stolen somehow, and then the last one given. Inherited's pretty easy—that's got to be your Cloak, Harry. Came down to you from your dad."

"No question there." Harry highlighted the triangle on his glowing diagram. "So one down, two to go. The Resurrection Stone, and the Elder Wand. Dumbledore said the Stone, in particular, was very close to my heart, and had been since the day I gave my heart away..."

Ginny sighed and pulled out her pendants. "Harry," she said, detaching the small cage of gold wire which hung from her chain. "Catch."

"What—" Harry caught, looked, and groaned. "You're kidding. You are *kidding* me."

"How come?" Fox craned his neck to see, as Harry extracted his own pendant chain from his robes. "What are those things?"

"The wedding presents Dumbledore gave us. All this talk about how the stone was for solidity, the circle was for completion, the triangle so we didn't collapse on each other—he was snowing us!" Harry unlatched the two cages and dumped out their contents onto his palm. "All so we wouldn't see that if you put the two pieces together, you'd get *that!*" He pointed to the symbol hovering in the air.

"So you've been hauling the Resurrection Stone around this entire time?" Ron shook his head, as Harry highlighted the circle to match the triangle. "All it needs now is for the Elder Wand to be somewhere really ridiculous. Up on the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts, maybe."

"What did Professor Dumbledore have to say about the Wand, Harry?" Hermione had her eyes half-shut, as though she were trying to bring a recalcitrant memory to mind. "Did he tell us where we could start?"

"With him." Harry conjured a box and set the two halves of the Resurrection Stone inside it, then leaned back to tuck it onto the hidden shelf with the Horcrux books. "He said he'd been carrying it, using it, ever since he took it off Grindelwald way back when."

"And wizards are almost always buried with their wands." Neville began to smile. "So all we'll need to do is go to Sanctuary and slip out onto the grounds when no one's looking. It's dark now—we could be back within an hour, easily—"

"We may not need to." Fox's quiet words brought all eyes to him. His hands were tightly clasped in his lap, as though he were thinking back over a moment which pained or frustrated him, but his words were calm and clear. "Harry, Neenie, do you remember when we said goodbye back in June? When I was checking through my pockets for something to hold the fire enchantment, and came up with a second wand I didn't recognize?"

"Yes," said Hermione slowly, as Harry nodded. "Why?"

"You wouldn't have known it, you got there too late, but I caught Professor Dumbledore with a spell—the other me, that is, the little me under all the enchantments." Fox circled a hand impatiently. "Whatever. It was a Disarmer. And because I hit him from behind, it worked. I got his wand away from him. Stole it, you might say."

"And then you were its Master, because you took it when he didn't want you to!" Meghan was quivering with excitement. "I remember that! And then when you met Hermione down under the castle, and *Harry* came up behind *you* —"



"Disarmed me of my wand, personally, but that means the Mastery passes again." Fox nodded, looking around at the Pride, his own smile starting to spread. "And that's what the second wand was, the one I gave you, Harry. It was Dumbledore's. The Elder Wand. So wherever you've been keeping it, that's where it is." He paused, frowning. "I hope you did keep it."

"No, I threw away what I thought was the last thing I'd ever have from you," Harry retorted. "Yes, I kept it!"

"In your sock drawer," Ginny murmured.

"Who asked you?" demanded Harry, over the laughter of the rest of the Pride.

*And this is why we're going to win. Ginny blew a kiss to her husband, and Harry relented enough to blow one back to her. Because as long as we can laugh, as long as we can find the fun and the joy in our lives, we can't be entirely broken.*

*I just hope we don't have to find out how badly broken we can be...*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 59: The Bargain (Year 7)

Breath rasping in his chest, one hand raised high to ward off branches from his face, the other holding his robes out of the way at knee level, he ran. His masquerade had been found out at last, and while his lady had been able to give him some small protection from the mark he bore on flesh and soul, it was unlikely to last.

*And then he'll be able to find me, wherever I try to hide. Drag me back and torture me, or use me to lure in my family, my friends.* He hurdled a rotting log, landing lightly on the soft, yielding ground beyond it, and kept moving, scanning back and forth with eyes, ears, nose. *I won't let him do that. To me, or to them.*

Though his breath was already coming short, he found a few scraps with which to laugh. *A few months later than I thought it'd be, but it looks like I'm going to die after all...*

"Psst!" hissed a voice from his left. "Over here!"

Startled, he skidded to a halt, leaves and branches flexing under his feet. *Who the hell? I didn't smell anyone—*

A small, pale face topped with fair and tousled hair peered around the corner of a bush, silver eyes fixed doubtfully on him. "Fox?" said the hesitant voice which matched the face. "Is that you?"

*Anyone except myself, that is.*

"Yes, it's me." Turning his wedding ring once entirely around on his finger, Reynard Beauvois sighed in relief as his features lost their disguise, and went to one knee to face the fragment of his four-year-old self he'd befriended several months earlier. "Why are you here, Draco?" He frowned. "For that matter, *how* are you here? This isn't—"

"Is so," Draco interrupted, and pushed with his foot on apparently solid ground between the two, setting up a rippling movement in it. "They said you might get caught up in it and forget, but when you saw me, you'd think to check." He grinned. "And then you'd remember."

*Remember.* Fox shut his eyes, trying to think back. *Remember what? Obviously I'm dreaming this, which is good, running for my life from Voldemort isn't anything I actually want to be doing, but what is there to remember other than waking up beside Luna for another day of being the only person I've ever hated? Unless—*

Planting his hands for balance, he focused his attention back towards his sleeping body, towards gathering information from its senses, as though it were someone else's. Slowly, gradually, scents and sounds drifted back to him, and the tales they had to tell left him trembling.

*Home. I'm home. We're home. Dunned up with the Pride. Alive. Safe.*

*Only how can we be sure the Mark won't—*

He pulled back his left sleeve, and closed his eyes for another moment in thankfulness. A faintly shimmering patch of woven magic hid the Dark Mark from view.

"Pretty," said Draco appreciatively, extending a finger. "Can I—"

"Better not." Fox tugged his sleeve back into place, then got to his feet and held out a hand. "Let's walk and talk, huh?"

"Walk and talk." Draco skipped a few times at the end of Fox's arm. "I like that. What do you want to talk about?"

"Let's start with this mysterious 'they' who sent you here." Fox ruffled his littler self's hair. "Not that I don't appreciate the help. Nightmares about what *could've* happened are pretty high on my pointless list."

"They said I wasn't supposed to use names, but I could tell you about them." Draco shook his hair back into place. "It was when everything was so scary." He looked sidewise up at Fox, as though gauging the older wizard's reaction. "I watched, you know. With Neenie. We watched what happened while you were pretending to be Father. And when it started to get scary yesterday, I said I wished *we* had a father, a real one, or a mother. To take care of us." He smiled. "And then, just when it got *really* scary, *she* came. And she hugged us and held us and asked if we were all right, and said she was as real as we were."

A flash of his own memories burst over Fox, of the woman who had bolted into his dream-bedroom and caught him up in her arms all those years before, murmuring just those words to him as she held him close and safe. "She gives good hugs, doesn't she?" he asked, scowling at the tremor in his voice.

"She really does. And then *he* came, and that was even better, because of getting double-hugged. And because he tells stories too." Draco extended a foot, looking at it critically. "He told us 'Cinderella' just like you did that one time."

"Where d'you think I learned it from?" Fox waved his free hand at the fallen log he'd leapt over earlier, drawing its wood upwards into a pair of seats. He wasn't sure how much longer his knees would hold his weight. "Sounds like you met my mum and dad, there, Draco. Pretty special, aren't they?"

Draco nodded, clambering up into the seat opposite Fox's. "And they said, if Neenie and I were brave enough, we could go back to you and to *Hermione* ." He pronounced the four syllables with care. "And tell you their message."

"Looks like you were plenty brave from here." Fox squeezed the littler hand resting in his. "I'm listening."

"They said..." Draco closed his eyes to recall. "They said, always remember to have faith and trust. But not pixie dust, because that's just silly, and besides, you're not a pixie. You're a pirate." He opened one eye to grin briefly. "And they said not to give up hope, because they won't, and because stranger things have happened. Oh!" Both eyes popped open now. "And just for you, they said when you woke up, to follow your ears."

"Follow my ears. Got it." Fox nodded. "Anything else?"

"No. That was it." Draco settled back into his chair, looking intently at Fox. "Except for one thing she said, just when they were leaving. She said for you to remember the very first line of the story that has pixie dust in it, and then think about me." His eyes took on a tinge of their old shadowed, frightened look. "Does that mean I have to go away?"

"Not like that, no." Fox leaned over to lift his younger self into his lap. "You belong here with me, and nobody can ever say different. But it's kind of complicated what she did mean."

"Oh, I think I know it now." Draco yawned, cuddling against Fox. "Isn't it 'All children, except one, grow up'?"

"Yeah." Fox let his fingers rest lightly on the small, fair head. "That's it, all right."

"So I shouldn't stay little forever and ever. Or I can, but not all by myself." Draco yawned again. "I have to stay with you, and be grown-up most of the time, but that can be fun too. And I don't have to be afraid of anything, not ever again." He glanced up sleepily and smiled. "Because you're just who I want to be when I grow up."

"Good to know." Fox closed his own eyes and matched the pace of his breathing to that of the child he held, calming himself until their hearts beat as one. Peace settled over him, peace and love and satisfaction, for an old, old promise kept faithfully even today.

*"The Den is real—we're real—and when you wake up, that's where you'll be..."*

Reynard Draco Beauvoi opened his eyes in the first faint light of morning, his lady curled against his side, his fingertips brushing his twin's soft hair. Rising with care, so as not to disturb them or his other fellow Warriors, he slipped from the den room, disdaining robes for the moment. The soft shirt and trousers in which he'd slept would do nicely for the people he was going to see.

*Since they've seen me, and occasionally had to haul me home, in far less clothing than that.*

His ears gave him a direction right away, namely, down. Piano and voice, soprano and baritone interweaving and combining, grew louder and more distinct as he descended stairs, until he stood in the main floor corridor listening to the last few notes of "As Time Goes By".

For an instant, he hesitated. *They're enjoying themselves—I shouldn't intrude—*

Beyond the door, the pianist's clever fingers swung into a new harmony, an open chord structure in a slow three, the final repeated note slipping to one higher at the very end of the phrase.

Fox was inside the music room before he remembered moving.

Letha lifted her hands from the keys, joy and welcome bright in her face, as Padfoot turned to face the door. "Hey, kid," he said with his easy smile. "Good to see you again."

"Thanks." Fox tried to breathe around the sudden frozen lump in his throat. "You too. Er...how've you been?"

"Not too bad." Padfoot shrugged. "Ducking Death Eaters. Running missions. Teaching lessons. You know, the usual sort of thing—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Letha shut the piano with a thump and swung her legs around the edge of the bench to stand up, punching Padfoot's shoulder along the way. "Come here, young man," she said, beckoning Fox with a peremptory two-fingered gesture. "Now."

Fox's legs obeyed the mother-voice without input from his mind, and Letha wrapped him in a hard, possessive hug. "If you ever scare us like that again," she murmured, her voice rough with suppressed tears. "If you ever even *think* about it. I will find the worst-tasting potion I have ever brewed, and I will find a reason you need to drink a gobletful of it every night for the rest of your life. Is that clear?"

"Yes ma'am," Fox got out before his throat closed, and Letha guided him down to the floor, which Padfoot had thoughtfully softened, and on which Padfoot was already sitting. Strong arms reached out to draw him in and hold him tight, and a broad hand rested lightly on his head.

"I wanted to do this the first time I saw you," said Padfoot quietly, his voice reverberating through his chest and into Fox's bones. "Scoop you up and mess with your hair and tell you everything was going to be all right. That no one was ever going to hurt you again." He laughed once, adjusting the way he was sitting so that Fox could fit between him and Letha more comfortably. "I didn't, then. It would've scared you even more than you already were. But now." The hand moved down to lie against Fox's shoulder blades. "Now you're back where you belong, and we're not letting you go again any time soon."

"Are you sure?" Fox could feel his control slipping away from him, even more thoroughly than it had with Hermione the day before. His limbs shook hard enough to make him glad he was already sitting down, and his voice had developed a matching quaver. "You don't know the half of what I've done. I've killed people, murdered them with my own hands, and I had to pretend I *enjoyed* it —"

"Listen to yourself," said Letha patiently, her fingers resting against the skin Fox's shirt left exposed, soft tingles of Healing energies easing his pain as long-tensed muscles relaxed. "You had to *pretend* you enjoyed it. And yes, there may have been moments when it was less of a pretense. There can be a terrible joy in doing something so weighty as ending another human life. But simply having a feeling isn't wrong. You feel what you feel. And even acknowledging that feeling isn't wrong. Trying to hide it or deny it would be the wrong thing here, because then it might turn in on itself and become an obsession. Do you understand?"

"I guess." A tight ball of fear within Fox's core was beginning to unravel, but a tiny knot of it remained twisted together. "But what if I start wanting that feeling again?"

Padfoot tugged on Fox's arm, helping him sit up so their eyes could meet. "Do you?" asked the older wizard, with no trace of joking anywhere in his demeanor. "Right now, this minute, do you?"

"No." Fox's denial was immediate and vehement. "But what if that changes?"

"If it changes, we will help you deal with it then." Letha spoke in the flat, no-nonsense tone she employed to inform refractory cubs their last line was close to being crossed. "But because you are aware that it *might* change, and that you will always need to mind your temper for that reason, you already have the best possible defense against its changing." She looked into his eyes, and try though he might, Fox could find no trace of fear in her gaze or in her scent. "You know now what you are capable of doing. Don't forget it, but don't let it rule you either."

"Choices, not abilities," added Padfoot with his lopsided grin. "As if you haven't heard *that* one before."

"No, never." Fox made a face at his Pack-father. "Haven't the foggiest what you're talking about. But that's not all of it." He sighed, his momentary relief and comfort dissipating like smoke. "Moony died because of me. Because I wasn't good enough. Because I wasn't smart enough, quick enough, brave enough, *something* —"

"Oi!" Padfoot snapped his fingers in front of Fox's face, breaking the rant in mid-word. "Focus. What'd Moony go out there for in the first place?"

"To keep Harry safe." Fox shivered, recalling the terrible panic of those snatched seconds with Luna in a side chamber at Malfoy Manor, working out how to send the messenger-Patronus without giving away its caster's identity. "I didn't think he'd come himself, I thought he'd try some kind of long-distance attack, or pull something so strange Voldemort would have to go and see what it was in person—Merlin's bookshelf, I didn't know *what* he was going to do, but I knew *I* couldn't think of anything—"

"So you sent a message to your father, and to the head of the Order of the Phoenix, and in both cases you did right." Letha's calm words were echoed by the steady pressure of her hand against Fox's. "Remus chose his own method of drawing Voldemort's attention away from Harry, and it worked. He made his choice, Fox. If you had tried to rescue him before you were sure Harry was safe, you would have dishonored that choice, and you had no way of receiving that message without alerting Voldemort."

"And tell me this," Padfoot took over without a pause. "Did you have a wand then?"

"No." Fox surprised himself with a genuine, if twisted, smile. "Couldn't have used one anyway, not for more than a couple half-arsed spells. I carried Luna's piece so I wouldn't go down alone if I ever got found out."

"Makes sense." Padfoot nodded. "Did Moony have a wand?"

"Doubt it. Patroclus Nott isn't quite such an idiot as all that."

"Even with surprise on your side, could Luna with her wand, and you with a potion piece, have fought your way out of Malfoy Manor by yourselves?" Padfoot's look was familiar from summers spent over the gaming table, as he meticulously poked holes in the cubs' too-elaborate battle plans. "Or even adding Moony back into the equation, if you'd been able to get hold of his wand for him. What chance would you have had, realistically?"

"I don't know." Fox sighed. "Somewhere between a snowball in hell and a deer in a dragon pen. But that doesn't stop it from hurting."

"No." Letha drew him close, and laid a kiss on the top of his head when he leaned into her embrace. "It doesn't."

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Upstairs, the four Heir-Warriors had gathered in a small circle, Ginny looking over Harry's shoulder at the diagram Luna was drawing with her wand's tip. Ron sat nearby, listening as he guarded Hermione's softly breathing form (the previous day's emotional ups and downs had exhausted her enough that it seemed wisest to let her sleep herself out).

"It was Professor Snape who really gave me the clue to it," said Luna, pointing out the serpent she'd drawn in lines of light with a poke of her wand. "When he told me about the experiments he did with his own Dark Mark. What he described sounds like a spell that's very, very clever indeed." She smiled. "But anything that's clever can be fooled."

"How so?" asked Neville. "It can't exactly mistake the person it's been cast on."

"No, but it can mistake the other people around it." Luna circled her finger around their little group. "I don't know yet if it will be able to sense magic or not, but it will be able to see and smell, like a real snake can, and it will probably know some of what its caster knew. So when it sees you, Harry, it might try to bite you and use its Portkey-venom on you, either because it knows you speak Parseltongue and can command it, or because you're *you* and Voldemort wants to beat you and kill you."

"He wants to kill all of us at this point," said Ron, waving his hand in a larger arc. "But I see what you're saying. Harry's an especial target. And if it's Fox he's trying to punish, or the Mark is, Neenie'd be another one." His face hardened. "Like she doesn't have enough to worry about."

"So what do we do about it?" Ginny asked. "Work Disillusioned?"

"It would just try and bite anything it could smell, then. And we wouldn't be able to see each other, so we might get in our own way." Meghan chewed her lip, thinking. "What if we changed our faces around? Disguised all of us as each other? You as Luna, Ginny, and Luna as you. And me and Neenie swapped too. And Harry and Ron and Neville all as a different one of them. If we're



sitting down to work the magic, it won't much matter that we aren't the same heights, and the mismatches between the faces and the scents might confuse it just long enough that we can do what we need to. Whatever that is."

"Kill it," said Harry flatly. "Talk it out of biting long enough that we can get a good shot at it, and then..." He flicked his fingers, sending out a whiplash of flame.

"That gets rid of the snake, but what about the skull?" Neville laid a fist against the inside of Luna's extended arm, pausing, with a smile, to trace the crescent-moon scar left so long ago by the shards of her mother's scrying bowl. "It's not going to just turn itself into some harmless little tattoo."

"No, it won't," Luna agreed. "As far as I can tell, it's meant to dissolve into the person's blood and poison them. But if there's a Healer nearby..." She exchanged grins with Meghan. "Especially one who can work with her power whispered invisible, so the poison can't try to hurt her back." Her eyes turned sad. "I wish that would work with Mrs. Danger, but she did better than she knew when she called on her Slytherin jewel to protect her. If anyone tried to help her, even if they weren't a Healer themselves, the poison that's in her would sense it and lash out to kill them. So now, if anyone comes close to her with any kind of Healing magic, whether they know it or not..."

"They can't touch her, can't affect her, can't do anything to her at all." Harry nodded coolly. "But two can play at that game."

A knock on the door ended any chance of further explanation, as well as waking Hermione. Ginny got up to open it, and pounced unceremoniously on the first person she saw on the other side. "Percy!"

"That's his name, but don't kill him, please," said Crystal as Percy loosened Ginny's attackhug with a judicious poke in the ribs and resettled his glasses into their proper place. "We wouldn't do too well without our fearless leader."

"And if I heard right..." Fred peered into the room, then grinned. "I did hear right. Lady Luna Lovegood, or should I say Beauvoi?" Stepping inside, he bowed to her with great ceremony. "Welcome back."

"Thank you." Luna inclined her head in reply, her eyes soft and sad. "I'm glad to have the chance to see you."

"Where's your other half?" Crystal leaned against the doorframe. "Or does he need some quiet time? I was in his shoes, I don't think I'd want to see much of anybody I didn't have to."

"That's about how he feels." Hermione covered a yawn. "Oh, excuse me. But he'll be glad to know you asked after him. Did you need someone, or were you just stopping up to say hello?"

"Yes," said Crystal and Fred in unison.

Percy sighed. "Saying hello is always good, but we were hoping to speak with Harry briefly," he said. "Possibly convince you to come to Sanctuary today, if we can?" he added in Harry's direction. "A great many rumors have begun to fly, and seeing you alive, well, and under your own control would lay at least half of them to rest right away."

"Sanctuary's actually just where I need to be, at least to start with." Harry got to his feet. "Why don't you head downstairs and see if Dobby's got the teapot going yet? I'll catch you up as soon as I'm dressed. And the rest of you lazy layabouts can do whatever you want for a while," he said to the Pride, who made faces or rude gestures back at him as their natures dictated. "We'll huddle up with Fox and get those declarations down on parchment before I leave..."

"*Wait for me,*" came the half-expected hissing whisper at the edge of his hearing, under the chatter of three conversations at once. Harry nodded and busied himself shoos everyone else out of the den-room, returning Hermione's hug and scent-touch last of all, before he closed the door, leaving himself alone with Luna.

"I'm listening," he said respectfully, turning to face her.

"Sanctuary is all the farther you need to go." Luna stood with her hands folded at her waist, the green in her eyes more prominent than ever. "You're meant to bargain, not to beg. A proper bargain is struck on neutral ground, and Sanctuary belongs to both the present and the past. If they mean to treat you fairly, they will meet you there. To bargain for life, in what was once a place of death."

"*Who are you?*" Harry asked point-blank, switching to Parseltongue so that there could be no mistaking his meaning. "*Are you truly Luna, or someone else?*"

"*You mean Amanda.*" Luna smiled, the same calm expression with a hint of mischief Harry had learned to expect from the years he had known his friend. "*No, Harry, I'm still Luna. But I'm just a little bit of Amanda now too.*" Stretching out her hand, she regarded her ring, speaking once more in English. "You read yesterday about accidental Horcruxes, and how a tiny fragment of soul sometimes stays behind if a person who makes one later forgives herself. It's a lot like the soul-bits goblin crafters put into their work."

"Is there a bit of Dafydd in Fox, then?" Harry shook his head almost before he was done speaking. "No, there can't be, what am I thinking of? Dafydd never split his soul. He just chose to stay until Amanda was healed."

"We also took the blood differently, Fox and I." Luna chuckled under her breath. "I don't know if he realizes it, but we did. He took Dafydd as a father, and wiped Lucius out of his bloodline entirely. Now that Hermione's twinned with him again, the House of Malfoy truly is no more. But I didn't want to lose any of my relations, so I took Amanda's blood as if I were twin-bonding with her. I'm still my daddy's daughter, but I'm Alex's daughter now as well." She paused, looking worried. "I hope that makes sense."

"Well." Harry prepared himself to Apparate. "As much sense as anything that comes out of your

mouth."

He vanished just in time, as Luna's expertly hurled pillow shot through the space where his head would have been.

---

Padfoot lost the best-out-of-three of wand, quill, parchment with Letha, which sent him down to the kitchen to fetch breakfast. As soon as the door had closed behind him, Letha looked directly at Fox. "Let's have it," was all she said.

"How did you—" Fox began.

Letha shook her head tolerantly. "I'm sure you were very good at fooling the Death Eaters," she said. "Even at fooling Voldemort. You're alive, after all. But I am your mother, and there's something about this little adventure of yours that you aren't sure if you should tell Sirius. So let's have it."

"Now I *know* I'm home," Fox muttered. "Promise you won't tell him? He'd never let me live it down."

"Not unless you give me permission, or it's necessary." Letha scent-swiped her cheek, then brushed the fingers across her heart in an X. "You have my word."

"Thanks." Fox looked down at the carpet, twisting a loose string between his fingers. "See, I gave myself away once or twice. Once to Tonks, though you probably know about that one. But it happened once before that, and it could have been a total disaster. Except...well, it wasn't." He lifted his eyes to meet Letha's. "Wormtail knew. Peter Pettigrew. At least that I wasn't Lucius. He was never quite sure if I was me, but he definitely knew I wasn't who I said I was."

"Did he." Letha tapped her fingers against her kneecap. "And how did that come about?"

"We shook hands." Fox held out his own as if to perform the action he'd named. "And it didn't occur to me until three seconds too late that Lucius never would have. Not only because he never would have considered Peter Pettigrew that much of an equal, but because he literally wouldn't have dared." He grinned. "Not after the present Danger gave him, and the one Voldemort gave his faithful Wormy."

Letha looked baffled for half a moment, until her eyes lit with laughter. "Oh, of course! Lucius was a werewolf—and Peter Pettigrew's right hand was made of *silver!* "

"Magical silver, but Lucius wouldn't have taken the chance it might not react the same as the ordinary stuff," Fox agreed. "I was kicking myself for that one for a good week. But nothing ever came of it. He kept his mouth shut. Kept my secret." He met Letha's eyes again, all traces of humor gone. "He died for it."

"I'd wondered." Letha nodded slowly. "When the news got back to us, I knew something drastic

must have happened, to him or to his Evanie or both."

"She died first." Fox shook his head, exhaling in wonder. "Merlin's wand, if you want to talk about *brave*... she deserved better, a lot better, but we got there late, Luna and I, and we're not Healers, either of us. Luna could help her through the worst of the pain, and make sure the baby survived at least..."

"A baby." Letha began to smile. "A little girl, perhaps? Left orphaned in the Death Eaters' stronghold, being cared for by a friendly house-elf?"

"It's like you read my mind." Fox brushed a strand of hair out of his face. "And he chose, Pettigrew did, to get himself killed quickly, once he knew his daughter would be taken care of. Because he knew he couldn't maintain his position without Evanie there to support him, and if Voldemort had a chance to question him, get him under Legilimency..."

"He would have seen that you were not who you claimed to be, and probably had very little trouble discerning for himself who you were, and what he could do with you." Letha blew out her breath. "And thus, Peter Pettigrew saves the Pack. Certainly not a set of words I ever believed I'd say. As for telling Sirius about this, or about little Annette..." She pursed her lips in thought. "Not yet," she decided after a moment or two. "Possibly not ever, but certainly not yet."

"Not yet what?" asked Padfoot, who'd Apparated back into the room with a tray balanced precariously on one hand in time to hear the final words of his wife's sentence.

"Not yet you." Fox jumped up to catch the tray as it started to slide. "But here you are now, so yes yet you. And yes yet food!" He popped the cover off the tray and sniffed appreciatively as Padfoot conjured a table and chairs for the meal. "Not that it was too bad back at the Manor, a bunch of the Death Eaters brought their house-elves with them, but I never seemed to have much appetite. Being forever one wrong move away from hideous bloody death will do that, I suppose..."

---

A sense of hustle and bustle pervaded Malfoy Manor, as Death Eaters hastily packed their personal property and prepared to vacate the premises. The story, as given out by the Dark Lord's Consort, was that Lucius Malfoy had been treacherously murdered by Remus Lupin, in the very moment of Lupin's well-deserved death at the Dark Lord's hands. Out of respect for their fallen comrade, Bellatrix explained, the Death Eaters would leave Malfoy Manor immediately, and would return there only when they could do so in victory.

Severus Snape wondered, as he finished filling his case of rare ingredients and snapped it shut with his wand, how many of his compatriots believed this tale.

*Half, at best*, he decided, swirling his wand three times around his cauldrons to reduce them to a size suitable for his pocket. He had decided to abandon anything he could not carry on a single trip, as he already had a supply of common ingredients in his personal workroom at Spinner's End, and dying for the sake of possessions seemed to him the most pointless of all deaths.

*The dead, after all, own nothing.*

But one thing remained which only he could do. One piece of justice required administration, and he planned to take it into his own hands.

Picking up the case and pocketing first the tiny cauldrons, then the vial of potion he would require, he Disappeared, concentrating on a small room in a long-neglected wing of the manor house.

He emerged from the compressive feel of Apparition to face a startled, shaken witch, her dark hair tousled and unkempt, one hand groping about her robes for her wand while the other waggled at him as though she were trying to shoo a cat. With a sigh, Severus drew his own wand and Summoned hers nonverbally, watching as it zoomed out of a pocket she had yet to reach. "Were you looking for this, perhaps, Miss Gamp?" he asked, setting down his ingredients to catch it between two fingers.

"Give that back this instant!" Elladora Gamp glared impotently at him, and stamped her foot like a child in a temper. "It's not yours!"

"Nor should it be yours, when you misuse it so criminally." Severus glanced around the room, and elected to toss the wand behind the dust-covered vanity. "You know the penalty for what you have done. To spend the rest of your life locked away, in a prison built not only of stone walls but of fears and horrors and nightmares. Is some petty vengeance on your sister worth that?"

"No sister of mine." Elladora drew her shoulders up haughtily. "She was outcast, beyond the law. I could do as I liked."

"Or as you were commanded." Severus motioned for Elladora to pull back her left sleeve, and sighed again when he saw the skin of her forearm pale and un-Marked. "He never trusted you," he said quietly. "He used you instead. Your hatred, your anger, even you yourself, were nothing more than tools to serve his ends. And when he is finished with tools, he discards them. His need for you is finished. Do you think he will protect you any longer?"

"Why do you care?" Elladora tried for a tone of lofty unconcern, but Severus did not need the heightened senses of a werewolf or an Animagus to smell the raw terror beneath her words. "I'm nothing to you, nor you to me."

"Perhaps not." Severus extracted the vial of potion from his pocket and removed the top with one hand. "But I am tired of watching lives wasted or ended because of a single rash decision. You have three choices, Miss Gamp. Leave this room and hope for the Dark Lord's gratitude, should he win this war. Appeal for some measure of clemency from the other side, should they be triumphant. Or..." He held out the vial. "This."

Elladora eyed the vial doubtfully. "What is it?"

"A second chance." Severus swirled the vial's contents, wafting its scent towards Elladora. "To live, and to call your soul your own. Justice more absolute than you can dream, paired with mercy

more thorough than you deserve. Will you take it?"

For a breath and a half, Elladora hesitated. Then she snatched the vial from Severus's hand and drained it.

"Excellent," murmured Severus, casting first a swift Levitation Charm, then the gentlest of Sleeping Spells. "Now, to speak to Amycus, and see if he is willing to sell the younger of his house-elves..."

---

Harry sat in the bedroom where Moony's body lay beside Danger on the bed, watching the two chests rise and fall in unison. Letha had explained to him while she was writing her declaration what she'd done and why, and Harry found himself in agreement with Hermione.

*Finding out how to let werewolves have kids if they want them is exactly what he'd want to be remembered for. And she had to start his heart and his breathing again to run the tests that would tell her if her potions worked. Which they did. So if he were still alive, there might be more cubs for the Pack next summer...*

*But he's not. The thought made his eyes burn, his throat ache, his hands close into fists. His body's alive, yes, but his soul is gone. The Killing Curse throws it out and shatters the bond, so it's got nothing left to hold it in this world. And Danger may still be alive, but the poison's working every minute, so she won't be for much longer.*

*Unless...*

He pushed those hopes to the back of his mind, where Wolf lay down on top of them to guard them. "Whether I'm right or I'm wrong, you're together," he said, speaking quietly enough that had Moony and Danger only been sleeping, as they appeared to be, he might not have woken them. "And whatever I use these for, I won't let that change." He patted the bag he was carrying, in which resided the three Deathly Hallows, along with a handful of strips of parchment, each covered in a Marauder's or Warrior's handwriting. "You saved me once, and then taught me how to save myself. And you did it so well that when my mind and Voldemort's got thrown together, I came out on top. Instead of using my memories against me, he got trapped inside them."

Getting to his feet, he stood still for a moment, regarding his parents' silent forms. "You taught me how to save myself," he repeated. "Now it's my turn to save you."

He turned in place and Disapparated, heading for the kitchen where his Red Shepherd escort was waiting.

His part in the war might not be exactly what he'd once thought it was, but certain things still had to be done.

---

When Harry, Crystal, and the two Weasleys had been ceremoniously waved on their way, Ginny

caught Luna's eye and glanced upwards. A few minutes later, they were sitting knee to knee under the Black family tapestry.

"I think I know what we were missing last night," Ginny said, rolling her pendant chain between her fingers. "Or not missing, exactly, but the last piece of the puzzle about the Pack's cubs. With the Hallows, and what Neville said about the odd one out being 'born'. It's the Heir, isn't it? The next Heir of Gryffindor?"

"Yes, it is." Luna smiled. "*She* is, I should say."

"She." Ginny let out a shaky breath. "A little girl, then."

"With her mother's hair and her father's eyes." Luna reached across to take Ginny's hand. "Don't be frightened, Ginny. It won't be bad."

"Bad or good isn't the issue. The issue is timing." Ginny laid her free hand on her waist, still as narrow as it had ever been. "We're supposed to finish the war *tomorrow*, Luna, and babies take a whole lot longer than that to be born—"

"She doesn't have to be born for us to win," Luna cut in. "She only has to exist."

"Why?" Ginny frowned. "If the last bit of the puzzle was 'born'..."

"Two answers." Luna held up the required number of fingers, wiggling them back and forth. "The first one is that we have to pass the point where the line will be continued." She sketched a shape like a family tree in the air. "Where even if the Heir dies in battle, a new Heir *will* be born. But the second one, and the more important, has to do with magic and love, and both of those come from the soul. And a soul comes into a body as soon as that body exists, no matter how small it is. So when a piece of you, and a piece of Harry, come together inside you and become something new, something that's different and distinct from either of you..."

"That means it's a new body, and a new soul to live in it. A new life begun, right then." Ginny pressed Luna's hand. "Which *should* be a little scary, I think, or at least not something we take lightly."

"And you're not." Luna returned the pressure. "I don't think you could. But that does mean you have something very important to do, just as soon as Harry gets back." She giggled. "I could help you get dressed for it, if you like, since I had to miss your birthday..."

---

Harry wandered the grounds of Sanctuary, letting his eyes rove across the cloud-dotted sky decorating the roof of the cavern, the stained-glass windows in the tops of the pillars, the artfully placed boulders for perching or climbing. He'd shaken Mr. Weasley's hand and hugged Mrs. Weasley before dispelling some of the more outlandish rumors which were working their way through Sanctuary, and if his parents-in-law had seen through his careful temporizing on the subject of Moony and Danger, they'd been kind enough not to say so.

*Now I just have to wait, and figure out where in all of this the Founders might be...*

A familiar shade of red-gold hair caught his eye, and he made his way towards a small group sitting near the foot of the Slytherin pillar. "Good to see you back in harness," he said to Natalie Macdonald, holding out his hand to shake hers and nodding towards the potion piece holstered at her hip. "Keeping up with practice, I hope?"

"Twice a day, every day." Natalie motioned to the rest of the group. "We all are. Though they only use the ones with dye in them," she added hastily, pointing to Bernadette Pritchard and Cissus. "And we asked their parents first!"

"Sounds like you're doing it right." Harry shook hands with Matt Smythe as well, then with Cissus and Bernie. "We're getting pretty close to things now, and if it goes the way we want it to, you shouldn't have to fight," he said, sitting down with them. "But you all know things don't always go the way we want them to. So just be ready, all right? Listen to your parents or the other grown-ups around, stick together, and don't do anything I wouldn't do." He winced almost as the words left his mouth. "Maybe that wasn't the best way to put that."

Cissus shook his head hard as Bernie and Natalie both giggled. Matt drew his wand, and balanced it on his palm. "I don't know if I want to fight," he said thoughtfully. "I mean, I will if I have to, but I don't want to have to." He turned his eyes on Harry, looking at him steadily. "I really just want it to be over. For the people who killed Amanda, and Graham, and Hannah's mother, and Dean's father, and everyone else who's died, to never do it again. And for the rest of us to go on living and do what we want to do, the best way we possibly can."

"Good plan." Harry nodded. "We'll do what we can about the first couple bits, it being over and them never doing it again, but the rest of it? The going on living? You'll have to figure that part out yourselves." He glanced around the circle. "But I think you're all up for it. Or if you're not, don't tell me about it for another couple days, all right? I've got enough of other people's problems to be going on with."

His listeners had barely finished laughing when movement to his right caught Harry's eye. A man and woman in Muggle clothing were approaching them, and Matt scrambled up as soon as he saw them. "Hi, Mum, hi, Dad. Have you met Harry? Harry Potter?"

"Once, in passing, though I doubt he'd remember." Mrs. Smythe, a petite woman with dark red hair, smiled as she gently disengaged her son's tight hug and extended her hand. "Grace Smythe, Harry, pleased to meet you. My husband, Ezra."

"You too." Harry shook the offered hand, and the one of the man next to her, rather mousy-looking and somewhat vague but with a kind smile. "I was sorry to hear about Amanda. She was a good fighter, and a good friend."

"High praise, from you," said Mr. Smythe. "Thank you for it. But we actually came out here looking for these two." He nodded to Matt and Natalie. "Their Transfiguration tutor is wondering where they are."



"Oops." Natalie flushed guiltily. "I knew we were forgetting something."

"Can we come watch?" asked Bernie, as Cissus nodded in agreement. "Please, can we come watch? We'll be quiet as quiet if we can!"

"Go ask, and don't pester." Mrs. Smythe made shooing motions towards one of the doors into Sanctuary's honeycomb of caverns, and the foursome scrambled up and hurried off, calling farewells to Harry and the two adults over their shoulders.

"Well." Mr. Smythe rolled his shoulders. "Now that *that's* out of the way."

He closed his eyes, as did his wife, and a conscious stillness settled over them both. Harry was tempted to hold his breath, but instead touched his fingers against his leg, counting silently in his head. *To win the war one, to win the war two, to win the war three, to win the war—*

Ezra Smythe's eyes blinked open once more. Moments before, they had been a nondescript brown. Now, they were as green as Harry's own. Even as he watched, the difference flowed outward across the man's whole body, transforming face, hair, clothing—

"Full physical manifestation?" said Alexander Slytherin, examining his hands, front and back. "Even a temporary one? That's unexpected."

"Yet helpful." The woman by his side brushed down her robes, a deep shade of navy blue, becoming to the warm red hair she'd clearly bequeathed to her daughter. "Anne of Eyrton," she introduced herself once more, curtsying to Harry. "Chronicler and world-guide. Not that any of that matters at the moment, but it's only polite."

"No one else will see us," Alex added, straightening the collar of his usual green robes. "So don't worry about answering questions. Except for the eternal one." He peered around Sanctuary. "Where are we going to do this?"

"What about Amanda's cave?" Harry suggested, glancing at the filled-in archway beside them. Then he winced again, hearing his words as his listeners might. "I mean, only if you're all right with that."

"Perfectly." Anne smiled. "Our daughter is at peace now, Harry, and we have your brother and your Pack to thank for that."

"Among several million other things." Alex took his wife's hand. "We should probably take a little walk first, though. Give the others a chance to catch us up."

It wasn't until they passed by the Hufflepuff pillar that Harry realized they were walking around Sanctuary widdershins, the traditional direction of Dark magic. "How come—" he began.

"Camouflage," said Alex without turning his head. "We're doing a bunch of tricky little dances on the border between what should be possible and what shouldn't, and starting things off like this masks it from our opponents by making them assume it's one of their own kind trying something."

By the time they realize it's not, we'll have our wands up, and by then it's too late for them to interfere."

Trying to imagine what sorts of opponents the Founders might face, and then deciding he really didn't want to know, distracted Harry so much he almost didn't notice the new pair of people approaching them. When he did, he was just in time to catch their original faces before they crossed the near-invisible boundary dividing his little group from the rest of the world.

*Percy and Crystal? But how—why—*

Helga Hufflepuff chuckled indulgently at the look on Harry's face, shaking her head. "Silly boy," she said. "Why in the world would you think I'd mind being hosted by a Muggle? She has a loyal heart, she's not afraid to work, and she fights every day for justice. That's what counts. Now, I don't believe you've met my husband." She gestured towards the tall, weather-beaten man by her side.

"Ignatius of Beruna," said that worthy briskly, tossing Harry a two-fingered salute. "Captain of the *Fireflower*, the finest ship on the water. Or under it, either." He grinned, his teeth flashing white in his deeply tanned face. "My beauty sailed the hidden seas and rivers underground, and brought students to this castle from every corner of these isles, long before trains were ever dreamed of."

"Captain." Harry gave the little bow in which Padfoot had trained him so long ago, respect to an elder, and fell into step again behind the new pair. *Beruna. Why does that name sound familiar? Not like a place I've been, but something I've read about...*

As they passed by the Ravenclaw pillar, Harry came alert again, and was somehow unsurprised to see Professor Kettleburn approaching with Madam Pomfrey on his arm.

*The people Luna once said had a "difference" about them, but it wasn't anything bad or harmful. She must have been seeing this, or its possibility at least.*

The transformation took place again as the two newcomers crossed the boundary, Madam Pomfrey's familiar form metamorphosing into Rowena Ravenclaw's graceful figure, Professor Kettleburn losing his perpetually harried look in favor of a calm poise which reminded Harry a great deal of Neville.

"Sylvanus of the Owlwood," he introduced himself when Rowena had greeted Harry. "Nothing nearly so grand as a captain." The smile he exchanged with Ignatius spoke of a long-standing joke between the two. "Only a gardener, but a good one."

"Some of my best friends are gardeners." Harry bowed again, and continued walking, trying to keep his heart in its rightful place rather than leaping up into his throat. *Just Godric and his wife left, and why can't I remember who else Luna saw that "difference" around? Though I suppose this explains why Professor Kettleburn knew so much about the Founders, him and—*

The small procession paused at the base of the Gryffindor pillar just as the name clicked into

place inside Harry's head.

*Professor Jones.* He watched her walk smoothly across the Sanctuary lawn, then turned his head to see the wizard coming towards her at an oblique angle. *And—*

Despite his best efforts, a tiny snort of laughter escaped him, as ex-Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour gravely held out his hand to the Hogwarts History of Magic Professor.

*Well, at least his looks won't have to change that much!*

Godric Gryffindor nodded to Harry almost before his transfiguration was complete, then indicated the beautiful auburn-haired woman beside him, her robes elaborate with embroidery. "Please, allow me to present my wife," he said. "Hestia, Princess of Terebithia."

"Ma'am." Harry bowed very deeply indeed, and an instant later was grateful for it, since it meant his face couldn't be seen when his mind finally saw fit to present him with the common factor among the three places mentioned.

*But that's—I thought it was—*

He tried to clear the astonishment and confusion off his features before he straightened, but saw from the little smile on the Princess's lips he hadn't succeeded. "You're a wizard, Harry," she chided in the voice he'd heard in lectures for the past year and a half. "You've swum with merpeople and flown on a hippogriff and stroked the neck of a unicorn. Is it so hard to believe in one hundred years of winter, or sailing to the edge of the world?"

"I guess not." Harry shook his head, feeling dazed by this latest revelation. "But how—"

"That is very much another story," said Godric, glancing towards Anne, who nodded matter-of-factly. "Suffice it to say, the first night we slept in Hogwarts Castle lasted twenty years. For us." He indicated himself, Rowena, and Helga with a gesture. "For the rest of the world, it was simply a night like any other."

"But from that night we gained great gifts, both mental gifts and magical," Rowena took over. "Each of the powers you think of as marking our Heirs today came from our night's sojourn in the land whose name you know."

"Perhaps even more important, in that night we gained time," Helga finished. "Time to codify our ideas about the teaching and learning of magic. Time to experiment with incantations and wand movements, with recipes and proportions for potions."

"And most important of all, we gained love." Godric held out his hand for Hestia's, and smiled when her fingers closed around his. "Though I still consider myself the luckiest of our little band, for I brought home a child as well as a wife. But to tell you all our story would take far longer than we have. We should proceed to the bargaining."

*Oh, sure, let's bargain.* Harry dropped back one step, watching the procession of Founders walk

towards the stone-filled archway which marked Amanda's tomb. *You go and throw something this huge at me, and then expect me to think clearly—*

"Do you want to win this war or don't you?" muttered Alex as he passed.

Harry responded with a two-part, deeply obscene insult in Parseltongue, which made Alex snicker. "What about your mum?" he asked, intrigued by this new information in spite of himself.

"Where'd she come from?"

"She was one of the Serpent Queens, from the underground kingdoms in the north." Alex nodded at Harry's half-stifled groan. "Yeah, explains a lot, doesn't it? Or rather—" He coughed once as they passed through the archway Rowena and Helga had enchanted the rocks into. *"Explains a lot about us."*

"No secret negotiations, please," Godric called from the front of the line.

"Yes, sir," Alex called back. "Uncle Meaniepants," he added under his breath.

"You think I can't hear you, but you're wrong," said Godric in a conversational tone.

Alex turned a deep and painful-looking shade of fuchsia, and Harry's struggle to keep his face straight and his snickering silent successfully defeated his nerves. By the time he stepped into the small, echoing cavern where the image of the serpent's daughter lay atop her sarcophagus, not even everything he knew about the people he was going to address could daunt his courage.

*They have what I want. What I need. I just have to get it.*

*And hope it doesn't cost more than I can pay.*

"My mother," he said into the silence around him, "is dying. The poison in her blood resists Healing. Worse than that, it would lash out to kill anyone who tried to help her, which means no living Healer can save her." He faced Rowena, looking into her eyes. "But maybe you can."

Rowena rose. "We are forbidden to interfere in the affairs of the living," she said coolly. "Unless our aid is properly invoked, and the price for it is paid. Your mother and father invoked us long ago, to rebuke those who mistreated you, Harry Potter. Now it is your turn to stand before us and bargain for them." The slightest of smiles touched her lips. "What do you offer?"

"First, these." Harry reached into his bag and extracted the bulkier of its contents. "The Deathly Hallows. Wand, Cloak, and Stone."

"Sacra Letifera," murmured Rowena, nodding to herself. "After our time, but known to us, yes."

"Do you think we need these things?" asked Godric, with a touch of sarcasm in his tone. "Do you think our power requires such augmentation?"

"No, but I think you might want to know where they are, and who's got them." Harry laid the

Cloak out flat on the floor, and dropped the Wand and the Stone onto it, the Stone's two halves landing one on either side of the Wand. "They're powerful objects. In the wrong hands, they could do a lot of damage."

"So they could," Helga agreed. "And even the best hands can become the wrong hands, for anyone can be tempted. Do you offer these to us freely, Harry Potter? To do with as we please, or to order you to do the same?"

"I do."

"Then that is the first part of our price." Alex spoke for the first time, his voice firm and clear. "Destroy the Deathly Hallows. Their time is past. What else do you offer?"

"Myself." Harry laid a hand on his chest. "Whatever I can give that's rightfully mine, or whatever I can do that's right, and that won't interfere with what I *have* to do. And I don't offer it just for me." Again he plunged his hand into his bag, and brought out his slips of parchment, spreading them out so that the Founders could see them. "The rest of my Pride, and my godfather and ungodmother, all offer the same things through me."

"In their own hands, to make it binding." Helga nodded approvingly. "Well done."

"So you offer both gifts and services." The Princess Hestia smiled, her hands folded in her lap. "Will you give up even those gifts you hold most dear, you and those who have written these papers? Will you give up what is yours through blood?"

"I will." Harry felt a little pang through his chest at the thought of never being able to hold flame in his hands again, but countered that easily with the memory of Danger lying impossibly still and silent on her bed. "So will they, or they would not have sworn."

"It's easy to swear such things, when the goal you want is in your sights," said Captain Ignatius. "Hard to hold to it, when the winds and seas of life toss you about. Are you sure of everyone whose hand you bear, Harry Potter?"

"If I weren't, I wouldn't have asked them for this." Harry squared his shoulders. "I am sure."

"Then the second part of our price is this." Sylvanus sat so still that Harry could have sworn the man was rooted to the ground like a tree. "Two of those who bear the special magics which signify our bloodlines must give them up, forever, for both themselves and their children. And only when one of those two has done so will this Healing you ask be accomplished."

Harry counted to ten, then fifteen, then twenty. "Is this all?" he asked when the silence seemed to stretch unbearably. "Is the price paid?"

"Not yet." Anne got to her feet. "One more piece remains, that only you can pay, Harry Potter. Hear my words and heed them well." She held out her hands, palms up. "At the last moment, on the last day, when you are prepared to choose your own fate and thereby save or doom your world,

you must agree instead to place that fate into the hands of another."

"On one condition," Harry said immediately, "I agree."

Anne raised her eyebrows. "Name it."

"I choose the person."

"Very well." Anne inclined her head. "But you must choose them here and now."

"My partner, in magic and in life." Harry held up his left hand. "Ginevra Weasley Potter."

"An excellent choice." Anne turned to look back at the Founders. "Are we agreed, then?"

"We are." Rowena stood, as Anne seated herself beside Alex again. "Hear then the terms of our bargain. On our side, the full Healing of Gertrude Granger-Lupin, known as Danger, from the poison which now threatens her life." She smiled. "Since your assumption, Harry Potter, was a correct one. This poison can do no harm to one who is already dead."

"On your side, to pay for this Healing," Godric spoke up as Rowena sat down in her turn, "three items. First, the destruction of the objects called the Deathly Hallows. Second, two of our Heirs to abrogate their blood-borne powers forever. Third, your promise, Harry Potter, to give your life without reservation into the hands you have named. And the Healing to take place when the first of the two Heirs has given up their powers." His tawny eyes never left Harry's face. "Do you, Harry James Potter, find this bargain satisfactory, and will you agree to it in the name of all?"

"I do, and I will." Harry nodded firmly. "So I speak, and so I intend."

"And so," said Helga with soft emphasis, "let it be done."

The cavern hummed with the echoes of her final word.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 60: Worthy (Year 7)

"So they're actually—wow." Ron whistled long and low. "I know Alex said it'd surprise us if we ever found out where his mum and the rest were from, but Merlin's blood!"

"No," said Fox from his perch in a niche on the den room wall. "Merlin's mother. And Merlin, too, come to think. "

"You really like having him around?" Ron asked Hermione, who only laughed. "Can't understand it myself." He craned his neck to look up at Fox. "I thought we were doing just fine without you, personally. Missed Luna a bit, but we could've worked around that..."

Fox swept his fingers through a mild piece of Pride-sign rudeness and turned his attention back to Harry, who was relating the tale of his bargaining session with the Founders. "So Danger will be healed as soon as we pay the first part of the price," he said. "Is that just a repudiation thing? Somebody uses the right language to say they'll never be an Heir again, and poof, they won't?"

"Could be." Harry shrugged. "But they've been pretty good about telling us if things need to be done a certain way. My guess is that since they didn't, whatever needs to happen will come up anyway, or the chance for it will. Our job is to recognize it and take that path, where maybe if things were different that's not the way we'd go."

"I don't like that whoever gives up their powers gives them up forever and ever, and won't even be able to give them to their children." Meghan scowled. "That's not fair at all!"

"We're asking for something awfully big, Pearl," said Hermione. "A Healing from a poison that was made specifically to fight back against Healing. Besides, the Founders need it to be clear that they're not there to fix every little problem we might have." She smiled, letting her pendant chain run through her fingers. "Instead they give us the tools, and let us fix them ourselves."

"And when we can't anymore, that's when they step in, if they're asked. And if we can pay." Ginny leaned back against Harry. "Did you have to choose me?" she murmured low enough that no one else would hear her.

"Who else?" Harry laid the side of his face against the top of her head, letting the soft scent of her hair drift around him. "You'd be offended if I'd chosen anyone else. And rightly so."

"That doesn't stop it from being terrifying." Ginny sighed. "Harry, what if I pick wrong?"

"I've been asking that question since I was old enough to understand what a prophecy was." Harry slid an arm around Ginny's waist. "Sorry to dump it on you like this, but I did promise you everything of me."

"I didn't think you meant it this way." Ginny's tone was biting, but her body language and scent



both told Harry she was, if not content, resigned to the situation. Her grouchiness was just her way of working off her nerves before the event, so that she could make her decision in the moment with as clear a mind as possible.

*Maybe I should try that. Snap and snarl at the Pride for the next day and a half, and then I might be able to laugh my way through getting rid of Voldemort...*

"Harry," Hermione's voice called him back from his momentary daydream of getting into a sulking match with Meghan. "What did Lady Rowena call the Deathly Hallows again?"

"Sacra Leti-something." Harry cast his mind back. "Letifera? I think that's right."

"Letifera." Hermione rubbed the knuckle of her right thumb against her lips. "Letifera. I've seen that word before..."

Drawing her wand, she revealed the hidden shelf of Horcrux books, and Summoned one from near the bottom of the stack, opening it near the beginning, then quickly flipping through the pages.

"Which part is that?" asked Ron, scooting away so as to be out of range of flying elbows and hands. Hermione in a book-mood was not to be trifled with. "Letifera, I mean. Deathly, or Hallows?"

"Well, look at the other one." Neville tapped off his points on his fingers. "Sacra sounds like sacred, which means holy, or hallowed. So Sacra must mean Hallows. And then Letifera would mean Deathly—"

"And here it is." Hermione held up the book triumphantly. "Only it's not talking about the Hallows. It's talking about Horcruxes."

"What?" said most of the rest of the Pride, their voices overlapping.

"Listen." Hermione laid her finger on the page and began to read aloud. "'But he who wishes to safeguard his soul from death for all time, instead of merely extending the span of his mortal life, must seek his answer in death itself, in the form of an object called by the ancients the Horcrux Letifera, but known in these latter days simply as the Horcrux...'"

"So it was originally called a Deathly Horcrux." Ron eyed the yellowed and dust-imbued book dubiously. "Bit redundant, isn't it?" He paused, frowning. "But magic isn't," he said slowly. "Or it shouldn't be. Remember in Professor Jones's class, how we studied the way spell incantations get figured out, and how they're never in their final form until they only say exactly what you want them to?"

"Maybe people were trying to take away some of its power, so they took away one of its names?" Meghan hazarded. "It could happen. Names matter."

*Or maybe it means something else.* Harry glanced over towards Luna, and saw her tiny, triumphant smile. *Maybe it means—*

Quickly, he censored that thought before it could go too far. Living in dreams of a happy future wouldn't do him much good if he didn't get the work done to ensure that happy future could come to pass.

*But I'm thinking more and more it really could...*

"Going back to what we started on," said Fox, breaking into the good-natured banter between Ron and Meghan on the subject of what people were called and what they answered to. "Why would you get to meet the people the Founders were married to, Harry? They aren't part of the crew at the Castle upstairs. We've never met them there. I don't even know where they do spend most of their time—though I could take a guess, now that I know where they came from," he added with a grin to Hermione, flattening his hands as though they held a book. "But why bring them into this, instead of Paul and Maura and Adam and the Fates? The Founders don't do anything without a reason..."

"They've given us our prophecy, which means they can't tell us anything else about how we ought to handle the Final Battle." Harry drew his own wand and summoned from a pocket on the Horcrux shelf the scroll containing said prophecy. "But that doesn't mean they can't hint. And look here." Unrolling the scroll near the bottom, he pointed to a line. "*The queens shall ride the lion bold* . If that's not a big red flag—"

Luna started coughing, but waved her hand to indicate she was all right when the rest of the Pride looked her way. "I swallowed wrong," she said weakly. "Don't mind me. Go on, Harry. I think you've got something."

"Seers," Harry muttered without any real annoyance. "Right. So we're all familiar with this stuff. We've read about it, we know it's powerful, and now we know it's real. But Voldemort doesn't. And all the while he's so busy being proud of the way he's the Heir of Slytherin, working as hard as he can to live up to that part of his blood, what's mixed right into it?" He tapped the line of prophecy in Danger's half-neat handwriting. "This. He's got exactly as much of this blood as he does of Slytherin's. And I think the Founders are trying to tell us we should use that. Use its ideas, its images, to hit Voldemort in a weak spot he doesn't even realize he has."

"How?" asked Neville, his voice inquisitive rather than challenging. "We can't exactly make him lie down with his cuddly snake and listen to a bedtime story. Though I might ask you to draw that for me, when this is all over," he said to Luna, who nodded, beaming. "Maybe even have him sucking his thumb..."

"But what if we could?" said Hermione when the snickering had settled down enough that she could be heard. "What if we could find a place which had so much magic, magic he's uniquely vulnerable to, that we could *make* him believe whatever he saw? *Make* him not think, not question, not do anything except watch and accept? Especially if what he was seeing also resonated with him, but in a way he's never felt before, a way he wouldn't know how to handle? It would throw him off his balance, and give you a better chance at him, Harry."

"I can't say I'd mind that." Harry laid down the prophecy scroll. "But where do you mean?"

Ginny rapped her knuckles lightly against Harry's skull. "Sounds hollow. Must be ripe. Hogwarts, Harry. She's talking about Hogwarts."

"Are you mad?" Harry stared wide-eyed from his sister to his wife. "You want to—to let him just walk onto the grounds—"

"Onto the grounds, yes, but not into the castle or Sanctuary!" Hermione held up her hands. "Listen, just listen to me for a minute! Voldemort's ancestors were *banished* from Hogwarts. Salazar tried to take the castle back by force, and instead he got himself killed by Godric's Champion. And Matthias never dared to try it at all. Don't you think the castle remembers that?"

"That's what Dadfoot said Professor Snape said, that one time when he was talking to the Bloody Baron." Meghan's eyes were half-shut, the better to remember. "Talking to Salazar Slytherin's ghost. 'The castle remembers, my lord. The castle remembers.' And we've got Heirs of all the Founders who *were* faithful. Even Slytherin's good line, now that it's not cursed anymore." She reached over to squeeze fingers with Luna. "And we know how to talk with Hogwarts, how to wake up its magic and get it to help us!"

"Plus, think about this." Ginny held the tips of her fingers together, then let them crumple inwards. "If they believe they've won an easy victory at the boundaries, that they've fought their way onto the school grounds without the kind of resistance they were expecting, they'll be all cocky and stupid coming towards the castle. At which point we show them what we can *really* do. They'll pull back, won't they, to regroup and make new plans? And where would they be more likely to go than the Forest?"

"And nowhere could be better for working the kind of magic we need than a forest." Luna sketched with her wand's tip in the air, creating a dark, moody scene of a tiny clearing among massive trees, lit by an inadequate fire, around which robed figures huddled nervously. "What waits out there beyond the light? No one can say. And the marvelous Lord Voldemort, for all his magic and all his greatness, has never outgrown the terrible fear of his childhood. Fear of the dark, which is also fear of the unknown."

*Alone and helpless, in the dark.* Harry nodded slowly, as the ease with which Voldemort's unprotected mind had been caught up in his own baby memories now made sense to him. *Not knowing if anyone can hear you crying, if anyone will ever open the door again.*

*Except I do know. And they did.*

*Maybe no one ever has, for him.*

He took an instant to pity the little boy named Tom Marvolo Riddle, then put that feeling firmly away. Whatever had happened to Voldemort when he was younger didn't excuse what he wanted to do now, or change the fact that he had to be stopped.

"So let's play this through, then," he said, signing a quick thank-you to Ron as his friend conjured a large map of Hogwarts into being, and the Pride leaned in (or down, in Fox's case) to study it.

"We'll need to find some way to let them onto the grounds without them figuring out we're *letting* them onto the grounds, and keep from taking too much damage in the meantime—I'm not getting people killed for a diversion if I can help it..."

---

"Why did you laugh earlier?" Meghan asked Luna as the Pride's lionesses settled into the den which was now their sole possession. Harry, Ron, and Neville had taken Fox off to do secret and manly things, about which the ladies felt no need to inquire. "When Harry said something about a big red flag."

"Because." Luna stretched her arms against each other, twisting her back to work out the kinks. "Did any of the spies ever send you reports on what it looked like while Fox and I were undercover? What I would do to make the Death Eaters think I couldn't be paying any attention to them even if I had my mind still?"

"Some kind of sewing, I think," said Hermione. "On your cloak, wasn't it? Putting decorations on it? Only they weren't visible, because it was black on black."

"It was, while I was stitching it. But it won't always be." Luna lifted her wand and sketched a black rectangle in midair, the long edge parallel to the ground. "I made it black to begin with, both to keep anyone from seeing it, and because ambition and cunning all by themselves almost always turn the person who has them Dark. But that's not all I have, especially not when I'm with you." She traded smiles with her friends. "Together, we have wisdom, and loyalty, and courage. And when all those things come together, what I made will look more like..." A flick of her wand sent illusory fire across the rectangle. "This."

Meghan cracked first, but Ginny and Hermione weren't far behind. "And Harry said..." Ginny managed to get out before another wave of laughter overtook her. "Oh, that's too funny!"

"And is that really what it is?" asked Meghan when she had her breath back.

"That's exactly what it is." Luna sketched in the towers of Hogwarts beneath her original picture. "But only the right people can put it in its place. And they'll come when we're ready for them." Her wand whisked through a spiral, vanishing the entirety of the picture. "So how have things been working out at Sanctuary?"

The conversation wound its way through the current state of Muggle/magical relations, the varying roles of Order, Red Shepherds, and DA in the ongoing battles against Death Eaters, and the sightings of Fox and Luna at the Founders' Castle ("I *am* an Heir now," Luna pointed out, "and Fox has sworn the Oath, so he could come as my guest"), before delving into the possible meanings of several prophetic phrases the Pride had studied, at which point Hermione and Meghan were made privy to Luna's revelation from earlier. Meghan looked awed, but Hermione's forehead furrowed as she thought it over.

"I don't quite understand how it can happen so soon," she said. "I mean, there's hardly anything for the soul to catch hold of yet. There certainly isn't a brain, so the baby won't be able to think..."

"But thinking and feeling are different, and feeling is what comes from the soul. Most especially, love." Luna laid a hand against her chest. "Did your parents wait to love you until you were a certain size or shape? Or did they love you from the very first moment they knew you were there?"

"My Dadfoot had to stop staring at Mama first." Meghan snickered. "Silly Dadfoot."

"And I remember when Harry saw Marcus's soul, at the Department of Mysteries." Ginny shaped an archway with her hands. "He didn't look the way his body would have looked at that point. He looked like an ordinary baby, one who'd been born and was a few months old. Is that because a soul doesn't really have an age, not the way a body does?"

Luna nodded. "And because even in that very first moment, the code that says how the baby will look when she's born has already been written. So the soul knows what its body *will* look like, and that's how it shapes itself."

"Her mother's hair, and her father's eyes." Ginny wove her fingers into her own hair. "Like you, Meghan. Or like Harry, only backwards."

"A lot of things about Harry are backwards," murmured Hermione, sending the female Warriors into gales of giggles once again.

In a little while, they would think again of war. This moment was filled with the friendship and silliness and laughter the war was being waged to preserve.

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"Well then." Fox looked up from the plans for the Manor Den, attempting to scowl but not quite managing. "Just make yourselves right at home in *my house*, why don't you."

"We didn't know it was your house." Ron was lying on his back on his bed, doodling something in the air with his wand that only he could see. "Matter of fact, you went to a good bit of trouble so we wouldn't know it was your house. We thought it was going to be Hermione's house, after we got the Death Eaters out of it."

"Which they've now done all by themselves, courtesy of your scaring Bellatrix," added Neville. "So that's handy."

"And we've got this lovely little wing here we were intending for guests." Harry pointed his wand at one of the farther areas of the Manor, lighting it up. "Same basic size as the bits we were all claiming for ourselves, same kind of amenities, and enough out of the way that you can hole up in there for a while if you need to. Unless you don't like the whole idea, I mean." He glanced over at Fox, trying to see the expression on his brother's face. "If you'd rather we settled down somewhere else, as a Pride, or if you and Luna wanted a house of your own instead—"

"No! No, God, not that." Fox shook his head hard. "I'd flash straight back to 'her and me against the world' if we were anywhere alone. And being proud of the Manor was one of the things I could

always tell the truth about while I was undercover. It's a gorgeous old place, and it deserves so much better than it's had, these last few hundred years." He laid his fingers against the lettering in the corner of the diagram. "I can't think of any better way to chase out all the old bad memories than by making a whole load of good ones."

"Like late-night Quidditch on our own private pitch." Ron whisked his wand back and forth across his invisible drawing, revealing stick figures on brooms tossing a familiar-looking ball among them. "Or hauling Hermione away from the library long enough to make her eat. Maybe going out to see if there's any magical creatures in the woods—a wizarding family's home helps hold magic together where Muggle stuff would chase it off, so most of the purebloods have really thickly inhabited forests around their houses, even if the ones who live there tend to stay out of sight because a lot of purebloods are also bloody murderous idiots..."

"No one's done anything with the gardens in years, have they?" Neville asked Fox, who shook his head again. "Good. I like a challenge. And we can have music every night if we want it, and anyone who doesn't can just go to bed. The rooms are so far apart we'll never even know."

"Have to wonder what's going to happen to number twelve, though." Harry laid a hand on the windowsill on which he was perched. "Pearl always said she wanted to live here someday, but if we're out at the Manor Den, she won't. Unless we keep it on as a second house, maybe."

"Or there could be someone else who'd want it." Fox had his head bent over the plans again, his wand in his hand, altering a few details of the wing newly assigned to him and Luna. "And we'd even be keeping it in the family that way."

"All right, what do you know that we don't?" Harry slid off the windowsill. "And is it knowing, or is it..." He wagged his fingers around his face when Fox looked up. "You know. *Knowing* ." A tap against his wedding ring. "Thinking about what the shiny thing means."

"Honestly, Harry." Fox looked hurt. "Do you think I'd ask Luna to Look into the future for no better reason than vulgar curiosity?"

"Yes," said all three other male Warriors in unison.

"Ow." Fox winced. "All right, all right. Maybe she Looked a couple times. There were a few nights when things got really bad, and we needed something, anything, that was cheerful and alive, and not about Pack or Pride, because that would just make us miss you too damn much." He sat back in his chair, sealing off his alterations to the plans with his wand. "I wasn't expecting what she found, and remember none of it is set in stone, but if it does happen, I can't wait to see how it goes..."

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Aletha looked up from her book at the sound of light footsteps on the stairs. "There you are," she said, standing as Ginny came into view. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrified." Ginny smiled wanly. "Not of Harry, but just of everything. When the war could be

won or lost by things we can't control or change..."

"I thought that might be the case." Aletha extracted two small bottles from her pocket. "Here. The red one is for you, the blue one for Harry."

"Thank you." Ginny accepted the two bottles and weighed them in her palm. "What are they?"

"A calming potion, for both of you. Just enough for an hour, to let you set aside your troubles and concentrate on each other. And to yours, I've added a stabilizer. To keep certain systems working correctly, despite the stress you'll be under." Aletha held out her arms, and Ginny folded herself promptly into them.

"You've been so brave," she whispered to the younger witch, holding her close. "I'm so proud of you. Of all of you, but you especially."

"Why?" Ginny drew back within the embrace to look up at Aletha. "Why especially me?"

"Because out of all the Pride, you had the most opportunities to choose a different path, and many people might say you should have. Should have said that you didn't want any part of getting married and having your first child so young, or that it wasn't fair to burden you with alpha status in the Pride, or even that you weren't of age to fight and you ought to be protected instead. There's a seed of truth in all of that, and some part of my heart would be easier if you'd taken any one of those paths. But." Aletha laid her hand against the side of Ginny's face. "I wouldn't have you as a daughter-in-law if you had, and I'm very glad I do. And we might not be this close to winning the war. Which I do believe we are, and we will."

"I believe it too." Ginny's second smile was stronger. "But it's always good to hear it from someone else. The red one for me, you said?"

"Yes, that's right." Aletha accepted the blue-bottled potion back so that Ginny had a hand free to remove the cork from the red bottle and drink its contents down in three long swallows. "And here's your opportunity," she added as the door of the bedroom opened, allowing Neville to step out with a roll of parchment under his arm, followed by Ron and Fox, who were eyeing one another warily. "You two," she called out, attracting their attention and Neville's, and incidentally giving Ginny a chance to take back the blue bottle, slip into the room, and shut the door behind her. "Whatever you're thinking of doing to each other, don't."

"But if he *deserves* it," Ron began.

"Not even once?" said Fox at the same moment.

"If you're really set on it, I can't stop you." Aletha traded small, smug smiles with Neville. "But it won't be very easy to make your battle plans if Hermione isn't speaking to either of you."

"Damn war," Fox grumbled. "Ruins all our fun."

"Should be over by day after tomorrow." Ron started for the top of the stairs. "And then you're

going down, Beauvoi."

Fox only smirked at the back of Ron's robes, which bore the words "I am a ginger lummoX" spelled out in maroon.

"Going to be glad when we have a place of our own?" Neville asked quietly.

"More than I can say." Aletha sighed. "Which, having said that, of course means I'll start missing you all within the first week you're gone..."

---

In the early afternoon of the day, the Pride gathered once again, this time in the tapestry room, where Fox took his place on one of the couches, his fellow Warriors gathered around him. Padfoot sat by the door, wand in hand, equally ready to defend them against threats from without or within, and Letha stood behind the couch in case anyone should need emergency Healing.

"What we have to do here is very, very dangerous," said Luna as Fox rolled back his left sleeve, revealing the magical shield over his Mark, which had begun to fray a bit at the edges. "There are so many ways it could come out that I can't possibly See all of them. But one thing is very clear to my Sight. Voldemort knows we will want to try this, and he's hoping the snake's Portkey-venom will bring him a hostage. Someone he can use to tempt the rest of us to come out and attempt a rescue."

"At which point he can pick us off like a kneazle at a gnomehole." Ron glowered. "Not interested, thanks."

"Does that mean we shouldn't try a rescue, if someone is bitten?" asked Neville. "Just abandon them?"

"It isn't abandoning them if we all agree to it." Hermione perched on the arm of the couch closest to Fox's head. "And besides, if we do this right, no one will *be* bitten."

"And we're the Pride." Meghan nodded firmly. "When things matter, we do them right."

"But if anyone is bitten, they're on their own." Ginny's lips twisted as though she were chewing an orange peel, but her voice was strong and clear. "Because to try to help them would only make things worse, and endanger the rest of us for no reason."

Luna held up a finger. "They will have help, if it does happen," she said. "Not from Pack or Pride, but they *will* have help. That much I can See, but the rest..." She shook her head fretfully. "It clouds over and tangles. There are too many paths."

"But we're all agreed, yes?" Harry raised his right hand, palm out. "No mad rescue attempts."

"Agreed," the rest of the Pride chorused, raising their own hands in reply.



"Here's hoping we won't need them," muttered Fox. "All right, you lot, time to put on your other faces."

By prior consent, Padfoot did the illusion spells for the younger wizards, and Letha for the witches. They finished almost at the same moment, and as the Pride resumed their seats around Fox's couch, only someone closely acquainted with them would have noticed the tiny differences in movement and carriage which betrayed the disguises they wore. A few moments of breathing together brought their magic into harmony, flowing in and around them freely, with the two Pack-adults standing guardian a short ways away.

"Ready, Fox?" asked Meghan, tucking Hermione's light-brown curls out of the way behind her ears.

"When you are." Fox swallowed once as she laid her hands on his arm, just above the Mark. "Going to hurt a bit, I'm guessing?"

"I'll do what I can," Meghan promised. "But I have to keep you alive first."

"Fair enough." Fox flipped up the collar of his robes, then took a firm grasp on a handful of couch cushion with his other hand. "On your mark, then." His grin came and went like lightning. "Or rather, on mine."

"Maybe we can extract some of the bad puns while we're at it," muttered Ron, pushing the prop glasses Padfoot had conjured for him up his nose.

"I rather like his sense of humor the way it is," said Luna serenely, her calm smile looking decidedly strange on Ginny's freckled face. "Is everyone ready? In three, two, one—"

Her wand sprang into her hand, and she breathed a three-word spell in Parseltongue, tracing a circle around Fox's shielded Mark. The shield vanished, and the skull-and-snake became visible once more, the snake beginning to twist and squirm beneath Fox's skin. Fox clamped his teeth around his upturned collar, as Meghan's small hands tightened on his arm and the rest of the Pride battled to maintain their magical unity.

"Come out and play, little snake," Luna crooned in English. "Come and see who is meddling with your Master's spell."

"Don't listen to her," objected Ginny from the other end of the Pride-oval, leaning forward so that her dark blonde hair could spill easily into sight. "I'm the one your Master wants! I tricked him for months in his very own lair!"

"Don't listen to her," Ron took over, waving a dismissive hand at Ginny. "I'm the one your Master's wanted for years! You ought to bite me!"

"Don't listen to him," Harry cut in on the heels of this, hoping his invisible glasses wouldn't slip from Neville's broader-bridged nose. "He's an impostor! I'm the one your Master really wants!"

*Can't you tell?* " he added in Parseltongue.

Fox's skin split, drawing a hiss of pain from behind his clenched teeth, and the snake's head ascended majestically from within his arm. Higher it rose and higher, its eyes fixed on Harry—

*"But why can't I be the one you want?"* breathed Luna, also in Parseltongue, and the snake whipped around to stare at her, its body language conveying a decided degree of bafflement.

"Or what about me?" Hermione put in, managing a fair imitation of Meghan's huffy-spoiled-brat tone. "I'm the Healer around here! No one will have a chance without me!"

"Yes, we will." Neville looked down his nose at her, which was more impressive on Ron's face than on his own. "You're just a whiny little kid. Nobody will get very far without me there to fix things."

"You're all wrong! It's me he wants!" Ron thumped a hand against his chest. "Harry Potter, the Chosen One!"

"No, it's me!" Ginny shoved at her brother's arm. "The Heir of Slytherin!"

"No, me!" "Why not me?" "It should be me!" The Pride's voices flew thick and fast, and the snake rose further and further from its resting place, its head turning back and forth uneasily. Harry watched closely, since to be sure of killing the snake cleanly without harming Fox, he had to catch it when the majority of its body had emerged from its spell-cocoon.

*Which should be right—about—*

A tiny, serpentine sigh of satisfaction was all the warning he had. The snake's tail slid free of its flesh-bound resting place, and in the same instant it whipped around and struck.

Meghan had no chance to dodge before its fangs sank deep into her right hand.

*Kill!* snarled Wolf in the back of Harry's mind, snapping his horrified second of paralysis. His flash of fire burned the spell-snake to ashes even as Meghan vanished from the spot where she'd been standing. Fox's back arched and a howl tore from him, but the rest of the Pride lunged forward almost as one, using their weight to hold him still, and then Letha leaned down to clamp her own hands over the place where her daughter's had been, her own magic flooding a cleansing blue over the dark and dingy green where the skull of the Mark was dissolving into a noxious cloud under Fox's skin. "Finish it," she said in a voice like iron. "Seal the spell, before we lose them both."

"You have no more power here," Harry said, barely recognizing his own voice as Padfoot, his face looking old for the first time Harry could recall, waved his wand in a broad arc, removing all the disguising spells at once. "By my right as brother, as alpha, as Heir, begone."

The cloud of green swirled in a furious dance, but Letha's magic and Harry's command, backed by the combined strength of the Pride, caged it ever tighter, until with a soundless pop it vanished.

Fox let out a shuddering sigh, slumping back against the cushions of the couch, as his Pridemates moved back one by one, releasing him.

"Please," he said in a hoarse whisper of a voice when he was free, turning onto his side and laying his arm across his face. "Just...leave me alone."

Luna seated herself on the floor beside the couch, and nodded once to confirm her husband's words. Her eyes held depths of sorrow Harry had never seen from her before, but understood perfectly. Only the worst of his nightmares had ever shown him his baby sister thrown onto Voldemort's nonexistent mercies.

*And Fox is going to blame himself for it, because if we'd never tried to take the Mark off him, Pearl would still be safe at home where she belongs...*

"I never knew success could feel so awful," Ginny murmured to him as the rest of the Pride left the room in slow procession. "And the pendants—what's wrong with them?"

"Nothing's wrong." Harry stepped to one side and drew his chain out of his robes, splaying out the medallions and pressing them against the inside of his wrist to better feel the faint, fitful flickers of chill. "She's in trouble, all right, but there's nothing we can do about it. So—"

"Wait." Ginny's finger darted in to touch the third pendant, the one which held the carvings representing the Pack-friends. "Harry, look!"

"At what?" Harry asked, and then could have kicked himself, as Ginny slid his first two pendants gently aside.

The carving of the raven was alight, giving off a strong and steady glow.

"Luna did say she would have help," Ginny began, then stopped as Neville came to stand beside them. The very stillness with which he held himself, the care with which he moved, set off warning bells inside Harry's mind, and Wolf whined uneasily at the undercurrents in his beta's scent.

"I could have been the Chosen One," said Neville softly. "If he hurts her, I might forget I'm not."

"I can live with that." Harry held out his hand, and Neville shook it, sealing the bargain. "Let's pack up. We'll need to get to Sanctuary and start briefing the DA as soon as Fox is back on his feet."

---

Sirius held his wife tightly against him, but for once could find no comfort in her presence, as he could feel her shoulders shaking in her own fear and grief. Their baby, their little girl, whom he'd loved since that first breathless moment of revelation, had been snatched from them by the whirlwind of the war, and their enemy's glee would know no bounds.

*He'll hurt her.* His storytelling mind and his experience as an Auror melded effortlessly to present him with images, sounds, even scents, fleshing out the barren, simplistic words. *He'll tear her apart, body, mind, and soul, not because she's ever done anything to him herself but just because of who she is, and who else he can hurt by hurting her...*

"Her fate is not yet out of our hands."

Startled, Sirius turned towards the source of the sound. Luna sat on the floor with her eyes half-shut, her head tipped back, her hands laid flat against the carpet. Fox, on the couch beside her, was pushing himself slowly into a sitting position, moving with care so as not to touch his lady. His eyes were fixed on her with the same desperate hope Sirius could feel rushing through his own blood, humming through Aletha where her arms wrapped around him.

"If we make the first move, our enemy must make the second," Luna continued in a flat tone, devoid of emotion. "He will rush to capture the greater prize without making sure of the lesser, and his carelessness will give her back her chance. But we must hurry, and be certain to send him a challenge he cannot refuse..."

"Merlin's bones," Sirius breathed as a plan burst into being behind his eyes. "That's *it*."

Embracing Aletha tightly once more, he released her, and strode to the door, yanking it open. "Harry!" he bellowed. "War Room! Now!"

*Should've been thinking like a Marauder all along.* He Disapparated, aiming for the small study on the floor below where the Order's plans and supplies were kept. *Play to your target's weaknesses, not his strengths, and get him into position while making him think this was all his own idea...*

---

Meghan thought she might have screamed with the pain of the snakebite, but couldn't be sure. The whirlwind of colors and sounds that was a Portkey journey drowned out everything else.

*Hermione*, she found one scrap of sense with which to remember. *I have to be Hermione...*

Then the world snapped back into focus around her, and she collapsed onto an uneven stone floor, bruising knee, hip, and shoulder as she fell. Startled shouts all around her proved her entrance hadn't gone unseen, and she flicked her wand into her hand, intending to put up a Shield Spell just as soon as she had enough breath to speak the words—

A red spell struck the center of her chest, stealing the few whiffs of air she'd been able to regain, and her wand tore painfully loose from her grasp.

"I see we have a visitor." Lord Voldemort lounged in his throne, his own wand pointing lazily in her direction, as Bellatrix reached up to snatch Meghan's out of its flight. "Miss Granger-Lupin, is it not? What a pity you could not have come to see us yesterday. You would have met your father here." He laughed softly, filling what Meghan could now see was a rough-walled cavern with breathy echoes. "Briefly, but you would have met him. Now, whatever can have brought you here

so abruptly? Is it possible you have a traitor from my ranks among you, and were trying to meddle with my Mark?"

Meghan sucked in half a painful breath, and bared her teeth rather than answer in words. From a long-ago conversation, she recalled her choice of rosebushes to keep her mind safeguarded from intrusion, and began summoning up and weaving together her thorny barricade. *Only a prince may enter here*, she thought as strongly and clearly as she could, while all around the borders of her mind the rose vines grew and twined and climbed. *Only a prince, which definitely doesn't mean you...*

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Severus Snape frowned, slipping from one shadow to the next inside the cavern the Dark Lord had claimed as his temporary headquarters while the richer Death Eaters debated over who should next have the honor of hosting their Master. The child now levering herself onto her knees, glaring with hatred at Lord Voldemort, looked more like a bad copy of Hermione Granger-Lupin than she resembled that young witch herself.

*She is not nearly tall enough, for one thing, and her body language is all wrong for another. If I could see no colors or lines, only shape and movement, I would almost think—*

"If you will not speak, I suppose I must employ other methods." The Dark Lord rose and fixed his red eyes on the girl's hazel ones, only to break off a moment later with a growling hiss, one which roused the Inferius of Nagini from her usual semi-sleep. "Such a clever little girl," he said softly. "Now who has been teaching you Occlumency, I wonder?"

"None of your business," the girl snapped back.

In the shadows, Severus tightened his fists in lieu of cursing. The voice, even shrill with fear as it was, had confirmed his worst suspicions. The witch before him was indeed a cub of the Pack, if not the one she had at first appeared to be.

*And what Black and his wife can have been thinking, to allow their daughter anywhere near such a dangerous operation as the attempted removal of a Dark Mark—*

Meghan cried out, twisting herself away from Lord Voldemort's eye contact and throwing up an arm to block her face, as the Dark Lord exhaled in triumph. "So," he said, beginning to smile. "Dumbledore had the Elder Wand all along. Would it not have been easier simply to tell me that, pretty Hermione, rather than put me to the trouble of prying it loose?" His voice, caressing, derisive, scraped along Severus's nerves. "For I *will* have everything I want to know from you. In time. Whether that time is long or short, painful or pleasant, and how whole your mind remains at the end of it, lies entirely in your hands, my dear..."

Severus's control snapped. His wand was in his hand, the Summoning Charm forming in his thoughts, before he had quite realized what he was doing, and belatedly he prepared himself to catch the girl now hurtling towards him, to use her momentum to begin his Apparition—back to Malfoy Manor, he thought, as its current owners surely felt far more friendly towards the two of

them than towards any pursuers who might follow—Meghan slammed into his side, curling herself instinctively around him, and Severus twisted his shoulder back, concentrating on being *somewhere else* —

A pebble slipped under his foot, and he lost his balance, falling heavily to the floor.

An instant later, his Mark exploded with pain, and angry, outraged shouts filled his ears as his fellow Death Eaters flung themselves at him, snatching his wand from him, wrenching Meghan away, pinning them both to the ground. Severus managed to get his head up long enough to look the girl in the eye, hoping she would have enough sense to drop her Occlumency for him—

**Thank you for trying**, he thought he heard her whisper, as a breath of magic like sweet flowers brushed past him, driving back the pain. Then her eyes widened, as though she had just recalled something, and she huddled into herself, hunching her shoulders forward—

A long-fingered hand closed crushingly around his wrist. "*Et tu, Severus?*" said the Dark Lord, looking down at him with a pretended sorrow in his parchment-pale face. "From Wormtail I could understand it, or even from a certain...absent friend of ours." The flare deep inside the red eyes told Severus his suspicions about Lucius Malfoy had, all but impossibly, been true. "Their connections to our enemies were real, if misguided. But what could *you* have in common with those who champion the unmagical herd?" The words, calm and pleasant as they seemed, heralded a ruthless thrust of Legilimency, battering at Severus's defenses. "Those who would give them a place beside us at the table, rather than kicking them beneath it to gnaw bones with the dogs?"

*You wish to know, my Lord? Then I will tell you...*

Releasing all his hard-won restraint, Severus flung into the Dark Lord's mind the memories he had hidden for the past sixteen years. He felt again his baffled, frustrated love for the joy-filled creature who was Lily Evans, the panic which had overwhelmed him at the realization that his tale-bearing had planted the seed of her peril, the deathly grief and loathing for himself when that peril bore fruit in her death. He watched her child grow towards manhood, surrounded by those whom he once had hated, and resented but could not stop the slow withering of that hatred, as he came to understand them better, and even, against his will, to trust and admire them.

*They bring life wherever they go, life in a thousand forms. We bring death, and a thousand empty mockeries of life.* The image of Nagini, caught forever in her half-decaying shape, hovered for an instant between them. *As long as one of them lives, you can never win. And if you try to kill them all, you will also destroy the power you seek, and find yourself, in the end, ruling nothing but a kingdom of the dead...*

"Brave words, Severus," said the Dark Lord cuttingly, snapping the connection between them and stepping back. "Brave thoughts, perhaps I should say. But words cost nothing, and thoughts even less." He drew his wand. "It is actions which give a life its worth, and your actions are those of a fool and a traitor to your cause. And I know only one punishment for such actions."

Everything slowed and sharpened, until Severus could see the green light beginning to gather at

the tip of the Dark Lord's wand, sense Meghan readying herself for a lunge forward out of her captors' hands—*perhaps she can escape while their attention is diverted*—hear a faint yelling in the distance, growing stronger by the second—

A flicker of darkness caught his eye in the center of the cave, a bit of matter flexing and warping in the manner of a Portkey arrival, as others among the Death Eaters shouted in alarm and backed away from the spot or covered their ears against the hoarse and angry yells emanating from it—

Time regained its normal speed as the Dark Lord lowered his wand and turned away from Severus to face Amycus Carrow, now flat on his back on the floor of the cave, gasping for air as he clutched his arms against his belly. "I never," he gabbled out, his eyes wheeling in his head. "I never meddled with the Mark, never *touched* it—he did it, said I might as well be his owl since he's throwing me out—it's him, I tell you, *he* did this to me—"

"Who?" the Dark Lord demanded, snapping his wand to lift Amycus to a sitting position. "Who did this?"

Amycus opened his arms, letting the red envelope held between them fall to the floor. "Harry Potter, m'lord," he said.

A long sigh, like a breath of wind, ran through the gathered Death Eaters and fell still.

"A Howler." Lord Voldemort regarded the envelope as he might an unwelcome insect. "How juvenile. Still, we must make allowances. He is very young. Bellatrix?"

"My lord." Bella quickly levitated the Howler off the floor, and Voldemort stretched out his hand to lift the flap with one long finger.

"Good evening," said a familiar voice from the interior of the envelope. "My name is Harry Potter. I understand you've been looking for me. Why don't you come and pay me a call? Bring along some friends, if you like. We're very hospitable here at Hogwarts. Only you might have to knock a little extra loud if it's too late when you get here, so do me a favor and hurry along." An ostentatious yawn. "I always prefer to get to bed before midnight."

Under the tumult of shouting which greeted this proclamation, Severus thought he heard a quiet, female snicker. He glanced at Meghan, and saw the matching laughter sparkling in her Hermione-hazel eyes.

*A challenge, bold and direct, as brash as a seventeen-year-old boy might be expected to send. And the Dark Lord will take it at face value, underestimating his enemies as he has always done. Ordinarily, I might take it upon myself to play the voice of reason, but today I find myself somehow disinclined...*

"You are sure Harry Potter is at Hogwarts?" Voldemort demanded of Amycus, staring into his eyes. "There could be no mistake?"

"No, m'lord. He wasn't alone, had all his usual crowd with him, and..." Amycus winced as he exposed his Dark Mark, which looked decidedly red and raw around the edges. "He talked to the snake, m'lord, the same way you do. When he stirred up the Mark and brought it to life, he talked to it, all hissing-like. And it *bit* me." He pouted, looking momentarily as stupid as the Imprimatus potion had rendered his sister. "I didn't *do* anything."

"So Harry moves into the open at last." Voldemort sighed, a long and satisfied sound. "What a pity for him he has chosen to do it on ground which belongs to me. Bellatrix, my darling, will you begin the preparations while I attend to the unfinished business here?"

"Of course, my lord." Bellatrix genuflected, her eyes burning bright with madness, and began to snap out commands to the gathered Death Eaters, as Voldemort turned and motioned away those who had been guarding Severus and Meghan. They scurried off to both sides, and Severus pushed himself more upright, wishing he had some way to communicate with the girl—

**I can hear you**, whispered her voice faintly into his mind. **Only when you think towards me, or about me, but I can hear you—can you hear me? Tap your left hand twice if you can.**

Stifling a very inappropriate fit of laughter, Severus did so.

**Oh good.** A mental sigh of relief. **I wasn't sure if the magic would work on you, we've only ever tried it with Pack or Pride, but I suppose since you're a Pack-friend—**

**Hush**, Severus interrupted, and Meghan hushed with a promptness he would have found gratifying if he hadn't been able to see the other reason for it.

*Lord Voldemort conjuring a stone wall between us and the rest of the world is scarcely a reason to cheer.*

"I could kill you here and now." The Dark Lord regarded them both coolly, his quiet, even tones more terrifying than any snarl of fury. "But the Killing Curse is fast and painless, and you, in particular, Severus, deserve neither. So I think I shall leave you with a small token of my esteem, and allow you to provide a fitting honor guard for her, until I return in my triumph to bring her home."

He turned and pointed his wand at a spot beside him. A moment later, the small, four-legged stool which had sat beside his throne materialized there.

Atop the stool, as always, was curled the Inferius of Nagini the serpent.

"Goodbye, Severus," said Lord Voldemort, and Disappeared.

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"Stay back," Professor Snape ordered, as curtly as he ever had in class, as the undead snake slithered off its stool, raising its head and flicking its tongue to taste the air. "Stay away."



"No." Meghan sketched the sign on her forehead with her thumb that she knew would dissolve the disguise spell on her, then drew her dagger. "I have a weapon. Something that can hurt it."

"It is already dead." Snape undid his robes, revealing a surprisingly Muggle-looking shirt and pair of trousers underneath, and slowly slid them off, backing away from Nagini one cautious step at a time. "A blade will hardly break the spells that bind an Inferius."

"This isn't just a dagger. There's phoenix tears inside it, for healing." Meghan tightened her grip, looking for a likely spot along Nagini's sinuous length of back. "And the best healing an Inferius could have is to be properly dead. Right?"

Snape's eyes flicked over to her and sized her up. Then he nodded once. "Wait until she strikes," he said, shaking the robes towards Nagini, who turned her head to investigate the movement. "Not yet—not yet—"

Nagini lunged, burying her fangs in the fabric of the robes. Snape flung himself on top of her, wrapping his arms around her head. "Now!" he shouted, but Meghan was already diving at the spot she'd selected, a shriek of fury coming naturally to her lips.

*This is for everyone you ever, ever hurt*, she growled internally, and drove the dagger home through the brittle scales. Her own magic pulsed as the tears Fawkes had given her flooded out into Nagini's convulsing body—*one, two, three, four—*

A hissing snarl burst from the serpent's mouth as Nagini reared up out of the swathing robes and sank her fangs into Snape's shoulder. He, too, hissed, but made no other sound, and Meghan gasped in horror, but did not release the dagger. *Five, six, seven*, she counted silently, pushing now with her own magic so that the tears would flow more quickly to their work of "healing" the Dark magic which held Nagini in her half-life. *Eight, nine, ten*. The snake was already weakening, her struggles slowing, her scales becoming dim and lusterless. *Eleven, twelve—thirteen!*

Triumphantly, she yanked the dagger free and bolted to Snape's side, clamping her hands down onto his arm. His face was already paper-white, his clothing below the point of the bite soaked with blood, but Nagini's venom had been designed to kill slowly and painfully, not with any eye towards stopping Healers. Her power washed through him, wiping the venom out of existence and repairing the damage it had done, and slowly his color returned, his breathing slowed and eased. **Your father will hardly thank you for this**, he said silently, through the channel Meghan's last blue jewel had opened for them.

**He doesn't really hate you.** Meghan grinned a little, as Nagini's tail gave a last few feeble twitches. **He just thinks he'd look silly admitting you're not that bad after all these years, so he has to go on pretending, and you have to go on pretending, and you probably both always will, unless something else happens—**

**Look out!** Snape shouted, and tried to push her aside, but his arms were still weak.

For the second time that day, Meghan felt the sting of a snakebite on her hand.

"Idiot child." Severus kicked the snake's head away from the girl, snarling under his breath when it fell to the floor with the limp lifelessness of the corpse it should long ago have been. *Of course, now, now it dies, now that it has completed what I am sure was its Master's last command, to bite us both. But there may still be hope...*

"Meghan," he said in his best tone of command, reaching down to roll her onto her back from where she had crumpled onto the floor. "Meghan, listen to me."

"Kay," came the whispered answer, spoken with a great effort.

"You must heal yourself." Severus reached out to take the girl's hand into his. "Do you understand me? It is your only chance. You must heal yourself."

"Can't." The small head shook weakly back and forth. "Doesn't work..."

**Explain,** Severus demanded, returning to the silent speech of thought so as not to overtax the girl. **Why not?**

**I don't think I'm strong enough to make it work.** Meghan's eyes were closing. **And even if I was, if I Heal myself with the Ravenclaw power, I'll burn it out and never have it again—**

"You *stupid* girl!" Anger lending him new strength, Severus caught Meghan by the shoulders and shook her roughly. "*Listen* to yourself! Will you value your power more than your very *life*? More than the people who love you, who are terrified for you, who would give *anything* to see you return to them safely, with or without the precious *power* you so treasure? If you let this happen for no better reason than pride, then you are forever unworthy of the name you bear, Meghan Lily Black!"

With a great effort, Meghan opened her silver eyes, and looked searchingly up into his face.

Then her breath shuddered out of her, and she sank limply against Severus's arms.

"No." Severus gathered the girl against him, cradling her as once he had cradled her namesake, shaking in grief at this second failure to save something brilliant and bright and beautiful. "No. No, please, no..."

Then, through the blurring of tears, he saw it, and scrubbed his eyes roughly to stare in disbelief.

Pulsing at the level of Meghan's heart, growing stronger every second, a blue light had begun to shine.

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Far away, in a deserted house in London, a sluggishly bleeding wound silently knit itself together. The person whose arm had been healed drew a long, slow breath, and smiled to feel the warmth of the hand in which the formerly injured one was cradled.

A prophecy of long ago had finally come to pass.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
***FanficAuthors.net***

# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 61: The Place of Honor (Year 7)

Corona lay silent on a narrow, crisp-sheeted bed in an unused room at Sanctuary, listening to Brian's regular breathing from the chair beside her. His hand lay loosely clasped around hers, as though even in sleep he needed reassurance that she would not disappear.

*We played so many times, Elladora and I, at being princesses rescued from hidden castles or tall, tall towers. Our imaginary champions swam across rivers, scaled high mountains, fought dragons and giants and trolls for us. And once they had won our hearts and our hands, they gave us beautiful presents of shining jewels and magical rings.*

*How could I ever have imagined that the greatest gift my love would bring me is his steadfast and faithful heart? His trust in me, even when I doubt myself?*

She had wept long and hard, and knew she would weep again, at her sister's betrayal and its consequences to her friends and colleagues, those who had been nothing but kind to her. Through it all, Brian had simply been there, offering silent sympathy or soft-spoken comfort or his warm embrace, each one as she needed them. Even when she had asked him to go away for a little while, he had gone only far enough to give her the privacy she wanted, and had returned as soon as she removed the spell from the doorway.

*And I have no doubt he was keeping a close enough watch that he could have intervened if I tried anything drastic. But I would not, not when Danger took such pains to spare my life, even as I struck to kill her. I will honor her far more by living, and loving, and fighting against despair...*

She closed her free hand into a fist as a wave of that same emotion rose in her, remembering what it had been like to be held prisoner inside her own mind, to strain her every nerve for even the smallest bits of control, to breathe the stench of her own burning hair and see the fear in Danger's brown-blue eyes as the poisoned dagger in her hand sliced into flesh—

"Enough," she whispered aloud, though the word seemed pitifully small against the rushing horror. "Enough. My hand, yes, but not my will. My doing, but not my desire."

*And if I let those memories control me, I lose myself again, and that I will not allow.*

Still, she shivered silently until the surge of feeling had passed, then reached again for the threads of her hopes and plans, as thin and inadequate as they currently seemed with which to weave her future.

*Perhaps I should join the Ministry, once it is restored, and see about regularizing the work I have done with the Order. I enjoyed it a great deal, and certainly it is very much needed—magical animals must not be mistreated and penned up, but neither should they be allowed to roam without boundaries and prey on Muggles, or frighten them, or be frightened by them...*

A knock at the door woke Brian, who came alert all in an instant, in the way Corona had become accustomed to in her love. "Yes?" he called out, squeezing her hand before he released it to draw his wand. "Who is it?"

"It's Charlie," came the answer from the corridor, in the cheerful tones of their dragon-keeper ally. "I've got some good news to share, and a letter to deliver to Miss Corona Gamp."

"One moment." Brian flicked an Imperturbable Charm onto the door and turned his attention towards Corona. "Tell me what you want," he said. "If you'd rather not see him, I can send him away."

The question was an honest one, Corona knew, since she had felt so frightened of being noticed by anyone except Brian during their move to Sanctuary that she had accomplished it under a borrowed Invisibility Cloak, but a quick exploration of her desires had her shaking her head. "No, let him in," she said, and pushed herself upright on the bed, drawing her legs in and tucking her feet beneath her knees. "Good news would be very welcome, and a letter is...intriguing."

*Since I have no idea who could be writing to me, when anyone with whom I would want to keep up correspondence at this point in my life is likely a member of the Order...*

"Come in," Brian called once he had removed the charm, and Charlie did exactly this, followed by Miss Ropes, the colorless witch Corona recalled taking notes at her and Brian's last session with Remus—only her lank brown hair was beginning to shorten and brighten, her face to round out cheerfully, her eyes to spark with mischief—

"Tonks!" Corona scrambled off the bed to hug her newly pink-haired friend. "Miss Ropes was you the whole time? Why didn't you ever tell—" She stopped short, realizing with a lurch of her heart what it would have meant if she had known.

"We knew there was a spy, but we didn't know who, or if they even knew it themselves," said Charlie, as Brian shook Tonks's hand with a smile. "Which, you didn't. So it's all for the best we kept it quiet. And she brought a little something back with her, too."

"Very little." Chuckling, Tonks reached into the odd construction of cloth Charlie was wearing over one shoulder, and lifted out—

"A baby?" Corona had to forcibly stop herself from gawking at the tiny, dark-haired creature now cradled in the crook of Tonks's arm. "But you weren't gone nearly that long!"

"She's not mine by blood." Tonks swayed slightly on her feet, seemingly unconscious of her movement. "I found her, or should I say, a certain little cousin of mine *arranged* for me to find her." She scowled. "I'd beat him up for it, but he's hardly in any shape for that. Besides, she's awfully cute, even if she does cry a lot."

"What's her name?" asked Brian, sitting down on the edge of the bed and motioning Tonks towards the chair he'd left, as Charlie conjured another one for himself.

"Annette Selene Weasley." Charlie grinned. "I'm Mum's very favorite son at the moment. She's always wanted granddaughters."

"And she and Echo are the only reasons I'm not going completely mad." Tonks looked down at the sleeping child, and her face softened. "Not that she won't be worth it. But still. Babies are a handful and a half. I didn't think I was ready—I still don't think I'm ready—but we're getting through every day somehow or other."

"She's beautiful." Corona hardly knew where the words had come from, but they felt exactly right. "I don't know anything about babies, but I can still see she's beautiful. And so little. How old is she?"

"A bit over a month, now. Born the twenty-first of September." Charlie shook his head. "We know her birthday, but not who her birth parents were. Even Echo doesn't know, or says she doesn't."

"She might have been asked not to tell," Brian pointed out. "If one of the Death Eaters had second thoughts, perhaps, and wanted to save his child, keep her free from any reprisals."

"True enough. And it's not like it matters whose she was." Tonks kissed her fingertips and brushed them against the soft cap of dark hair. "Not when she's ours now."

Charlie leaned back in his chair, then sat up again at the crinkle of parchment. "And look at me, forgetting my manners." From his pocket, he extracted a narrow envelope, and handed it across to Corona. "For you. Just arrived a few minutes back. Guaranteed curse-free, by the way. Bill's taught me a trick or two."

"Thank you." Corona accepted the letter and regarded her name, written in a thick, dark handwriting she associated vaguely with Hogwarts, but could not otherwise place. "I wonder who could be writing to me." Laughing a little under her breath, she slid her finger beneath the flap. "So why don't I find out?"

Extracting the folded slip of parchment, she opened it and began to read.

*To Miss Corona Gamp:*

*First, I wish to offer my deepest apologies for the position in which you were placed yesterday. It was my work, as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, to prevent such things from happening or discover them before they reached fruition, and I failed at both in your case, with what results you already know. I hope that you can forgive such a failure, though you would be well within your rights to refuse.*

*Second, I believe you deserve the latest news of your sister Elladora. She was alarmed by the partial failure of the mission for which she used an Unforgivable Curse upon you (caused, I have no doubt, by your resistance to said curse), and chose to take her fate into her own hands. Upon investigating her rooms after this had happened, I found that she seems to have had a side of her life of which her family and her colleagues were equally ignorant. Sleeping on her bed was an*

*infant of approximately one month's age, a healthy baby girl.*

*For the time being, my house-elf is caring for the child. If you are not able or willing to take custody of her, I will certainly think no less of you, and have already made arrangements for her welfare if this should be the case, or if you or I should fall in the battle to come. Still, you are the child's nearest blood relation, and I wished to inform you of her existence. If you wish to communicate with me on her behalf, ask the house-elf Echo to take a message to her closest friend from Malfoy Manor, as he now works for me.*

*With thanks, I remain,*

*A Well-Wisher*

Corona lowered the letter to her lap, her arms and legs feeling almost as weak as they had when she first awakened after her ordeal, nearly a day ago now. "A child," she breathed soundlessly. "Elladora had a child..."

"Is something wrong?" Brian asked, looking around from his conversation with Charlie and Tonks. "What is it, love?"

"My sister." Corona extended the letter to Brian, who accepted it. "She—there was a child. A little girl." She laughed weakly. "About the same age as Annette. How funny. And now she's gone, Elladora's gone, and there's no one left except me..."

"Don't you have a grandmother?" asked Charlie.

"Well, yes, but—" Corona broke off, paling, as an inner panorama unfolded itself before her horrified mental eyes.

*There is nothing my grandmother could want more just now than a chance to "fix her mistakes". If she discovers that Elladora had a daughter—and what secret of that sort was ever kept for very long?—she would move heaven and earth to claim that child. And then...*

The scenes of her own childhood, after her parents' deaths, rose up in succession before her. The colorless governesses and tutors who had cared nothing for how much or how well she truly learned, only for how well she could parrot back their precise phrasings. The carefully measured half-hour in her grandmother's perfect parlor, answering endless dry questions about her lessons, sitting as still as a stone because "fidgeting" would mean no tea, and "knocking things about" no supper on top of it. The endless comparisons between herself and her sister, which had so often driven wedges between them when they should have stood united against Grandmother's bullying.

*And she will not give this child even as much freedom as she gave to me or to Elladora, because she has seen where that leads. She will raise the girl in the strictest of seclusion, train her in only the magical skills Grandmother deems necessary for a "proper pureblood witch", school her and groom her to believe herself destined for one end and one end only in life, and that end to marry a pureblood wizard and produce children...*



"I know nothing about babies," she said again. "But I *cannot* let my grandmother do to another child what she tried to do to my sister and to me. Her teaching warped Elladora's mind and ruined her life, because she thought herself, Elladora did, defective and worthless when she could not find a husband." She surprised herself with a small, breathy laugh. "Though she seems to have found a lover, at least. But I will not let her daughter learn the same twisted falsehoods as though they were undeniable truths." Suddenly recalling that there was another party to be consulted, she looked up at Brian. "That is—I mean, if—"

Brian only smiled. "We'll see if anyone knows where there's a nice cottage for sale," he said, taking her hand in his. "One with two bedrooms, at least. And plenty of space to play."

"Settle for a townhouse?" asked Tonks, her voice studiously casual.

"I'm sorry?" Corona blinked at her friend. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it so happens I was talking with Sirius about Headquarters, and what'll happen to it after the war's over." Tonks transferred the sound-asleep Annette back to Charlie, who nestled her gently into the sling he was still wearing over one shoulder. "He doesn't need it, he and Letha have their house out in Devon, and the Pride's all for taking over Malfoy Manor."

"The Manor Den, they're calling it," Charlie put in. "Ron's showed me a few of the plans, and it should be pretty spectacular by the time they get done with it."

"But in any case, that leaves number twelve, Grimmauld Place, without anybody in the direct line who'd want to live there. And the next one along on the family tree..." Tonks shrugged, her hair rippling momentarily green and orange before flushing back to pink. "You're looking at her. Awfully big house for just me and Charlie and Annette, though. And we already know we like you, we all get along, we work well together. Besides, you said you don't know anything about babies. Well, I don't know much more." She twisted her hands together in her lap. "We might have a better chance of working it out together. But only if you want to!" she added hastily. "Only if it sounds good to you!"

*If it sounds good.* Corona's pureblood training came to her aid, keeping her face calm and serene, despite her desire to laugh wildly or jump up and down with excitement. *To have a home and a family all but given to me. To know that I will never be lonely again. That Elladora's child—no, my child now, and Brian's too, wherever she may have started out in life—will know friendship and laughter and love in every moment of her days and nights.*

*And Tonks wants to know if this sounds good to me?*

"I think," she said, a trifle unsteadily, "that we could make it work. If you think so, of course," she said quickly towards Brian, who chuckled aloud.

"I've been sitting here trying to think up ways to convince *you*," he said, and sketched a polite half-bow towards Tonks and Charlie. "A household of six it shall be. And we're going to raise the most spoiled pair of little girls on the face of the earth, aren't we?"

"Not spoiled." Charlie stroked Annette's hair with two fingers. "A little pampered, maybe, but not spoiled. We'll get pointers from Mum."

"As if she won't be the worst offender," Tonks scoffed. "But we'll figure it out somehow. We always do. So, how do you want to set the place up? There's probably a back staircase in there somewhere, and if not we can put one in, so we can have our two halves properly separated, for times when we'd like some privacy. Or we could do it by floors, one for us, one for you, and one for guests..."

---

Sirius was in the Hogwarts kitchens, taking reports from some of the house-elves on the state of the castle's supplies, when the flames in the fireplace suddenly turned emerald green. Simultaneously, the intermittent chill infusing his pendants vanished, leaving the metal no more than pleasantly warm with his own body heat.

"Pearl," he breathed, and started to stride towards the fireplace, only to have to stop and steady himself halfway there, hands pressed against his thighs. Sheer relief had made his knees go weak, in a way no danger or peril for himself ever had.

*Almost makes me see why Voldemort thinks love is such a weakness.*

*But then, if I didn't have the people I love, why the hell would I be doing all of this?*

Straightening, he frowned. The spinning figure now growing more distinct in the green flames was far too large to be his little girl, and shaped very oddly indeed.

*Luna did say she'd have help, but who—*

With a whoosh of fire, the riddle was revealed, and Sirius sighed under his breath before starting forward once again.

*I should have known.*

"You could not have remembered you had a portable Floo in your pocket *before* we had to fight for our lives with an undead snake?" Severus Snape inquired tartly of Meghan, whom he was carrying in his arms. Her eyes were shut, her limbs limp, but Sirius could both see and smell that she was breathing, and found he didn't much care about anything else.

*Well. Maybe finding out where all the blood came from.* Snape's shirt and trousers were liberally soaked with the stuff down one side, and Meghan's robes bore several good-sized stains. *But if they were fighting, that probably explains it.*

"She is my daughter," he said aloud, bringing Snape's head around to face him. "What were you expecting? Here, let me," he added quickly, as Snape tried to take a step and nearly lost his balance. "Can we get a chair here, please?" he called over his shoulder, and scooped Meghan into his arms at the same time. She stirred with the motion and lifted one eyelid fractionally, then

smiled a tiny, tired smile and pursed her lips once towards him before sighing and relaxing against his chest.

"Spirit," said Snape, nodding brusquely to the house-elves who had come scurrying over with a wooden kitchen chair, then sitting down in it with more speed than style. "Spirit to burn, a fair dose of impudence, and surprisingly little in the way of intelligence. All of which she demonstrated today."

"Yep, sounds like my girl." Sirius propped one foot on the cool edge of the hearth and balanced Meghan's weight on it long enough to draw his wand, murmur a few words into its tip, and send his messenger-Patronus on its way. "He going to be looking for you through that thing anytime soon?" he asked when he was done, displaying his own left forearm by way of explanation.

"Through—" Snape glanced up and shook his head. "I doubt it. As far as he is concerned, we are both dead." A gleam of humor sparked in his black eyes, which Sirius wouldn't have believed if he'd been told about it. "Or should I say, he thinks *Miss Granger-Lupin* and myself both to be dead. We had no time to discuss the reason for such a masquerade, though the Dark Lord posited some form of spell regarding a Dark Mark..."

"Yeah, we tried to get it off Fox." A smile came more readily to Sirius now than he could have imagined a few short minutes before. "Managed it, too."

Snape went very still. "Did he survive?" he asked after a second or two, his voice calm to the point of boredom but raw-edged hunger in his scent.

"Came out of it just fine, physically. And he'll be back up to snuff mentally just as soon as he sees—" Sirius looked around at the crash of the kitchen's painting-masked door against the opposite wall. "Make that right now," he said as the remaining seven-eighths of the Pride piled in, gasps and cries of relief mingling with questions and half-hysterical laughter. Neville, in the lead of the little group, strode across the floor to Sirius's side, stopping only to bow deeply to Snape.

"Give her to me," he said, holding out his arms. Sirius looked down at Meghan's relaxed face, then sighed a little and relinquished his hold on her in favor of the younger wizard.

*And why I'm feeling like this has happened before, I don't know.*

Neville stepped back and tapped his left foot twice, and the pair disappeared with a loud crack, startling a cough out of Snape. "House-elf," said Sirius under his breath, in the last moment before Hermione and Ginny stepped apart, revealing Fox and Luna, who crossed the floor to stand in front of Snape, hand in hand.

"I think it was terrible of you to try to make me laugh when I came to visit you," said Luna severely. "But," she added in a more penitent tone, "it was terrible of me to make you think I was under the Imprimatus Potion for so long. So we should be even."

"So we should," Snape agreed in a tone which Sirius had no trouble recognizing as one of vast,

baffled amusement. "And what do you have to say for yourself?" he asked Fox, looking him up and down. "What excuse have you given your grieving family for such a ridiculous masquerade?"

Fox shrugged. "It worked."

"How very Slytherin of you, Mr.—Beauvoi, is it? Your sister told me," Snape said at Fox's surprised nod. "Indeed, she gave me a vast array of knowledge during our little time together, for most of which I had neither need nor desire. Still, there can be no doubt about her courage, though there may be some about her basic common sense."

"Some, sir?" Fox raised an eyebrow, glancing towards Sirius. "We are talking about Meghan *Black*, aren't we?"

Sirius growled once in his throat. "Come here, you," he said, beckoning Fox towards him. Fox came, and stood with feet firmly planted, hands folded at his waist, looking as innocent as physically possible. "I'm about to break a promise. That all right with you?"

"Er." Fox frowned, his eyes abstracted, clearly searching his memory for the promise Sirius might mean and coming up empty. "All right. I guess."

"Good." Sirius reached around and swatted Fox on the back of the head. "I've wanted to do *that* since the day we brought you home too," he said through Fox's indignant yelp. "You were a pesky little brat, you know that?"

"Maybe if we could beat each other up later?" suggested Aletha, having come in through the kitchen door in company with Neville in time to see the last exchange. "I'm sure Severus would prefer us to get on with things, and Minerva was looking for you, Sirius. Something about making sure all the secret passages are safeguarded, even the ones she might not know about."

"Right." Sirius nodded. "Harry, where's the Map got to?"

"I left it with Colleen Lamb when the school year started." Harry grinned. "She and Blaise have been using it to keep the DA going, and all its little offshoots, like that 'Muggles Are People Too' thing that one Hufflepuff started. Murrow, I think his name is. And when Professor McGonagall's been 'forgetting' to enforce the detentions for anybody caught being a part of one..."

"Head Boy, Head Girl, and Headmistress." Sirius chuckled. "The Carrows never had a chance." He tossed a quick salute to Snape, who nodded once, and hurried out into the corridor, headed for an internal passage which would let him out two corridors over from the Fat Lady's portrait.

Voldemort was coming to Hogwarts.

Hogwarts intended to be ready.

---

Severus was grateful for the laconic warning from Reynard Beauvoi (whose newly-chosen name

had amused him a great deal) that "it hurts a bit, getting the Mark off". No physical pain in his lifetime could have compared, not even the Cruciatus Curse, skillfully cast by the Dark Lord himself—

*No. By Voldemort himself.* His lips pressed firmly together, he examined the lurid scar on his left forearm, exposed by rolling back his bloodstained sleeve. *For the first time in more than sixteen years, I can be certain that thinking that name will bring no repercussions. Even shouting it aloud would do me no harm.*

*For whatever such a thing is worth, I am free.*

"Oh, before I forget, sir." Harry, about to leave the kitchen with his Pride, instead knelt down to murmur a few words to a passing house-elf, who disappeared immediately. "I think I have something of yours."

Severus nodded absently, his mind wandering to another subject, as for the moment he was disposed to allow it to do. Any period of meditation about what had just passed seemed likely to bring certain emotional consequences with it, and his outburst towards Meghan had exposed him quite enough for one day. "How long has Miss Lovegood—or I suppose I should say Mrs. Beauvois—been possessed of Parseltongue?" he asked. "I had thought that particular gift confined to two people currently with us."

"She's had it since they got married. Short version, she's an Heir of Slytherin now too. By blood-adoption, so it's magically binding." Harry lifted a small locket from his robes. "Sort of a more permanent version of what I did with...Moony." The hesitation before Remus Lupin's nickname was minimal, but Severus had no doubt the boy before him was grieving, and deeply so. "Stroke of luck for us, since we knew we'd need all four Heirs to pull this off properly—ah, perfect. Thanks, Grabe."

"Welcome, Master Harry." The house-elf handed over the small, wrapped packet and scurried away, and Harry undid the wrappings and held out a battered, ink-stained, and almost painfully familiar object.

"Yours, sir?" he inquired, and Severus sighed and accepted the Potions text in which he had so long ago inscribed his self-given nickname, along with a great deal of other marginalia. "Thanks for the spells. They were awfully useful. Remind me sometime to tell you about the way we found out what *Levicorpus* does."

"I think I can guess." Severus set the textbook down beside his chair. "Though not who might have been the other party involved..."

"Ron." Harry grinned once at Severus's half-stifled snort and started for the door, stopping most of the way there to turn around. "Thank you, sir," he said quietly. "For Meghan. She can be a pest sometimes, but it would have torn us to pieces to lose her like that."

He was in the corridor beyond the painting of the fruit bowl before Severus could decide on a

response. Aletha passed him on the way, and murmured a few words to him before stepping into the kitchen with her arms full of familiar-looking black cloth.

"I *thought* you'd probably left some clothing behind here," she said, laying a clean set of robes over a nearby chair, and setting a small bag which doubtless contained other necessary items on its seat. "And..." From one of her pockets, she produced a wand, and tucked it into the bag after displaying it to him. "The house-elves were able to hunt me up a few extras. It won't work perfectly, but it will work."

"Which is all I need at the moment." Severus glanced down at his blood-streaked arm. *Though a Cleaning Charm is likely to be rather rough with an unfamiliar wand...*

"Pomona's said you can use the Hufflepuff common room if you want to clean up," Aletha went on, and Severus breathed a silent, but fervent, sigh of relief. "Most of the younger students have already been moved to safety, and the older ones are all helping to fortify the borders or being briefed on their positions." She regarded him for a moment, frowning faintly. "Do me a favor and don't send what you're wearing to be washed just yet. We might find a use for it later. If you don't object."

"Given what you are trying to achieve?" Severus got to his feet, pleased to find that his knees did not wobble, and bent carefully to pick up the Half-Blood Prince's book. "I doubt there is much to which I would object."

"Be careful of saying that around Sirius or Harry. Though I don't think even they would stoop to playing pranks just now. Especially not on you." Aletha pressed a hand against her forehead, letting out a shuddering sigh. "When I think of what might have happened...but it didn't. I have to remember that. It didn't, and that was because of you." She lifted her eyes to look at him again. "Thank you, Severus."

"I have seen enough death I could not prevent or change." Severus picked up his robes and slid his book into the bag beside the borrowed wand. "It was—and be aware I will deny this to your husband, should he ask—but it was my pleasure."

"I won't tell." Aletha stood aside to let him step out to the corridor himself. "Tell me, do you know the secret passage behind the mirror on the fourth floor?"

"I had thought that caved in years ago."

"It did, but the DA excavated it. For reasons of their own." Aletha smiled. "Try it out, when you're finished cleaning up. I think what you find will surprise you, in the best of ways."

"Thank you. I shall." Severus moved off down the hallway, locating without much difficulty the pile of barrels stowed away in a convenient nook, and counted up and over with care until he had located the proper barrel. With two fingers, he tapped out a rhythm on the lid, long-short, short-short-long, and it promptly swung open, revealing a tunnel into which he climbed.

*I have always wished I could have met Helga Hufflepuff. One must approve of a witch who not only bars invaders from entering her students' common room, but douses them in vinegar as well, to make their foolishness obvious to all...*

---

Meghan roused from her half-sleep with a gasp. She lay in a screened-off bed in the Hogwarts hospital wing, with Neville sitting in a chair beside her, holding her hand. The taste of potions lingered in her mouth, and she felt decidedly better than she had during her few moments of wakefulness with Professor Snape or her Dadfoot, but she knew her healing was still incomplete. Without thinking, she reached out to the magic of the school to replenish herself—

*Only I can't.*

She could feel the magic of Hogwarts humming around her, but it hung tantalizingly out of her reach. Nor could she see anything about Neville's state of health when she tried to shift her sight. A little sob trembled in her throat, and her eyes clouded over with tears.

*I've lost my powers. Forever. And I did it to myself—it's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair, and I hate it...*

Neville transferred himself from chair to bed without any words being spoken, and she buried her face in his offered shoulder and howled unabashedly, knowing from long experience that trying to keep a stiff upper lip would only make the inevitable explosion worse when it came.

"I'm sorry," she whispered when the first bout was past. "I wish I hadn't had to. It isn't very fair to you—you thought you were getting another Heir, and instead you're just getting an ordinary Healer, so if you don't want to, you know, anymore, I understand..."

"I wish you hadn't had to for your sake. But I'm glad you did for somebody else's." Neville lifted her head long enough to slide his handkerchief between his robes and her face. "Or don't you remember Harry's bargain?"

"Harry's—oh!" Meghan squealed under her breath. "I never thought about that! Neville, do you really think—do you *really* —"

"I think we'll be sure to keep a careful watch on all the ways into the castle. To keep the Death Eaters out, yes, but also to be sure we don't stop anyone who's on our side from joining us here." Neville looked down at her with an expression she knew well, half tenderness, half annoyance. "But going back to what you said a minute ago, you little goose. Would you walk away from me if I couldn't talk to plants any longer, or whisper things invisible?"

"I'm not a goose. I'm a deer." Meghan stuck out her tongue at him. "And no, of course I wouldn't. I love *you*, not your magic."

Neville leaned forward and kissed her. "Same goes to you," he said when he was done. "Goose."

Meghan pouted. "Take it back."

"Goose."

"Take it back now."

"Goose goosey goose." Neville grinned. "With roast potatoes and drippings."

With an indignant squeal, Meghan punched him in the ribs.

"Ow." Neville rubbed the spot ruefully. "Feeling better?"

"Yes. Thank you." Meghan glowered. "But I am *not* a goose."

"Yes, dear," said Neville with mock humility.

Then he bolted for the door, with Meghan only half a pace behind him.

---

"You runny-nosed animal food trough wipers!" bellowed Fred Weasley from the top of the Astronomy Tower, towards the distant lines of people and tents which marked the Death Eaters' encampment around Hogwarts. "I fart in your general direction!"

One of the graduates of Beauxbatons who had been arriving in small groups under the direction of Bill Weasley and Fleur Delacour, standing atop Ravenclaw Tower, added a stream of shrill soprano French which made Sirius blink in appreciation. "Here I thought they were *nice* kids Madame Maxime was sending us," he said to Aletha, with whom he was crossing the grounds. "I'm not even sure I know how to translate some of that."

"And the best is yet to come." Aletha motioned for him to pause. "Listen carefully..."

The voice which floated through the gathering evening was definitely feminine, and bore some of the hallmarks of age. It was also using the kind of language generally attributed to sailors, though Sirius wasn't sure he'd ever met a sailor with that kind of imagination. Most of the acts it was advising the Death Eaters to undertake were physically improbable, all were wildly inappropriate to a school environment, and the whole thing was being carried off with a skill Sirius envied.

"Who on earth—" he began when the unknown witch had ended her tirade.

"See for yourself." Aletha drew him out from under the shadow of the castle, then pointed towards Gryffindor Tower.

Grumbling at the annoying habits of his womenfolk to draw things out longer than they needed to be, Sirius turned and looked, and looked again.

"No," he said finally, staring upwards in disbelief. "It can't be."



"And why not?" Aletha chuckled warmly. "Since when does being Headmistress of Hogwarts mean her every thought and word has to be pure and proper and prim?"

"Merlin's ear hair. Minerva McGonagall, mistress of the art of the curse." Sirius shook his head in wonder. "Say, why are the Death Eaters hanging back like that? I'd have thought they'd be attacking us by now, not sitting still and listening to us insult the hell out of them."

"I thought I heard Percy saying something about stability," said Aletha as they continued their walk. "I could be wrong, of course, but that's the word I think he used..."

---

"...the ground around the walls of Hogwarts for approximately the distance of the average spell-cast has been mined," Percy finished his statement to the hastily assembled leaders of the fighting forces gathering in Sanctuary. "The Death Eaters can't set foot on it without risking a fall through the roofs of tunnels, which resist both covering over and filling in by magical means." He glanced over at Harry and Ginny. "They appear to be the work of goblins."

"It's always good to have allies," said his father, nodding. "So they appear to have decided to make camp for the night, and attack us tomorrow once they've had a chance to reestablish their footing?"

"That is their privilege," Percy agreed. "The castle can't exactly run away from them. And as far as they're aware, they've completely cut us off with the severing of the Floo Network to the castle fireplaces and the sky-watch for brooms or owls."

"Good. Let them continue to think so as long as possible." Mr. Weasley flicked his wand once, and a large map of Hogwarts and its grounds unrolled across the table. "Now, Harry, let's hear more about this plan of yours."

"Hermione's, really, sir," said Harry, glancing across the table to his sister. "But I agree with her now, even though I didn't when she first mentioned it." He highlighted the boundaries of Hogwarts with his own wand. "Everything inside here is our ground. Our territory. Not just legally, but magically. And magically, if the Death Eaters break through our defenses, if they invade Hogwarts when we don't want them to, then every inch of ground they walk on becomes *their* ground. It's like having your wand taken in a duel. But." He created a few small gaps in the boundary lines, then widened them. "What would happen if we *let* them come onto the grounds?"

"Magically, I suppose that'd mean we'd still have the advantage," said Auror Letitia Halcyon after a few moments of murmuring around the table. "But that's an awfully risky plan, Potter. They could get cocky, once they were in, and just keep coming. Run roughshod right over us."

"With all due respect, ma'am, they'll do that anyway if we don't find some way to stop them." Harry highlighted another, smaller line around Hogwarts castle proper. "And if we set up the *real* defenses a ways inside the grounds, to keep them out of the castle and away from Sanctuary, then they'll be fighting on unfriendly magical ground, which means the advantage is all with us."

"Besides, we have one other advantage," Ginny added. "They don't want us dead. For all their talk about bad blood, theirs are the lines that are dying out, and they know it. If they kill off all of us, they'll never be able to bring the wizarding world back up to full strength. We're the only chance they have, so they have to take as many of us as possible alive."

"And when that starts to become more difficult, they'll probably look for a place to retreat and figure out a better plan, and the best one they'll find is the Forest." Harry tapped it with his wand's tip. "Which is where I'll be waiting for Voldemort. Me and a few other people." He smiled, as a waft of Ginny's scent gave him her matching amusement. "And then all we have to do is keep him occupied, while I set the stage so we can finally get rid of him..."

---

Severus attempted not to stare. It took a surprising amount of his self-control to manage it.

*I had known the DA was doing something, with all their late nights and early mornings and disappearings into the hidden depths of the castle, but I had no idea it had reached this extent...*

The cavern before him was at least twice the size of the Great Hall, possibly larger, and its ceiling shared the enchantment which gave it the look of the open sky above, but this cavern continued the illusion with skillfully executed wall paintings, which gave the viewer the feeling that he was standing in the center of a great stone dance.

*And some of the stones are rather neatly ornamented.* He looked around at the stained glass insets into the columns and raised an eyebrow in surprise. *All four Houses represented, I see...*

"Professor Snape!" Selena Moon, one of his former students, who had been standing nearby demonstrating a modification to her potion piece to a small group of (if Severus was any judge) mixed Muggle and magical children, was now hurrying over towards him, holstering her piece as she came. "Welcome to Sanctuary," she said, a little shyly, motioning towards it. "Building it wasn't always easy, but it's done now, and it's where we belong." Her glance into the milling crowds which clustered throughout the cavern's expanse showed Severus the location of her fiancé, Roger Davies, former Ravenclaw Quidditch star, who seemed to be in a huddle with at least two Weasleys, among others. "Where we *all* belong. So...what do you think?"

"I think, Miss Moon, that I would be most obliged if you would give me a tour." Severus nodded towards a plateau-like construction of rock and soil. "What, for instance, is *that*?"

"Oh, that's the open-air theater. We've had so much fun with it." Selena laughed. "Just the other night, we looked up the notes about the pantomime of 'The Fountain of Fair Fortune' that went so badly at Hogwarts all those years ago and reproduced it, complete with everything that went wrong..."

Nearly an hour later, Severus heard his name called, and turned to see the Blacks, husband and wife, approaching him. After a brief exchange of greetings with Selena, Aletha drew her off to ask about something relating to the placement of artillery nests, leaving Severus alone with Sirius.

"So," Sirius said after a few seconds of silence. "We're working up this plan to make sure the war ends the way we want it to. Thing is, it turns on whether or not we can shock the hell out of a certain Dark Snarker long enough to keep him from spotting what's *really* going on. And given that he thinks you're dead and buried in some ugly little cave somewhere, your popping up alive and kicking in the Forest would probably help us out a lot. You willing?"

"I think so, yes." Severus nodded. "Does this plan have a name, by any chance?"

"Oh, I don't know." Sirius grinned. "I think 'Operation Brain-Fuck Voldemort' has a certain ring to it."

---

Far away, two lovers slept in one another's arms. Their work, for the moment, was over.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to seek out the rest of their kind.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 62: Raising the Flag (Year 7)

Dozens of tiny campfires glowed on the greensward of Sanctuary like red and yellow flowers, as families and friends gathered together for one last peaceful night before the siege and battle awaiting them in the morning. Laughter rang through the air, coupled with, and often caused by, the words "Do you remember..."

"Do you remember the day the chimney cracked in Ginny's room?" Bill was just saying as Harry joined the Weasleys at the fire they were sharing. "When you kept trying and trying to make your firecalls, Mum?"

"Oh, goodness, yes!" Mrs. Weasley laughed. "I would get the fire lit, poke it up to a fit state to support a Floo connection, turn around to get the Floo powder off the table, and whoosh!" She flicked the fingers of both hands outwards. "Out it would go!"

"It took you three or four tries to realize it wasn't anything that you were doing wrong," Bill took over again. "Meanwhile, upstairs, poor little Ginny was trying to nap..."

"And poor little Ginny didn't like her room filling up with smoke." Ginny shoved her brother's shoulder affectionately. "So every time it started happening, I made it stop."

"You were too little to know that making it stop was the same thing as putting out the fire." Mr. Weasley lifted a burning stick from the edge of the fire and held it up to Ginny, who blew it out with a brisk puff of air. "Plenty of children do that, especially if they're angry because they want their parents to pay attention to them rather than the Floo fire, but rarely so young as you—you were three, I think? Yes, that's right, because that was the summer before Charlie started Hogwarts..."

"And met this one for the first time." Charlie squeezed Tonks in a side-hug, and got a friendly nip on the ear in return. "Do you remember our Opening Feast?"

"I know I fall down a lot, but that doesn't mean I hit my head and forget about it every time," Tonks retorted. "Yes, of course I remember..."

Harry sat back to let the stories wash over him, both those he'd never heard before and those long familiar to him from cozy firelit den nights and lazy sun-filled afternoons. Whatever was coming tomorrow, tonight they had each other.

*More than the rest of the Pack suspects, even.* He cupped his pendants in his hands, thinking a command towards them, and had to suppress his grin as two of the engraved figures glowed with golden light. *Pearl gave up her powers, so the bargain could start to be fulfilled, and I was right about the other thing...*

Even inside his mind, he didn't examine 'the other thing' too closely. Counting one's Fwoopers

before they hatched was never a good idea.

*And since I need them all alive and singing to drive Voldemort properly mad out in the Forest tomorrow night, I'd better let them hatch in their own sweet time.*

"Oh, that's nothing," he said as Tonks finished the story of how she'd fallen on her face in her excitement at being Sorted where she'd wanted to be. "Do you remember, Ron, how Neville was so flustered at getting into Gryffindor that he took off for the House table still wearing the Hat?"

Ron snorted. "I don't remember much of anything about that night except trying not to sick up from nerves, but I'll take your word for it..."

---

Fox, curled into a compact ball in Luna's lap at the next fire over from the Weasleys', pricked up his ears with interest as he heard a familiar pair of voices.

"...telling you, I saw him," Dean Thomas was saying with some heat a short distance away. "In Animagus form, sure, but how likely is it there's going to be another one of those around?"

"Except that he's *dead*," Seamus Finnegan shot back. "Has been for months. Don't you think Harry or Hermione or somebody would have told us if he weren't?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. And look who *is* over there." A hand shot out in the darkness, indicating Luna. "Since when did you see one of them without the other one?"

"Well, if he's *dead* ..."

"Maybe we should go talk to them," Luna murmured to Fox. "Only if you want to, though."

Fox considered it, then nodded his head. *I can't be shy of people forever*, he thought "loudly" in Luna's direction. *I'll want you there with me, and it'll need to be short, but I think I can handle Seamus and Dean for a minute or two.*

"Of course." Luna got to her feet, uncoiling Fox and hanging him around her neck stole-style. Fox squirmed once to distribute his weight more comfortably, then went limp as Luna stepped away from the fire in the direction of his dormmates.

"Hello," she said, bringing both their heads around to face her. "Did you want me?"

"Luna, hi." Dean stuck out his hand for Luna to shake, with Seamus just behind him. "Good to see you again. Maybe you can tell us. I could have sworn I saw—"

"That?" said Seamus, pointing to Fox. "Assuming it's alive, that is."

*Bring that finger a little closer and you'll find out, Finnegan.* Fox bared his teeth, startling a yip out of Seamus and a half-stifled oath from Dean, then swung his back paws down from Luna's shoulder and changed in mid-air, standing up human just behind her.

"Good God." Dean took a step back. "Oh good God that's strange. You look like you—but then you look like Hermione—what the hell—"

"My husband, Reynard Beauvoi," said Luna in introduction, turning her serene smile back towards Fox for a moment. "You knew him by a different name before, but he's still the same person he ever was."

"For whatever that's worth." Fox shrugged. "Glad to see you two."

"Oh, *God* ." Dean turned away to pace in a tiny circle, his hands clutched against his head. "Now you still *sound* the same, but you don't *look* the same, I can't *deal* with this—"

Seamus peered closely at Fox by the light of the nearby fires and the stars gleaming down from the enchanted ceiling above. "Do you want it back?" he asked with no preamble.

"What, my broomstick? Not after your stinky arse has been sitting on it for six months I don't." Belatedly, something occurred to Fox, and he snorted a laugh. "Wait. Was that a test?"

"Never hurts to check." Grinning, Seamus offered his hand, and Fox shook it firmly. "Glad to see you back. Reynard, she said?"

"Fox for everyday. Just like before. And yes, you'll get the whole story of how and why and what exactly happened," Fox added before Seamus could ask. "Not yet, though. We've kind of got a war to finish first."

"But if I die tomorrow, I don't get to find out?" Seamus frowned. "That's not fair."

"So don't die tomorrow," said Luna reasonably. "They probably won't be casting to kill anyway. They want us alive, as many of us as they can manage. For breeding."

Seamus grimaced as Dean let out a fresh groan. "Thanks so much for sharing that, Luna."

"You're welcome." Luna beamed, and held out her hand to hoist Fox back onto her shoulders as he retransformed. "Sleep well!"

---

The sun had barely risen over Hogwarts before the Death Eaters were awake, casting careful spells over the tunnel-ridden ground between themselves and Hogwarts's walls. From the towers, picked teams of Order members, Aurors, Red Shepherds, and DA watched their progress, until a parade of Weasleys mounted the stairs of the Astronomy Tower, each levitating a box. Under Ron's guidance, the boxes were unpacked, and the machine which had made the trip in pieces assembled.

"What is it?" asked Maya, walking a circle around the compact contraption.

"It's a catapult." Ron patted the spoon-shaped arm which ran diagonally through the machine's center. "And it's going to help us give the Death Eaters a really, really bad day. Water bomb!"

"Water bomb," responded Fred, and conjured the named item in the cup of the "spoon".

"Stand clear, please." Ron turned the catapult slightly to the left and adjusted its angle of attack, muttering to himself. Then he pulled the lever on one side of the mechanism, and the arm snapped forward, hurling the water bomb into the air. Everyone rushed to the front of the tower, only to see the colorful missile strike several feet short and well to one side of the startled Death Eaters.

"These are just ranging shots," explained Fred as Ron began to adjust the catapult's aim again, muttering more fiercely than before. "Once we're hitting them, then we'll put something in there they won't like at all."

"Er." Lee shifted from one foot to another. "Problem. If they can see them coming, why won't they just Vanish them before they ever get there?"

"Two answers." Fred nodded sagely. "And the first one is, that's *if* they see them coming. We could Disillusion them if we had to. But we won't, because the second one involves a spell we spent a month and a half perfecting for the fireworks. Remember?"

"Why, yes." Lee started to grin. "Yes, indeed, I do."

"Water bomb!" Ron called again, peremptorily, and Fred snapped his wand towards the catapult's cup. "Stand clear!" This shot fell much closer, the Death Eaters' defending spells missing it by several feet, and the yells of outrage as the Dark wizards were splattered with water brought cheers and laughter from the defenders of Hogwarts.

"Excellent." Ron nudged the catapult very slightly to one side. "Now, let's give them a few for free and let them get their eyes in. So to speak." He glanced down the stairs. "Hermione!" he called. "Any luck with that potion?"

"It's coming," his girlfriend's irritable voice floated back. "Keep your robes on!"

"Even after you're engaged, she still won't budge on that one?" Fred shook his head sadly. "Harsh."

"Shut up and reload." Ron glared at his brother, before turning back to his new favorite toy. "Stand clear!"

The third water bomb flew straight and true for the Death Eaters' working party, at the far edge of the mined ground between their camp and Hogwarts, but one of them raised a wand almost lazily and the missile disappeared in midair.

"Perfect." Ron nodded in satisfaction. "Give them a couple more, just like that..."

Action was suited to word, with three more water bombs being launched, flying beautifully through their arcing trajectories, and meeting their fate in the form of a Vanishing Charm before they could strike the Death Eaters. A few of the Order members looking on had begun to murmur to each other, looking concerned, when Hermione appeared at the top of the stairs, carrying a sealed beaker in each hand. Neville, Meghan, and Luna were behind her, each carrying two more



beakers, and all four of them were smiling like they'd found a thirteenth use for dragon's blood.

"Excellent." Ron held out a hand to Fred. "Empty balloon."

"Empty balloon." Fred conjured it.

"Spell, please."

"Spell, thank you." Fred's wand traced several rune-like characters on and around the balloon, finishing with a murmured four-part incantation. "All right, it's ready." Levitating the balloon, he wafted it towards Ron, who used his own wand to pull the neck open wide. With great care, each of the four other Warriors present (in human form, as Fox was observing with interest from Luna's shoulders) poured the contents of their beakers into the balloon, which Ron then tied off tightly.

"Load," he said, and Fred lowered the balloon into the catapult's cup. "Everyone stand well clear. And if you've got a good sense of smell, now'd be the time to change that," he added in Maya and Lee's general direction. "Ready, aim—"

His hand yanked the lever back, and the balloon soared into the air.

Below, one of the Death Eaters raised a wand idly to Vanish this annoyance.

The balloon promptly multiplied itself by five.

The Death Eaters stared, yelled, pointed. A few of them tried to run or Apparate away. Only two succeeded before the balloons struck the ground all around them with a great slushy *splat*.

The shrieks and yelps of disgust which rose to the defenders' ears were followed closely by a waft of an odor which made their source quite clear indeed.

"It's Harry's mum's slug potion," said Hermione proudly, as Lee swiftly conjured a Bubble-Head Charm around the top of the Tower and Maya, one hand over her face, began the three steps of the Scent Removing Spell. "Unless they know the proper counterspell, or they have someone good enough to analyze the potion and figure it out, they won't have much luck getting the smell off them. Or out of that area."

"And if you can't breathe, you can't very well work." Ron slid behind the catapult to hug Hermione. "They could use Bubble-Heads themselves, but that'll slow them down quite a bit. And that's the whole point of this. Delay, delay, delay. We don't want them on the grounds until right about sunset."

"Because that's when Harry's plan will come off, right?" Lee peered appreciatively down at the Death Eaters, some being sick in a convenient clump of bushes, others frantically casting *Scourgify* after *Scourgify* on one another with no effect. One had accidentally run onto the undermined ground in his panic, and nothing could be seen of him except a neat round hole in the dirt with a few halfhearted sparks spraying upwards from it. "What's he going to do, exactly?"

"Well." Hermione turned in Ron's embrace to smile at Lee. "I could tell you. But then I'd have to throw you off the Tower."

"I think maybe I'm better off not knowing." Lee leaned against one of the upthrust merlons. "Give me a hint, at least?"

"Ever look real close at his name?" Ron gestured with each syllable. "Vol-de-mort. Fly-from-death. He's seriously scared of death, and he gets around that by controlling it, deciding who gets to live and who has to die. But what if he didn't control it anymore? What if someone else did instead?"

"Which doesn't tell me much. But messing with Voldemort's head has to be a good thing." Lee glanced from Ron and Hermione to Neville and Meghan, finishing with Luna and Fox. "Just tell me he's not going to control any death for any of you."

"He won't." Luna shook her head. "As far as he'll know, it wouldn't do any good. Because all the people we intend to show him?" She smiled. "He thinks they're already dead."

---

Inch by painful inch, the Death Eaters advanced towards Hogwarts. Catapulted showers of potions or bespelled sticks and stones fell among them, nearby vegetation reached out to trip them or hold them in place, the goblin tunnels proved ever trickier to successfully brace, fill in, or avoid, but still, they advanced. Their fear of their Master, and his anger if they did not advance, was greater than any desire to avoid the nuisances and annoyances ahead.

Shortly after noon, they arrived at the physical walls of Hogwarts, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Then they looked up.

"What're we doing here?" asked Patroclus Nott in annoyance, staring at the crumbling drystone wall. It couldn't have been much taller than his waist, and in the distance he could see a ruined castle, barely more than a manor house, boarded up here and there, with a flaring sign declaring it condemned and dangerous to enter. "They've pulled a switch on us! Someone examine that ground for a hidden Portkey!"

The Death Eaters spread out, looking diligently at the ground they had just passed over, seeking for any signs of the method their enemies had used to transport them from where they'd been to where they clearly now were. As Patroclus checked his own sector, he felt a small hand tap against his leg.

"Letter for you, sir," chirped a familiar voice.

"Oh. Thank you." Patroclus accepted the parchment envelope and slit it open with his wand, wondering idly why the encounter seemed so odd to him.

The explosion caved in the goblin tunnels beneath, which had only been roughly stabilized, for a

radius of approximately twenty feet, engulfing three other Death Eaters in the resulting landslide. Only a few scraps of Patroclus Nott's robes were ever found.

---

From a nearby copse of trees, Brilly the house-elf snickered to herself, and Apparated back to the Hogwarts kitchens. Her little master and her new little mistress were safe now, and whether they came home tomorrow or in a year from now or when the little-master-to-come was ready to go to Hogwarts, Brilly would be waiting for them.

She hoped it would be sooner rather than later, but one oughtn't to be greedy. A fine upstanding beau with a little master and mistress of his own in the offing, a steady job at Hogwarts until her chosen family returned, and the chance to deliver her former master an exploding letter should quite satisfy any reasonable house-elf.

As she picked up another pile of bandages to supply a medic station, she wondered how long it would take the Death Eaters who were left to stop focusing on the explosion and figure out how they'd been fooled.

---

After attempting to rescue the people who'd been buried in the goblin tunnels (only one of whom survived long enough to be reached) and dealing with the secondary cave-ins caused by those attempts, the advance party of Death Eaters continued their search for the mysterious method by which they'd somehow been transported away from the outskirts of Hogwarts. They'd signaled to the rest of their compatriots, back in the camp, not to come forward until the precise trigger point had been located, which was starting to worry Amycus Carrow. The day had begun just after sunrise, and here it was, nearly halfway through the afternoon, and they were stalled dead. If they took much longer finding out the trick, the Dark Lord wouldn't be pleased...

"Amycus," whined Alecto from the base of the crumbled stone wall, where she was sitting with her legs crossed, her arms folded across her chest and an outrageous pout on her face. "*Play with me, Amycus!*"

*And why she couldn't have fallen into one of those holes, or knocked her head against the wall, or* — Amycus paused in the middle of his mental rant, a smile growing across his face. "You want to play?" he said, drawing his wand. "All righty, then, let's play. You remember how to count, don't you? One, two, three, four?"

"Ooh!" Alecto bounced in place, clapping her hands, her pout magically replaced by a beaming grin which showed off her stained, misaligned teeth. "Yes, yes! One, two, three, four, seven, eleven, ten!"

"Something like that." Amycus beckoned with his free hand. "Let's see those fingers, now, dearie. Yes, that's right, put them here...good." With his wand's tip, he coated Alecto's palms and fingertips with thick green paint. "Now, I want you to go count up all the stones in that wall, and touch each one with your finger to make sure you don't count it twice. Understand?"

"Yes." Alecto nodded hard, her head bobbing absurdly at the end of her thick neck. "Count the stones. Yes."

"Keep her busy for a while," muttered Amycus as his sister stumped back over to the wall, "let me get a bit of blasted *work* done..."

Another hour of frustration brought him no closer to a solution of how the too-clever defenders of Hogwarts might have concealed the spell which had changed the Death Eaters' location. With a sigh, Amycus straightened his back, and looked over towards Alecto.

Rows of little green fingerprints smudged the stones of the crumbling wall, and then marched upwards into the air above it. Alecto was grunting with effort, trying to reach still higher above her head, as she leaned her entire weight against what was, apparently, empty space.

---

Fred sat on the edge of the Astronomy Tower, his wand in his hand, levitating the end of an Extendable Ear out towards the walls. "And they've figured out the reversed Muggle-repelling spell," he reported after a moment. "Air ought to be turning blue around them any minute, the kind of language they're using."

"Well, we never thought it would last even this long." Percy scratched another item off his list. "Rather foolish of them, don't you think, not to recognize what Hogwarts looks like to Muggles?"

"Why should any of them care what Muggles see?" Crystal shrugged. "They never have before."

"True enough." Percy ran a finger down the scroll in his hand. "So that leaves us with those three layers of magic-deflecting wards, and a few little surprises within the walls themselves. Correct?"

"Correct," confirmed Crystal, glancing down at her own list, then up at the sun. "But we don't have that much longer to wait, do we? The wards ought to last as long as we need them."

"I certainly hope they do." Percy started for the stairs. "Still, for safety's sake, perhaps we should start getting everyone into their final positions a bit early..."

---

Near the edge of Sanctuary, Colleen Lamb stood quietly, gazing up at the Gryffindor crest, through which the sun no longer shone, though its rampant golden lion on a crimson background could still be clearly seen against the simulated sky.

"I've never understood it," she murmured, half to herself, half to the symbol of her House. "Why should anyone think I'm brave? Can't they see how frightened I am? Can't they tell how hard my hands are shaking, how much my knees are trembling, how for two Knuts I'd turn and run away?"

But no one was offering her two Knuts, and the Head Girl badge on her Hogwarts robes next to that very same rampant lion meant people would be looking at her, looking *to* her, trusting in her to do the right thing. If she turned and ran away, so would some of them, and in a war like this

one, a single wand could be the difference between victory and defeat.

"And besides, it's not that difficult, what I have to do." Colleen brushed her hands down her robes, starting to smile. "Blaise and I together, so that makes it even easier. Just at the last moment of our fighting at the walls, after it *looks* as though we're beaten and running away. We have to stop, we have to turn back and face them, and we have to say, both of us, 'Welcome to Hogwarts'—it can sound sarcastic and rude, but we know we mean it, and that's what counts."

"Because it means that even if the Death Eaters don't realize it, they haven't broken in here," said Blaise from her left, startling a gasp from her. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you heard me."

"As quietly as you walk? I never do." Colleen blew out her breath. "Just going over things with myself, one final time. It hardly seems real, you know. Everything in here is just like it always is. How can we be getting ready to have a battle?"

"I don't know." Blaise held out an arm, and Colleen fit herself into his embrace. "But I know as long as I'm fighting next to you, it will be very hard to lose."

"You give such nice compliments." Colleen laughed a little. "Strange, but nice."

---

Out in the Forbidden Forest, Harry sat astride the branch of a tree, watching and listening as Luna and Sangre the basilisk renewed their acquaintance in the more intimate terms to be expected now that Luna could speak Sangre's language. Luna, with her usual nonchalance in any situation, had even taken Harry's own usual place astride one of Sangre's cool, slick coils, and was stroking the glistening scales with affection as she told the story of how she and her Consort had fooled Sangre's faithless former Master.

*"I could almost believe, "* said the great snake thoughtfully when the tale was done, *"that you are the Master I was truly hatched to serve—or should I say, the Mistress? "* Her forked tongue flickered out and in humorously. *"That the other who used me to kill humans some few dozen years ago, and possessed others to try to do the same only a few years past, was some kind of great cosmic accident. "*

Harry snorted. *"That's one way I've never heard Voldemort described before, "* he said, drawing both females' attention upward. *"But it fits. Except that nothing about him is accidental. He likes what he does, and he won't stop until he's stopped. "*

*"And that is your job, my human eggling. "* Sangre lifted her head and nudged Harry gently with her great blunt nose. *"Do it well, and come to see me afterwards. And do not fear to walk in the Forest tonight—the many-legged ones who used to dwell in the clearing near here were leaderless and disorganized after their patriarch died, and I took advantage of the moment to scatter their clan. If any of them remain in these parts, they never dare to come near me while I hunt, and I believe I feel the urge to hunt tonight. "*

*"Just don't get too near the men with their wands, "* Luna urged, sliding down the basilisk to the

Forest floor. "*We don't want you to get hurt.*"

"*What she said.*" Harry dropped from his branch onto Sangre's broad back, and thumped his fist affectionately against her scales before joining Luna on the ground. "*Take care of yourself, Sangre, and I'll see you after—*"

The earth and sky around them seemed to tremble for a moment, though as Harry realized dizzily, nothing physical had moved. The leaves on the trees, the twigs on the ground, both revealed by the fireball he'd set to hover in the air above them, were precisely where they had been a few moments before—

But the fireball itself was coruscating, shimmering back and forth through all the colors of the rainbow and a few more that weren't.

"Magic." Harry put out a hand to the nearest tree to steady himself. "It's the magic, the school's magic, something's happened—it's *him*, Voldemort, he must have broken through, he's here already—"

"It can't be, Harry," Luna broke in urgently. "Just feel! Whatever's going on, it's *happy*. Hogwarts is glad tonight." Her face seemed to glow in the soft golden light the fireball was now giving off. "Someone it likes very much has come back."

"Someone it—" Harry stopped, and sketched two symbols with fire. Luna nodded, beaming, and took a few running steps forward before leaping up, her strong white wings beating the air to gain altitude.

"*I have to go, Sangre,*" said Harry unsteadily, as his friend's head turned towards him. "*Something wonderful has happened.*"

"*I am glad for you, Harry.*" Sangre wrapped her tongue once around his wrist, then turned and slithered away. "*Goodbye,*" her voice floated back out of the darkness under the trees.

Blowing out the fireball, Harry dropped to all fours and raced out of the Forest as Wolf, bounding swiftly across the Hogwarts lawns, darting around guardposts and leaping the not-yet-activated defensive lines. The castle loomed up in his vision, all its comfortingly familiar angles and towers, but something was moving atop the tallest one—

A burst of fire blossomed in the darkening sky, then died back to reveal the flag which now flew above Hogwarts castle. Its cloth was the rich red of the Gryffindor crest, and a silver serpent wove sinuously about its border, highlighting the trio at its center, also sewn in shimmering argent. A lion leapt across the cloth, his mane ruffled by the wind of his passage, with two crowned women seated on his back.

The silence of the dusk was broken by a long, clear, triumphant howl.

---

In an unused classroom at Hogwarts, Ron and Neville watched via the copy of the Marauder's Map Mr. Padfoot had made for them as their families and friends took their places in the defense posts outside. Near the window, curled together in Animagus form, Fox and Neenie napped on a pile of dust covers. The Death Eaters had already carved their way through one of the three sets of wards which had reinforced Hogwarts's walls, and the fighters at the outer defenses, mostly DA skirmishers and Order members, were preparing for their spirited but ultimately futile battle.

*We'll need to get out to the Forest before they break through.* Ron glanced over at the untidy heap of fur which was his fiancée and her twin, and wondered once again if it was time to wake them up. They had lead roles in tonight's little drama, after all.

*Just as glad it's not me. I'd start fumbling and stumbling, and that would give everything away.*

His eye was caught by his own surname, twice repeated, as Percy and Fred's dots of ink crossed the grounds to a spot on the outer line near a small crew of DA skirmishers he knew vaguely, not terribly far from Hagrid's Place. *That'll probably be their retreat, then. Into the house, under the bed, and down the passage to Sanctuary...*

"Knut for your thoughts," said Neville quietly.

"Just tracing out how it'll go, once they're through." Ron ran his finger along the various routes the defenders could take to safety, whether that meant one of the many secret passages into the castle or simply reaching the inner lines of defense. "Harry locked that passage by the lake, didn't he, the one that opens to Parseltongue? Not that I think Voldemort knows anything about the Hogwarts Den, but this'd be a bad time to find out I'm wrong."

"You know, I'm not sure if he did or not." Neville got to his feet. "Why don't I pop down to the Den and check? There's this little spell I can do on the wall of the passage that'll tell me if access has been restricted—"

The door of the classroom creaked, bringing both boys' eyes up.

Ron thought the sound that came out of his mouth might have been spelled "Erk", if it could have been spelled at all. Neville, beside him, didn't seem to be breathing.

The two creatures who had provoked this response walked unhurriedly across the room, to the pile of fur by the window. One dainty paw reached out to separate the pair, and each predatory head dipped and came up with a smaller creature of its own approximate kind hanging from its mouth. A friendly bow towards Ron and Neville, and the twosome left the room as silently as they had entered it, the door closing itself behind them.

"Erk," Ron said again, then ran his fingers across his closed eyes, for the first time since his sight had been changed doubting what they told him. "That wasn't my imagination," he finally managed to get his voice to croak out. "Right?"

"I'm pretty sure I saw what you saw." Neville started to sit down, hissed a little when the chair

wasn't where he'd expected, and lurched backwards to where it actually was. "If what you saw was completely and totally impossible."

"Pretty much it was. Except we saw it, so...wait." Tiny bits of information, disregarded at the time, were starting to work themselves in a whole in Ron's mind, rather like reaching the point in a chess game where he could see how to force the mate he wanted, or the moment in a Chaser's approach where it became clear through which hoop they'd try to score. "I think, I just *think*, I might understand. And if I'm right..." He blew out a long breath, and grinned on the end of it. "We need to go find the others. Because if I'm right, we have the perfect addition to what we were already planning to do."

"How so?" Neville rolled up the repeater-Map and tucked it under his arm.

"We were hoping to mess with Voldemort's mind by showing him people alive who he's completely sure are dead." Ron started for the door. "Who'd cap that off better than someone he killed his very own self?"

---

Fox awakened all at once, a moment of confusion replaced swiftly by relief as he recognized the walls and floor of a different classroom to the one where he'd fallen asleep, then by fury at his deplorable lack of reaction. *What the hell—that should never happen, no one should ever get close enough to me while I'm sleeping to move me! Not unless it's Pack or Pride, and it can't have been, unless it's Ron pulling some stupid prank and it had better not be, not this close to the end of things—*

So far his mental rant had reached when he happened to take a breath, and all coherent thought ceased in simple shock as his nose gave him the identity of the person who had moved him. She was about as far from Ron as she could be while still being within the two groups he'd named, and it was impossible that she could be here, now, alive and well—

*Except that here she is, the back of his mind whispered. And what else did Harry go to bargain for, if not for this?*

Changing back to human, he rose to his feet and turned in a single swift, flowing motion.

"There you are." Danger had seated herself on the edge of one of the desks, and was resting some of her weight on her palms, her eyes unwaveringly fixed on him. "Are you all right?"

Fox started forward, then stopped. "You *can't* be real," he said, his voice harsh as he willed his disbelief into play. *Surviving that little charade of mine without getting myself or Luna killed was highly unlikely, the Mark being removed without someone dying was well-nigh impossible, but a miracle of this sort is just a little too much for me...*

"Oh, but you can be?" Danger snorted. "Little Mr. 'I think I'll play dead for nearly five months' is questioning *my* right to reality? Why, for two Knuts I'd—no, I think I'll do it anyway." She whisked two fingers in a brisk circle, and Fox yelped as flame winked into and out of existence



around his head. "There, that's better. Who on earth cut your hair the first time?"

"Er." Fox tried to remember over the sudden tumult inside his mind. "Harry. I think."

"Typical." Danger sighed, sliding off the desk. "Give that boy a few pots and pans or a broomstick and he'll give you back a work of art, but visually gifted he is not and never has been." Moving out from between the desks, she opened her arms. "I'm here, little fox," she said, her tone gentle, as though she spoke to the frightened boy he once had been. "Come on, now. Let's have you."

Smiling through the tears he could no longer contain, Fox ran into his mother's embrace.

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Neenie blinked her eyes open and twitched her whiskers, confused. She'd fallen asleep next to Fox on a pile of soft things, and here she lay alone on something hard. To add to that, her scruff felt tight, as though she'd been carried in her sleep. She could see a window from where she lay, the warm light of sunset beaming in, which only baffled her more—surely they ought to be heading out to the Forest to get set up soon?

Absently, she changed forms back to human, and started to sit up.

The table on which she'd been placed collapsed with a loud crack, startling her yet again. She managed to vault halfway off it and complete a somewhat graceful landing on the other side, but the force of hitting the ground startled a little "Oh!" out of her.

Catching her breath, she pressed a hand to her heart. "Is it more magic?" she said uncertainly.

"Yes," said a soft voice from behind her. "Yes, it is more magic."

Hermione whirled around and stared at the speaker, her hand rising to cover her mouth as her breath deserted her once again. Words, usually so reliable of friends, escaped her entirely, and she could only shake her head, not in negation of the speaker's identity but in denial that such a thing could be happening.

"And that magic is called the Horcrux Vivens." The wizard stood in front of the sheeted desk near the front of the room, his voice as matter-of-fact as if he were teaching this concept to a class.

"The Living Soul Outside. Outside its original body, that is. A bond between two people whose souls are wounded with guilt or grief or pain. If they meet, these two people, and find themselves drawn together by love, it is possible for their souls to touch, and..." He interlaced his fingers in illustration, soft silver fire highlighting the points of contact. "Heal together. Become, to some extent, one soul inhabiting two bodies. Not entirely—the two so bonded are still able to think and feel and act for themselves, and even to disagree or argue sometimes—but the bond is very real and very powerful."

"Powerful enough..." Hermione barely recognized her own voice, as breathy and shaky as it was. "Powerful enough to keep one of the souls safe from death?"

"Yes. Exactly that powerful." The wizard nodded thoughtfully. "It may even be that the Horcrux Letifera, the Deathly Horcrux, was created *after* the first instance of the Horcrux Vivens bond, in imitation of that which evil can never understand." He moved a few steps forward. "Love."

Hermione covered the rest of the distance between them in a stumbling run, and Remus Lupin caught his daughter in his arms and held her tightly against his chest. "Hello, Kitten," he whispered, stroking her hair. "It's going to be all right now. Daddy's home."

---

"Is *that* why you didn't try to bargain for his life as well?" Ginny demanded when Harry had explained to the remainder of the dumbfounded Pride the concept of a Horcrux Vivens. "Because as long as you could save Mrs. Danger, Mr. Moony would be able to come back to life any time he wanted to?"

"Pretty much." Harry wasn't sure he'd ever stop grinning, and didn't see that as a problem. "My only worry was about his body, but the Killing Curse doesn't do any damage, it just stops the heart and the breathing. So once I knew Letha'd got them started again, within the time limit before things started going south, we were good to go." He glanced up at the flag flapping above their heads, as they'd chosen to hold this meeting on the momentarily deserted Astronomy Tower. "And how long have *you* known?" he demanded of Luna, pointing at it.

"I haven't *known* any longer than you have. But I hoped, and I suspected." Luna sat in one of the merlons, swinging her heels against the stone wall beneath. "And I thought that sewing the flag like I did would make it all the more likely to come true, because we aren't witches and wizards for nothing, Harry. Magic is belief. So what we believe in, and hope for, and *want* badly enough, very often comes to pass."

"And this did." Neville gazed up at the flag, highlighted around the edges with shimmers of the same fire which had been used to reveal its true nature. "You made a lion for our flag, and he's back with us right now."

"Don't forget the queens." Meghan's grin matched Harry's in size, despite her smaller stature. "Gertrude and Hermione were both queens in Shakespeare. And they're even sisters, just like they should be!"

"We going to use that out in the Forest, then?" Ron asked, making one of his hands sit atop the other, which walked four-legged in the air. "Really play up the scene, give it all we've got?"

"Hey, it's like Letha used to say when we did *Joseph* ." Harry straightened his shoulders. "What's the best way to look stupid on stage?"

"Hold back," Ginny recalled. "And what are we doing out in the Forest but staging a performance? The biggest one of our lives, yes, but still just a show." She smiled. "I think it should be as amazing as we can possibly make it."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 63: The Last Enemy (Year 7)

"So." Remus stroked his hand across the four furry forms which had planted themselves between him and Danger, finishing with a little tug on Wolf's unruly black ruff. "I understand we have a plan?"

"Sort of, kind of, more or less." Sirius shrugged. "A little more less than more."

"It's clearer now that you're here," said Aletha, bumping her shoulder into Sirius's affectionately. "But the basic structure remains the same. Voldemort wants to kill Harry—all right, we'll let him do that. Or rather, we'll let him *think* he's done that. And then we make him think that everything's going to start working backwards."

"The deeper magic, from before the dawn of time." Danger nodded, looking around the clearing in the Forbidden Forest which the Pack and Pride had claimed for their own (Neville and Luna had tacitly worked together to delay their own, Ron, and Ginny's arrival at the spot, to allow the Pack a bit of time for their full reunion). "Though in this case, mainly smoke and mirrors."

"Yes, well, what about the case where it wasn't?" Sirius poked Danger on the knee, provoking a soft growl and a smack on the arm in return. "Mr. Padfoot cannot help but notice that Mr. Moony is surprisingly lively for a dead man."

"Because Mr. Moony never truly was. Dead, that is." Remus let his hand rest on Fox's furred back. "Though it's worth noting that Voldemort must suspect the existence of the Horcrux Vivens bond, because if his plan had worked, I would be." He turned his hand over to twine his fingers with Danger's. "We both would be."

"But it didn't work." Aletha rubbed her left elbow, her eyes abstracted. "Because Corona fought back against the Imperius. Because she weakened the poison, and stopped herself from striking for Danger's heart."

"And that bought us just enough time." Danger reached around to scratch the corner of Neenie's furred jaw, then caressed the base of Pearl's soft ears. "Time for me to make sure you wouldn't be killed trying to help me, and time for Harry to go to the Founders and bargain for my healing."

"Because as long as one of you is alive, your souls are both anchored in the world, so neither of you can fully die." Sirius shook his head in wonder. "What happened in between?"

"A surprisingly prosaic stay at the Founders' Hogwarts." Remus chuckled once. "As prosaic as that ever is. But it's where we ended up, and where we've been eavesdropping on you. Shamelessly, I might add, except that you probably already know that."

"You two. Shameless." Aletha pursed her lips, considering. "Yes, those concepts do seem to fit together nicely."

Danger stuck out her tongue at her friend. "You should talk. Doing experimental Healer work on my poor husband while he couldn't say yes or no for himself!"

"A procedure we'd already discussed in a theoretical sense, and for which she did have the approval of my legal next of kin." Remus tapped a chiding finger on top of Danger's head, and pulled it out of the way as she snapped her teeth at it. "Looking for trouble tonight, aren't you?"

"She won't need to go looking for it pretty soon." Sirius turned his head, listening. "It'll come and find us. Which means we ought to be getting into position." He got up and helped Danger to do the same, then scooped her into a tight hug, lifting her off her feet and making her squeak. "Don't you *ever* scare me like that again," he told her before he put her down and turned to Remus. "You neither. Got that?"

"I'm hoping I never have to." Remus embraced his friend in turn. "You'd have done the same," he murmured close to Sirius's ear. "You know you would."

"That's beside the point."

"No, that *is* the point."

"Is not."

"Is so."

"Is not."

"Is not."

"Is s—wait a minute!"

Remus only snickered and turned to accept hugs from the once-more-human cubs, since Danger and Aletha had withdrawn a few steps to talk together. Meghan took her turn first, holding onto him as tightly as her slender arms could manage. "Thank you for not being dead," she whispered to him. "So, so much."

"You're welcome, love. And thank you for the same." Remus kissed his goddaughter's forehead, directly over the scowl lines, then turned to Hermione. "Tonight you're Lucy, but next summer you might just be Susan again," he said quietly as he held her close, and felt the little quiver and leap of her muscles when his meaning struck home. "But keep that to yourself for now."

"I will." Hermione leaned against his shoulder. "What was the price?" she asked, her own voice low and worried. "You and Danger have to have paid something, for that and for being alive. Nothing ever comes free."

"We made our choices, Kitten, like you made yours." Remus traced his fingers through soft brown waves of hair. "You're right that gain always comes with loss, but in this case it's nothing we can't live without. A natural consequence, really." He looked down into the hazel eyes now flecked with

gray, and smiled as his mind presented him with image after image of these same eyes upturned to his throughout the years, filled sometimes with joy and sometimes with sorrow but always, always with love. "It's nothing to be afraid of," he said firmly. "Trust me."

"I do." Hermione leaned up to kiss his cheek. "I always have." She giggled a little. "Moo-nee nice," she said in a little-girl treble, and Remus laughed and returned the kiss before releasing his daughter to turn to the first of his sons.

"Scared, Greeneyes?" he asked.

"Some. Not too much." Harry's eyes seemed to hold an inner light, as though he were still Wolf, peering towards some dim and distant fire. "If it works the way we want it to, we can't possibly lose. And if it doesn't, at least this time I'll be doing my own fighting..."

The fey look died away from his face, leaving behind the earnest teenager Remus knew so well, struggling to find words to explain a life-scarring experience. "I hated it," he said after a few moments of silence. "Watching that. Watching you. It was—no." He shook his head hard, the motion continuing down through his shoulders and arms. "That's not how it's supposed to be. I'm grown-up now. I'm the warrior. I should be able to *stop* that sort of thing, not just sit and let it happen!"

"It's a father's job to protect his children." Remus ruffled Harry's hair as he had earlier done to Wolf's ruff. "However grown-up or warlike they may be."

"Except for tonight. Tonight, it's my turn to protect you. To protect everybody." A brief smile sprang to Harry's lips. "And there's nothing you can do about it, because Trelawney's prophecy and Danger both said so."

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of fate, or of my lady." Remus gave Harry a brief, tight hug, smiling to himself at the answering pressure of his cub's strong arms. "Though I do think that if Voldemort had any sense, he'd be running away from you as fast as he knows how to run."

"If he had any sense, we wouldn't all be in this bloody mess in the first place." Harry disengaged from the hug and bowed his head formally, and Remus laid his fingers lightly on the back of Harry's neck, letting the touch convey pride, hope, love, none of which could be adequately expressed in words. After one more shared smile, alpha to alpha, Harry loped away across the clearing, to the spot where most of the rest of the Pride had congregated to begin their preparations.

*Most, but not all...*

"What gave me away?" asked a voice from the edge of the clearing, where a tall, slim silhouette could just be discerned against the tree-shaded evening. "When did you know?"

"Almost as soon as I scented you." Remus tapped a finger to the side of his nose. "That werewolf-scent potion you helped Letha develop is good, but it was starting to wear off. But I would have

discounted that if it hadn't been for the other part of it."

"Other part of what?" Fox shifted his position enough to give Remus a look at his features, closed down into the mask which meant deep distress he thought it either wrong or dangerous to show.

"Where did I go wrong?"

"You didn't. Or rather, the reaction you had was probably unavoidable, and I doubt anyone else would have elicited it, or caught it if they had." Remus seated himself on a fallen log, keeping his eyes on Fox. "I've had quite a while to learn how to sort through human emotional scents, and the difference here may be subtle, but once you've learned it, it's hard to mistake. Even in his own home, without my wand, and with my other magic contained, the real Lucius Malfoy would have been at least a little afraid of me. But you." He smiled. "You were afraid *for* me."

"I wasn't wrong." Fox leaned forward now, eyes narrowed, teeth exposed. "Dammit, Moony, he *killed* you! And I had to stand there and watch, and *feel* —"

"I know." Remus was up and across the clearing in a smooth rush of motion, catching Fox as he started to crumple. "I'm so sorry for that." His arms closed around Fox, who stiffened for an instant, then made a breathy little sound which could have been either a sob or a laugh and wrapped his own arms around Remus, shaking in every limb.

"That's my boy," Remus murmured as a curtain of fire shielded them from the rest of the occupants of the clearing. "That's my Fox. I've got you. It's over now." As he had two nights before, he tapped his fingers against Fox's arm, thumb, ring, middle, the unspoken code for *I love you* which the Pack had used from their earliest days. "And after tonight, it will all be over."

"But will it?" Fox's voice trembled, until he drew a deep breath or two and pulled away from the embrace, sitting down on the Forest floor, Remus following his lead. "Is it ever going to be over, really and truly over? I'm ruined for any kind of normal life now. I can barely even speak to people I've known for years without wanting to run away and hide. How long is the Pride going to put up with dead weight like me? With someone who can't contribute anything, who can barely get his arse out of bed in the morning, never mind getting out of the house?"

Remus had to mask a smile at the decided **Hmph** in the back of his mind. "Is it always necessary to get out of the house to contribute?" he asked. "And no, I don't mean that it's all right for you to do nothing because you happen to have inherited a pile of gold," he added quickly, feeling Danger's answering chuckle at the baffled look on Fox's face. Clearly one of his self-deprecating arguments had been countered before it could be put into words. "But tell me this. Out of the four of us, the Pack-parents, who tends to stay home the most?"

"Danger." The answer was immediate. "She likes it in the Den. It's her place, her center. Where she wants to belong. Where she does belong."

"And would you say that Danger is dead weight on the Pack, that she doesn't contribute anything?" This time Remus didn't bother to hide the smile at Fox's exaggerated expression of horror and frantic head-shaking, complete with warding motions of his hands. "Of course not. She works

harder on any given day than those of us with so-called 'real jobs'. And she has control over almost every aspect of her life, over what she does and when, over who she sees and talks with."

"That sounds wonderful." Fox looked down at his hands, as though he were seeing them in a new light. "It seems so strange, though. I've always loved it when people were looking at me, so long as I knew what I was doing. I wanted to impress everyone, to be the best and have everybody know it. And now...now all I want is quiet. Quiet, and home, and people I love who love me back. I don't care if anybody other than the Pack and Pride ever says my name again for as long as I live." His eyes gleamed. "Well, maybe when we have kids, Luna and I. I'll want to hear how they're upholding the fine Marauder tradition of driving all their teachers up the wall."

"Remind me to send in my resignation the year your first-born arrives." Remus got to his feet and held down a hand for Fox. "Come on, let's get into costume. The sooner we start this show, the sooner it's over with, and then we can get on with those quiet lives." He chuckled. "You might want to see about borrowing Fang to patrol the grounds at the Manor Den for the first few months, to keep the reporters away."

"Fang? You're kidding, right?" Fox snorted. "The worst he'd do would be lick them all to death! If we really want to discourage them, we'll get Lynx to bite off a couple of their kneecaps, or have Redwing and Starwing dive-bomb them..."

Above, the sky darkened further, moving swiftly towards true night.

---

An explosion struck at the walls of Hogwarts, sending the ancient stones toppling inwards. The Death Eaters grouped before it bellowed in victory and pushed forward, to the accompaniment of screams from the other side. Spells flew thick and fast, holding the invaders at the breach for the moment, but the nerve of the young witches and wizards in the front line was visibly wavering.

Bellatrix, hidden beneath her mask, laughed softly to herself and chose her target, a tall girl with brown hair who was holding a shield over herself and a group of others. One of their own turning on them would panic them faster than anything else could do.

*Imperio*, she thought with diamond clarity, and watched the young witch jerk slightly as the spell struck home. *Say and do only things you ordinarily might, until I give the word*, she instructed. *Then turn and strike at...* A moment of observation netted her a tall, dark-skinned boy a few places down, bolstering up one of the faltering flanks of the defensive position. *Him. Stun him before he knows what is happening, let us take him prisoner, and drop your wand and give yourself up. You have no need to fight. We will spare your lives, even allow you to live comfortably, and all in exchange for this small service...*

The girl's mind fluttered in panic beneath the stifling softness of the Imperius Curse, then quieted. Her left hand went to her right arm and came away with a small, circular object which gleamed green in the light of the glowing balls floating overhead. On the other side of the formation, the young wizard Bellatrix had noted stiffened in surprise or shock.



Her hand pressed to her robes, the girl stepped clear of her Shield Spell and faced Bellatrix fully, her brown eyes filled with defiance. "Welcome to Hogwarts," she said, her scornful words ringing clearly over the shouting of spells.

Bellatrix heard the sound of rushing wind begin behind her, and half-turned to stop whoever was casting the curse, but it was already too late.

A bolt of green light struck the young witch full in the chest, just below the bracelet of intertwined serpents she held against her heart.

---

"That's it, that's the signal!" Percy waved at his own group of defenders, pulling them back from the crumbling bit of wall they'd been holding in place with magic and luck. "Let's go, let's go, let's go! "

Together, the little group sprinted across the Hogwarts lawns, Percy shining a red light from his wand to show them the way without destroying their night vision, Fred and one of the DA skirmishers taking it in turns to hold a Shield Spell over the back of the group. Hostile spellfire glanced off it with sounds like water on hot metal, and once Percy felt the rush of a Killing Curse shoot by him, but they were almost at their destination now, Hagrid's Place loomed up before them—

"*Ware high!* " shrieked a feminine voice, and Percy snapped his wand into the air and flung a Shield Spell upwards just in time, as a series of spell-lights streaked downward from what he could now see was a small contingent of Death Eaters mounted on brooms. Quickly he swirled his wand around the little house at the edge of the Forest, putting up what protections he could as skirmishers and Red Shepherds fled past him into Hagrid's Place, but he was already exhausted from the fight at the boundaries and the spells wouldn't last.

*Especially not against four—no, eight of them,* he self-corrected with a sinking heart as the four Death Eaters now bringing their broomsticks in for a landing were augmented by four more from the group who'd been chasing them on foot. His people were all safely inside now, and most of them had surely passed through the trapdoor under the bed on their way to Sanctuary, but the Death Eaters would be sure to find that same doorway within a very few minutes.

*And we may be able to block it off, but what magic can lay, magic can take away.*

Ducking inside, Percy slammed the door against another Killing Curse and leaned against it, regaining his breath. As he'd expected, the interior was almost deserted already, only Fred and Crystal remaining there. It was her voice he'd heard, Percy realized, warning them of the flying menace above them.

*Saving our lives, keeping us free, but for what? So that we can watch the Death Eaters break into Sanctuary, and rampage their way through everyone we've tried so hard to save?*

Dully, he crossed towards his brother and his colleague, fishing up what few scraps of strength he

had left to pay attention to their quiet, urgent conversation.

"I *know* there are built-in shields on here already," Crystal was insisting, glaring at Fred, her hands on her hips. "I remember you two arguing with Lee and Maya about what order to put the layers!"

"They're already inside those shields, though," Fred countered. "We might be able to push them out again, but—"

"But the shields weren't designed for defending this place." Percy shook his head, astounded by how hard the simple gesture was to make. "They face the other way. Controlling energy from the inside, not the outside. Designed as a safeguard, in case something went wrong in here, with—"

He broke off, seeing the same realization on Fred's and Crystal's faces as had just shot through his own mind.

As one, they looked up.

Five pyramids built from bricks of a reddish-brown substance sat in the rafters above them.

"Well, well." Crystal snickered. "When in doubt indeed."

"But we still have a problem." With difficulty, Percy drew his mind back to the issue at hand. "They'll expect us to have laid traps in here, so they'll be ready to nullify any spell we'd leave behind. Including one to set that off. And the same goes for something mechanical—they've already seen us using Muggle tools, and I know there are spells designed to destroy anything with moving parts..."

"So we use the one thing they can't control or destroy from a distance." Fred shrugged. "How many of them were there?"

"Eight, I think." Percy closed his eyes for an instant to remember. "Yes, eight of them."

"Perfect." Fred levitated the gigantic bed out of the way, revealing the trapdoor in the floor, left ajar by the last person through. "Ladies first."

"You've got that bloody well straight," said Crystal sharply, and Percy had to stifle a snort of laughter in his sleeve. "See you on the other side." Blowing a kiss to Fred and saluting Percy, she pulled the trapdoor open and dropped down lightly into the passage beneath, disappearing from view.

"What are you going to—" Percy began, then staggered back a step as a Disarmer and an Impediment Jinx struck him in quick succession. Fred caught Percy's wand neatly in his right hand, his eyes strangely alight.

"I'm sorry, Perce," he said, and tossed the wand into the passage under the trapdoor, following it with a Banishing Spell. "But it's probably better this way. Tell Mum I love her, would you?"

A quick swish and flick, and Percy felt himself lifted into the air and lowered neatly to the passage below. The Impediment Jinx began to wear off just as his feet touched the floor.

"Run," Fred told him quietly, and shut the trapdoor with a soft *thud* .

Wrenching himself free from the last vestiges of the Jinx, Percy fled down the passage towards Sanctuary, scooping up his wand on the fly and conjuring three stone walls behind him, lining the third with a resilient layer of waxed canvas. Crystal's blonde hair was a blur of yellow further down the passage, hazed not only by the infrequent lanterns which lit the way but by the wash of tears over his eyes.

*"We're not going to lose Fred,"* her voice echoed inside Percy's mind. *"We already have..."*

---

The Death Eater in the lead of the attacking force yelled in triumph as the flimsy shields around the hut-like outbuilding failed, and charged forward, his three best fighters and the four from the broomstick battalion following him. Spells shot ahead of them, shattering the windows and ensuring no time-delayed magic or nasty toys like the ones the stupid children had been using from the towers remained functional inside the stone walls.

*We'll teach them better manners, once we've got them properly brought to heel.* The Death Eater licked his lips, thinking of all those naughty little ones who needed proper lessoning, proper discipline, to learn their places and be grateful for what scraps of power the true rulers of the world chose to throw them. *And it starts here, now, tonight...*

He burst in through the door, shining his wand's light around the rudely appointed room. It was empty, but that didn't concern him. The tiny place could hardly have held all the children he'd seen disappearing into it in any case, so there had to be some kind of exit.

*And once we find it, we'll have them, and any of their lot who're hiding there with them...*

A small noise behind him made him whirl. A red-haired boy, one of the pair who'd been shielding the runners from behind, stood at the foot of the bed, his eyes sparking with madness as he looked the Death Eaters over.

"Welcome to my parlor," he said, and fired a spell straight up into the rafters.

The Death Eater had just time to wonder what that might mean before five hundred pounds of Semtex made their own meaning completely, cataclysmically clear.

---

Lord Voldemort was just stepping across the crumbled wall onto Hogwarts's grounds when an instant's brilliant flare of fire turned night into day. Less than a second later, an earsplitting *boom* shook the night, striking the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters with all the physical force of a hard blow to the chest.

"That way!" shouted Bellatrix, tearing off her mask to let her face be seen. "Hurry!"

*Yes, do hurry.* Lord Voldemort watched his army go stampeding off into the darkness before he strolled away himself in a slightly different direction. Harry Potter's bookish sister, before he had caged her and the traitor Severus Snape to be destroyed by his dear Nagini, had given him a most valuable piece of information. *Hurry to see whatever the children have set up for your entertainment, while I gain for myself the world's most powerful wand...*

The white marble tomb of Albus Dumbledore was soon reached, and with a single spell the Dark Lord split its top wide open. The old man's body lay in repose on its cushioned bed, looking, in the starlight, surprisingly whole and alive.

*But that is nonsense. No spell can awaken the dead. And neither can the dead claim possessions, which means...*

Lord Voldemort leaned over and plucked the long, slim wooden rod from its place between Dumbledore's fingers, laying down the yew wand which had served him for so long beside the body of his former enemy.

*Which means, by right of conquest, that the Elder Wand is mine. Just as Hogwarts will soon be mine, both by conquest and by birthright. A worthy castle in which a Dark Lord may dwell, and from which he may rule the wizarding world.*

*But first I must deal with Harry Potter.*

He turned to gaze at the castle, its windows shuttered and dark. A frontal assault had carried them onto the grounds, but the walls at the boundaries of Hogwarts had been built as decoration and demarcation, not with any serious intention of defense. The castle walls were sturdier, and neither the students nor the teachers of Hogwarts were fools. They would fight, and fight fiercely, to keep his Death Eaters out of their hallowed halls, and with every spell thrown by either side, precious and irreplaceable magical blood would be spilled.

*And yet, we still must find our way into that castle...*

*Or must we?*

Lord Voldemort began to smile, and then to laugh, as the chance thought which had crossed his mind became clearer and clearer by the second.

*Use Potter's heroism against him. His vaunted Gryffindor courage and chivalry. Promise him that if he only comes out of the castle to face me, his friends and family—those who remain of them—shall all be spared!*

Still laughing, he strode away from Dumbledore's tomb, towards the source of the earlier explosion. *And of course, I would not lie to my worthy adversary. His friends and family shall be spared. Spared the dragging dullness of the Muggle-loving life they have led to this point. Spared*

*the terrible trouble of having to make their own decisions about such things as marriage and childbearing.*

*In the most extreme cases, spared even the pain of taking their next breath.*

---

"And...he's doing it." Sirius forced himself to exhale, then inhale, clearing his lungs from the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding, and looked up from the repeater-Map at the rest of the Pack and Pride, along with Severus Snape, looking decidedly uncomfortable in present company, though Sirius couldn't be sure how much of that was the make-up and costuming their plan called for. "He's taking the bait. Heading into the Forest." He looked over at Harry. "You ready for this, kid?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Harry patted the inside pocket where the Elder Wand and the Resurrection Stone resided, then pulled on the Invisibility Cloak and vanished from sight. "I'll hit my mark," his voice said from the bit of air which still smelled like him. "Just make sure the rest of you do the same."

"Teach a jarvey to hunt gnomes, why don't you?" muttered Fox, flicking a bit of his regrown hair over his shoulder with an impatient gesture. Luna, beside him, laid a hand against his arm, and he drew a deep breath of his own, visibly calming. "All right. I'm all right. We'll need to circle around behind, once they pick a stopping place," he said to Snape. "How good are you at sneaking in the woods?"

"A few months ago, I followed what I thought might be the music of forest-elves outside Malfoy Manor, and saw something completely different." Snape smirked as Fox blinked in shock and Luna let out a soft "ah" of appreciation. "Yes, I rather suspected I had not been noticed on that occasion. You would hardly have been so bold with me later."

"Good enough to sneak up on them is good enough for me," said Danger with a nod. "And of course we have a bit of an advantage." She motioned to herself, Hermione, and Remus. "As for the rest of you...*try* not to trip over any ridiculously large logs, please?"

With subdued chuckles and blown kisses and scent-touches, the Pack and Pride scattered, Aletha offering Ron her arm to perch on as Redwing, then covering both of them with a Disillusionment before doing the same to the various animal forms before her. Padfoot the dog rubbed his length against her legs when she was done, then slipped into the night, following the scents of many anxious humans, along with one tainted with the bitter musk of snake.

*Dark out here, he thought "loudly", pushing the thoughts outward as he might if he were wearing someone else's pendant chain to speak silently, or joined in a magical bond with them to accomplish something greater than they could do alone (which was, he had to admit, a pretty good description of their plan). Dark and scary. Anything could be living in this Forest. Anything could be waiting around the bend.*

*Anything could happen tonight.*

*Anything at all.*

---

As the Death Eaters disposed themselves to rest around the periphery of the large clearing they had found within the Forest, Amycus Carrow kindling a large fire in its center, Lord Voldemort touched the tip of the Elder Wand to his throat, thrilling with the warm rush of power as the spell formed itself before he could make any conscious choice to desire it.

*Anything could happen tonight. Including my final victory.*

Envisioning his voice echoing out over the trees, through the grounds, into the rooms and corridors of the castle, he began to speak.

"Hear me, defenders of Hogwarts. You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained losses already, and if you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste. Lord Voldemort is merciful. My forces have already retreated. I give you one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured."

The Death Eaters were sniggering among themselves. "Patch 'em up, save us the trouble," one voice rose above the others. "We need 'em alive for what we're going to do..."

Lord Voldemort gave the speaker a quelling glare, silencing him immediately, and continued. "I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you." The mental image of Potter's white, shocked face brought a certain thrill to the speaking of the next words. "You have permitted your friends and family to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences."

Bellatrix sighed once. "I almost hope he doesn't come," she murmured. "All that lovely killing..."

"This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter." Lord Voldemort smiled at his consort, and enjoyed her girlish squeal of glee. "I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me."

"Those that're still alive," muttered another Death Eater, waking further snickers among his comrades.

"One hour," Lord Voldemort finished, and removed the spell with a flick of his wand.

*One hour. Perhaps less. And he will come. He will not be able to help it.*

*Anything can happen tonight.*

*I must simply make sure it happens in my favor.*

---

Blaise sat in a corner of the Great Hall, looking at the stones of the wall without seeing them. One of them seemed, in some mysterious way, to have lodged itself inside his chest, which made even such a mundane act as breathing supremely painful. All around him, noise and activity reigned, but none of it touched him, which suited him perfectly. His mind was busy playing and replaying the impossibility he had seen. Over and over, Colleen stepped into the open, holding his gift against her breast, and spoke the three words which had cost her life to say.

*It makes no sense. None. She would never—*

*Except that she did.*

*There is something I don't know.*

The thoughts had recurred in exactly this form so many times that Blaise had lost track of them when Selena Moon emerged from the milling crowd, clearly headed in his direction. He nodded curtly to her as she seated herself beside him on the floor.

"We had a chance to examine Colleen," she said after a few seconds of silence. "Someone tried to put her under Imperius. Possibly they succeeded but they worded it wrong, or she might have fought them off for a moment. We can't tell."

The stone in Blaise's chest contracted, then slowly began to dissolve. "She chose," he said, in a voice which sounded startlingly normal. "She chose that way to be sure they could not truly succeed. That they could not use her against us." The image of Colleen holding his bracelet to her heart recurred once again, but now it made more sense than he could have wished. "Against me. One leader destroying another. It would have terrified our defenders, turned what was meant as a planned retreat into a panicked rout. And there would have been no one left to say the words." The stone finished its dissolution with a rush of chill through his limbs. "She died to save us all."

"That's what it looks like." Selena nodded. "I'm sorry, Blaise. If that means anything tonight."

"Not tonight, but someday it will." Blaise shut his eyes and leaned back against the wall. "As long as we win, of course..."

---

Harry stood at the edge of the clearing where the Death Eaters had set up camp, touching the inner pocket where he carried Wand and Stone, then the silky fabric of the Cloak. His pendants, hanging against his heart, his own wand up his sleeve, and the red-stoned dagger belted at his waist were all just where they should have been as well, and with less than ten minutes remaining of the hour Voldemort had given him, he had to believe his friends and family were in the places he needed them to be.

*Right, then.* Pressing his hand to his pendants one last time, for courage and luck, he took out the Elder Wand and the Resurrection Stone, then stepped out of the trees, shedding the Invisibility Cloak as he did so. *Curtain up, and may we all break a leg.*

*Or perhaps our enemies' brains.*

---

A shudder of movement at the edge of the clearing caught Lord Voldemort's eye. Shedding his Invisibility Cloak and dropping it to the ground in front of him, Harry Potter stood revealed, his face strangely calm in the firelight.

Green eyes met red for an instant, but nothing could be seen of the mind beyond them other than a brilliant flare of fire. Then Harry dropped to his knees, tossed two small items from his hand onto the Cloak, and flicked out the fingers of both hands towards the little collection. With a *whoosh* of flame, they were rendered dust-fine ashes before the Dark Lord had clearly made out their shapes, though one of them had been long and slender and the other small and rounded.

*A wand, perhaps, and some sort of magical fuel? But why—*

Shaking off such needless thoughts, Lord Voldemort rose, drawing the Elder Wand. "Harry Potter," he said quietly. "The Boy Who Lived."

With no more than a thought, he cast the Killing Curse towards the child who had been his enemy since before he had been born.

The green light struck Harry's robed chest, flaring again as it made contact, and a loud explosion sounded behind him. Without a change in his calm expression, The Boy Who Lived crumpled into the dirt, arms and legs limp and lifeless.

The Death Eaters sat motionless, their eyes flickering from their Master to his fallen enemy, as the tension in the broad clearing mounted. Lord Voldemort found he could not blame them. The feeling of anticlimax was distinct.

*Something else should have happened here.* He would not, could not, permit himself to look fearfully around, as some of the Death Eaters were doing even now, but the sensations which were prompting them were clear even to him. *Something greater, something more, should have marked my defeat of the only enemy who could have defeated me, my dispatching him to the journey from which there is no returning—*

From behind the Dark Lord came the hoot of an owl, long and low and mournful. An instant later, the bird itself swept through the clearing on silent wings, white as any ghost. Straight to the tree under which Harry lay it flew, and landed on a branch above his body, its cry like the sound of a sob, as though it grieved for his death.

Within the Death Eaters' ranks, the whispering began.

"Starwing..."

"Malfoy's owl..."



"It's her, the girl..."

"But she's dead!"

"So're they." One of the Death Eaters pointed, trembling. "So're they..."

Slowly, Lord Voldemort turned to look.

At the edge of the clearing stood two tall figures, bleached of all color and shining with an inner light, yet unmistakable in their lineaments. Lucius Malfoy was only now lowering his arm from where he had cast his owl-girl into the air, and Severus Snape still wore the bloodstained robes in which he had died.

"My lord," said Lucius, bowing slightly, as did Severus behind him. "Yours to command, as ever." He glanced past the Dark Lord to the place where Harry lay, Starwing perched above him like a guardian. "I would congratulate you upon your victory, but I fear you did not understand what Potter did just before you cast your curse. Shall I elucidate?"

As in a dream, Lord Voldemort felt himself slowly nod.

"Harry Potter, as Albus Dumbledore before him, sought out three semi-mythical items known to some as the Deathly Hallows. The Elder Wand, of which you already know, but with it the Resurrection Stone and the Cloak of Invisibility." Lucius laughed softly. "The legend would have us believe them gifts from Death itself, but whether or not that is true, there can be no doubt that their magic is powerful indeed. The wizard who masters them all is said to be the master of death."

"But Harry Potter did not have the Elder Wand." Lord Voldemort strove for some measure of control over a situation which was slipping away from him more quickly than he could regain it. "I have it myself. He cannot have mastered what I hold in my hand, what I have just used to kill him!"

"Do you truly think, *my lord*, that Albus Dumbledore would have been so careless as to allow you to gain control of the world's most powerful wand?" Severus spoke for the first time, his every word a symphony in sarcasm. "He had Ollivander make him up a replica, a fake, a year before his life was ever threatened. And then he left instructions for his faithful followers to conceal the true Elder Wand until such time as Harry Potter needed it, and have him buried with the copy." A smirk touched the pallid lips. "The Younger Wand, if you will."

"Very nice," said Lucius appreciatively, and Severus inclined his head in thanks. "But as I was saying, my lord, in the ancient lore, the master of all three Deathly Hallows is also the master of death itself. And Harry Potter has done more than master the Hallows." He began to walk forward towards the form of Lord Voldemort's enemy, Severus stepping back into the trees and fading like the ghost he surely was. "He has destroyed them. Unmade them, as he might some faulty piece of work." Reaching the spot where Harry had fallen, he stepped carefully clear of the body, moving to its right. "As for what means to death, both his death and others..." One slender hand gestured

gracefully towards the trees.

Out of the darkness paced a majestic male lion, his footfalls silent on the leaf-littered Forest floor, his mane and body as glowing a silver as the man who had summoned him forth. On his back sat two ghostly female figures, robed and veiled so that no hint of their identity could be seen, the very image of the flag which flew over Hogwarts castle. Lucius bowed low before them, then stepped to the lion's side to offer his hand to the rider in the front.

Dismounting with his help, the slender woman lifted her veil away from her face to let it rest upon her shoulders, revealing the features of Remus Lupin's wife, Danger. She and Lucius held one another's eyes for a long moment before he bowed once more and stepped back, clearing her path to Harry Potter. She unwrapped her veil still further as she crossed to Harry's side, laying it across her arms like a shroud, then knelt beside him and lifted his lifeless form into her embrace, cradling him against her chest with her head bowed down in grief.

Lucius reached up to the lion's second rider now, helping her to dismount in her turn. Once her feet were on the Forest floor, she too removed her veil, disclosing the face of Hermione Granger-Lupin. Gathering the veil in her hands, she cast it over Lucius's head, hiding his face from view, then whisked it away once more in the style of a Muggle conjurer. The person thus revealed bore some resemblance to Lucius still, but a great deal more to the girl in front of him, with whom he joined hands, smiling, and stepped back.

The great lion, freed from his burdens, came solemnly forward, crossing behind the grieving mother and her son, until he stood across from the woman. Slowly, he lowered his head, his shining mane shifting not at all, and breathed upon the still, silent face.

For the length of one breath, nothing happened.

Then Harry Potter stirred, and opened his eyes, and smiled at the man who now knelt beside him. Reaching out a hand, he touched Remus Lupin on the cheek, and where his fingers touched, the ghostly silver faded away, replaced by the color of living flesh. Lupin returned the smile as the transformation spread swiftly across his entire body, then gestured to his wife, and Harry sat up and laid his hand on Danger's lips, her deathly pallor retreating from his touch until two unmistakably living people knelt beside him, their eyes alight with happiness.

Rising to his feet, Harry approached his twin siblings, who stood a few paces distant, hand-linked. His lips parted as though he were laughing as he offered them his own hands, and they accepted, the colors of life rushing back across the pair who had been dead as the three siblings spun in a circle like Muggle children, around and around and—

In a blur of speed, the twins sprang apart, leaving Harry facing Lord Voldemort, his wand magically in his hand and pointed towards the Dark Lord. "*Expelliarmus!*" he shouted, and a jet of red light tore the wand from Voldemort's hand.

Behind Harry, Remus Lupin conjured up a ball of golden flame and flung it to his right, streamers of fire following it as it flew. Aletha Black, with her husband Sirius beside her, bounded clear of

the trees in time to catch the ball and throw it once again, this time to Neville Longbottom, who had emerged from the Forest at Voldemort's rear, little Meghan Black at his elbow. He held the flame for an instant in his hands, then passed it into the keeping of Luna Lovegood, who laughed once as she caught it and tossed it back to Remus, past the boy who had been masquerading as Lucius Malfoy.

Remus caught the ball and blew once on it, and the threads of fire which had followed it around the circle rose up, encasing Harry and the Dark Lord, at the circle's center, in a shield of shimmering fire. Harry whistled once, shrilly, and flung the two wands in his hand through the top of the shield an instant before it closed, to be caught by Ron Weasley, on the circle's other side. "This is our fight," he snapped out. "No one move—"

"Master!" shrieked Bellatrix, flinging herself forward and ripping her wand free of her pocket.

Neville turned to face her and flung out one hand in a throwing motion, clapping the other against his chest as a rich golden light ignited there.

Bellatrix had time for one choked scream before the wood of her wand, sprouting in her hand, closed over her face and body, wrapping her in the embrace of a twisted and dwarfed black walnut tree, its roots digging deep into the earth as leaves burst from its branches to shiver in the cool autumn air.

"Now," said Neville, dusting off his hands and exchanging satisfied smiles with Meghan. "No one *else* move."

"Showoff," muttered Harry, drawing snickers from his Pack and Pride. "As I was saying..." With his right hand, he drew a gleaming silver dagger, and displayed it to Lord Voldemort before throwing it into the ground between them to stick there upright, the red stone in its hilt gleaming in the light of the shielding fire around them. "I challenge you to a fair fight." His eyes flared with contempt. "For once in your stinking life. No fancy spells, no special wands, no weapons of any kind. Just you, and me, and whatever we've got of our own."

"You call this fair, Harry Potter?" Lord Voldemort was astounded that he could frame the words without snarling in rage at the way he had been fooled. "Using ambush tactics and trickery to force me onto your own chosen battlefield?"

"It's a better chance than you gave my parents." Harry's lip curled. "Any of them. You going to talk all night, or are we going to finish this?"

"Oh, we will finish this." Lord Voldemort reached deep into his core, seeking out the center of his magic. The boy might think he was crippled without his wand, but certain things were still possible, especially in the grip of rage such as now suffused his being. "We will finish this here and now."

*And with your family and friends gathered around to watch you die, my triumph will be all the sweeter...*

Harry circled to his left, mirroring Voldemort's movements, his eyes and ears and nose alert for the slightest hint that his enemy was prepared to attack. Facing the Killing Curse without flinching, even with his Slytherin jewel to render him intangible for the crucial second the deadly magic would otherwise have made contact, had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

*Closely followed by lying completely still and breathing as slowly as I could manage while Fox and Snape and the rest did their little distraction dance. But it went just the way we wanted it to go. He's disarmed and off his balance, Bellatrix is out of the way, and the rest of the Death Eaters are so confused and petrified I don't think they'd move even if he ordered them to—*

Voldemort's scent spiked, and Harry dropped to all fours, launching himself across the circle as Wolf. The bolt of white-hot magic cast from Voldemort's open hand passed harmlessly over his head, and his teeth slammed shut on that same hand, sinking deep into Voldemort's pasty flesh and drawing blood of a surprisingly deep red. The Dark Lord howled in pain, the sound modulating into a Parseltongue oath which would have had dire consequences for Harry's future with Ginny if it had struck home, and Wolf rolled clear of his prey and came up on the opposite side of the circle, panting open-mouthed.

*Blah.* Regaining his human form, Harry spat scarlet. *Nasty stuff. Just as foul as he is.* Across the circle, Letha cupped her hands and blew into them, and the tingling numbness in Harry's mouth eased. *Poisonous too. No real surprise there. He used to drink snake venom, back before he was able to restore his body...*

"First blood to me," he said, straightening. "Not in as good of shape as you thought you were, are you, my lord? Not as young as you used to be, not as strong, not as powerful. You can't cheat time forever. Sooner or later, it catches up with you."

"You know nothing, Harry Potter." Voldemort stared hard at his hand, and the bleeding cuts slowly scabbed over, giving it something of the same appearance his entire body had displayed in the form Harry had just been thinking about. "You have learned only the very beginnings of magic, the most basic and fundamental forms. I have delved deeper, striven harder, risked more than any wizard who has ever lived. And for that reason, I will never die."

"Talking about your Horcruxes?" Harry grinned at the look of shock suffusing Voldemort's face. "That's right, we know about them. Dumbledore found you out, and pinpointed enough of them for us that we could do the rest. We've been sweeping them up and taking them down for months." He shook his head, an unexpected twinge of pity for his enemy working through the rush of his battle fever. "How much soul have you got left by now? Is it enough to feel, to really feel anything? Or are hate and anger and bitterness the only things you have? Maybe if you tried, tried hard, for some remorse over everything you've done..."

"Why?" Voldemort lifted his chin, staring down where his nose wasn't at Harry. "Why should I want to feel such a pointless emotion? The past is the past, Harry Potter. Set in stone, cast in iron, unalterable by anything we may say or do. Remorse changes nothing."

"It changes you." Harry shrugged. "And if you managed it, you might be able to heal your soul a little ways. Enough to leave a ghost behind, if nothing else." A smile tugged at his lips. "Just like your famous ancestor. You could haunt the castle with him. Be the other resident ghost of Slytherin House." He frowned thoughtfully. "Would he call you 'Junior', maybe? Or is that too Muggle for you?"

"What right do you have to mock at Salazar Slytherin?" Voldemort flung another bolt of magic at Harry, who dodged aside. "You, who descend not from any line of the Founders but from Godric Gryffindor's Champion! A Muggleborn fool graced with more luck than skill, who had the effrontery to murder the greatest wizard who has ever lived!"

Throwing his hands wide, Harry summoned fire, casting a smaller circle around Voldemort within the greater shield the Pack and Pride were maintaining. "You so sure I'm not Gryffindor's Heir?" he asked, staring Voldemort down through the shielding wall of flame. "I'm pretty good at this for someone who wasn't born to it. But hey, whatever floats your broom." He lowered his hands, letting the fire die down, and extracted his pendants from his robes, snapping off the blood-bond locket he and Moony had made a bit over two years before. "I'll even help you out."

With a flick of his thumb, he flipped the locket into the air. Moony pointed a finger at it, and it flared up once and vanished. "There." Harry dusted off his own hands, hearing Ginny snicker behind him. "By your lights, that's the only link I've got to Gryffindor's blood. Up in smoke, just like the Deathly Hallows. And you know what? You might be right about that, or you might be wrong. And I don't care." He spread his hands wide. "Sure, it's fun to toss around fireballs, but that's the least of what I'd give up to make sure you're stopped. That you never get the chance to hurt anyone I love, ever again."

An unexpected snicker broke from him at the dumbfounded expression on Voldemort's face. "Not that you look much like you could, at the moment. Standing there staring at me with your mouth hanging open like that. Are you sure you didn't get the instructions for those Horcruxes wrong, and split your mind into pieces instead of your soul? Or maybe it's just old age creeping up on you. You're nearly seventy, you know. Seventy versus seventeen, and fighting with our bare hands." He turned his back deliberately on Voldemort, facing Ginny, who stood on the other side of the shield with Fox and Luna. "Not very fair to him, is it?" he asked her. "But then, he's never been interested in fair before."

"Nor is he now," Ginny murmured, and Harry nodded in understanding, mentally renewing a magical command he'd given before the fight started, then counting backwards in his head. *In five, four, three, two—*

His dagger shot through his midsection, tracing a chilly path where its intangible metal brushed his flesh, and buried itself hilt-deep in the fiery magical shield before him.

"What a surprise." Harry tugged his dagger free and turned to face Voldemort once again. "You're still trying to cheat, even now."

"I never agreed that this duel was to be weaponless." Voldemort braced his hands on his thighs,

breathing deeply. "You stated it for yourself, but never asked for my consent. So now..." He held out his right hand, and a swirl of darkness above it formed itself into a matte black shortsword, its blade seeming to drink the light around it. "Let us finish this, Harry Potter. Once and for all."

*Filio leonis*, Harry thought clearly, and turned his wrist to accommodate the greater weight of Godric Gryffindor's sword of goblin-wrought silver as it materialized in place of his dagger. "Yes," he said, bringing his weapon up to guard position, as Moony had drilled into him time and time again. "Let's."

Blade rang on blade as Voldemort opened the attack. Harry blocked and danced aside, letting the sword become an extension of his arm, keeping his eyes focused solely on his opponent's weapon and body, waiting, watching, searching. Voldemort's blood was up now, his hunger for the kill matched only by his fury at being tricked again and again by an adversary he clearly considered unworthy. The combination was dangerous, but more so for the person feeling it than for his opponent, Harry knew.

*All I need is one clear shot.* He parried two wild swings and thrust forward, forcing Voldemort back a step. *Just one—just one—*

Voldemort brought his sword down in a great sweep aimed at Harry's side. Harry spun out of the way, and used his momentum to slice his own blade through the fine black robes into Voldemort's left shoulder.

The scent of blood washed over him once again, and Harry had to fight not to shout with exaltation.

"What is this?" Voldemort lowered his sword, suspicion in his eyes. "You think—" Dabbling his fingers into his own blood, he raised them to his slit-like nostrils and sniffed. "Venom," he said with certainty. "Basilisk venom." Under his breath, he began to laugh. "You think you can kill me with basilisk venom, Harry Potter? I *feed* on the venom of serpents. The very king of serpents from whom you took this venom was hatched to serve my ancestor, and later awakened from his long sleep to serve me! Do you truly think the venom of the basilisk will harm me? Me, the Heir of Salazar Slytherin?"

"No." Harry grounded his blade. "Though I should point out, strictly speaking, Slytherin's basilisk's the *queen* of serpents, not the king. But that's not important right now." He smiled. "Look at your hand again, my lord. Look at your blood."

Eyeing Harry suspiciously, Voldemort did so. Then his eyes widened in shock. The black sword fell from his hand, dissolving back into darkness as it dropped.

The smears of blood on the parchment-pale fingertips had shrunk and solidified into shards of fine black ash.

"Funny thing about being blood-son to a werewolf, and having a wolf Animagus form." Harry leaned on the hilt of Gryffindor's sword as Voldemort ripped open the torn shoulder of his robes,

revealing long streaks of blackness running down his arm and chest. "If you bite someone while you're transformed, you can infect them with lycanthropy. Lucius Malfoy could have told you that." He smiled. "But then, he's dead." Lifting the sword and twisting his wrist again, he sheathed his dagger at his side. "Just like you will be, in a couple more seconds here."

"No," Voldemort breathed as his arm fell away from his body, smashing to pieces as it struck the ground. "No!"

Turning towards the dumbfounded Death Eaters, he made a twisting gesture with his still-untouched right hand, then pulled viciously. Harry felt a wrenching surge of magic, and the Death Eaters collapsed as one, some of them shrieking and clawing at their faces, others clutching their throats, still others reaching beseechingly towards their Master.

"This is not over, Potter!" Voldemort shouted, the line of black ash sweeping down through his body and upward towards his head with equal speed. "You have not yet—"

His throat, then his face, were overtaken by the change, and the body of the Dark Lord Voldemort crumbled where he stood, his fine robes falling softly atop the ashen pile.

"He's right," said Letha quietly, as Moony snapped his fingers to dismiss the fiery shield. "This isn't over. It can't be. There's too much magic here still. Something's not right..."

"We missed one." Hermione pressed a hand to her chest, trying to slow her breathing. "I don't know how, or what, but we must have missed a Horcrux. He's not dead. And now he's not tied down to a body, so he could be *anywhere* —"

"To the castle!"

The voice was distant, yet perfectly audible, filling the clearing with its impossibly familiar tones. "He will follow where you lead," the speaker went on. "He is bound to you, and either you or he must fall tonight. Hurry, to the castle, and call on all the help you can muster along the way!"

Without wasting another moment, Harry turned and bolted towards Hogwarts, hearing Pack and Pride fall into place beside and behind him. He would have made better time as Wolf, he knew, but not everyone's forms were equally well-suited for running, and he had no desire to let anyone be picked off now.

*We stand or we fall together. And I don't intend to fall.*

*We're going to win this war tonight.*

*No matter what it takes.*

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 64: If You Ever Loved Us (Year 7)

Harry's head pounded in time with his flying feet, wild fury and cold determination battling for dominance. He knew, distantly, that these emotions belonged to Voldemort, not to him, that he should be feeling exaltation at the success of the plan the Pack and Pride had carried out, even with its last-minute check.

*But the blood-bond between me and Moony is gone, which opens me back up to Voldemort. And with Voldemort's body being gone now too, he's only got one place to vent his emotions, and that's me. Shoving aside a disturbing notion about why this might be so, he fought for control, for focus. I need some way to lock him out of my head. Keep him away from my thoughts, so he can't tell what we're going to do next—*

"Blue jewels!" he called out, angling his head first one way, then the other, to let his voice stream back to the V-like wings of Marauders and Warriors who ran with him through the Forbidden Forest on this night of All Hallows' Eve. "Blue jewels! Anybody who's got one left, use it now! Tie us in together, lock everything else out!"

From the people keeping pace behind and beside him, azure light erupted, first on his right, then on his left, then on his right again. With every burst of sapphire, Harry's headache receded, the mad tangle of emotions sliding away, until he could feel Wolf shake out his ears in relief at getting the inside of his head to himself again.

**Thanks**, he said silently through the link now established among Pack and Pride.

**You're welcome**, came Letha's calm answer, overlapping Danger's cheerful **Not at all** and Hermione's chiding **Well, what else would I use it for?**

Despite everything, Harry found a laugh on his lips, as the comforting, familiar senses of his family's and friends' magic rose to meet his own. Silently, he tossed the disturbing notion which had occurred to him earlier towards Wolf, who caught it in his jaws and trotted off to his den with it, to guard it and keep it from being seen. If it was true, he'd face what it meant when the time came to do so, but until that time came—

*No point in getting everybody all worked up for nothing.*

*Especially when we've still got a war to finish.*

*And for that, like the man said, we're going to need some help.*

**Okay, red jewels next**, he said through the link, feeling everyone's minds turn towards their pendants once again. **I think most of us should have one of those left—**

**We all should have one**, Neville interjected. **Unless somebody used theirs up and didn't say**

**anything to me.** The flash of orange-spice magic he sent could have meant nobody but Ron, who responded with a wordless suggestion about what Neville might do to himself after the fighting was over, sending the female half of the Pride into giggles.

**Gentlemen, that'll do,** said Letha coolly. **What about them, Harry? Second them to you?**

**Yes.** Harry reached out an insubstantial hand, and felt against its fingers the smooth facets of tiny gemstones, as his parents, siblings, and friends passed along to him the storehouses of magic those jewels represented. When Meghan had mentally dropped into his palm the eleventh such blood-red gem, Harry added his own to make twelve, then closed his magical fingers around them.

*The Gryffindor gift is fire. Fire makes light. And I'm going to need as much light as I can get.*

*It's the only way to see things properly through a veil.*

**Whoever you are, wherever you are, if you can hear me now,** he called silently, willing the jewels into life. **If your symbol's on our pendants, if you helped to shape our lives, come and help us in our fight, please, if you ever loved us!**

Against his chest, then against Ginny's and Moony's on either side of him, then against Ron's and Danger's on their other sides, and spreading outwards through the Pack and Pride, soft red glows began to shine, growing brighter and fiercer with every second, until the Forest was illuminated for several paces around the twelve who ran, revealing the trees past which their pace was carrying them. For the second time that night, Harry felt the thrill of mystery lift the hairs down his arms and along the back of his neck.

*Anything could happen tonight.*

*And even when I'm the one who caused the anything, it's still just the least bit terrifying!*

Movement at the edge of their lighted area caught his eye. Beside him, Moony's breath caught in his throat, as though he couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry, an impression borne out by the rush of emotions through the mental link.

Harry couldn't blame his Pack-father for the reaction. The man and woman now keeping pace with them, rendered in washed-out color not unlike the revenants the Pride had seen in Luna's memory-recreation, had faces which each bore a distinct resemblance to Moony's, faces Harry had seen until this moment only in photographs, some Muggle, others magical.

*I called them. They came.* Pressing his hand against his pendants, Harry let his triumphant grin break forth. *And they're only the first—there will be more...*

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"Remus." Katherine Lupin reached out a hand towards her son, then drew it back, smiling. "We're so proud of what you've done with your life. So glad to see you happy." She turned her smile on Danger. "I wish we could have met in the flesh. I know what it's like to be dropped so suddenly

into the magical world. But you've done a magnificent job, both with all of them and with him, specifically." She winked in Remus's direction. "Go on as you have been and you'll be fine, even with the changes ahead."

"Thank you," Danger answered, startled when the words she'd formed in her mind emerged as clear as if she'd spoken them aloud, though all her breath was going towards maintaining the pace Harry had set towards Hogwarts. Katherine smiled and gestured for Danger to go on, and with a little laugh, Danger did so. "Remus always said we would have loved each other. I didn't doubt him, but it's good to have it confirmed."

"Son. Remus." John Lupin, at his wife's shoulder, shifted uneasily. "I should have told you. You deserved to know. But the time was never right..."

"I understand, Dad." Remus reached down without looking to take Danger's hand as they ran. "What happened, happened, and there's no point holding grudges now." He smiled, lifting their clasped hands a little higher in time with their strides. "Not when the path I walked brought us here. Together."

"Thank you." John bowed his head briefly, then looked up and smiled as a woman materialized at the edge of the lit area on the other side. Her features were beautiful, almost statuesque, and Remus heard Aletha's muffled gasp more with his mind than his ears.

"Oh, love." Teresa Freeman pressed her hands together, as though only thus could she stop herself from reaching for her daughter. "You're so strong, you've done so much—your work, your family, your power—I couldn't be more proud, and I'm only sorry it took you so long to realize who you were, but I never knew myself—"

"Mother, please." Aletha's breathy laugh was more than halfway to tears. "No apologies tonight. I am who I am because of you, and I wouldn't change it for the world."

Blinking away tears, Teresa blew a kiss, and moved aside to make room for a slender wizard in neatly tailored robes, who smirked at Sirius almost before his face had finished forming.

"Rebellion's contagious, big brother," said Regulus Black. "It's at least halfway your fault I ended up like I did, and you know what? I don't regret a bit of it." A flicker of sadness passed across his face. "Well, except not getting to know my son. Watch out for him, would you? And Suzanna?"

"Have been, will be," promised Sirius. "Though Kreacher's doing a pretty bang-up job of it on his own."

"Stroke of genius, that, by the by. Well done you." Regulus snickered. "Let him know I loved what he did to the Death Eaters who tried breaking in at their place?"

Sirius tossed his brother a salute, which Regulus returned before dropping back to keep pace with Teresa.

**It's exactly what Harry called for,** Danger murmured privately to Remus. **Everyone who ever**

**loved us**— She broke off with a little gasp of her own, as two more figures in Muggle clothing shimmered into existence beside her.

"And don't we count?" David Granger asked, chuckling through his words. "Or didn't you think we'd come?"

"To see you stand up and go on, despite everything, my Danger." Rose Granger pressed a hand against her heart, her eyes gleaming bright as she smiled at her older daughter. "To see you fight so hard, not just for your own sister, but for a little boy you barely even knew when you began. And then to see you still be able to trust your dreams and take that leap of faith. Into love, into marriage, into magic, and everything it meant for you. I can't explain how much pride and joy you've brought to both of us."

"And as for you, little Miss Oh-my-knee." David drifted back until he was parallel with Hermione, who was gazing at her birth parents with awestruck eyes. "We've missed being there for your growing up, Neenie-queen, but more than anything we wanted to see you happy. I think you have been."

"I have been. And..." Hermione glanced to one side at Ron, whose long, loping strides matched her own shorter, quicker ones with ease. "I will be."

"Yes, you will be." Rose nodded with certainty as David returned to her side. "*We know*."

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**Did you know this was going to happen?** Ginny asked Harry in the silence of their two minds, the background humming with the aftershock of her amazement. **When you called for help, did you know what kind you were going to get?**

**I suspected.** Harry slipped a brief feeling of laughter into the link. **Fox may not have been telling the truth about what it did when I destroyed the Deathly Hallows, but it has to have had some effect—and speaking of Fox,** he added as the next apparition materialized beside the Warrior he'd named. **Look who's here.**

"So much more," murmured Narcissa Black, her hair streaming behind her as she kept pace effortlessly with her son. "So much more than I ever had hoped or dreamed that you would be."

"I never could have hoped or dreamed it either. Not without you." Fox lifted his shoulders a little. "I'm sorry I didn't keep the name you gave me."

"You kept more important things than that." Narcissa shook her head, smiling. "Your integrity. Your life. Your love and happiness and freedom. And the new blood you've taken, to wake an old and honorable line to new life. Even our home will be yours again." Her eyes turned momentarily wistful. "Think of me sometimes, while you live there in joy."

"Every day." Fox held out his right hand, and Narcissa closed her insubstantial fingers around it, as though they swore a Vow to one another. "We all will."

"Thank you, my love." Narcissa slid back, reaching out into the darkness beyond the warm red light, and led forward another witch, at the sight of whom Luna breathed a word in Parseltongue.

"Really, now." Anita Lovegood planted her hands on her hips, but she was smiling. "Is that any way to talk to your mother?"

"She did say 'Mummy'," said Fox, squeezing his lady's hand. "Would you have wanted her to say 'Daddy'?"

"I think she wanted me to speak English." Luna made a face at her husband, then turned her eyes back to her mother. "I've missed you," she said simply. "But thank you for my life. And for this." She traced a finger along the scar on her forearm. "It's helped us all a great deal over the years."

"I've loved watching you grow into it, and learn to master it, instead of it mastering you." Anita blew a kiss to her daughter. "Tell your father to stop being foolish. I love him, and that means I want him to be happy. You understand."

"Yes, I do." Luna giggled. "I'll remember."

---

**It's amazing,** Meghan whispered privately to Neville as they ran. **Everyone is so much like themselves!**

"Should we be like someone else?" asked Andromeda Tonks, her shape unfurling out of the sparkling air beside them. "Death is only a doorway. It changes where you are, not who." She sighed. "Not that I wouldn't have loved a chance to stay in this world a while longer, and meet my grandchildren in person. But if there's anyone I can trust to do the spoiling for me, Molly Weasley would be the one." She looked down at Meghan, her lips curving up. "And you, young lady, are going to make a tremendous Healer. Powers or no powers."

Meghan sucked in her breath, feeling Neville's hand tighten on hers. "You think so?"

"No." Andromeda laughed. "I *know* so."

**I told you,** Neville murmured as Pack and Pride burst out of the trees, the lawns of Hogwarts opening all around them. **Didn't I tell you?**

**It's a good thing I like you so much,** Meghan grumbled, but did not let go of Neville's hand.

The flutter of robes made everyone look up. At the topmost edge of the region illuminated by the jewels flew Cedric Diggory, waving down at them. "You're getting close now!" he called. "Tell Roger and Selena thanks for me!"

"We will!" Hermione called back.

To their left, a hugely tall patch of light solidified into the form of a gigantic man with a full and

bushy beard, pumping his fist in the air. "Yeh're goin' ter win, Harry!" he bellowed as that young man passed him. "I know it! I can feel it! *Yeh're goin' ter win!* "

"Thanks, Hagrid!" Harry shouted back. "Sorry about your house!"

"What'd I tell yeh 'bout keepin' those twin brothers o' yers under control, eh?" Hagrid mock-growled at Ginny, who only laughed as she sped by, waving. "S'pose that's my job now..."

Neville's grip tightened again, and Meghan turned to see where he was looking. Keeping stride with them now was Frank Longbottom, nodding in approval. "Do us proud, Neville," he said, moving one pace forward to make room for pretty, dark-haired Penelope Clearwater and a little girl in Muggle clothing who was holding her hand. "Always remember to follow through, but don't kick your enemies when they're down." He frowned a little. "Though if I remember right, your mother considers 'down' a more flexible concept than I do..."

Meghan nearly strangled on her laughter. Neville didn't bother with concealment.

"Is that where the other Annette will go to school, when she gets old enough?" the little girl was asking Penelope in tones of astonishment. "It's *ginormous!* "

**Because death is only a doorway.** Meghan knew her eyes were welling up, and didn't care. She could have run from the Forest to Hogwarts in her sleep. A few little tears weren't going to get in her way. **And that means the person I want most to see should be just like himself too...**

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"Do me a favor, ickle Ronniekins," said a voice in Ron's ear, which unfolded with startling swiftness into George, his freckled features burning cold on the autumn evening air. "Tell Percy to get his head on straight. I want him to be happy." He grinned. "And somebody else, too. I can't exactly fault his taste."

"Tell him yourself," retorted Ron, nodding towards Hogwarts. "He's in there."

"You know, I just might." George peered ahead through the darkness. "Have to wait for my backup to arrive, though."

"Backup?" Hermione asked. "Does that mean—" She broke off, glaring at Ron. **You didn't tell me?** she demanded privately.

**When have I had time?** Ron returned the same way. **We've been a little busy trying to knock off the evil maniac and his gang of stupid minions. Besides.** He glanced over his shoulder at the crater marking the spot where Hagrid's Place had stood. **If that's what I think it is, he went out the way he'd have wanted to.**

"Freddie got big boom," said George in a childish sing-song, sparking snickers up and down the Pack and Pride. "*Big boom!* Beat my record, too," he added, reverting to his usual voice. "Well. Mine and Crystal's. She got a bunch of them that night. Honestly, the way she's been going, I think

she and Percy are better suited than she and I ever would have been."

"Don't you like violent women?" inquired Ginny sweetly.

"Violent's one thing. Crazy's entirely different."

"How ungallant of you, sir," said Amanda Smythe as she joined the growing crowd which surrounded Pack and Pride. "Considering the lady's madness, what there is of it, came about through love of you."

"Maybe I'll just shut up now." George mimed zipping his lips, drawing more laughter as Amanda smiled smugly at him.

Ron heard Hermione's happy exhalation at Meghan's squeal, and squeezed her fingers in understanding. Graham Pritchard had just stepped out of thin air beside her, and had his hand lifted as though to touch her face.

"It's going to be all right, Meghan," he said to her. "Truly, it is. Natalie's still not sure about that—can you tell her? Or maybe I can." He glanced at the castle as it drew ever nearer. "I'm not sure what the rules are about this sort of thing."

"We're breaking all of them tonight." Meghan's voice hitched slightly, but her sense within the jewel link resonated with joy. "Tell her what she needs to hear."

"I hope I can." Graham sighed once. "Will you help me?"

"All you have to do is say to her what you said to me, and mean it." Meghan smiled at him. "I think you can do that."

Slowly, Graham nodded, and fell back into his place in line.

---

Harry took the castle steps two at a time, hearing the living people behind him do the same, as their escorting army flowed about them to either side, following them through the doors. Beyond, in the entrance hall and the Great Hall past that, he could see a milling crowd of students and teachers, Order and DA, Ministry and Red Shepherds, some warm and solid, others pale and faint and cold. Colleen Lamb stood beside Blaise Zabini, her face twisted in frustration as she watched him fight his grief, and Fred Weasley's face lit up as he spotted his twin in Harry's train.

*But somebody's about to show up who we'll all like a whole lot less...*

"Everyone move back!" he shouted, projecting his voice as Letha and Padfoot had taught him, bringing the faces of living and dead alike around towards him. "Clear the middle! We need it!"

Robed figures scrambled aside, leaving a space into which Harry waved the Pack and Pride. "Moony, Danger," he said, indicating the other side of him from Ginny. "Padfoot and Letha, then

Neenie and Ron. Neville, Pearl, Fox, Luna. There." He exhaled briefly as Luna took her place next to Ginny. *All right, what next?*

"Hands," whispered a voice in his ear, soft and feminine, a warm shield against the burning cold which was starting to wear away even the shielding power of the three blue pendant-gems that linked Pack and Pride together. "Take hands, and say the Oath."

"Thrice, to defy him," added the voice's masculine counterpart, with a brief chuckle. "Or rather drive him bloody mad."

Harry reached for Moony's hand, only to find it already closing around his. All around the circle, Marauders and Warriors joined hands, and Harry began the recitation, eleven other voices joining his in careful unison.

"My hand in yours,  
"My wand with yours,  
"My life for yours,  
"Now and always."

"Look!" "Look at that!" "What is it?" "I don't know..." The whispers ran around the Great Hall, as a spot in the center of the Pack and Pride's circle began to shine with a dull and leaden glow.

*You will in a minute.* Harry tightened his grasp on Ginny and began the second repetition.

"My hand in yours,  
"My wand with yours,  
"My life for yours,  
"Now and always."

"It's getting brighter!" "It looks like a person!" "Merlin's beard, is it—" "Do you think—"

"Once more, with feeling," whispered Harry's unseen prompter (female edition), and Harry smothered a totally inappropriate snigger before leading the third and final declaration.

"My hand in yours,  
"My wand with yours,  
"My life for yours,  
"Now and always!"

"Don't panic," said the male voice, low and urgent, Moony frowning a little as though he could hear it too. "This is going to feel weird."

With no more warning than that, a bolt of lightning shot around the circle of Pack and Pride. Harry yelped as he felt his body collapse to the floor, leaving his 'walking' self standing where he had been, hand-linked with what he thought for a single nervewracking second were the ghosts of Ginny and Moony—



*No, it's just their souls, not their ghosts.* He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the silver cords connecting his wife and Pack-father to their bodies, exactly similar to his own, and to the ones obtaining all the way around the circle. *We're alive, we're just...temporarily disembodied.*

All around him, he could hear people explaining that to one another, but he had no time to listen to them. The sullen glow in the center of the circle flared once, twice, three times, and exploded soundlessly into the form Harry'd been expecting.

*Which is more than I can say for some people.*

"How intriguing." The figure of Lord Voldemort, looking exactly as he had in the moments before the swordfight in the Forest, examined his faintly glowing body, then looked around the circle which hemmed him in, bound together by the same cords of light Harry remembered seeing every time the Pride performed some feat of magic which could only be accomplished together. "All my enemies, together in one place. Standing against me. But can you keep me here?"

"Yes," said the female voice, and Lily Potter stepped around the curve of the circle into Harry's view, Voldemort focusing on her with what Harry thought might be a tinge of fear in his red, slitted eyes. "They can. 'If twelve stand strong in the circle of light, the darkness cannot prevail'."

"Which means," James Potter put in, strolling around the circle's other side, "that as long as all of them are standing here, you can't win."

"But if one of them breaks their oaths, if they falter or somehow fail in their duty, then I am free to do as I will." Voldemort laughed once. "And I see now where my connection to earth remains! Do you see it, Harry Potter?"

Harry looked where Voldemort was indicating, and swallowed hard against a feeling of illness, Ginny's hand tightening around his in sympathy or fear. His earlier notion, disturbing as it was, had been correct.

The pale, pulsing green cord that was Voldemort's only connection to life emerged from the lightning-bolt scar in the center of his body's forehead where it lay beside his feet.

"So, Harry Potter, what will you do now?" Voldemort laughed again, long and low. "Take your own life, and hope that your own determination to leave this world will drag me with you before I can break through your shattered circle and claim a new body for my own? I promise you, I have the strongest of motivations for continuing to live. And as the cord which binds us is of my making, it must also be of my breaking. Trying to sever it will do you no good. So you must attempt to outlast me, to hold me here until I grow weary. But you have bodies, bodies which will suffer hunger and thirst and exhaustion. I have none. And you are many, prone to contention, where I am one, filled with the power that is rightfully mine."

"Power you stole from the people who trusted you," Harry shot back. "But I know what you'd say to that. No right, no wrong, just strong and weak. Except that everybody's weak sometimes, even you." He caught a glimpse among the army of revenants of a half-familiar mop of mouse-brown

hair. "You needed Wormtail, once. Peter Pettigrew. He had to carry you around places, because you weren't strong enough to stand on your own two feet."

"He was not strong enough to resist me, so he served me instead," Voldemort countered. "That was as it should be."

"He wasn't strong enough then." Harry smiled, the crowd having parted for just long enough that he could identify the woman standing by Peter's side. She winked once at him before the other revenants closed their line of sight again. "But he found new strength, in a place you can't even begin to imagine."

"Yes. New strength." Voldemort began to prowl the inner limits of the circle, peering into each of the Marauders' or Warriors' faces as he passed them. "From where can any of you draw new strength now? And even if you do, how will it benefit you? You are trapped here in your circle, unable to leave it for so much as a second, for fear I will overwhelm you when you are no longer twelve." He shook his head, mock-sadly. "You poor, deluded fools. To try to use the magic of numbers, the power of patterns, against me."

"Careful who you're calling a fool," said Letha lightly. "You seem to be missing a very obvious point about those very same numbers and patterns. But then, he would," she added in Padfoot's direction, flicking the swiftest of glances towards James, who was rocking on the balls of his feet, a movement Harry had seen most recently from Tonks.

*Tonks, and my dad—something to do with numbers, and patterns, and how we can get another person in this circle—*

Harry's stomach tried to bound for joy and sink into his feet simultaneously as the answer came to him.

*Because as soon as we get that other person in here, I have to get out of it.*

*All the way out. Forever.*

*Still, I said I'd do this, no matter what it took. I can't back away from that now.*

"What's wrong?" Ginny whispered, her lips barely moving. "What is it?"

"It's..." Harry swallowed. "You know I love you, right?"

"Nothing good ever starts like that."

"You're right. It's not good." Harry glanced back at Voldemort, still stalking along the opposite side of the circle. "He's right, Gin. The only way to kill him is for me to die too. Don't worry about keeping him confined, I know how that's going to work," he added hastily as Ginny began to open her mouth. "But after that's happened, after we can keep holding him without me, I have to..." He gestured towards the ghostly dagger belted to his side, then to the cord which joined him with his body.

"You have to?" Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Pardon me, but I believe that's *I* have to. As in, me. Ginny Potter. Or didn't you just recently make a bargain where you agreed to put your fate in my hands?"

"Well, yes, but..." Harry frowned. "Ginny, what are you going to do?"

"Do you trust me?" countered Ginny.

"Of course I do, but—" Harry broke off as the other eyebrow joined its mate. "Yes, dear."

"You just get used to saying that, because I intend for you to be around a great many years to say it." Ginny pressed his hand tightly. "Trust me, Harry. Partners, remember?"

"Partners." Harry returned the pressure, and looked up in time to meet Voldemort's eyes blandly as the Dark Lord peered into his face. "Something for you?" he inquired.

"I could have made you great, Harry." Voldemort shook his head sadly. "As great as you were born to be. Your name would have been spoken, in whispers, forever. Of course, it could still happen, if you give up this pathetic charade and accept your true destiny. We will become one, you and I, and death will never touch us..."

"Not interested," said Harry flatly, allowing a trifle of Wolf's snarl to show in his eyes. "Go away."

"Such a shame." Voldemort turned his head to regard Ginny. "And you, lovely Ginevra? What will your life be, tied to a husband who would rather risk his life in the service of the foolish masses than bring himself safely home to you? His luck will not last forever, you know. Sooner or later, he will be killed." His thin lips curved. "Perhaps even tonight. But if you come to me—"

"You'll kill me, take over his body, and destroy everything I care about, piece by piece." Ginny's own lips curled back in a hiss. "Do I *look* stupid?"

Behind her, Fred opened his mouth, which George prudently clapped a hand over.

"Your sister is obstinate." Voldemort crossed the circle laterally to stare down Ron, eye to eye. "Perhaps you will see sense more easily. Do you think these others respect you? Give you the credit you deserve? Or do they regard you as their chosen fool, their bumbler, their backwards comic relief? Do you come first in their affections, or do you come a distant last?"

"Don't know." Ron shrugged once. "But I do know I'd a hell of a lot rather be last with them than first with you."

"And this is what you choose, to spend your life with?" Voldemort demanded of Hermione now, whirling to face her. "With your intelligence, your beauty, your determination and strength, you could have had your pick of wizards. You still could. Especially if you are also known to be the means by which the true power over the wizarding world was restored to his rightful place!"

"You murdered my parents." Hermione's every word was chipped from stone, and Voldemort took

a step back in shock. "Twice . What makes you think I would lift a finger to see you saved from the hell where you belong?"

"Such a charming child you raised," Voldemort remarked to the Pack-parents, turning now to look at them, one by one. "Or should I say, such charming children. Such a pity they stand imprisoned in this circle, doomed to die of hunger or exhaustion, if their parents remain so obstinate as to stand against my inevitable victory."

"They'd be no less dead if you won," said Padfoot, his tone flat. "And there are worse things than death."

"You would know, Sirius Black." Voldemort leaned as close to Padfoot as the lines of power connecting the Pack and Pride would allow him to get. "Better than almost anyone else living, you would know what fates are worse than death. And should any other give way before you, that will be your fate again. Imprisoned, alone, forgotten, while the worst memories of your life haunt you endlessly, day after day, and all that remains of your precious Pack is a dry and dusty list of names, the names of those who are dead, while you are not..."

For a moment, Harry saw fear in his godfather's eyes. Then Letha's hand tightened around his, and Padfoot exhaled sharply. "I get it," he said, shaking his head as though he had just come out of the water in dog form. "Bribery didn't work, so now you're trying intimidation. If you can't lure us out of the circle, scare us out. Anything to win, right?"

Voldemort snarled wordlessly and turned to stare at Letha. She stared back, her face set in lines of contempt. "You've already done your worst to me," she said softly. "And still, I found my way home. As for them." She nodded towards Moony and Danger, who stood hand in hand, their eyes swirling with color. "Is it really worth your while to try? Your soul couldn't possibly fathom theirs, which means you have no chance to offer them what they want."

"She's right, you know," said Moony conversationally. "You couldn't."

"Nonsense." Voldemort took three strides to confront Moony directly. "Every man has his price. I have proved it over and over. Those I could not buy, I could break, and those I could not break, I could kill."

"And yet..." Moony kindled a tiny fireball in the air between them. "Here I stand. Unbought, unbroken, and surprisingly alive."

"Your tool was flawed," added Danger softly. "Corona fought the Imperius, and I lived. Your tools will *always* be flawed, my lord, for perfection can only be found in the lifeless. Life, by its nature, is messy, chaotic, imperfect." She smiled. "Rather like magic, and like children. Laughter and friendship and love. All the things, the million and one little things, which make it worth living, every day that is given to us." Her eyes turned momentarily sad. "I pity you, and everyone else who will never understand that simple truth."

Voldemort took a step back, staring at her in confusion, then whirled, his robes flying out, and

stalked across the circle once more, headed for Neville.

"There's a name for things like you in my line of work," said Neville before Voldemort could open his mouth. "We call them parasites. And when we find them, we kill them."

"So?" Voldemort spread his arms wide, offering his chest as a target. "Come and kill me, then. The prophecy could, after all, have spoken of you just as easily as Harry."

"Only problem is, you picked Harry." Neville gestured the lightning bolt on his forehead with a finger. "Marked him, like the prophecy also says. The only marks you put on me don't show." His eyes hardened. "Doesn't mean they're not there, but it means it's up to Harry to take you down. But I took your consort, the one person left who had a hand in what happened to my parents. And I didn't kill her. I didn't even hurt her. She's alive inside that tree. She can see, and she can hear, but she can't move, she can't speak, and she can't do any magic. And she's going to stay just like that for as long as the tree is there." His grin flashed out, quick and feral. "Maybe you ought to be glad you picked the one of us you did."

For the first time in his life, Harry saw Lord Voldemort flinch.

"I was born in hiding because of you," said Meghan like a quiet growl of thunder before the Dark Lord could even turn to her. "I grew up having to keep secrets from my best friends. I had to run away from my home and never look back, and work and scheme so my family could be free. My whole *life* has been spent fighting you. Why do you think I'd help you now?"

"Perhaps for the sake of that same family, and those same friends?" Voldemort's voice had turned honey-sweet as he looked down at Meghan. "I will be free of this circle, pretty Meghan, and when I am, I will kill you all. Unless one of you surrenders to me willingly. Then I might be placed in a good enough humor to spare the rest."

"I don't believe you." Meghan crossed her arms. "You're lying."

"You have my word that your Pack and Pride will not be killed, or harmed in any way you can imagine," Voldemort assured her. "All that you must do is take that one, single, solitary step backwards. You will be rich beyond compare, the most famous of witches, and all before you are even seventeen..."

Meghan tapped her fingers against her left elbow. "But would I ever get to *be* seventeen?" she asked reasonably. "You said you wouldn't kill *them*. You never said you wouldn't kill *me*."

"Of course I would not kill you, foolish girl." Voldemort laughed, but the sound had a brittle edge. "What sort of reward would that be to the one who helped me so greatly?"

"The same kind you give everybody you don't like." Meghan glared. "And I know you, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Even your *name* is a lie. You couldn't tell the truth if your life depended on it." Unexpectedly, she giggled. "Which right now, it kind of does. Because I might, *might*, have taken that step back if I thought you were telling the truth." She cocked her head to one side. "But then

again, I might not. You'll never know!"

Behind Voldemort's back, Padfoot mimed clapping a hand to his chest and panting for air. Moony just shook his head with a sigh.

"What about you, little cousin, as I understand you are to me now?" Voldemort asked Luna, crossing to her. "*We who know the speech of the serpent should be friends and not enemies,*" he continued in Parseltongue, which Harry translated via jewel-link to the rest of the Pack and Pride. "*Will you not join me and learn the greatness the blood of Slytherin craves by its very nature?*"

"*The greatness my blood craves is not the same as yours, my cousin,*" answered Luna in the same tongue. "*For my blood calls out for great joy, rather than great power. The thrill and wonder of discoveries never seen before by human eyes, and the quiet moments of everyday life which hold the deepest and truest happiness. Rather than rule over others and impose my own standards of perfection upon them by force, I wish to live my own life as closely to those standards as I can, and teach them to others who are drawn to my life's results.*" She gestured to the circle which surrounded Voldemort. "*I think they will all say the same, or some variation thereof.*"

"If you insist." Voldemort spoke once more in English, and turned his attention to the young man who stood beside Luna, feet planted, eyes front. "And so, I come at last to you. Draco Malfoy."

"Reynard Beauvoi." The young man so named flicked a whiplash glance of contempt over Voldemort with stone-gray eyes. "*If you don't mind.*"

"Oh, but I do mind, *Draco*. I mind very much indeed, when a wizard such as yourself chooses to deny his father and refuse his name." Voldemort shook his head sadly. "You made, I must admit, a better Lucius than Lucius himself. Such subtlety, such panache. Such power." He prowled a step closer to Fox. "You felt the power, Draco, did you not? When you killed Rowle, when you crushed his throat between your fingers, you felt the glory and the thrill which comes when you make your first kill—oh, but I do apologize. Rowle was not your first. Your first was Lucius himself. And if I may judge by what Harry has told me, you struck him down with silver, and stayed to watch his body crumble away into ashes."

Fox was fighting to keep his breathing level now, and Voldemort moved a step closer still. "That hunger, once you feed it, can never be fully tamed, Draco," he breathed. "Who should know that better than I? You will kill again. It cannot be stopped. And who will it be, next time? Your lovely lady Luna? Your pretty twin Hermione? Your baby sister Meghan, or your dear brother Harry? One of your friends, your parents, perhaps even some innocent passer-by?"

"No." Fox turned his head to one side, panting. "You're lying. It's not like that."

"You will never know what will set it off." Voldemort stepped closer once again. "Not until you stand with blood on your hands and a body at your feet. And then..." He laughed under his breath. "Then they will turn on you like the wolves they are, and rend you limb from limb, or cast you into the prison of nightmares to rot. No one can save you then, Draco." Closer and still closer he leaned, until his chest was almost touching the line of magic which penned him in place. "And

only I can save you now. But only if you choose to help me first."

"Help me." Fox repeated the words, dully, and shut his eyes. His head tipped back, his weight began to shift off one foot—

**Help me**, his voice whispered silently through the jewel-link, terrified, pleading, and with a rush the magic of Pack and Pride responded, a whirl of color humming through the lines, forcing Voldemort back with a shout.

"You lie." Fox's eyes shot open once more, his face as fiercely joyful as though he faced down death at this very moment. "I'm not like you. Killing and pain and power are all you want, all you've ever wanted. I killed to save myself, or to save the ones I love. And I already have what I want." Raising Luna's hand to his lips, he kissed it. "Or I will, once you're out of the way."

Behind him, Narcissa's eyes shone with pride.

"Very well." Voldemort placed himself in the exact center of the circle. "So, it is to be the waiting game. One lone spirit, who needs neither food nor drink nor rest, against twelve poor body-bound souls, and the dead who have come to see them die..."

A stir at the entrance of the Great Hall turned into a moment of shocked hubbub, then died down again just as quickly, as living and dead parted in astonished respect.

Pack, Pride, and Dark Lord turned together to see what new player had entered their game.

Between the rows of people walked Severus Snape, or rather the soul-shape of him. In his arms he carried a little girl of about a year, whose green eyes peeked shyly at all the strangers around her through her mane of warm red hair. Behind him walked a man of late middle age, his auburn beard and hair streaked here and there with white, whose burden was a child of similar age, blue eyes peering warily past a curling curtain of brown.

**The hell?** said at least three people in the jewel-link.

**"Black to red and red to brown."** Danger covered her mouth, but her eyes were dancing. **Nicely done, Alex.**

"Dumbledore," breathed Voldemort, staring at the auburn-haired man. "Even you..."

"Yes, Tom, even I." Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore came to a halt beside the circle of Pack and Pride, beaming genially at them. The little girl he carried hid her face against his shoulder. "This is hardly a moment I would choose to miss." For a moment, his eyes behind their half-moon spectacles held no trace of their usual twinkle. "Seeing you brought to bay at last, and soon to be destroyed, by means you understand not at all."

"Is this..." Danger motioned to the child in his arms. "Is she—"

"She is." Dumbledore turned his attention to Danger, his eyes warming once more. "But she is

very young, and easily frightened. She must be assured of your protection, of your welcome. Of your love."

"I think we can do that." Remus reached out and laid his fingertips, very gently, on the child's shoulder, making her stiffen. "Hello," he murmured to her soothingly. "It's all so strange and new, isn't it? But you'll learn, and we'll help you. So someday you'll grow up big and strong and fierce. A Warrior." He gestured to Meghan and Fox, then to Harry and Hermione. "Just like your brothers and your sisters."

"We're here for you," crooned Danger, stroking her own fingertips down the little girl's back, until the tiny head turned and the blue eyes looked wonderingly at her. "And we always will be. We want you. We need you. And we love you." She laughed, though her eyes were strangely bright. "That's something we know very well how to do!"

The girl seemed to consider for a moment. Then, with a crow, she lunged out of Dumbledore's hold towards Remus. He caught her handily, laughing at her obvious delight in this fascinating new game, and tossed her once above his head before he kissed her cheek and passed her to Danger, who settled her onto a hip and stroked the brown curls so very like her own. "Hello, baby," she whispered. "I've been waiting for you."

At the level of the child's breastbone, a faint glow began to shine, tracing lines outward from the new arrival towards Danger and Remus.

**That's it!** Harry all but shouted through the link, and turned to face the little girl, waving to her when she looked his way. "Hi there," he said, smiling at her. "I'm your big brother Harry. We're going to have lots of fun when you get big enough, you know that? I'm going to teach you how to do tricks on a broomstick, and Neenie—she's the one over there, with hair kind of like your mum—she's going to teach you how to climb up shelves to get at where the good stuff's hidden, and Meghan, she's over there with all the braids, she's going to teach you how to cry on cue..."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Danger groaned. "Can't you even let the child be *born* before you start corrupting her?"

"Why wait?" Fox chuckled. "Hey, baby. You can call me Fox. Maybe, if you're very good, I'll let you chew on my ears. But only until you have teeth, because that's a funny story to listen to when it's Padfoot getting nipped, but it wouldn't be funny if it was me."

"Speak for yourself, kid. I think it'd be hilarious." Padfoot waved at the little girl. "Hey, there, you. Took you long enough getting here. We're just going to have to spoil you extra rotten every time your mummy and daddy aren't around to make up for it."

"Don't listen to him," said Letha with a long-suffering sigh. "Or rather, go ahead and listen to him, since I know you will anyway. But listen to me too, and your born parents—that way you might get a *trace* of common sense to go along with all this madness..."

The little girl crowed once more, bouncing in Danger's hold, as she looked gleefully from one



welcoming, joy-filled face to another. Tiny hands reached out, grasping at each Marauder and Warrior in turn, and the lines of light followed in their wake, stretching, brightening, broadening —

"No!" Voldemort sprang forward towards the child, but Harry and Hermione moved faster. With a snap of power, the line between them shot into red-hot life, and Voldemort shrieked and recoiled from it, as the new lines of power and love, anchored in the baby held between Danger and Remus, settled quietly into place.

"You asked how we could be so stupid as to use the magic of numbers against you." Harry drew his dagger from its sheath at his side. "I'll give you one right back. How were you so stupid as to forget what we are? We're a *family*. And families grow." He cast a quick glance back at Snape, who stood silently behind him and Ginny with the red-haired little girl in his arms, before he went on. "We used to be twelve. Now, we're thirteen. And that means..." Taking one step forward, he seized the bundle of magic lines anchored at his chest and slashed them through, dissipating them on contact. Only his bond to his body, and his bond to Voldemort, remained. "Twelve are still standing strong in that circle. You can't break it. And here I am." Going to one knee, he picked up the silver cord which tethered soul to body. "Ready to do what I have to, to make sure you never hurt anyone I love. Not ever again."

**Not without me you don't**, Ginny snapped, with an odd glow to her magic-feel. Harry frowned, trying to track it down—it felt very Gryffindor, somehow—but then set it aside as unimportant. What mattered now was beating Voldemort.

*No matter what it costs.*

"Come on, then," he said, holding up cord and knife. "Partners it is. Which one you want?"

"This." Ginny seized the cord, twisted it around her hands in a complicated, familiar pattern, and held it out to him. "I love you, Harry," she said quietly. "Strike true."

"I love you, Ginny." With one swift, drawing slice, Harry severed the piece of cord offered to him between his wife's upraised hands.

A cold chill struck through him, and as he looked down at himself, he saw all his color drain away. He got to his feet and walked forward towards Voldemort, the true silver of a spirit or a ghost surrounding him, and saw with satisfaction the fear he'd always known lived behind those slitted eyes.

"I don't know about you," he said, dropping the dagger at Voldemort's feet. "But I'm about ready to find out what's waiting in my next great adventure."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Snape lean forward and hand the little girl in his arms to Ginny. She cradled the child to her chest, whispering to her, watching Harry intently. All other motion seemed to have stopped.

From the doorway came the notes of a glorious, heart-filling song, and Fawkes the phoenix soared over the heads of the crowd, circling Harry and Voldemort three times, then offering his plumed tail. Harry caught it in his hand, and felt himself lifted off the ground, every eye in the Great Hall following him.

"I cannot die," breathed Voldemort, and dropped to his knees, scrabbling for Harry's dagger. "I cannot *die!* "

With a scream, he sliced the intangible blade through the cord which bound him to Harry.

The baby girl in Ginny's arms wailed in distress and reached out a hand.

Fawkes cried out, a single note of pure, indescribable triumph.

White light exploded in all directions from the center of the Pack and Pride's circle.

Harry Potter closed his eyes and let go, falling softly into the light.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 65: Cornerstone (Year 7)

"I can't help you."

The noises meant nothing. Feebly, he tried to demand, to shout, to threaten, but nothing emerged except frantic, mewling cries. Scabbed, stunted hands and feet scabbled in the air, trying to catch hold of the tall form silhouetted against the light, to keep it nearby, to stave off what must surely be coming next.

"Like I said before, this isn't the kind of door someone else can open for you." The form sighed. "I wish it didn't have to be this way, but no one forced you into what you've done. You made your own decisions. This is where they've brought you." Hinges moaned in complaint as the light narrowed down to a crack. "And most likely, this is where you're going to stay."

A moment's pause, then: "Goodbye."

The door shut softly, and it was dark.

It would be dark for a long time.

He would be alone for a long time.

---

Harry Potter leaned his weight wearily against the wall of the corridor, then turned at the sound of quiet applause. Framed in the doorway of one of the rooms nearby, as hale and healthy as Harry had ever seen him, stood Albus Dumbledore, his hair fading back into white from the more youthful auburn with which he had appeared in the Great Hall.

"What a remarkable young man you have grown to be, Harry," he said, his voice reverberating with both pride and pain. "Now, if only I could claim the credit for that."

The quirk in lips and scent alike made the words into a joke, and Harry laughed. "The Pack may not have been your idea, sir, but you protected us once we got started," he said, pushing himself upright. "Not perfectly, but nobody's perfect. Though I might have liked to know..." He laid his fingers against his forehead.

"That you were yourself the final Horcrux?" Dumbledore finished. "I thought for a long time about telling you that very thing, Harry, and I fear I can offer you only the most Slytherin of reasons for concealing it from you instead."

"It worked." Harry nodded. "But it only worked because I had the Pack and Pride to back me up. Because we had everyone who loved us, alive and dead, backing *us* up. And because I made that bargain with the Founders, and we all followed through on it." He paused, thinking. "But you knew we would, didn't you, sir? When we give our word on something, we keep it. No matter what it

costs."

"So you were raised, and so you have grown," agreed Dumbledore. "I look back to my folly sixteen years past and tremble. To think what *might* have become of you..."

"I would have been okay, I think, sir." Harry shrugged. "If Danger hadn't 'spoiled' me, I would've got used to sleeping in a cupboard and dodging Dudley and his friends, the same way we all got used to changing our looks and using different names when we went out of the Den. That's just how kids are. Whatever's around them is normal, and they usually don't bother much with wondering why." He laughed again. "It would've been an awfully big shock to learn about Hogwarts, though!"

"Indeed, and an even greater one to discover that you were famous far and wide, to say nothing of the evil wizard who wanted to kill you." Dumbledore shook his head. "I had worried that growing up with that knowledge might twist your mind, turn you either fearful or prideful." He chuckled. "Though in a sense, the latter did come to pass."

Harry groaned at the pun. "Will you tell them I'll miss them, sir?" he asked, looking away. "When we're done here, I mean. I didn't have much of a chance."

"Now why, Harry, would you assume I could tell them anything?" Dumbledore's voice was gently teasing.

"Because I saw who you came in with." Harry glanced up to see, as he'd expected, Dumbledore's eyes a-twinkle behind the half-moon spectacles. "Moony and Danger's daughter, and mine and Ginny's, and Professor Snape. And none of *them* are dead..."

---

"Hello, Sev."

Severus Snape blinked away the afterimages of the brilliant light which had swept the Great Hall. He still stood in the same place he had been, but the rest of the occupants of the enormous room were gone, save one. A few paces distant, laughter warming her eyes, stood Lily Evans, her hands outstretched to him.

"Where are we?" asked Severus, after swallowing once or twice to try and be sure that his voice would not betray him (it trembled slightly, but neither skipped unexpectedly high nor cut out altogether in the middle of a word).

"In a place between." Lily lifted her face to the stars studding the ceiling above them. "Where on this night, despite everything, those who love can meet on equal ground." Bringing her eyes back to his, she smiled sadly. "And there *was* love between us, wasn't there? Perhaps not the kind the poets sing about, but there was still love."

"How can you say that?" The anger and pleading Severus had expected from this meeting was fast turning to bafflement. "I betrayed you. I turned away from everything that would have made me a

fit companion for you, and served the man who killed you. I brought him the very prophecy that led him to your doorstep!"

"Yes, you did." Lily's voice was soft and level, without a trace of accusation. "And what did you do after that, Severus?"

"After that?" Severus snorted in chill amusement at his own expense. "I repented and wept bitter tears, and tried frantically to redeem my mistake, but no such chance was given to me. You died the death of a heroine, protecting your son, and I..." He trailed off, at a loss for once to find words.

"Yes, and you." Now the much-loved tones began to turn edged, as Lily folded her arms across her chest. "Why don't I tell you what you did, since you don't seem able to articulate it very well yourself? You *moped*, Severus."

"I beg your pardon," Severus snapped, stung. "I do not *mope*."

"And what else would you call closing yourself off from the world in your moldy old dungeon and making yourself unpleasant to everyone you couldn't avoid for precisely sixteen years?" Lily fired back. "Unless you'd rather I said you brooded. Does brooding sound better than moping?"

"Yes. Thank you." Severus tried to maintain a straight face, but Lily's eyes were dancing once more, and after a very few moments he was unable to keep his composure any longer. He began to laugh, weakly at first, then with more strength as the full absurdity of the situation struck him, and somewhere in the middle of their shared laughter he and Lily met in the center of the Great Hall, clasping hands as they had when they were children.

"Oh, Severus." Lily blinked away a tear of merriment and smiled up at him. "I do love you, but you frustrate me so incredibly sometimes. I know how it hurt you when I died, and how you've blamed and hated and punished yourself. But that's not what I wanted for you, Sev, not what I ever wanted, and not what I want now. Are you finally ready to listen to me?"

"I can try."

"I want you to forgive yourself." Lily squeezed his hand tightly, forestalling his mechanical protest. "No, hear me out first. I know all the arguments, how no amount of forgiveness changes what happened, how you'd feel disloyal or wrong or like you were forgetting me. But I'm standing here, Severus, and I'm telling you that it hurts me to see you hurting. Hatred, grudges, blame, none of them matter where I am now, but friendship and love still do. Please, for my sake if nothing else, try to forgive yourself."

"It was never my own forgiveness I needed." Severus looked away. "Never that of anyone living."

"Whose, then? Mine?" Lily's other hand rose to touch his cheek, bringing his head back around so that he faced her again. "It's yours. It always has been. And you would have known that, if you'd thought about it from my point of view. But that's never been easy for you, has it? To set aside

how you think about things, and try to see them through someone else's eyes. Can you believe me when I tell you that I've forgiven you long since, and that I want you to do the same for yourself?" Her smile held a trace of wickedness. "You did say I had that right."

"I most certainly—" Severus stopped short, remembering a moment in his workroom at Malfoy Manor, a face and form both like and unlike the one before him now, a silvery voice which moved effortlessly from intoning lines of prophecy to asking an impossible question. "Did," he finished with a sigh. "I did say that. Though I never thought I would be held to it!"

"I know you didn't." Lily chuckled. "But that doesn't change your answer. Are you going to stand by it?"

Severus scowled. "What else can I do?"

"Are you asking?" Lily tilted her head to one side. "Because I do have one other suggestion. Not an order, not a command. Just an answer to a question I know you must be asking yourself." She laid her fingers for a moment on his left forearm, where the Dark Mark no longer resided. "What you're going to do now that it's all over. Now that you've survived the war, which I know is something you never expected."

"How did you know th—" Severus pulled his unruly tongue to a halt once more as Lily's wicked smile resurfaced. "Never mind. Forget I asked. I'm listening."

"Then, go." Lily waved her hand towards the door of the Great Hall, towards the great oak doors leading to the outside world. "Right now, right away, or as soon as we're finished here. Before anyone looks for you, before they know for sure what's happened to you, even whether you lived or died." She chuckled again. "Every good battle should have at least one mystery."

"Where should I go?" Severus found himself smiling as well, drawn into the spirit of the game. "To the Continent, to America or Canada, Australia or the wilds of Africa?"

"Yes. To all of them. Though not all at once, obviously." Lily caught his other hand in hers, cradling them between their two bodies. "Go out and explore the world, Severus. Do all the things we promised each other we'd do together someday. See the sights. Meet the people. Enjoy each day, for as long as you have, to the fullest extent you can. That's what I want for you, what I always have wanted. That you *live* every day you're your own sake, Sev, and for mine." For the first time, her glorious eyes held a trace of sadness. "I only wish I could go with you."

"But you will be with me." Gently, Severus drew their clasped hands towards him, and laid them against his heart. "Always."

Lily laughed in wonder and threw her arms around him, and for one eternal moment they embraced beneath the stars. Then Severus Snape awakened, lying at the base of the empty tomb which stood by the Hogwarts lake, his cheek still warm from Lily's farewell kiss and her whisper humming in his ear.

"I hear Sarajevo is lovely in the springtime."

Getting to his feet, his heart lighter than he could ever recall its being before, he started on his way. Only once he paused, at the shattered remains of the gates, to look back at the towers of Hogwarts and think of those who dwelt within.

"Take care of yourselves," he murmured. "Goodbye."

Crossing into the world beyond, he turned in place and was gone.

---

"Well-spotted, Harry." Dumbledore beamed as though Harry had answered a question correctly in class. "Now, do you know why?"

"Probably for the same reason we played out our little masquerade in the Forest. To keep Voldemort guessing." Harry jerked his thumb at the door behind which the grotesque figure which had once been the most feared wizard in a hundred years lay and shivered in the darkness. "Like we discussed that one time, he judged us by himself, and the Death Eaters would've fallen to pieces without him. So he thought we'd do the same without you, and by the time he realized he was wrong, if he ever did, we already had him down by sixteen goals."

"That is one reason, yes." Dumbledore nodded. "Another was that Aletha told you no more nor less than the truth that night in June. My magic was greatly taxed by helping your brother to break free from his captivity, and my health had been none too good for some months before that. Even with good Healing, I had only a short time left to live. But I had a great desire, childish as it might be, to see your triumph with my own eyes. And if I could discomfit our mutual enemy by appearing to return from the dead, thus playing on his fears and weaknesses, so much the better. So your un-godmother, with magic borrowed from the castle as well as some donated by Fawkes, worked on me a variation of a certain runic spell." He smiled. "You may recall it from your third year."

Harry laughed aloud. "Wherever Malfoy is these days, he must be steamed," he said. "Everything he tried to use against us keeps coming back to help us!"

"And you will help to perpetrate what he would have considered the ultimate sacrilege," Dumbledore agreed. "The installment in his home of a motley crew of ruffians, bent on further eroding the walls between the Muggle and magical worlds rather than building them higher, and on finding a balance of dignity and fun, ritual and free spirit, past and present and future."

"I suppose I will help, somehow." Harry sighed, his high spirits dissipating. "Even if I can't exactly be there. Maybe Dad and Mum can teach me how to keep an eye on things..."

---

Sirius lowered the arm he'd flung up to try to shield his face from the light (it hadn't helped) and looked around. He was still hand-linked with Aletha, and still standing in the Great Hall, but now only one other person was present—



*Well, two. Strictly speaking.*

"And what the hell do *you* want?" he demanded of James Potter, packing as much exaggerated annoyance into his voice as possible. "Haven't you played around with my life enough yet?"

"Never." James imbued the word with an overly posh drawl, making Marcus, riding in the carrier on his back, clap his hands and laugh. "As for what I want, we're waiting on the decision from the big shots for that one." He nodded towards the small antechamber to his right, from which the sound of disputative voices could now be heard. "And I wasn't supposed to be here alone—"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," said Lily's exasperated voice as the light of the candles overhead took shape beside James and solidified into her form, hands already on her hips. "This may be hard for you to believe, James Tiberius, but I occasionally have something to do which does not concern you..."

"What was it Andy said to Meghan on our way in here?" Aletha murmured to Sirius as their friends embarked on an amiable session of bickering. "'Death is only a doorway', wasn't it?"

"It changes where you are, not who." Sirius shook his head. "Truer words. Now if they'd just get around to telling us what's going on, I'd be a lot happier."

"Whatever it is, it involves..." Aletha frowned, staring intently at the half-closed door of the antechamber. "Alex, and that must be his wife, and the Fates. All three of them."

"Not a combination designed to strike confidence into the heart," Sirius said a moment before the door swung open wide.

"...*highly* irregular," said Brenna Ravenclaw's voice stridently, as that witch exited the room a few steps ahead of her sisters. "Not to mention what kind of precedent it's setting."

"But they have good points as well," said Sophia, waving her hand towards Alex and Anne, who had followed them from the room. "And this situation isn't precisely a usual one."

Margaret sighed. "None of them are, are they? So." She nodded once to James and Lily, then started across the expanse of floor towards Sirius and Aletha, as Alex escorted Anne out through a side entrance, tossing a wave towards the Blacks before he shut the door behind himself. "We'll leave it up to them."

"Up to us?" muttered Sirius. "That's never good."

Aletha favored him with a withering look. "Stop being defeatist."

"I'm not, I'm being realistic—" Sirius shut his mouth firmly as the three younger Ravenclaw women stopped directly in front of them.

"You have fought faithfully through this time of trial, and weathered many ordeals, both separately and together," said Brenna in careful, ritual tones. "And still, here you stand before us,

your oaths unbroken and your aims achieved."

"From those who have much to give, much is demanded," Sophia took over. "It seems fitting that those who meet the demands with honor should have much given back to them."

"And since your Heir and mine gave up her powers at our demand, to save lives and further your cause, it has been argued—very movingly, I think—that an heir should be restored to you." Margaret smiled a little. "If you want him."

"If we want—" Sirius felt Aletha's hand tighten on his an instant before the answer came to him as well. "But I thought you couldn't—that there wasn't any way—"

"There are a great many technicalities involved, but it comes down to the same thing." Sophia held up a finger. "In this one case, we can."

"But at what price?" Aletha's voice held equal parts longing and fear, a combination Sirius had no trouble understanding. The story Harry had told of his experience at the Department of Mysteries kept coming to mind, all the more easily when James and Lily were standing only a little ways distant, the latter hiding behind her streaming hair for Marcus to find her. "We were told, at the time, that our friends would care for our son as we had cared for theirs. Is that bargain now at an end?"

"It is, but that has no bearing on this decision." Margaret's face was carefully blank of all emotion. "Whatever you decide in this instance will change no other price which has been paid tonight."

"Some lives end, others begin." Brenna's eyes flashed with a brief instant of sorrow. "It is how things must be, in this world we watch over."

Sirius allowed his first wave of worry and grief to rise, crest, then subside, and tapped his little finger against the back of Aletha's hand to ask her opinion, though he knew before she sent it her answer of two quick squeezes. "We want him," he said, dropping Aletha's hand so that she could hold out her arms. "Chuck him over here."

Lily beamed and scooped Marcus out of his carrier, zooming him in circles as though he were riding an invisible broomstick, then fetching up beside Aletha, into whose eager grasp she ceremoniously lowered him. James followed a pace or two behind, absently removing the no-longer-needed carrier, and Sirius seized the opportunity to beckon his friend aside. "Come on, Prongs, give me a hint," he said, dropping his voice below the level where the women could hear it. "What the hell's going on here?"

"You ought to know better than that, Padfoot." James tossed the baby carrier into the air, where it vanished before it could collide with any of the candles floating overhead. "What did McGonagall tell you about trying to cheat off me back in third year?"

"You mean that thing about at least picking somebody who had an outside possibility of knowing the right answer?"

James winced. "Not actually the time I was referring to, but sure, we'll go with that one. They don't tell us everything, you know."

"No, I didn't, but now I do. And what time did you mean, then?"

"I was thinking of the time she told you cheap tricks designed to fool Muggles wouldn't get anywhere with her." James's eyes were studiously fixed on Marcus as he nestled into Aletha's arms, exploring her face with curious fingers and giggling helplessly as she pretended to eat his hand. "And did you know she's only a little bit older than Voldemort? Whole lot smarter, though..."

About to demand what Voldemort's age had to do with anything, Sirius stopped, as certain pieces of James's artless conversation rearranged themselves to shed a blinding new light on what he'd seen only moments before. "No. No way. Merlin's b—irthday cake," he finished just in time, remembering that he would now have to confine himself to innocuous cursewords for another twelve years or so.

*And possibly longer than that, depending on what everyone else gets up to.*

"Merlin's birthday cake?" repeated James, snickering. "Did they really fall for that?"

"Long enough that I could claim their friends taught them anything else." Sirius exhaled slowly. "This is going to be one hell of a new world we're building here."

"There's nobody I'd rather trust it to." James clapped Sirius on the shoulder, and the friends exchanged one last, rib-cracking hug. "Take care of yourself, Padfoot."

"You too, Prongs." Sirius stepped back, towards his wife and son, as Lily and Aletha exchanged a kiss and parted ways. "G'bye."

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"Yes, as to James and Lily—" Dumbledore glanced towards the front door of the house. "But if you will excuse me, Harry."

"Of course, sir, but—" Harry broke off as the sound of pounding footsteps reached his ears, and the door flew open, admitting the two people he'd been half-expecting from the first. His mother reached him first, but his father was only a step behind, and their arms went around him as though they would never let him go.

"You've been so brave," Lily whispered to him, laughing through her tears. "Such a perfect little Gryffindor. Or should that be big Gryffindor now?" she finished with a smile, reaching up to lay a hand on Harry's messy black hair and one on James's, her two palms resting precisely the same distance above the ground. "I hoped and hoped you wouldn't inherit my height..."

"No, he got your temperament instead." James leaned over to kiss Lily's hair. "Fire-eater. Not literally, though," he added quickly. "No hidden Heirs anywhere in your background, right?"

"Purest Muggle, through and through. Right up until me. And then you." Lily went to her tiptoes to kiss Harry on the cheek. "Harry James Potter. My half-blood prince, if not *the* Half-Blood Prince. Aletha did tell you who he was?"

Harry shook his head. "He told us himself. Right before he left to be a full-time spy, he asked for that Potions text back, if we survived the war. I gave it to him yesterday, so he's got it now, wherever he is."

"Observe that smile, Harry." James pointed to Lily, who was indeed smirking ever so faintly. "That is a dangerous type of smile. It signifies that she knows something, and that she has absolutely no intention of ever telling us poor slob anything about it. Though given who we're talking about, I'm pretty sure I don't want to know in any case."

"He isn't so bad," Harry objected. "I mean, I wouldn't want to have him over for Christmas dinner or anything, but he was on our side, even if he wasn't always nice about it, and he did save Meghan's life. Besides, it was really kind of childish the way he was always trying to get a rise out of anyone he didn't like. As long as you could keep your sense of humor about it, and remember to be the adult in the situation, you could handle him..." He trailed off, suddenly aware of a stunned look being bestowed upon him from a pair of hazel eyes. "What?"

"Are you absolutely positive that blood-bond with Moony only went as far as the locket?" James ran his fingers through his hair in bemusement. "Except that wasn't even him talking. He hated Snape as much as the rest of us. He just had to be more careful about it, because Snape had dirt on him. Where you learned to be so, so, so *sensible*, and *reasonable*, and *grown-up* ..."

"Letha," said Lily and Harry at the same moment, glanced at each other in surprise, then burst out laughing. James joined in, tapping the side of his head ruefully, before scooping them both into another tight hug.

Harry closed his eyes, willing his heart to calm. *It was always meant to happen like this*, he reminded himself. *Danger's very first prophecy said so. "And peace comes to the Man Who Won". I'd never have had any real peace if I'd lived—I'd just have had to keep on fighting, to live a normal life, to stay out of the spotlight, to keep from being dragged into other people's battles every third week! No, this was the right way. The only way.*

All the same, he couldn't help but wonder what it would have been like to wage that particular war, with his Pack and his Pride fighting alongside him as they always had.

*It would have been exhausting, and maddening, and ridiculous. But it would have been an awful lot of fun sometimes, too...*

"All right, enough self-indulgence." Lily detached herself carefully from the hug, James following her lead, and the Potters seated themselves on the floor, close enough to touch, although they didn't. "Harry, you do still have one choice left to make. Where you want to go now."

"That oath you swore, because you meant it and you've kept it, gives you an interesting

possibility," James took over seamlessly. "Moony took advantage of it already, while he was temporarily dead. So'd Dumbledore, though I still say that was cheating."

"Since it was cheating *for* us, why do you care?" Lily produced a dainty wand from up her sleeve, outlining a square in front of her, then filling it with color. "But before you decide anything, Harry love, you need to watch what happened. Carefully." Her eyes crinkled at the corners. "I have to say, your Ginny is a young lady after my own heart..."

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Hermione Granger-Lupin sat up with a gasp. She was back in her body, back in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, and her Pack and Pride lay around her in the circle where they'd battled Voldemort. Of the Dark Lord himself there was no sign, though she could see and smell shattered stone and scorched wood here and there around the Hall (clearly the witches and wizards who had witnessed the battle had been forced to direct some of the excess energies into the walls and ceiling). Eleven Marauders and Warriors, including herself, were starting to stir, taking deep breaths, sitting up.

The twelfth would never stir again.

"Harry," she whispered, looking at the familiar, messy-haired form across the circle, feeling the tears begin to flow hot and harsh into her eyes. "Oh, Harry..."

"Hey." Ron sat up beside her, putting his arm around her. "Don't cry. It's going to be okay."

"How can you say that?" Hermione shoved at his shoulder, trying to pull herself away. "When Harry's—"

"Do you trust me?" Ron interrupted.

"What kind of question is that?" Hermione scowled. "Of course I trust you."

"Then trust me now." Ron looked at her levelly, taking one of her hands in his free one. "Everything is going to be all right."

"But—" Hermione began again, when a fresh wave of gasps from the direction of the door caught her attention. Just as he had a few moments before, but this time alone and wearing his very-much-alive body, Albus Dumbledore walked unhurriedly through the astonished crowd which surrounded the circle of Pack and Pride, kneeling down beside Harry when he arrived there.

"Let us see," he said, grasping Harry's shoulder gently and starting to turn him onto his back, "what we shall see..."

"Aaah-choo! "

Dumbledore dodged neatly to one side, away from the main force of the sneeze. "God bless you, Harry," he said, producing a handkerchief.

"You know, sir, I think he does." Sitting up, Harry accepted the proffered bit of cloth and blotted his streaming eyes. "I really think he does." He glanced at Ginny over the handkerchief's folds. "Thanks, partner."

"I wasn't about to raise this baby by myself." Ginny laid a hand against her midriff, tone and demeanor nicely nonchalant, Hermione thought, for anyone who couldn't smell the ragged edges to her emotions. "So I found a way I wouldn't have to."

It was the last coherent thing which got said for quite a while.

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Harry thought the first person to reach him had been Danger, but it might have been Hermione, and he didn't see a reason to try and work it out. Familiar faces, voices, scents surrounded him as the Pack satisfied themselves that he truly was alive, Padfoot's arms around him, Letha's lips against his forehead, Moony's fingers disarranging his hair, Fox's eyes shining as they clasped hands in their own personal shake. Meghan had pounced on him only a few seconds behind the Granger-Lupin sisters, and was now firmly ensconced in his lap, glowering at anyone who got too close to him. Since the rest of the crowd in the Great Hall all seemed to have the same idea as the Pack, she was doing a fair bit of glowering.

"Yes, it's over," he said again and again as new clusters of people fought their way out of the seething mass to ask him, pitching his voice to carry over the cacophonous babble of near-hysterical relief. "Voldemort's dead, for keeps this time."

"But *how?*" came the universal question, one Harry could hear Dumbledore answering on his own behalf with unflinching patience a short distance away. He wondered, in the back of his mind, if his Headmaster had chosen the path he had with an eye to this exact eventuality, limiting the inevitable hero-worship Harry would have to face by taking some of it on himself.

*It's the sort of thing he'd do. And is doing, whether or not it was planned that way.*

"It was a trick," he answered for what felt like the thousandth time, glancing over at Ginny, wrapped in her mother's arms and with her brothers surrounding her, rather like the Pack had spread out around Harry. "Muggle magic, sleight of hand. Ginny and I've been partners at it for years, and it's all about misdirection, leading your audience to what you want them to see and think, rather than what's really there. Only this time, our most important audience was Voldemort, and we couldn't warn any of you that it wasn't real without warning him as well."

"I borrowed some real magic from our friends to make it look better," Ginny added, as she'd been doing since a suspicious-eyed witch had insisted on poking Harry all over with the tip of her wand to make certain he was solid. "You saw how we were all connected together in the circle? That meant I could reach out to Neville and borrow some of his power, to make people see what they expect to see. Voldemort expected to see Harry become a ghost when he cut through that cord, so that's what he did see. It made him panic, Voldemort, I mean, and that panic meant he broke the bond between the two of them."

"And because that bond was the last thing keeping him alive, he's dead." Harry rubbed his fingers across the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. His every muscle was sore, and a large number of bruises were beginning to make themselves known, but the shooting pains he'd associated with his scar for years were conspicuous by their absence, which couldn't have suited him better. "Him and all his Death Eaters, at least all the ones he'd Marked."

"How can you be sure of that?" demanded one of the members of this latest group, a middle-aged wizard with his wand arm bandaged and in a sling. Harry wondered why the wizard hadn't gone to see the Healers, who had finished their list of critical cases some time ago and were now circulating through the Hall, dealing with the less urgent injuries, but squelched the words before they could escape him.

*Probably because this way he gets sympathy from everyone around him, and he can hang about and rack up points in his own personal status game. I wonder if he sees himself on a Chocolate Frog card already, as "one of the first wizards to speak with Harry Potter after his heroic duel with Lord Voldemort"?*

The image of said card brought a smile to Harry's face, a smile which lingered even after the thought of what he'd witnessed in the Forest, though it gained a twist to one side which brought a trace of uneasiness into the older wizard's scent.

*There wasn't any time, while it was happening, to appreciate how horrible it was, what Voldemort did to them. To the people he supposedly trusted, and who definitely trusted him. Way, way too much. His smile twisted even further, in sympathy with his stomach, and the wizard edged away from him half a step. Which means it's going to be all the worse, once I really do get around to thinking about it...*

"The Dark Mark wasn't just on the Death Eaters' bodies," he said quietly, almost to himself, and the noise of the people around him started to lessen as his voice reached them. "It was on their souls. Where their magic lived. And Voldemort needed that magic if he was going to keep himself together without his body, if he was going to confront us and have any chance of winning. So he tore their magic out of them, and shredded their souls into little tiny pieces while he was doing it, to be sure they couldn't fight back against him. Almost like the Dementor's Kiss, except it started from *inside* them. Everything they feared, everything they hated, everything they'd ever tried to deny in themselves, all rising up at once and driving them mad."

He noticed without surprise that Fox had taken refuge in his four-legged form and was curled into a neat ball on Danger's lap, ears flat, tail fluffed out. Meghan shuddered and tightened her grip on him, and Harry squeezed her gently in a side-hug before continuing. "I don't know if their bodies are still alive, out there in the Forest. But I do know their souls are gone, just as thoroughly as if they'd been Kissed. So I don't think they'll be making trouble any time too soon."

"Er, no," the wizard agreed weakly, glancing from side to side. "Pardon me, but I see the Healers are free now, I really should have this tended to..."

As he vanished into the swirling crowd, Luna muttered an insult under her breath in Parseltongue,

or so Harry assumed. The breathy, half-growled hiss meant no more to him now than the quick finger-flicks of Pride-sign would mean to someone not a Warrior, and the loss ached even as it comforted him. His only abilities in that direction had been because of the link between him and Voldemort, he knew, so it ought to make him deliriously happy that he no longer understood the language of snakes—

*But it means I'll never be able to talk to Sangre again, not directly. I'll never be able to listen to a story about what life is like in between the blades of grass, or know what a boa constrictor is thinking when it stares at a human outside its zoo exhibit.*

*Maybe it wasn't ever truly mine, but I'm still going to miss it now that it's gone.*

He let his eyes rove back towards his Pack-parents, Padfoot whispering something in Letha's ear, Moony stroking between Fox's ears where he lay in Danger's lap. Behind them, Professors Sprout and Flitwick were splitting the crowd along precise lines so that Professor McGonagall could restore the House tables to their usual places.

*Of course, I could say that about more things than one...*

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Danger slid her fingers through Fox's thick coat until she found his skin and mentally tapped for admittance, feeling his mind open to hers just enough for speech. **Feeling better?** she inquired. **There's a question I'd like to ask someone, but if you still need me here—**

**No, I'm all right now.** Fox nudged her hand with his nose, then uncoiled and flowed off her lap, turning back to renew the contact with a paw to her wrist. **I'll be with Luna if you need me.**

**Thank God for her,** Remus commented privately, as the fear he'd had so much practice at hiding shuddered along the corridors of his bond with Danger. **If she hadn't been able, or willing, to go with him, to take on what he took, even more than that in some regards...** The chill of fear faded, chased off by warmth and light. **But then, she's not the only one.**

**Stop that,** Danger scolded, flicking the tip of her husband's ear. **I don't need to conduct this particular conversation with my face bright red, thank you very much. Come to think of it, why don't you just stay out of my personal business altogether?**

Anyone who couldn't see Remus Lupin's thoughts would probably have assumed that his slow smile was caused by innocent rejoicing at the ending of the war and the survival of his family. His wife was under no such handicap, and her cheeks flamed a brilliant shade of crimson at the memory of the previous night he had called up for her perusal. **That's not what I meant and you know it!**

**Oh really?** Remus raised an eyebrow. **So it's no longer your personal business just how many times you and I—**

**That will be quite enough,** Danger snapped, slamming the link shut and shooting to her feet.



Remus's soft chuckle, Sirius's barking laugh, and Aletha's rueful sigh followed her between the crowds of people now thronging the Great Hall (larger than ever now that some enterprising soul had thought to relieve the fears of the inhabitants of Sanctuary by escorting them upstairs en masse) until she emerged a few feet away from Albus Dumbledore. He had seated himself near the end of what would ordinarily have been the Slytherin table, and was recounting the story of his bespelling at the hands of "a very clever Healer" to an audience of awestruck children a little too young even to be first years.

*But if they're here, either they're magical themselves or they'll be Muggles who know about magic. The more people like that who learn the truth, here and now, firsthand, the better off we'll be as we go forward into the future...*

To one side, she caught a glimpse of Arthur Weasley listening to several worried-looking wizards all talking at once, Percy a step or two behind his father muttering into a DictaQuill. A small eddy in the crowd near them was briefly revealed as Crystal Huley forging determinedly towards them with Molly, Bill, and Charlie in her wake, Fleur Delacour (or was it Weasley now, Danger wondered) and Tonks a step or two behind them.

*Probably trouble at the Ministry. Voldemort would be just the sort to rig up dead-man spells, to make sure that if we ever did manage to bring him down, we'd have a huge unholy mess to clean up afterwards. But if there's anyone I'd trust to deal with it, it'd be that little crew right there. Plus it will keep them too busy to get bogged down with grief over Fred until things are calm enough that they can afford it...*

"...until tonight," Dumbledore's voice broke into her musings, "when a good friend of the Healer's came to my resting place and used the counterspell to awaken me. And so, here I am." He drew a wand from his pocket and conjured a bunch of flowers from the air, handing them to the little girl in the front of the group, who cuddled them to her wide-eyed. "Now, I believe this lady needs a few words with me, so if you will excuse us?"

"A good friend?" Danger asked, sitting down on the bench beside Dumbledore as the children scurried off.

"Was Severus anything else to you, in the final analysis?" Dumbledore turned to smile at her. "As you yourself once predicted, he has taken his place with honor. If also with his own inimitable flair."

"Who'd want to imitate it?" Danger held out her hand. "May I see that, please?"

"This? Of course you may." Dumbledore laid the wand across her palm. "I found it beside me when Severus awakened me. With which, I might add, he had an easier time than he thought he would. Not only was Fawkes present to help him with the awakening process, but some helpful person had already split open the stone of the tomb, relieving Severus of the necessity to perform such a powerful spell with an unfamiliar wand."

"Would that be the same helpful person who left this behind for you to use?" Danger sniffed

daintily at the wand, wrinkling her nose at the bitter, snakelike musk emanating from it. "To cast whatever spells you cast that let you come walking in here in spirit-form, with my daughter in your arms—" She had to stop, to let the shiver of delight run up and down her back. "My daughter. Remus's daughter. Our little girl. I've dreamed of her for so long, and now she's real, she's here, and she's helped us save the world before she's even been born—"

Cutting herself off with a brisk headshake before she could become completely maudlin, she returned the yew wand to Dumbledore, holding it between two fingers. "I did actually have a question for you which isn't related to most of this," she said, gesturing around at the joyous madness all around them. "Did you know about the Horcrux Vivens bond the night you stopped me from killing Igor Karkaroff?"

"I cannot say I *knew*, but certainly I strongly suspected." Dumbledore returned the wand to his pocket, his eyes grave. "If you had killed him as you then wanted to do, in revenge for your mother's death, while you held him at your mercy..."

"That would have been murder, which would have torn my soul." Danger twisted one hand inside the other. "And it would have torn at its weakest point. The place where we're joined together, the root of our bond. We would have been ripped apart then and there, and we probably couldn't ever have healed from it, assuming either of us survived it with our sanity intact." She shivered again, for a different reason this time, and leaned over to embrace Dumbledore. "You saved us that night. All of us. Thank you."

"It was most truly my pleasure." Dumbledore returned the embrace. "Now, I have a question in my turn." He let his hand rest briefly against Danger's midriff. "What price did you pay for this? I know our mutual friends too well to think otherwise."

Danger sighed. "Don't go spreading it around, all right? We haven't even told the rest of the Pack yet. And it's not so much a price as a natural consequence. We strained the bond terribly by using it to keep Remus from going on, especially with my life running out as fast as it was. It held, it's still holding, but it's been weakened quite a lot, so we had to choose." She spread her hands wide, then brought them together, cupping a tiny volume of air between her palms. "To have it the vast majority of the time, or only one night a month. The night that matters."

"Your taming power." Dumbledore nodded. "In reality, little more than your mind and soul taking on an equal share in Remus's curse of lycanthropy, diluting its strength to the point where it can affect neither of you, and your own wild magic producing compounds similar to those of the Wolfsbane Potion to compliment it. But if the bond by which you are joined is not strong enough to withstand so violent an eruption of magic—"

"We could be torn apart, and leave him an uncontrolled werewolf and me unconscious at best, mind-blasted at worst." Danger exhaled a brief laugh. "Not that it would matter either way, since the first thing he'd do in those circumstances would be to kill me very dead. And the only way to avoid that, to be certain the bond would always be strong enough to bear that load, was to put it into abeyance all the rest of the time, the way I once did to go looking for Sirius and Letha. To be separate, alone in our own minds, as we were before this ever began. Every day and every night,

except for full moons."

"And your choice?" Dumbledore asked after a few moments of silence.

Danger looked up and smiled, her eyes deeply blue. "I would go through an uncontrolled transformation every night," she quoted in a warm tenor, "if I knew I would see you in the morning."

"As I thought." Dumbledore turned to regard the entrance to the Great Hall, where a small commotion was arising. "Now I wonder..."

A silver streak wove its way through the crowd to coalesce into a feline form in front of the two. "*Albus, if you have a moment,*" said the Patronus-messenger in Minerva McGonagall's worried voice. "*You should see this.*"

"That sounds moderately ominous." Dumbledore got to his feet, moving with care. "Would you care to join me, and see what is troubling Minerva? Since you have something of a stake in the knowledge."

"Yes, and I'll want an explanation about that later on, if you'd be so kind," said Remus through Danger, attempting to administer a stern look to Dumbledore, though Danger knew she was spoiling it with her incipient fit of giggles over the helpless amusement at the vagaries of fate she could feel in the back of her husband's mind. "I'm quite sure I remember you saying something different a few years ago from what you're saying now."

"As Harry has already said himself, the object of this exercise was misdirection of the audience, and my most important audience was Voldemort." Dumbledore made his way towards the door at a leisurely pace, wizards and Muggles alike moving aside to let him pass. "Not necessarily to trick him, in this case, but to lead him to believe that we had been tricked. That we did not know the truth he had so laboriously uncovered." His scent spiked with equal parts pride and shame. "If there had been some way for me to tell you without altering your behavior, without changing the way you thought about yourself, about Harry, about the war in general..."

"Is it really worth our while to argue the point now?" Danger slipped forward to take control of her own voice. "Whatever we were or weren't told, whatever we did or didn't believe, it's brought us here, and we've *won*. We're together, we're free, we're alive. Yes, we'll carry some scars from it all." Inwardly, she brushed fingertips with Remus, and felt his mental kiss land softly on her cheek. "But we know how to live with scars."

"So you do." Dumbledore stepped into the entrance hall and held up his arm for Fawkes, who came soaring down from the railing of the indoor balcony to land as lightly as any owl. "So you all do."

Together, they descended the steps outdoors, crossing the lawns to join the small cluster of people gazing up at Hogwarts castle where it loomed against the starlit sky. Danger's nose twitched as a breeze blew past her, bringing her scents she knew and some she didn't, all laden with worry,

chagrin, even fear. *What in the world—*

**It'd have to be fairly drastic to have Alice Longbottom this upset,** Remus murmured. **And I have a feeling I may know what it is...**

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"We have a problem."

Startled, Harry turned to look at Moony. His Pack-father and fellow alpha was sitting very still, eyes closed, a position which usually indicated he was sharing Danger's mind more actively than usual, but the tone in which he'd spoken made his words the flat and uncompromising statement of a most unwelcome fact.

"What kind of problem?" asked Letha, turning from her murmured conversation with Ginny and Meghan. "What do you see?"

"We just finished working several feats of powerful magic in and around a castle which is more than a thousand years old." Moony had his hands planted flat against the stones on which he was sitting, as though he were trying to hold the floor in place. "And our enemy, although his ancestors were banished, still did have a viable tie to Hogwarts. Not to mention a vindictive streak broader than a Quidditch pitch." Now his eyes opened, brown swirls darting in and out of the blue as he communed silently with Danger. "What better way to ensure any victory of ours would be empty than to take advantage of the strain we've just put on Hogwarts's magic, and leave behind a spell meant to bring the castle crashing down on top of us?"

"You're kidding, right?" Padfoot glanced up at the ceiling of the Great Hall, showing as usual the star-laden sky above them. Then his eyes narrowed. "That would be a no."

Harry followed his godfather's gaze and swore under his breath. Though the night-black background made it difficult to see, a definite pattern of warping was beginning to show against the vaulting of the ceiling above them.

*And we can't even do any spells to hold it together, because everyone is watching us, and people will be just as dead trampled in a panic as they will be if the roof collapses on them...*

"There has to be something we can do." Meghan looked uncertainly around the small circle of Pack and Pride. "Right?"

"There is." Luna was sitting in a pose similar to Moony's, hands flat, eyes closed, head tipped back, but instead of the worry his face was showing, hers was serene, even slightly smug. "Harry and Hermione know about it already. So does Professor Dumbledore, and he'll show the rest of us. But it will mean something has to be spoken aloud, something that's been hidden for a long, long time." Her eyes opened, and focused first on Harry, then on Moony. "Are you ready?"

"I had better be, hadn't I?" Moony started to get to his feet, then stopped and braced himself. An instant later, the floor rippled lightly beneath them, sending cries of surprise and shock through

the Great Hall. "That doesn't feel like we have much time to waste."

Hermione glanced over at Harry and held up a hand, first closing her fingers around her thumb, then making a proper fist with the thumb outside. *What in the world is she talking about?*

Harry shrugged, circling a finger in midair and landing it on his left wrist. *Search me. Suppose we'll find out in a minute.* Then an idea struck him, and he drew his wand and began to sketch in the air, doodling a four-cornered outline with tiny stick figures of various colors surrounding it. *Do you think—*

A smile of understanding broke out on Hermione's face, and she leaned up to whisper a word in Ron's ear. Harry murmured what he assumed was the same word into his wand's tip and shot a Patronus-messenger towards the grouping of Letha, Meghan, and Ginny, as the now nervous crowd moved back from the doorway, revealing Dumbledore, Neville, and Danger hurrying up the aisle between the middle House tables.

Getting to his feet, Harry spotted Professor McGonagall and Mrs. Longbottom conferring in the doorway, before each witch threw three of her own Patronus-messengers into the crowd and disappeared out the door again, to be followed by the people they'd summoned. *Getting ready to try and hold things together, in case this doesn't work...*

"Everyone, please, be calm," said Dumbledore, stopping in what Harry estimated was the center of the Hall and beckoning Pack and Pride forward to stand with him. "The Founders of Hogwarts foresaw this very eventuality, and left behind a magical tool with which the castle may be safely restored to itself."

He swirled his wand three times over the section of floor in front of him, and with a creak and a groan, a segment of stones about four feet square began to rise. People in the far corners of the Hall conjured boxes, or climbed onto benches and tables, in order to see better. On one side of the stone, Padfoot flicked his wand, slicing a neat triangular piece from the table beside him to create a path around the pillar. Moony, opposite him, added a graceful inward curve to his side's bench to do the same.

"You were right," Hermione murmured into Harry's ear as the six-foot-tall pillar settled into place with a rumble, echoed ominously by the walls and ceiling around them. "It's the cornerstone of Hogwarts, just like Professor Jones showed us..."

Dumbledore waved his wand in a wide circle, and a line of carving glowed golden around the top of the pillar, above the square metal plates with their inset handprints which adorned each side. "Let those with whom we share our blood," he read aloud into the thick silence, the lettering rising up into the air as he spoke so that everyone could see it, "with Consorts loved and Champions good, come lay their hands where ours have lain, to make our home itself again."

"What *is* it with these people and their bloody awful iambic tetrameter?" Danger asked Letha in a clearly audible stage whisper, sending ripples of nervous laughter throughout the Hall.

"I'm more interested in why they can't come up with a decent rhyme for anything," was Letha's equally audible answer, and the laughter redoubled and lost a bit of its anxious edge. Dumbledore waited patiently until his audience had calmed down, then stepped up to the closest side of the pillar, ornamented with a silver plate.

"Let the Heir and Consort of Slytherin come forward," he said, "and name the Champion who will stand beside them."

Luna came to Dumbledore's side and curtsied slightly, Fox leaping from her arms and retransforming beside her with a bow, so that it seemed part of a choreographed dance. "I call upon my friend Ginny Potter to stand with me as my Champion," proclaimed the Heir of Slytherin. "Who could be more worthy of that title than the witch who tricked my foolish cousin into defeating *himself*?"

Another round of laughter filled the Great Hall, and a brief spatter of applause, as Ginny stepped up and hugged first Fox, then Luna, before they arranged themselves along the side of the pillar, Luna in the center, Fox to her right, Ginny to her left. Dumbledore nodded once and stepped behind Ginny to round the corner of the pillar, facing a new sheet of stone, this one hung with a plate of black iron. "Let the Heir and Consort of Hufflepuff come forward," he said, "and name the Champion who will stand beside them."

Neville stopped partway to Dumbledore's side to kiss Meghan's hand, which gesture she received as her due, though the curtsy she made Dumbledore, like Neville's bow, was perfectly correct. "I call upon my friend Ron Weasley to stand with me as my Champion," declared the Heir of Hufflepuff. "No one would suit me better than the wizard who would rather be last with his friends than first with his enemies."

"You notice he didn't say I *wasn't* last," was Ron's muttered comment to Hermione, but he was grinning through the words, and Hermione only sighed and gave him a gentle shove forward, blowing a kiss after him as he hugged Meghan and shook Neville's hand. Heir, Consort, and Champion arranged themselves as before, and Dumbledore proceeded around the next corner to face a plate of bronze. "Let the Heir and Consort of Ravenclaw come forward," he said, "and name the Champion who will stand beside them."

Letha and Padfoot stepped forward, hand in hand, and made their reverence to Dumbledore, Padfoot wearing his smug Marauder's smile, Letha with an extra glow about her which made Harry wonder if Danger and Ginny might have company on the journey they would shortly be sharing. "I call upon my Pack-daughter Hermione Granger-Lupin to stand with me as my Champion," announced the Heir of Ravenclaw. "Her thirst for knowledge and her skill in learning are rivaled only by her burning desire to uphold the truth."

"She did that on *purpose*," Hermione grumbled under her breath to Harry, before squaring her shoulders and going forward to embrace her Pack-parents, then taking her place on Letha's left. Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling at Letha's unobtrusive pun, slid behind Hermione and smiled in satisfaction at the sight of the pillar's final side, hung with its plate of gold.

"Let the Heir and Consort of Gryffindor come forward," he said, "and name the Champion who will stand beside them."

Baffled murmuring broke out in several portions of the Hall, some of which Harry could catch, though he didn't bother listening very hard. He had a good idea what most of the onlookers would be saying.

"I know what you're thinking," he said conversationally, stepping up onto one of the benches and bringing all the other talk in the room to a halt. "You think it ought to be me." He shrugged. "Can't blame you. I thought that too, for quite a while. But then I started finding out more about what happened here at Hogwarts a thousand years ago. And it wasn't Godric Gryffindor, or his wife or children, who killed Salazar Slytherin. It was one of his students, a Muggleborn kid named William, who was fighting both to defend his friends and to avenge his parents. Decent, ordinary people, who loved each other and made a family together, and the Bloody Baron killed them just because they were in his way." He grinned. "Some things really never do change."

The rumble of laughter which filled the Hall had its ominous counterpart in the walls around him, and Harry stepped onto the table, gaining silence once again. Part of him wanted to hurry up and tell his audience the truth already, but he knew better. Things like this had their own particular order and rhythm.

*Magic is belief. If they don't believe me right now, if I can't convince them what I say is true, that'll end our chances just as fast as Fox stepping out of the circle would have...*

"So once I found that out, I wanted to know even more," he said, gazing back and forth across the sea of faces, moving slowly enough that he knew most of the people watching him would swear he'd looked for a moment directly at them. "I asked Hermione if she could tell me anything else about William, like what his parents did for a living. And she searched through a lot of old stories until she found the answer." He turned to look across the pillar at Hermione, to hold her mildly baffled eyes for one second. "She told me William's parents worked with clay."

*Since most people will accept "my sister found it in a book" much better than "my brother heard it from a woman who's been dead a thousand years", even if the second one is true and the first one's not...*

"There's a word for a person who works with clay," said Harry, watching the realization dawn on the faces of Marauders and Warriors, on the silent spectators around them. "And back then, whatever your parents did, you'd probably do too, and that's how a lot of people got their surnames. So that wizard who killed Bloody Baron Slytherin on the battlefield here at Hogwarts? Pretty good bet his whole name was William Potter. I may not know for sure if I'm descended from him by blood, but I'm proud to be today who and what he was back then. Champion of Gryffindor, in loyal service to the Heir and his Consort." He leapt down from the table to land lightly before the people he meant. "Now and always," he said, and went to one knee.

Remus Lupin, Heir of Gryffindor, and his Consort Gertrude, known as Danger, reached down together to lift their Champion to his feet, as somewhere in the rear of the Great Hall the cheering

started. It only grew as the three embraced, and as they stepped forward to the golden plate, Harry on Remus's left, Danger on his right.

"Heirs at the ready," said Dumbledore softly, under the sounds of celebration. "Three—two—one—*now*."

Four palms pressed against four metal plates.

Once more, the Great Hall of Hogwarts filled with brilliant white light.



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 66: The Lion and the Queen (Year 7)

"Did you do that on purpose?" Fox muttered to Harry as the Pride, whispered invisible by Neville in the wake of the cornerstone's restorative magic, scooted cautiously along one of the benches of the Gryffindor table, moving towards the small section Padfoot and Letha had claimed for their own near the teachers' dais. "Telling everyone Moony's the Heir so they'd all go gawk at him and leave the rest of us alone?"

"Dumbledore set it up, not me, but yeah, I'm pretty sure he had that somewhere in the back of his mind." Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he edged past the last cluster of eagerly chattering witches and sat down next to Padfoot, succumbing to the urge to lean against his godfather's shoulder. "Merlin's snaky hat, I'm tired."

"Can't imagine why." Padfoot ruffled Harry's hair with one hand, as with the other he drew his wand and twirled it three times at the table, covering it with a thick red cloth which hung to the floor on all sides. "It's not like you battled an evil wizard four or five different ways in the past three days or anything."

"And you haven't had a lot of time to eat, or much appetite, I'd imagine." Letha accepted a number of capped potion vials from a house-elf beside her and set them out on the newly covered table. "So we'll just go back to the way things used to be when you were small." She smiled, as though she knew a secret. "Call it a refresher course, for about nine months from now. But we'll deal with all that later. Right now, here's the only choice you have to make for the rest of the day: cherry, orange, grape, or lime?"

Harry selected one of the red-tinged potions, as Ginny, beside him, took an orange one, the rest of the Pride reaching over shoulders or around elbows to help themselves. Padfoot, Harry noticed as he drank his potion down in three long swallows, had lifted the edge of the tablecloth and was conjuring something underneath it. Elsewhere in the Hall, other witches and wizards had created their own colorful tablecloths, though there appeared to be some dissent at the Ravenclaw table over the exact shade of blue to be used, and black badgers were appearing and disappearing along the Hufflepuffs' length of golden-yellow.

*Not my problem.* Finishing his potion, Harry handed the vial to the waiting house-elf. *Though if it turns into a Silly Duel, I hope they take pictures. We'll all need some good laughs over the next few weeks and months and years, with everything that is still our problem...*

"*Mesdames et messieurs*," Padfoot announced, flipping the edge of the tablecloth up onto the table to display the now-cushioned expanse of floor beneath, sectioned off with vertical drapes and filled with pillows and sheets. "Your den awaits."

"We'll make sure no one disturbs you." Letha chuckled, sitting down on the other side of the cloth's lifted section. "After that little display with the cornerstone, I doubt anyone will want to cross Pack or Pride for quite a while."

"Eh, they'll forget about it in a few weeks." Padfoot waved his hand airily. "Fountains of light shooting out the top of a rock, broken bits of wall jumping back up into place—that's nothing. The way the whole castle leaned over to one side for a second, though, that was impressive..."

"That may have been the Chamber of Secrets filling itself in," said Luna, pausing with one leg over the bench. "Salazar crafted it all by himself, it was never truly part of the castle, so the cornerstone wouldn't have recognized it. It's just as well, really. I wouldn't want to have to come to Hogwarts every other week once our children are old enough."

"And given that you'll be raising Marauders, that's exactly what you'd have to do." Letha laughed a little, her hand resting for a moment on her stomach once again. "Instead of which, whoever ends up in charge of the grounds will just have to collect them from the Forest every so often. Maybe you and Sangre can set up a meeting point..."

Harry lost whatever Luna replied to this in an enormous yawn. By the time he could see clearly again, he and Ginny were the only Warriors left outside the small den, and Ginny was swinging her legs over the bench, preparing to slide into the space Ron and Hermione were in the process of vacating.

"Nice job, Greeneyes." Padfoot slid his fingers across his cheek and tapped them against Harry's. "You kicked arse and took names, and you did it with style."

"I had good teachers." Harry returned the scent-touch, then bent down to hug Letha tightly. "Am I going to be a big brother again?" he murmured to her. "More than I already know about, I mean?"

"Yes, you are." Letha kissed the top of his ear. "And his middle name will be James."

"Oh good." Harry squeezed his un-godmother once more, then released her and sat down beside her. "That was the one thing I still didn't understand."

"Go put your friends in that same enviable condition." Letha blew a kiss to the rest of the Pride generally, then let the red cloth drop as Harry slid from the bench and into the cozy, Pride-scented dimness of the improvised den. Small noises of shifting told him his fellow Warriors were in the process of making themselves comfortable, and he did the same, following his nose to the spot where Lynx had curled herself into a compact bundle of fur, then transforming into Wolf and fitting his body around hers. She lifted her head and washed a spot along the underside of his jaw in greeting, and he nuzzled between her ears in reply.

"Catch," came the order in Ron's voice from the other side of the den, and a gold necklace came shooting out of the dimly-lit recesses. Wolf caught it on his nose and tossed his head back, looping it around his neck, then lying down carefully so that Lynx, too, would be included in the connection the chain made possible. She rumbled once in contentment, then shut her eyes and settled into stillness, the touch of her mind moving from jittery wakefulness to grateful, contented sleep.

**Ready when you are,** Harry sent through the pendant link, and closed his own eyes.

When he opened them a moment later, the Pride sat in a circle on the dreamworld version of the Quidditch pitch inside the Hogwarts Den, his seven fellow Warriors staring avidly at him. "Well?" said Hermione after several seconds of silence. "Is it true?"

Harry took a moment before answering to look around at his friends and siblings, the people in the world whom he trusted more than anything. If he'd had to, he knew, he would have lied even to them, even now, and done whatever was necessary to make sure they believed him.

*But I don't have to lie anymore.*

*I won't, ever again.*

"Yes," he said. "It's true."

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"I didn't know it myself, not for many years," Remus explained to yet another group of eager listeners, grateful for the voice-restoration potion Aletha had sent over via house-elf, and the plate of sandwiches Danger had procured by similar means. "But it seems a distant ancestor of mine was actually the grandson of Godric Gryffindor. My father must have known about it, at least in terms of keeping me from setting things on fire as a child, but I doubt he ever thought much of it. It wasn't the sort of thing that would have seemed important to him..."

**Not to mention, he was afraid of what might happen if that power ever got loose on a full moon night,** commented Danger silently, as the little crowd in front of Remus busily told one another how amazing it was that anyone should think so little of his heritage.

**He had reason.** Remus repressed a shudder, thinking of what could have happened if he'd ever been able to attack the enclosures which held him with more than simply his weight and strength as the wolf. **But I've had you all these years. And now I'll make do with the Wolfsbane, and seeing you in the morning.** He let a bit of his inner smile bleed onto the bond. **And this coming summer, it won't just be you I'll be seeing...**

"I'm sure I've heard all sorts of things about young Harry Potter being able to handle fire," said one of the witches in the group in front of Remus. "That was supposed to be the gift of the Gryffindor line, wasn't it?"

Remus held out his hand, allowing the magic which filled the Great Hall to settle into his palm in a physical form. "Harry and I undertook a blood-bonding a few years ago, to keep his mind safe from Voldemort," he said as the watchers gasped and whispered in awe at the silver flames which danced against his skin. "While we were linked by that bond, he was technically an Heir of Gryffindor just as I am, but he gave up that bloodline and that power as part of defeating Voldemort."

**Hang on a tick,** said Danger as the side conversations resumed, people wondering aloud if they could have abandoned such an astounding ability, speculating on what they might have done with it, wishing there were some way for them to receive it for themselves. **Something just occurred**

**to me. That little girl of Harry and Ginny's...when was she conceived, exactly?**

**I don't see why**— Remus began, when suddenly he did. **Well now. That is interesting.**

**We'll just have to see where that goes.** Danger craned her neck, and sighed in relief as huge, steaming platters of food began to materialize on the high table, with stacks of plates, bowls, and cutlery neatly set out on either side. **And we are about to be eclipsed by a far more interesting subject. So if you wouldn't mind—**

"Not at all," Remus said aloud, drawing his wand and touching it first to Danger's head, then to his own. A few moments later, two patches of air got to their feet and meandered slowly down the narrow aisle between the tables, pressing themselves against the bench as people came crowding by in their rush to get at the banquet the house-elves had prepared.

"Hey there, strangers," said Sirius as first Danger, then Remus, slipped inside the Disillusioned Privacy Spell, their own Disillusionments dissolving as they did so. "Care for something to eat? Kady's taking orders."

"I'm fine for right now." Danger sat down beside Aletha and exchanged a thorough hug with her friend. "Except maybe a cup of tea, please, Kady?"

"Right away, Miss Danger. And Master Remus?" Kady beamed up at the person she'd named. "Is there anything you is wanting?"

"Make it two, and some biscuits to go with. Chocolate, if possible."

"Of course, Master Remus!" Kady vanished with a sharp snap.

"I should've figured this out a long time ago, shouldn't I?" Sirius raked his hair back from his face. "Every damn house-elf in this place calls you that, and they have as long as I can remember. And they never did to me or James, or anyone else I can think of. Except you," he added to his wife. "You're 'Mistress Letha' to them, have been for years. Since well before we ever knew which of us Pearl got the powers from."

"Just one more reason we should never underestimate them." Aletha sighed deeply, cupping her hands around her own mug of tea. "I can hardly believe it's finally over. We've won. We can go home—or rather, we *are* home." She glanced up at the ceiling of the Great Hall above them. "Since I doubt Severus will want his position back. Either of them."

"Speaking of which, did he even make it through this whole mess?" Sirius glanced towards the door which led to the outside. "I mean, we got the Mark off him, so he wouldn't have gone down with the rest of them, and he was with us up until our lion and queens popped out of the Forest, then we saw him in that spirit-parade with Harry and Ginny's little girl, but I haven't spotted him anywhere since..."

"Does it matter?" Remus turned to accept his tea from Kady as she reappeared, balancing a tray

wider than she was tall on one tiny hand. "Letha would know if he were in need of healing somewhere on the grounds—or so I assume?" he ended on a questioning note, glancing towards his Pack-sister.

"Yes, I would." Aletha's eyes unfocused briefly. "And he's not. Whether that means he was ambushed somewhere in the Forest and he's dead, or he simply chose to slip away while we were handling other items of business, I couldn't tell you."

"We'll find out sometime." Danger relieved Kady of her other burdens. "Maybe. In the meantime, let's talk about more important things." She grinned broadly. "Like us."

"Yes, like you two." Sirius reached across to tug a handful of Danger's hair, pulling his hand back just in time as she snapped her teeth at it. "Hey, knock that off. That's not how the Consort of Gryffindor ought to behave."

"Is it how the Consort of Ravenclaw ought to?" Danger riposted. "Bully."

"Brat."

"Enough," said Aletha tolerantly, catching Sirius's hand in her own and pressing it gently to the table. "But it really does make a great deal of sense, when you think about it. The Heir of Slytherin, of Salazar's elder line, chose to safeguard his existence with the deaths of others, by tearing his soul in the making of the Horcrux Letifera. What could be more fitting than the Heir of Gryffindor being saved by the life and love of others, through the healing of his soul in the bond of the Horcrux Vivens?"

"Makes sense out of Gryffindor's sword being guarded by Slytherin's Heirs, too." Sirius helped himself to one of Remus's biscuits, dunking it into his tea a few times before taking a bite. "They were related. What with the original Amanda, Alex's daughter, and John the Wolf, Maura's son, both marrying one of the Beauvoi sibs."

"And there was something Fox said to Neenie, while he was pretending to be Lucius." Danger glanced downward with a smile, at the red-draped segment of table currently serving as a den for their cubs. "About an Heir of Slytherin being buried at Godric's Hollow. There is one. William Beauvoi, Alex's last Heir in direct line of descent, and the keeper of Amanda's amulets, until they were given to those who could safely use them..."

"Safely." Remus sighed. "As safe as any of these powers ever can be." He rimmed his mug with flames, brushing his fingers through them. "I never noticed it at the time, but knowing what I know now, I'd imagine being Gryffindor's Heir embarrassed and terrified my father in equal proportions. He never wanted to be anything other than ordinary, and this power that lived in him was so far from ordinary that he must have repressed it incredibly. Because at the moment of his life when he would have needed it the most, he couldn't use it."

"Your mother." Aletha nodded, her eyes quiet with understanding sadness. "I'd wondered about that. He couldn't control the fire that killed her, could he?"

"No, he couldn't. And I'd imagine that's why he never told me we were the Heirs." Remus sketched on the tabletop with a fingertip, the flames following his every move. "He'd probably intended to tell me when I came home from school the summer I was seventeen, and spend the holidays teaching me control—which would have meant total repression, never daring to use the power at all—only she talked him into going away for a week or two first, and on that holiday their hotel caught fire and she died. He must have thought I'd blame him for not being able to save her." He passed his hand over the fire, collecting it into his palm, and closed his fingers on it, snuffing it out. "And truth be told, I probably would have. Then."

"I'd have laughed at Regulus if he'd told me he'd fallen for a Muggle girl," said Sirius softly into the silence. "Probably would have shared the joke with everyone I knew. Including Wormtail."

"I could easily have burned my powers out, trying to heal my mother." Aletha snapped one of the biscuits in half. "Or myself, if I hadn't been warned about that."

"And if my parents hadn't died..." Danger exhaled a shaky little laugh. "But no one is ever told what *would* have happened. Maybe we all would have found each other, and found our way, and done what we needed to do just as well if everything had gone exactly the way we thought we wanted it to go."

"Then again, maybe not." Remus stroked a finger along the back of Danger's hand, and smiled at her when she looked over at him. "For all the pain and trouble along the way, I still wouldn't change a thing. As it fell out, I have you, and our Pack, and our little girl who's on her way, and whoever comes along after her. And for tonight, that's enough."

"Because when you have enough for tonight, you have all you'll ever need." Danger leaned back against her husband. "Have I mentioned lately I love you?"

"It may have come up once or twice, but I'm never averse to hearing it again." Remus looked around at the Blacks. "Further questions?"

"I have one." Sirius held up his hand as though they were back in class. "What about that stupid pretend curse you put on Gryffindor, Danger, back before my trial? The thing about having his best present opened, him and all his descendants, and the next morning Draco had Harry's Cloak open before we were awake?"

"Oh, that!" Danger laughed aloud. "Do you know what this one said he wanted most that Christmas?" She nudged Remus with her shoulder. "To see my eyes looking into his again—and who was it opened up her eyes that morning before any of the rest of you, and saw that little blond head floating in midair?" She glowered at the tabletop, as though she could see Fox through it. "But I'll get him back for it. My revenge is not swift, but it is very thorough. Someday, somehow, when he is least expecting it, around he'll turn, and there my head will be..."

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The Pride's period of "let's all talk at once" lasted only a few moments, since seven people needing to ask questions were decidedly more manageable than the several hundred Harry knew his Pack-

parents were facing back at the waking Hogwarts. Barely a minute after he'd made his declaration, the rest of the Warriors had ceded the floor to Hermione.

"So everything you've ever been able to do with fire has just been because of the blood-bond with Moony?" his sister asked, tapping her fingers against her lower lip. "I could have sworn there was something—ah!" She slapped an open hand against the grass, which rippled slightly in proper dreamworld fashion. "Got it! When Voldemort kidnapped you out of the third Triwizard task, when he was holding you captive at the graveyard, you burned the ropes off yourself, but you hadn't done the blood-bond yet, you wouldn't for weeks after that—"

"Which ought to mean I couldn't have burned the ropes, and I didn't." Harry shook his head, grateful that he had lingered for a few moments after making his bargain with the Founders to ask them this same question, leaving it up to them how much or how little to tell him. "The ropes did burn, and I thought it was me, but it wasn't."

"Who was it, then?" asked Fox. "It can't have been Moony or Danger, they were off dealing with the Karkaroff mess, and there isn't exactly anyone else around who could do that kind of precision fire work at a distance..."

"Want to bet?" Harry laced his fingers and tucked them behind his head, stretching his arms. "There was someone that night who was thinking hard about me, someone who wanted to help me. Someone who would have done *anything* to help me, no matter whether it was hard or whether it hurt or whether it took away something she could never get back..."

Ginny's eyes had been widening gradually through Harry's recitation. "I was holding onto my pendants," she murmured, cupping them in her palm as though to illustrate. "Holding onto them hard, so I could concentrate on that and not on screaming. And I thought that I could see my blood running under my skin, but it wasn't blood, was it? It was light. Red light. I used a Gryffindor jewel without even realizing it. I sent you that fire."

"You saved my life, is what you did." Harry laid his own hand over Ginny's, squeezing it gently. "Getting to be kind of a habit with you now, isn't it?"

"And I remember you got burned back in your third year, Harry, when Hagrid had those Skrewt things, and again when Moony was starting to teach you Occlumency." Meghan brushed her fingers across the back of her hand. "But Moony never, *ever* gets burned. Not from the sun or from his tea or from anything."

"He can see through my magic, too, the way Mrs. Letha can." Neville gestured in front of his eyes to indicate his power of whispering things invisible. "Remember Hagrid's house, the night you passed baby Norbert along to Tonks?"

Meghan giggled. "I remember Mama Letha said Moony said you looked like baby birds standing there waiting to be fed!"

"You want baby bird, I'll give you baby bird," said Ron, starting to draw his wand. Meghan



shrieked and dived behind Neville, who reached around with his fingers waggling, evoking a second shriek and a brief wrestling match. "One thing does seem kind of weird to me. Gryffindor, Sir Godric, he's all about bravery and daring, but Mr. Moony...well, nobody could say he's not brave, 'cause he is. Still, no offense meant, but he's kind of ordinary. He doesn't go around doing the big heroic things you'd think the Heir of Gryffindor would do."

"Maybe that's because he's Maura's bloodline, not Paul's." Fox twisted a bit of grass between his fingers. "Might be interesting to find out just how many generations Paul's descendants lasted, if that's they were all about. Because isn't doing big heroic things generally how you get big heroic funerals?"

Ron joined in the general laugh on this one, and reached over to pluck a wisp or two of grass from Meghan's braids as she sat up, her robes disheveled. Luna motioned for Neville to face her and brushed him down briskly. "What needed you to be braver, Ron?" she asked over Neville's shoulder. "Fighting the Death Eaters to help save Percy and the Muggles, or dealing with everything that came after?"

"Ah, got it." Ron nodded, laying a hand briefly across his eyes. "Fighting the Death Eaters was scary, but it only lasted a little while. Having to figure out how to get places without being able to see, and pulling out of feeling sorry for myself because of it, and getting done everything that still needed to get done whether I had a working set of eyes or not, that was the harder part, because it lasted a whole lot longer, and because I couldn't just nerve myself up and *go*. I had to keep going, and *keep* going, and sometimes it just felt like nothing was ever going to get any better." He glanced towards Hermione, who nodded in understanding. "I wanted to give up an awful lot of times, and once or twice I got pretty close to it."

"But you never went through with it, not all the way." Neville leaned his arms on his upthrust knees. "That's the truest kind of courage. Not being a hero for a few seconds or a few minutes and then getting praised and lionized for it, but doing what's right all day, every day, through good times and bad ones. Maybe without anyone noticing what you do, or maybe even with people trying to tear you down for it because you make them uncomfortable about how they're handling their own lives, but instead of trying to improve themselves, they'll try to destroy you. Not that we don't need the...bold heroes, I guess you'd call them," he added, jerking a thumb towards Harry. "We do. But we need the quiet ones even more."

"Because evil isn't always so considerate as to call itself nice obvious things like 'the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters', and we won't always have prophecies about how to get rid of it." Ginny rubbed her hands along her arms. "Even if they are sometimes a little more cryptic than we'd like them to be, they're still helpful."

"Yes, about that." Hermione frowned. "I can't say I'm too happy that we were tricked into thinking you were the Heir, Harry, when it was Moony all along. I mean, I can understand it in a way—Voldemort couldn't exactly hate you more than he already did, and our all seeming so sure it was you would confuse him and keep him off his balance—but when it comes to things like the lion's line continuing, you should never have been put in that kind of position, Ginny, not when Harry being the Heir was nothing more than a feint—"

"Except that if we hadn't got married, if we hadn't been trying to have a baby, Voldemort would have *known* it was a feint, so what would the point of it have been?" Ginny snapped. "You might as well say Fox ought to've told you he was alive, and put himself into mortal danger when Voldemort realized you weren't acting right for him to be dead! As it was, we kept our enemy confused for just long enough that we could beat him. And I don't regret anything, *anything*, that I've done to get us there." She sighed wearily, as if she had run out of anger before she expected to. "I'm only sorry you took my werewolf curse on yourself when it wasn't necessary. That, I'll regret."

"Oh no you won't." Hermione tossed her hair over her shoulder mock-huffily. "If anyone's going to regret that, it's me, and I don't. Not in the least. One of us becoming *half* a werewolf is far and away better than one of us becoming the real thing! At least the curse calmed down in me eventually, where it never would have with you, because it would have had the disease to back it up..." She twisted a bit of her hair around her finger, her eyes far away. "That they shall change into the form of beasts at every full moon," she murmured aloud. "That they shall lose their human minds in the change. That they shall be forever feared and shunned by other human beings. And her one 'mercy'—that they shall never have children of their own."

"The story of Rhea Silvia, and how werewolves began." Luna drew her own wand and outlined a square on the air, the graceful lines she sketched filling with silver-washed color to create the image of a great she-wolf, lifting her mournful howl to the red-tinged moon. "I remember when you told it to us, three days after Mr. Moony told it to you. When you had enough of your courage back to trust us, to be with us again."

"All down to this one." Hermione turned her smile on Ron, who dipped her a seated bow. "He just wouldn't give up on me—and speaking of which," she added, her momentary flippancy vanishing. "Ron, how did you know?"

"Know—oh, about Harry?" Ron became very interested in his fingernails. "Don't suppose you'd believe it was a lucky guess—"

"*Ronald*."

"*Neenie*," Ron returned in the same tone. "How do I see things these days? It isn't the same way you do, any of you, Dolohov put paid to that—"

"Oh!" Hermione clapped a hand to her forehead. "Of course, of course! You could see he wasn't dead, because you see heat, and living people are warm!"

"Well, he could've been freshly dead, no time to cool down yet. But then I saw..." Ron waggled his fingers under his nose, moving his hand away from his face. "Pretty sure dead people don't breathe. Though if we want to know for sure, maybe we should ask a vampire. They're technically dead, aren't they?"

"They're technically stupid." Luna scowled briefly, but with intense annoyance. "They can barely speak in complete sentences unless you're far enough away from them that they can't smell your

blood, and even then, they're always thinking about how they can get you to come closer so they can feed on you..."

Harry caught Fox's eye as a three-way discussion about the difference between vampires and Inferi erupted among Luna, Meghan, and Hermione, with Ron and Neville as interested if somewhat baffled listeners. A moment later, a gauze-like curtain drifted into being, separating the Potters from the rest of the Pride. Ginny sighed in relief, the tension Harry had been able to smell on her bleeding out of her shoulders. "How did you know I needed this?" she asked, leaning back into the crook of his arm.

"Don't suppose you'd believe it was a lucky guess," Harry said in tones similar to Ron's, winning a brief giggle from his lady. "So why'd you shut Neenie down? Not that it's a bad thing to do necessarily, we all need it from time to time, but this seemed to have a little more of a point to it than usual..."

"You don't understand." Ginny pressed her face against his shoulder, shivering. "Oh, Harry, I thought we were going to lose you for real!"

"Well, between you and me and the goal hoops, so did I." Harry allowed himself a brief snicker, given the overtone to his scent which would tell his mate in no uncertain terms that he was laughing at himself rather than her. "And I'm pretty sure that's why the Founders made the final term of the bargain what they did. By the time I came around to it, I was so focused on beating Voldemort, whatever it cost, that I *would* have cut that cord if I'd been handling it on my own. You had enough brains to remember we knew a trick that would fool him, and to pull it off without giving us away. But you're not allowed to tell," he added hastily. "You're never allowed to tell *anyone* that I thought I truly was dead, until Mum and Dad showed me I wasn't."

"Don't worry. I won't." Ginny's hands fisted tightly in his robes, shaking as they only did when she was badly frightened, even by something which hadn't happened. "Because you almost were, Harry. When you took hold of Fawkes's tail, when he lifted you up, you believed the cord was cut just as much as Voldemort did, and that belief was starting to weaken it. And Fawkes is very strong. If he had kept flying, without you knowing that you ought to be alive...you might not be, right now."

Harry went very still, letting his mind absorb this thought. "So why am I?" he asked when he could trust his voice to form the words without trembling overmuch. "Was it—"

Ginny freed one hand to withdraw her pendant chain from her robes and toss it over Harry's head. A picture formed in the space their two minds shared, a picture, from Ginny's perspective, of the moment Voldemort seized the spirit-dagger to sever the connection between himself and Harry. The cord which still bound Harry to his body was visible, but faint, and thinning perceptibly at a point nearby—

A point about which a set of tiny fingers had wrapped itself.

"She held onto me." Harry stared in awe at the determination on his daughter's small face, as she

clutched at the line which held him anchored into life. "She could feel that you were sad because I was going away from you, and she reached out and held onto me so you wouldn't be sad anymore..."

"And that is why I will never let anyone say we should have been told you weren't the Heir." Ginny let the picture dissipate. "Because I like you better alive."

"I like me better alive too." Harry bent his head and found Ginny's lips with his own. **So**, he said silently through the pendant link. **What should we name her?**

**We...actually have a little while to think about that.** Ginny's mind filled with the image of a smiling, silver-haired witch holding out both hands to her. **Lady Rowena knew a lot of people would look at things the same way Hermione did, that it's a bad idea for us to be starting our family so young, when neither of us has even finished school yet, and when you aren't really Gryffindor's Heir. So she offered me a gift.** Her hand rested briefly against her belly, which still held the same gentle curve it always had. **A gift of time.**

"How long?" Harry asked, breaking off the kiss.

"Three years." Ginny grinned up at him. "How much trouble do you think we can cause in three years?"

"You're asking this of a Marauder's cub?"

"True. Silly me." Ginny chuckled under her breath. "Still, I did have an idea. For her name, I mean. If you like it."

Harry shrugged. "I can't like it or not like it if you won't tell me what it is."

"Oh, *make* sense, why don't you." Ginny stuck out her tongue at her husband. "I was reading over Mrs. Danger's prophecies a couple weeks ago, and I kept looking at the very first one she ever got, at a line near the end of it."

"'And peace comes to the Man Who Won'," Harry quoted. "That bit?"

"Exactly that bit." Ginny drew Harry's hand to rest against her midsection as well. "What would you think of naming her Irina?"

"Irina. 'Peaceful one'." Harry spread his fingers, imagining himself cradling the tiny life which slept within his lady even now. "You do realize we're going to end up calling her Reenie."

"There are worse things." Ginny smiled. "So what do you think?"

"I think that's just about perfect." Harry turned his hand over to grasp Ginny's. "Irina Potter it is." He glanced upwards, seeing only the ceiling of the dreamworld Quidditch pitch, but thinking of the people who were surely watching over his sleeping body in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. "And three years'll give us a chance to get in some practice, on Marcus and on...whatever Moony and

Danger end up naming her." He chuckled as a thought occurred to him. "I wonder if Danger did any of that same kind of research? Because there's a line right before that one in the prophecy, a line about one of the other things that would happen once we finally beat Voldemort..."

---

"Nadia," said Danger firmly. "Her name is Nadia."

"'Hope'." Remus nodded. "Given that she ended a war before she'd even existed a day, it seems fitting."

"Not to mention how long we've both hoped this could happen." Danger closed her eyes, feeling the hum of the magic of Hogwarts as the castle sang greeting to the newest member of its family. "And I don't know if I could even have dreamed that she'd be an Heir, that she'd belong here at Hogwarts—"

"But you did dream of it," came Aletha's teasing voice from beside her. "'When they who saved the savior twine/the freshest blood with Founder's line'—sound familiar at all?"

"Harry being the savior, though we won't repeat that in front of him," Sirius put in. "Kid's going to have quite enough hero-worship to be going on with. And what kind of blood could be fresher, magically speaking, than a witch who's not just Muggleborn but who wasn't born a witch at all?"

"Though there is one thing you've dreamed that hasn't yet happened, and should happen. Soon." Aletha's tones took on an undertone of sadness. "Albus won't be with us for very long."

"What're you—" Sirius broke off in the middle of his sentence. "Oh. That."

"'Oh, that'?" Danger cracked one eye open to glare at her Pack-brother. "Two of your best friends in the whole world are going to be magically married, celebrating the end of decades of war and the continuation of the Gryffindor line, and all you have to say about it is 'Oh, that'?"

"I'm a man." Sirius held up his hands in surrender. "The closest I get to being involved with a wedding is signing the Gringotts forms when someone shoves them under my nose and saying 'Yes, dear' a lot."

Remus sighed. "Mr. Moony would like to remind Mr. Padfoot that Mr. Padfoot's daughter is fast approaching marriageable age, and will most likely wish to enter into that happy state as swiftly as she may, not to mention with as many bells, whistles, and fireworks as the other half of that pairing will allow her to cram into a single ceremony."

Sirius dropped his head on the table. "Mr. Padfoot respectfully requests that this conversation never be repeated to said daughter."

"Mr. Moony has no plans to repeat it, but cannot speak for Madam Danger and Madam Letha in this regard." Remus tilted his head at first Aletha, then Danger, and was greeted with identical smug smiles from both directions. "However. One wedding at a time, please, ladies. And the first

one will be here, in the Great Hall." He lifted Danger's hand to his lips. "Just the way we dreamed it together, all those many years ago..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 67: Hail and Farewell (Year 7)

On the morning of the eighth of November, sixteen years to the day after she'd first dreamed of marrying a man she'd never met, the woman called Danger stood before a mirror, studying the white gown she'd found waiting for her when she awakened that morning. The material lay against her skin as soft as any cloud, from the gauzy sleeves, embroidered with rampant lions and stalks of grain, to the gently curving neckline with its little ruffle of lace, to the softly layered skirt which flowed sleekly with her every step.

"Hello, Mrs. Lupin," she murmured to her reflection. "It's nice to meet you."

"As if that's not who you are already," said Aletha from behind her, straightening the shoulder of her own gown of deep, rich blue. "And he's not peeking, is he?"

"No, he's not." Danger chuckled. "I won't let him. But truly, no, I wasn't. I always hung onto the Granger part of it, so Neenie wouldn't feel...left out, I suppose. And then she took the Lupin for herself, added it on the way I did, and made me wonder why I'd never done that in the first place."

"And one of these fine days we'll be doing this for her, just before she becomes Mrs. Hermione Weasley." Aletha picked up a delicate golden circlet from which descended two filmy swathes of material. "May I?"

"No one better." Danger stood very still, allowing her friend to lay the coronet gently on her curls and arrange her veils, one down her back, the other over her face. "How are things going out there?"

"Like a dream." Aletha smirked at Danger's groan. "You didn't really expect me to ignore that easy a straight line, did you?"

"I shouldn't have. But silly me, I did." Danger turned to look at her friend through the slight misting the veil laid over her vision, ignoring the possibility that some of it might also be due to tears. "I wonder sometimes what I've done to deserve this," she said quietly. "How I can possibly have such amazing friends as you and Sirius, and this incredible man who loves me so very much, and those mad, marvelous miracles we call the cubs. It can't be just because I had a dream, or even because I believed in it..."

"It's not." Aletha smiled, though her own eyes were shimmering bright, and drew her wand to conjure Danger a handkerchief. "Millions of people have dreams, and I'd imagine most of them believe in those dreams. But you *acted* on your dream, Danger. Maybe you didn't go out looking for it, but you didn't ignore it when it fell into your lap, either. And then, once it was happening, you refused to run away or back down when things got complicated and frightening. You stood your ground and you fought like the mother wolf you are, and *that's* what brought you here and now. What brought us all."



Danger laughed shakily through her tears. "Aletha Carina Black, if it weren't for smear-proof makeup, I would be so angry with you right now!"

The Pack-sisters embraced once, tightly, then left the small antechamber where they'd been making their final preparations. In the entrance hall of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore and the entirety of the Pride awaited them, just as Danger had dreamed it all those years ago on the first den-night the Pack had ever known—

*And it really is just like I dreamed it.* Danger had to stifle a sound which might have been either a laugh or a sob as she caught sight of Fox, on one knee between Meghan and Hermione. From his impeccably combed white-blond hair to the wicked gleam in his silver eyes, he was the image of the handsome young man she'd seen that night, a perfect foil for Harry, sporting a look which could have descended equally from the line of Malfoy or of Beauvoi.

*That story came full-circle in the end. But then, the best ones always do.* Watching Aletha move down the line of kneeling cubs, murmuring a few words to each, Danger smiled to herself. *I suppose that means mine and Remus's is one of the best as well...*

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In the side chamber where he was riding herd on the groom, Sirius frowned. Something about Remus's expression didn't seem right for a man who was about to celebrate a magical wedding ceremony with a woman about whom he'd been crazy for over fifteen years, and who also happened to have saved his life.

"You all right?" he asked, flicking a bit of overcooked rice off the shoulder of his dark red dress robes (Peeves had ambushed them earlier and got off one balloon filled with the soggy white gunk before Remus's firmly voiced *Go away* had taken effect). "You look like your dog just died."

Too late, he realized why these words seemed familiar to him.

*Well, I suppose his laughing his arse off is preferable to that weird sad look he had going on...*

---

Remus didn't know if he could have explained to Sirius what he'd been thinking. For that matter, he wasn't sure about it himself. He'd been considering his own growing-up (surprisingly happy, despite the ever-present fear centered around full moons), the childhoods he'd been able to give his cubs (once again, achieving an unexpected level of stability and normality, if with their own Marauder twist), and the life his daughter Nadia would know.

*Nadia Abigail, for surely no little girl ever brought her father more happiness.*

So far he'd gone in his thoughts, when suddenly a twist of mind had brought him into contact with something bigger and broader than himself. He'd seen a thousand years and more stretching out before him, filled with joy and pain, laughter and weeping, loyalty and betrayal, and through all of it a strange, bone-deep longing, as though some part of himself were lost, never to be regained...

*That was you, wasn't it?* he asked Hogwarts silently, catching his breath and steadying himself with one hand on the stone wall, as Sirius peered out the door to the Great Hall, checking if the signal was being given for the groom and best man to take their places. *Missing the Founders. Missing Slytherin. He may have had some unpleasant ideas, but he still helped found the school—more than that, you belonged to him first, so losing him must have been a wrench, over and above any of the others.*

Hogwarts assented. Although many of that one's thoughts had been of causing others pain, still that one had been a vital part of what had begun here, and losing such vital parts left wounds that were difficult to heal.

*There will be new Heirs born soon, you know. Danger and I have a daughter on the way, and Aletha and Sirius have a son. The other two pairs are still young, so they'll need to take a bit more time, but I'm sure they're planning on children of their own eventually...*

A slow, warm wave of happiness grew within Hogwarts's "mind", until Remus had to take his hand away, breaking off the connection. There could be no doubt the school highly approved of the idea of further Heirs of its Founders.

*Which is fine by me, given that I rather approve of the idea myself.*

"There's our cue," Sirius hissed, and Remus roused from his reverie and crossed the room in four strides, pausing just long enough to check Sirius's appearance and have his own checked in return (one final grain of rice had adhered to his collar) before they stepped out into the brightly decked Great Hall.

So far as Remus could remember, both the decorations and the packed benches of attendees matched Danger's long-ago dream point for point, and the Minister of Magic he hadn't then recognized as Arthur Weasley awaited him and Sirius on the dais. A certain degree of sadness lurked in Arthur's eyes still, and likely always would, Remus thought. Losing Fred only a few months after George's death had been painful for all the Weasleys.

*But they did get to see the twins together, one last time, when Harry called on everyone who ever loved us. And given that shell-shocked expression Percy keeps sporting every time Crystal comes near him, I'm wondering if George didn't take the opportunity to drop a word in his ear...*

Grinning at his own matchmaking tendencies, Remus blinked out of his reverie and faced the rear of the Great Hall as the doors swung wide to admit the first couple, Neville and Meghan. The first dream of this day he'd shared with Danger, he recalled with some astonishment, hadn't included them, nor had it shown him Fox and Luna.

*Though given who Fox looks like today, I probably would have taken that as proof Danger was some kind of Death Eater spy, and tried to pull myself out of the dream. And given that I'm fairly sure her taming power wouldn't have taken effect at that point, since the link between us didn't form until I'd taken her hand and accepted that connection between us... He repressed a shudder. No need to think about that now. It didn't happen. And this is.*

Hermione and Ron parted at the bottom of the steps up to the dais, making way for Harry and Ginny, which called to mind the first bit of Danger's prophecies Remus had ever heard. *I wonder what would have become of us if we'd had enough sense to follow the hints about 'red' and find Wormtail sooner than we did? Though I don't suppose we could have cleared Sirius's name and still stayed anonymous as long as we managed to do otherwise. It was difficult, being in hiding so long, but it gave the cubs that chance for more-or-less normality that they might not otherwise have had...*

"Oy," muttered Sirius, nudging Remus in the ribs, as Aletha paced down the aisle with her head held high, in advance of the veiled vision in white on the arm of Albus Dumbledore. "Come on back from wherever you went off to."

Remus flashed a brief, hand-signed invitation to Sirius to do something unpleasant to himself, and let his eyes rest on the woman approaching him to the strains of the bridal march. For so many years, this moment had been only a dream to them, a goal distant and all but unreachable, to be wistfully imagined but never achieved. Now it was here, and Remus realized one of the reasons why it had taken so long.

*Because we needed to fight our battles, learn to keep going through every kind of adversity, to be sure we'd be strong enough to handle this much joy.*

Dumbledore gently folded Danger's veil back and spoke a few soft words to her, inaudible even from a step or two away. Whatever they were, they made Danger laugh and blush like a schoolgirl all at once, and then Dumbledore was laying her hand in Remus's, smiling at both of them, and going to the spot in the front row beside Fawkes's perch which was waiting for him.

**There you are,** said Remus silently, turning with his lady to face the Minister of Magic. **What took you so long?**

**Oh, I don't know.** Danger allowed a stream of images to race through her mind, images of days and nights, winters and summers, joys and sorrows. **Sixteen years isn't so long in the final scheme of things. We'll have at least four times that long again together. Maybe even five...**

**Five's pushing it, even for witches and wizards,** Remus objected. **Don't forget, you weren't born a witch. And I've had a bit more wear and tear on my system than a normal wizard would.**

**Ha.** Danger sniffed inaudibly. **Bet you a kiss we make it.**

**Now there's a bet I'm willing to take.** Bestowing the mental version of the named item, Remus squeezed Danger's hand, and turned his attention to the words being spoken before him.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today..."

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Out in the Forest, Blaise Zabini sat on a convenient tree stump, regarding the oddly twisted black

walnut tree which grew across the broad clearing from him. After the clean-up of the Battle of Hogwarts had finished, when his questions had been answered as fully as he thought they ever would be, he'd had Neville draw him a map to this place, and had chosen this moment to come here so that he could be sure he was alone.

*Or as alone as anyone will ever be in this particular place, anyway.*

"I know you're in there, Bellatrix Black Lestrange," he said aloud, never taking his eyes off the tree. "And I know you can hear me. You had some big dreams, didn't you? Wanted to be the Dark Warrior Lady, the Consort of the Heir of Slytherin. Live forever with him, ruling over Hogwarts, and over all the wizarding world. Tell everyone where to go and what to do. Wave your wand and make the puppets dance. And look where you are now. Trapped *inside* your wand, rooted in one place. Just another curiosity of Hogwarts, for first years to dare each other to go near. Nothing to be afraid of here. Not now, and not ever again.

"But no, I lie." He leaned forward a little, watching as the tree's leaves rustled, although the day was still and no wind moved in the clearing. "There is a way you could get out of there, you know. Heir of Hufflepuff, fair play and all of that. But it's not a way I think you could ever handle, no more than your precious *Dark Lord* ever did. You'd have to look back at your whole twisted, warped, Dark-loving life. You'd have to think over everything you ever did that was wrong, from whatever it was you started with, tormenting your sisters or cousins or whatever, to the very end of it all. Putting my Colleen under Imperius. Being the reason she died.

"What's that?" He paused, sardonically, as the branches quivered more emphatically than before. "Oh, you didn't cast the Killing Curse? You were angry with the fool who did? Well, that's nice of you. But you were still the reason she stepped out there, the reason she came courting that Killing Curse." His lips curled in a smile which held nothing of humor. "And you're also one of the reasons your side got defeated. You see, you told her to do only what she ordinarily would. And Colleen was a true Gryffindor, even if she didn't think she was. So it was perfectly ordinary for her to do something so brave as that. Perfectly ordinary, for her to offer her life to save the rest of us...

"But there I go, off on my tangents again." Shaking his head, Blaise straightened his robes fussily, taking the moment he needed to force the tears out of his voice. This important information deserved to be delivered in as clear of tones as he could muster. "You see, my lady Bellatrix, the only way you'll ever be free of that branchy prison of yours is if you look back at all those wrong things you did and *realize* that they were wrong. If you can muster up even the least little drop of honest *remorse* for any of them. Do that, and..." He mimed the tree trunk breaking open. "It's the same thing that could have saved your beloved Master, or so Harry says. Frankly, I'm not sure I believe it." He shrugged. "But then, that's just me."

Getting to his feet, he bowed elaborately to the tree, as he might have to one of his mother's most definitively pureblood friends. "Enjoy your forever," he said. "Goodbye."

He walked away, and did not look back.

Catching her breath after one of the livelier pureblood set-pieces, Danger waved off several hopeful prospective dancing partners, choosing instead to sit down next to Dumbledore at the small table he was sharing with McGonagall and the Heads of House, all of whom were conveniently dancing themselves or at the buffet table. "Knut for them," she said, arranging her skirts.

"My thoughts?" Dumbledore chuckled. "Hardly worth the investment, my dear."

"Oh, come off it." Danger punched him gently in the arm. "You have more deep thoughts in a minute than most people pack into a month."

"Well, if you insist on knowing." Dumbledore did not move, but the level of noise around them diminished, as though he had cast a partial Privacy Spell. "I am...apprehensive about what comes next for me, as silly as that may sound."

"Not at all." Danger smiled a little. "Adventures are always frightening to start out on. They'd hardly be adventures if they weren't."

"True enough, but..." Dumbledore was examining the grain of the table so intently that Danger was surprised the wood hadn't begun to warp. "You know the story of the greatest folly of my youth. My unfortunate friendship, and how it ended."

"Yes, and I did want to thank you." Danger laid her hand on the table, palm up, and after a moment one of Dumbledore's moved to grasp it. "For trusting us enough not only to tell us that story, but to ask us to tell it to the rest of the world."

"Better you than most others." Dumbledore laughed, softly, painfully, but truly. "Though I suppose it would have been little more than I deserved if such a quill as Rita Skeeter's had told the tale instead...but that is neither here nor there. You know that in the final disagreement between myself and Gellert Grindelwald, in which my brother was also involved, that my sister Ariana was killed by a stray spell in the crossfire. What I do not know, what I have never known..."

"Is whose spell it was," Danger finished when her friend's fingers only tightened around hers. "Is *that* what's been eating at you all these years. That you don't know, you *couldn't* know, if you killed her yourself, or Grindelwald did, or even Aberforth."

"I...have reason to fear it may have been me." Dumbledore's breathing had turned ragged, bringing Fawkes fluttering down from the back of his chair with a worried croon. "So many times I had been angry with my mother for dying and leaving us with the burden of my sister. So often I had wished, in my stupidity and short-sightedness, that Ariana had died instead..."

"So you're afraid that you might accidentally-on-purpose have thrown a spell that killed her." Danger let out a long breath. "Albus, tell me something. Where did you spend the last few months?"

Dumbledore glanced at her sideways. "I think you know that already."

"For the sake of argument, say I don't. And don't you *dare* repeat that back to me," Danger added hastily as the light-blue eyes began to twinkle. "Just...bear with me here. Where were you, while your body was resting in that tomb out by the lake?"

"I was in the place generally known as the Founders' Hogwarts." Dumbledore stroked Fawkes with his free hand as the phoenix nestled under his chin, both of them watching Danger steadily. "Why do you ask?"

"And you have a right to go there, when you've been invited, because you swore the same oath we did, a long time ago, with your brother Aberforth. Yes?"

"I did."

Danger smiled. "Do you think the Founders would let you come into their home if you'd broken your word?" she asked quietly. "You may have resented Ariana, but you also loved her, you and Aberforth both. And you're sworn to one another, hand, wand, and life. I doubt either of you would have missed the signs of such an obvious betrayal of that oath as killing her..."

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"Don't look now," said Sirius to Remus at the wedding party's table, "but the old man's beating your time."

"No, he's not." Remus didn't even look up from the diagram Hermione was drawing for him. "Danger just told him something he's always wanted to hear, and probably should have figured out for himself. Case of being too close to the problem." His finger came down on a point where three lines crossed one another. "No, this is where you're going wrong, Kitten. A triple-intersect is too much power in one place for this part of the spell. Try widening it out to a triangular pattern."

"Troubleshooting spell diagrams on his wedding day." Sirius sighed and took another drink of his punch. "Only Moony."

"Do you remember what we did on ours?" asked Aletha, helping herself to another bit of cheese from the platter in front of her.

"The first one, or the second?"

"Caster's choice."

"Well, on the first one, I spent most of the day sleeping in the sun with Harry using me as a pillow. Recuperating from being out and about, seeing people and having to *talk* to them." Sirius exaggerated his shudder, and smiled at Aletha's answering laugh. "It wasn't until the second one that I got the more traditional kind of nerves, because that was the one in front of the Order, who actually *knew* me, and could embarrass me to within an inch of my life at the supper afterwards..."

---

Harry meandered around the Great Hall, punch cup in hand, letting the joy of this day of celebration hum through his bones and beat in time with his heart. He'd never doubted they would win the war, but on some level he hadn't been expecting to see it himself.

*If this were a story, then my part would be over as soon as Voldemort died. The author wouldn't know quite what to do with me afterwards. So it would just make sense, in a poetic kind of way, for us to kill each other instead of letting me hang about. He sipped at his punch, enjoying the rush of bubbly-sweet-sour citrus across his tongue. But this isn't a story—or rather, it's a whole bunch of stories, because what else is life? And my part as The Boy Who Lived may be over, but my part as a lot of other things is just beginning...*

A flicker of silver fur to one side caught his eye. Luna and Dumbledore were sitting side by side at the Hogwarts teachers' table, Luna's erasable sketching quill moving rapidly over a scroll. Fox lay across the top corners of the scroll, anchoring it down, and watched as the lines on the parchment developed, his tail whisking back and forth with interest.

"Yes, you have it exactly," Dumbledore was saying as Harry reached listening range. "And if the robes can be subtly charmed so that they take to Color-Changers well, that would be even better." He chuckled. "I believe I shall make it a stipulation that all incoming classes of first years must watch two other students quarrelling over whether my robes should be blue or pink, and have a prefect nearby to note which of them will require Remedial Muggle Studies..."

Harry swallowed a snort of laughter by taking another drink of punch and reached Luna's side to see, as he'd half-expected from the conversation, that she was sketching a statue of Dumbledore himself, seated in the armchair which held pride of place behind the Head's desk in the office behind the gargoyles.

"Ah, yes, and here." Dumbledore tapped the statue's hands, which currently lay palms down, grasping the chair's arms lightly. "If one of these could be turned upwards, so that items can be placed there at need, I believe we shall be all but finished." He glanced up. "Hello, Harry. Perhaps you can help make my case to Minerva, and to the Heads of House, that my memorial on the grounds of Hogwarts should be somewhat less ostentatious than it has been to this point."

"Didn't like the tomb, sir?" Harry pulled up a chair for himself.

"It was tasteful, in and of itself, but it seemed intrusive." Dumbledore shook his head. "Hogwarts is a school, a place for the youth of the magical world to seek fresh joys and explore new beginnings. They will encounter sorrows and endings all too soon without being reminded of them every time they wish to observe the giant squid or write papers on the lives of mer-folk. A statue, on the other hand, serves as a reminder of its subject's life, rather than his death. And a statue may be useful, since like the suits of armor, the statues on Hogwarts grounds can be enchanted into life, to fight if they are needed." His eyes were momentarily bleak. "Though if that should ever happen, the situation will be dire indeed."

"All we can worry about is our own time, sir." Harry held out his hand for Luna's quill, and sketched a familiar shape in the palm of the Dumbledore-statue's upturned hand, drawing a

snicker from Fox. "And I think we've done pretty well. Kept our feet warm and dry, for one thing."

"So we have, and that is no small feat. If you will." Dumbledore chuckled at the three-part groan from the assembled Warriors. "Do you think that students will bring my statue socks, Harry? As a sort of luck-offering, hoping that they may do well on an examination or in a Quidditch match?"

"It'd be pretty funny if they did." Harry grinned as Luna took her quill back and began to add other socks here and there about the statue, rolled up on its pedestal and its lap, hanging loosely from its pockets, waving flag-like from its hat. "Maybe we'll spread the word about that. But quietly, keeping it under the *Revelio*. Turn it into a tradition without people ever knowing where it came from..."

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The house-elves were already beginning to clear the mess away as Remus and Danger bade farewell to the last of their guests, exchanging handshakes, hugs, murmured congratulations and bawdy advice, often from the same people. At last only the adults of the Pack and Albus Dumbledore remained in the Great Hall, the latter looking around thoughtfully as Fawkes circled the ceiling, singing softly.

"To live," he said, regarding the star-studded sky overhead, "has been a very great adventure indeed." He looked back at the two couples standing beside him and smiled. "Made greater still by the company of friends for this last part of the way. I wish you all joy, and that in abundance."

"Same to you." Sirius held out his hand, then rolled his eyes and gave Dumbledore a brief, tight hug. "We'll miss you."

"Travel safely, and without pain." Aletha kissed Dumbledore's cheek before embracing him herself. "Thank you for everything."

"For being there today, especially." Danger added her own kiss on Dumbledore's other cheek. "It meant the world to me."

"We'll take care of things, Albus." Remus whisked two fingers in a circle, indicating themselves, Hogwarts, and the greater wizarding world all at once. "Don't worry about us."

"But if I did not worry, how would you know it was me?" Dumbledore inquired, drawing laughter from all four Pack-adults. "I will not say goodbye, but rather *au revoir*, for be it soon or be it late, all those who love will see one another again." He smiled a little as Fawkes backwinged to a landing on his wrist. "Though do not be surprised if it is rather later than you may be thinking even now."

In a rush of flame, Headmaster and phoenix were gone.

"Typical Dumbledore," grumbled Sirius, blinking furiously against the afterimages. "Cryptic to the last. What do you think *that* was all about?"



"I don't know." Remus held out his hand to the spot where the two had vanished, and a final thread of Fawkes's fire coiled itself about his wrist. "But I'd imagine we'll find out." He chuckled under his breath. "Be it soon or be it late."

"And it is late." Danger tucked her chatelaine watch back into the pocket on her gown designed for just such a thing. "Past midnight. Will you excuse us, please?" Her smile turned salacious. "After all, we are newlyweds..."

---

Deep in the Forbidden Forest of Hogwarts, fire flared brightly, and Albus Dumbledore looked around him and smiled. The lore of the Heads of Hogwarts spoke of the Peaceful Grove, a place Helga Hufflepuff and her friend Sylvanus had nurtured together, and where she had often come to regain her composure when the strains of being Headmistress had become too much for her. It was here, or so said the legend, that she had embarked upon her own next great adventure, leaving behind the body she had worn out with more than a century of life and love.

With a long sigh, he lay down on the flat, moss-covered rock in the center of the clearing, letting his weariness overtake him at last. His eyes drifted shut, his aches began to ease, as Fawkes perched beside him and sang, the brilliant croon of his feathered friend at its saddest and most joyful simultaneously.

*I have done the best I could with the time that I was given, and made amends as far as possible for my errors and mistakes.*

*Little more, I think, could be said of any man.*

The final note of the phoenix lament faded into the night.

Then there was silence.

---

"Are we sure this is the right place?" Corona asked, looking around anxiously. The dead-end street in a dingy industrial town was almost aggressively Muggle, and she blessed the vagaries of Muggle culture which made a long skirt and a loose blouse acceptable garments for her to wear on this little excursion. Brian's outfit, jeans and a light jacket over a T-shirt proclaiming that Things Are About To Get Hairy, would have felt decidedly strange and uncomfortable to her.

*But then, he grew up in and out of the Muggle world, so he's used to wearing Muggle clothing. I'll need to get used to it, or at least to things like this, if we're going to bring up our little girls to know both worlds...*

"We gave Echo our note to take to her friend, and this is where she said he was." Brian lifted his hand to knock on the door, then lowered it again. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. No." Corona laughed shakily. "No is more true, but I won't get readier by standing here dithering."

"No more will I." Brian lifted his hand again and knocked three times.

The door swung open almost immediately, revealing a wide-eyed young house-elf in green trousers cut from a kitchen towel, gazing up at them with mingled worry and relief. "Mister Brian Li?" he said tentatively. "And Miss Corona Gamp?"

"Yes, that's us." Brian stepped inside, Corona at his shoulder. "Are you Echo's friend?"

"Yes, sir. Brekky." The house-elf bowed a little. "Brekky has taken good care of little Ella. It is what Brekky's new-old master called the little girl, miss," he added swiftly at Corona's faint gasp. "Only to have something to call her. It is not good to say 'baby' or 'little girl' all the time."

"New-old master?" Brian frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Brekky had an old-old master, who owned his mother." The house-elf held up one long finger. "Then Brekky's new-old master bought him from the old-old master, to take care of little—of the little girl..."

"No, please." Corona managed a smile, and with an effort made it stop wobbling. "If you've called her Ella this long, I think that ought to be her name for real."

*Not to mention, it's close enough to my sister's name that I'll never forget her, but far enough away that I don't have to remember everything...*

"Yes, miss." Brekky beamed. "So Brekky was bought to take care of little Ella, and then the new-old master came back some few days ago and..." He gestured to his trousers, his smile growing improbably wider. "Brekky is a free elf now."

"Are you really." Brian glanced over at Corona, and she nodded her approval of the idea she could see at the backs of his eyes. "You know, Brekky, it would be a shame to take you away from Ella, when you've been caring for her this long. And we may be looking to hire a second house-elf for the townhouse we're going to share with our friends, to help keep up with the chores and take care of our two little girls. Do you think you and Echo could find a way to work together?"

Corona had to fight hard against her desire to laugh at the odd shade of brownish-green which mottled Brekky's face in a distinct house-elf blush. "We'll take that as settled, then," she said. "Now, will you show us Ella?"

"Of course, miss! Right this way!" Brekky scampered through a nearby doorway, and Brian and Corona followed him, to see the house-elf gently levitating a small bundle wrapped in a soft white blanket out of a low-lying cradle. "She is sleeping now, miss," he murmured, waving a hand and wafting the baby across the room towards Corona. "Please be holding her very gently..."

Opening her arms, Corona accepted the tiny bundle, and looked down into a small, round face topped with a downy fuzz of no particular color. Though she would have said five minutes earlier that babies all looked alike to her, and still couldn't have named or listed the differences with any

certainly, she already knew that she would never mistake this little girl for Annette, or for any other child on the face of the earth.

*She is mine.* Bending her head, she brushed a kiss across the soft, unwrinkled forehead. *Mine to love and guard and cherish, as my parents loved and guarded and cherished me and Elladora, and as our grandmother most assuredly did not. And Brian will help me.* She looked up at that wizard, and surprised a bit of the same besotted smile on his face she could feel creeping onto her own. *And Charlie and Tonks will help the both of us, and we them with little Annette.*

*Together, we will build something beautiful, in this new world springing up from the ashes of the old.*

"Goodbye, Elladora," she murmured. "Hello, Ella."

In her arms, the baby squirmed once restlessly, then calmed.

---

"So," said Ron as the Pride walked together towards the Founders' Castle. "Anybody have an idea what this is all about?"

"Not the foggiest." Fox looked towards Luna, who shook her head firmly.

"I don't spy on people who outrank me," she said. "It's rude."

"Not to mention unwise." Hermione chuckled. "Like meddling in the affairs of dragons."

"For we are crunchy and good with ketchup." Meghan grinned from her place riding piggyback on Neville. "And mustard, if it's Dadfoot."

"I resemble that remark," said Padfoot, popping his head around the great oak doors at the top of the outside stairs. "Come on, everybody inside, let's not keep our friends waiting..."

"I wonder." Harry hung back a little, gazing up at the towers above him. "Where's Irina's soul while she's 'sleeping' inside you, Gin? If her body's not going to grow or change at all for those three years we were given, is her soul asleep too? Or..."

Ginny closed her eyes, a brief expression of pain flitting across her features. "Alex and Paul," she murmured. "And probably Adam too. Oh, Harry, we're in so much trouble."

"It's all her fault." Harry hooked a thumb towards Letha, waiting for them at the top of the steps. "She used to say to me, when I was little and driving her mad, 'I hope you have a child just like you someday'..."

"Yes, but this child is going to be a daughter," said Letha as the Potters started up towards her. "Which means she'll be a thousand times worse than you ever were, young man, because she'll have you wrapped around her little finger from the moment she's born."

"No, she won't." Harry let his hand rest against Ginny's abdomen as they reached the top of the stairs. "She's got me there already."

"As it should be." Letha waved towards the doors. "Shall we?"

The rest of the Pack and Pride, along with the Founders, were gathered in the small side chamber where Danger had come to choose her fate not quite seven years ago. Harry handed Ginny into a chair upholstered in green, seated himself in the one beside it decorated in red, and turned his attention to Helga Hufflepuff, who stood in the center of the room, Adam a few paces to one side, his eyes on his mother.

"Do you know what you have done?" she asked, bringing an end to two or three quiet side conversations on both sides of the room. "I'll give you a hint. It seems simple, and yet it's very nearly unprecedented." Now she smiled, and the room seemed to grow warmer and brighter. "You made promises to one another—and *kept them*."

"Many others have sworn the oath you swore," added Rowena Ravenclaw, standing in front of the cluster of her daughters. "Some of them were faithful, some were not. But in all the time over which we have been privileged to watch, you are the only group of twelve who have sworn this oath and maintained your fidelity through some of the most trying times and events which may come to human beings, magical or not."

"Your challenges, of course, are not over, no more than your lives." Godric Gryffindor stood flanked by his son and daughter. "But unless the coming years wreak radical changes in one or more of you, when your earthly lives come to a close, the Oath of the Guardians which you have sworn and kept will come fully into its own."

"What's that mean when it's at home?" asked Ron.

"Simplest terms?" Alexander Slytherin spread his hands. "You're our replacements." He grinned. "Someday, my son, all this will be yours."

"And it's not even a swamp," muttered Padfoot into the stunned silence.

"Wait, wait, wait." Danger held up her hands as though to stop traffic. "Back up the broom a second. Your *replacements*? As in, the people in the castle in the air who watch over things and make them happen? The ones who enforce curses and blessings and try to keep life running smoothly? *That* kind of replacements?"

"Precisely." Alex nodded. "You won't be forced into it, of course. It's still your choice, to stay here or to go on. But it isn't like being a ghost. You're here for a certain amount of time, and then, once you've chosen your own replacements and they've proved themselves, you go on as you would have otherwise. A thousand years is pretty standard, but some Guardians do longer, some shorter. It all depends on what happens during your tenure."

"Make no mistake, this is work." Helga crossed her arms and looked sternly at each Marauder and

Warrior in turn. "Sometimes it may feel like play, but it is always, always work. There are times it will be tedious, and times it will be heartbreaking, but neither of those must be allowed to stop you from fulfilling your duties."

"But there will also be joys along the way." Rowena smiled. "Such as the joy we have felt in watching you grow strong together, and having you as our friends."

"So we ask you now, with all of ourselves as witnesses." Godric spun his fingers in a circle around the room. "Will you accept this gift, and this burden, when your time comes around at last?"

Twisting in his chair, Harry looked from one to another of the Pride. Neville's initial stunned look was fading into wondering acceptance, as though he were hearing a secret which made a hitherto baffling story make sense. Meghan seemed torn between laughter and tears, but her smiles were starting to win out. Luna's eyes were closed, her face composed and calm, but the scent of private glee rising from her was difficult to ignore, and Fox wasn't bothering to hide his smirk, instead stroking the red stone on his wedding ring. Ron and Hermione were having a hand-signed discussion which was moving too fast even for Harry to make out, but which grew calmer even as he noticed it, ending with Ron's *If you say so* and Hermione's *Trust me*.

"What do you think?" he asked Ginny under his breath. "Thousand years sound good to you?"

"A thousand years in a beautiful castle, with you and all my best friends?" Ginny sighed, sounding put-upon, but Harry could smell the laugh she was barely containing. "Well. If I *have* to."

Harry looked over to Moony and nodded once, firmly. Moony smiled and got to his feet, facing his ancestor squarely.

"Sir Godric," he said, "we will accept both the gift and the burden of being Guardians in your stead. So we speak, and so we intend."

"So let it be done, and we thank you for your acceptance." Godric spread his hands. "And for your time here, we give you this wish. May your pains never exceed your joys, and may you always be able to say, of your every endeavor, 'I gave it the best I had.'"

"So let it be done indeed," said Danger softly. "In every day of our lives, and beyond."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 68: Let's Go Home (Year 7)

"And so the Pack and Pride, and their friends and fellow fighters," Sirius muttered as he typed, "began not to return to normal, because nothing goes back to the way it has been, but to find their new normal. To build their lives in the time and place now theirs, and look for ways to keep some of the more painful things that had happened to them from ever happening again." He grinned at the sketch and letter lying next to his typewriter. "For instance, a little place called the Center for All to Magically Explore the Lifestyles of Others Today, or, a bit more manageably, Camelot..."

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"Tell me this seems wrong to somebody else," said Ron, peering around at the long-empty house, now ringing with cheerful shouts and the din common to construction sites the world over, magical and Muggle alike. "I mean, we'd talked about setting up a place where all sorts of people could meet, a sort of crossover point between the Muggle world and the magical one, but *here*?"

"It fits all the criteria we were looking for, except one, and that might actually make it better." Hermione was examining the carvings on a doorframe leading into a small, dark room shrouded in curtains. "A big old house that no one's using, that has connections to the magical world, and that we can set up like a home where a mixed Muggle-magical family lives, even though one never did. Why does it matter that we took it from the other side of the dividing line than we originally thought we might?"

"It doesn't. What matters is who it used to belong to, and what's down there." Ron pointed out one of the windows towards a low hill not too far distant, into the side of which, though it was not visible from this vantage point, a ramshackle hut had been built. "Are we going to tell the Muggles, 'Oh, and just in case you're wondering, the biggest magical bastard in the last hundred years, who thought you were all filth, this was his dad's house and his mum was born just over there'?"

"We won't lie to them if they ask, but why should they ask?" Hermione got to her feet and crossed the entryway of the Riddle house to join her fiancé. "As far as they'll ever know, we chose this place for Camelot because it's fairly easy to get to, because it's big and roomy and has the right look to it, and because it was empty and falling to pieces and supposedly haunted so we could get it cheap. We don't have to mention that it was empty and falling to pieces and supposedly haunted because of Tom Marvolo Riddle, but I think it's kind of ironic, don't you? That some of his earliest murders set the scene, so to speak, for a place that will try to undo everything he did?"

"What of it *can* be undone." Ron slid an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Some wounds never heal right, or at all."

"I know." Hermione leaned into the embrace with a sigh. "But we do what we can with what we have, and we go on." She laughed a little, wearily. "Which sounds horribly like one of those things well-meaning people tell you after bad things happen, that you want to punch them in the face for

saying, but what other words are there?"

"Maybe you don't want to use words," suggested Ron, and reached around with his other arm.

Neville, coming in from one of the back rooms, cast a quick Privacy Spell and Disillusionment over his friends before the rest of his work group arrived.

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"But, of course, there are lots of different ways to bridge the gap between the worlds." Sirius had only to turn his head to see the tiny drawing on the edge of a scroll Hermione had brought to his attention when he'd expressed surprise at the event he was about to chronicle. "You can do it with big fancy buildings and mythical names and loads of planning, or you can do it with just a couple of words, if they're the right ones to the right person at the right time..."

---

Percy paused at the corner of the Huley house to catch his breath and compose himself. Remembering a snatch of conversation he'd heard between his twin brothers nearly a year before, he'd presented himself to Crystal's parents earlier in the morning, for an interview as illuminating as it had been terrifying. Now, here he was, standing in the chill of an early December day, about to talk to a girl who held the power in her slender hands to change his life forever.

*Strange how none of the battles I've fought in were nearly so frightening as this one single moment...*

Summoning his courage, he stepped around the corner.

Crystal, on her knees near a small thicket of bushes, looked around and smiled to see him, but held up a hand to stop him where he was. "Don't come any nearer," she said softly. "You'll scare them."

"Them?" Percy looked closely towards the thicket, and after a moment was able to discern among the interwoven branches the shapes of tails, whiskers, paws. "Cats?"

"Two of them. I think they may have got out a window, or run away from a car, because they don't look like they're wild, and they seem to think human beings should pay attention to them." Crystal held out her hand, and a small, black-and-white nose emerged from the branches to sniff at her fingertips before being withdrawn. "Can you send those dishes over here, the ones I left by the back door? I think maybe if I feed them they'll stay."

Percy circled his wand once, magically tying together the two small bowls of shredded fish and the broad dish of water into a single item, then levitated that item and carefully traced its path through the air towards Crystal, setting it down beside her without spilling a drop. Crystal picked up a piece of the fish and held it out, and a brown-striped nose poked out of the branches this time to investigate, before a set of gleaming teeth neatly nipped the food away from her.

"Excellent." Crystal pushed the dishes closer to the thicket, then got to her feet and backed away slowly. "I'll leave them to that—it's nice to see you, Percy. Come and sit down?" She nodded to a



wooden bench set up beside a small garden bed, and Percy joined her there, wondering at the strangely brittle overtone in her voice. "How's your family holding together? I'm sorry I haven't been able to come up and visit much, but one of my sisters just got engaged and Mum's in full wedding-madness mode."

"We're not as bad as we could be." Percy adjusted the collar of his cloak as the wind picked up slightly. "It's not been easy, of course, it's never easy to lose someone you love, but..."

"But I was right." Crystal folded her hands across her knee and gazed at them. "Fred lost his center, his counterbalance, when George died, and it sent him what I've heard called 'fey'. It was all over him, every time we went out on a mission, if you knew where to look. He'd never have risked your life, or mine, or any of his other partners, but saving his own life simply didn't factor into his equation any more. And eventually he found the right place and time for that attitude to save us all." She smiled a little, sadly. "I don't think I'll mind so much, losing those memories."

"I'm sorry?" Percy was half-tempted to draw his wand and do a self-diagnostic spell, to be sure he hadn't been struck with a curse that scrambled the words in certain sentences to mean things that they simply could not mean. "Lose *what* memories?"

"That's why you're here, isn't it?" Crystal shrugged. "I'm a Muggle, and I'm not going to be connected to your world any longer, now that George is dead and the war's over. I know too much for just some girl floating around out here at large. So I'll have to be, what's it called, Obliviated. Memories wiped out." She snapped her fingers in front of her forehead. "Don't know what I *am* going to think happened in this year and a half or so, but I'd appreciate it if I didn't quite forget some things. How much fun we've had together. All the good we managed to do. Maybe some of the bad, too, to keep me motivated to find what's worst in my own world and fight against it as best I can."

"I...you...that..." Percy closed his mouth firmly when he heard himself babbling like one of Professor Snape's test subjects and counted to ten backwards in Mermish. "No," he said when he thought he had himself under sufficient control to do so. "And not no, I won't leave you those memories," he added hastily as Crystal stiffened. "But no, that's not why I'm here. Not at all."

"Oh." Crystal shrugged, a seemingly careless movement. "Are they going to send someone out to do it specially, then?"

"There's been a bit of a shift in the Ministry's policy on such things." Percy chose his words carefully, but could do very little about the smile which kept trying to escape his control. The "shift" had involved several shouting matches among Ministry officials, two duels (one of which had been summarily ended by his mother with the application of a Muggle broomstick to various parts of the duelers' anatomy), and a huffy resignation by a high-ranked wizard who had looked flabbergasted when Percy had immediately conjured him a box with which to clean out his office. "So many Muggles learned about the wizarding world over the course of the war that it simply wouldn't be safe to Oblivate all of them, so we're taking things on a case-by-case basis."

"And what's the basis for my case, then?" Crystal's tone was still stiff, half-formal, half-hurt.

"That I'm too unimportant to tell anyone that magic is real and be believed?"

"No, that you're too honorable to tell anyone things that you've been asked to keep a secret," Percy shot back. "Do you really think I'd—" He bit his tongue in the middle of the next word. "That was uncalled for. I'm sorry."

"So am I." Crystal turned to face him fully for the first time, her expression softening. "I jumped to conclusions, and I shouldn't have. I was just..." She sighed. "It was so wonderful, to be allowed to *be* there," she said wistfully. "To see it all, and learn about it, learn about this whole other world that runs right alongside the only one I ever knew. So I can't do magic myself—so what? I can't fly, either, but that never stopped me from watching the birds. Even the war had its own kind of wonderful, because there I was, proving them all wrong, fighting right alongside the boy I loved, even though he had magic and I didn't. Only then came Hogsmeade, and I didn't defend him well enough." Her eyes went distant, hard, cold. "And he died."

"Do you think that's your fault?" Percy kept his gaze on the bushes, out of which a slender cat, attractively patched in black and white, was beginning to slink. Her shyer sister, mantled and masked in brown tabby, twitched her nose at the bowls of food from cover. "Do you blame yourself?"

"Sometimes. Especially late at night, when I lie in bed awake and it all comes back again." Crystal bowed her head, her eyes closing tight. "It *is* my fault, or if it's not, it ought to be," she murmured. "I was *there*, right there beside him. If I'd shot a little faster, a little straighter, or if I'd seen that particular Death Eater was targeting him, or even if I hadn't been there at all to distract him..."

"Crystal, please." Percy reached out to touch her shoulder. "Don't do that. You might as well say it's my fault, because I *wasn't* there, or at least not in time."

"You were in time for me." Crystal's voice wavered, but the words were entirely understandable. "You took a huge chance. You dropped your shield while I was still crazy, and I nearly killed you. I *wanted* to kill you, because you were alive and he wasn't."

"But you didn't do that." Percy waited until Crystal looked up, until her eyes met his. "You couldn't do that," he said, as calmly as he could manage. "That's not who you are."

Crystal twitched her shoulder impatiently, throwing his hand off it, and got up to pace. "Nice of you to say, but how do you know who I—" She stopped mid-step, then put her foot down before she fell and turned to face him, staring at him with a peculiar intentness. "Oh," she said softly, and again, "*Oh* ." Scrubbing her hands across her face, she exhaled a half-laughing breath. "Well, that certainly explains a great deal. How long?"

"How long..." Percy repeated dubiously.

"How long have you been looking at me like that without my noticing it," Crystal elaborated. "Or wanting to look at me like that, even if that famous Percy Weasley self-control wouldn't let you do it."

Percy kept himself from wincing with an effort, and knew that his ears had begun to glow red from the mingled look of amusement and something else (he refused, even inside his head, to call it tenderness) which Crystal was bestowing on them. "For a great deal longer than I should have been," he admitted. "It helped, some, to remind myself that you loved George, that you were happy with him."

"Which I was." Crystal glanced over towards the two cats, who had their noses in the bowls of food now. "And I would have been gone on loving him and being happy with him, I think. But the night he died, there in Hogsmeade, the girl who loved him died too, and I was born. I'm a little rougher, a little angrier, a little nastier than that girl was. And I can do things, terrible things, the kind of things that would have made her break down crying or run away screaming. I can never quite let myself forget that." She met Percy's eyes again. "Can you?"

"Forget it? No." Percy got to his feet. "But I don't think it's a bad thing to know yourself better. Or to be capable of a few terrible things, in a world where terrible things are sometimes needed." He swallowed, gathering his courage. "He spoke to me that night at Hogwarts, you know. George did. In that moment of light, when Voldemort was defeated, he spoke to me. If you believe that."

"I believe it." Crystal stood quite still, her hands folded at her waist. "What did he say?"

"That he wanted the people he loved to be happy." Percy had never wished so desperately that he could look away, but Crystal's eyes held him in a spell more binding than any Imperius. "And that life was too short to waste time."

"That's funny." Crystal smiled a little. "That's just what he said to me, down in Sanctuary, a minute or two before that. Well, that and something about having courage to face up to the changes that were coming to me, which I thought meant going back to being a clueless little Muggle. But now..." She looked once more at the cats, took two deliberate steps away from them, then turned back to Percy. "Well, don't just stand there," she said. "Get over here and kiss me."

Nearly a minute later, Crystal leaned against Percy's shoulder, catching her breath. "I'll never think about the phrase 'detail-oriented' quite the same way again," she murmured.

"I believe that was a compliment, so thank you." Percy brushed a bit of Crystal's hair out of her eyes. "Will you come over to the Burrow for lunch? Mum made chicken last night."

"I thought you'd never ask."

Hand in hand, they walked back to the house, a pair of cats following in their footsteps.

---

"I never thought, when I walked out on being a pureblood all those years ago, that I'd get such a kick out of seeing the old places put back into shape." Sirius grinned at a series of photographs pinned to a board on his wall, showing the gradual recreation of a pureblood manor house from showplace into home. "And Mum's probably spinning in her grave faster than a Keeper who's been Bludgered halfway through a Starfish with Stick, because after a motion by Tonks, seconded by

Charlie, and duly voted through by the rest of the company, number twelve, Grimmauld Place, is now officially on the Floo Roster as 'Headquarters'! Nothing to how Lucius must be writhing to see what the Pride's up to in *his* precious house, of course..."

---

"How in the world did you get so much done so fast?" Danger asked in awe, sliding her arms out of her coat. The entrance hall of what had once been Malfoy Manor gleamed and glowed in the light of the candles floating in midair (she wasn't about to ask who'd purloined the spell from Hogwarts), the wood paneling on the walls burnished to very nearly the same state of shine as the bronze stair railings.

"We didn't. The house-elves did." Hermione let her hand rest on one of the newel posts of the banister. "Dobby and Winky told us very firmly that we had schoolwork to do, and we were *not* to get involved. I have a feeling they may have 'borrowed' a few of their friends' off-hours, but you know house-elves."

"If they're not overworking, they're not happy." Danger smiled, gazing up at the broad windows above the front door, across which some enterprising decorator had painted a design of snowflakes. "So does every room look this good?"

"Some of them look better. Though Luna and Ginny and I did have to come in a few times and deal with little things like color matching." Hermione grimaced. "Winky means well, but she doesn't always understand what looks good to humans and what doesn't, and Dobby..."

"Dobby is both a house-elf and male, and therefore not to be left unsupervised with fabric swatches and paint cans at any time." Danger paused, a thought striking her. "Although, you could always let him have his way in one spare bedroom. Just for fun. And if any unsuspected Malfoy relatives pop up, claiming they have a right to stay here..."

Hermione laughed so hard she had to sit down on the stairs.

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"They did let us help with some of the fun parts," Meghan was telling her mother in another part of the house. "Like stripping off the old wallpaper!"

"Which you did using my new broomstick." Harry glared at his sister. "And covered it, and yourself, and everything else in the room, in wallpaper paste from sometime around, I don't know, 1740?"

"I am going to regret asking this question." Aletha put her fingers to her forehead. "I know I am going to regret asking this question. And still, I am asking this question. How in the world do you strip wallpaper with a broomstick?"

"Well." Meghan beamed innocently. "You get a little strip started, and then you attach it to the twigs of the broomstick, and then—"

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"Where are we going, exactly?" Remus asked, walking forward with his hands obediently shielding his eyes.

"Just outside, behind the house." Fox's voice and scent both read to Remus as somewhere between mischief and gloating. "We're almost there. Moony, step up, over the rocks—all right, Padfoot, you're there—good. On three. One, two, three."

The Marauders removed their hands from their eyes and took in the sight before them.

"That," said Sirius, sounding somewhat awed, "is a Quidditch pitch. That is a regulation Quidditch pitch."

"Couple steps up from playing out in the Weasleys' orchard." Fox had his hands in the pockets of his robes and a highly satisfied smile on his face. "Never be quite as much fun as that was, of course, but that's only because we can't sneak out of the house when you're not looking now..."

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"But if you want to talk about a happy Christmas..." Sirius switched his gaze to the next set of photographs down, all filled with people in their holiday best, grouped comfortably in front of their grandly decorated Christmas trees, and waving frantically or calmly as their natures dictated. "Mad, of course, completely mad, what with the Den, the Burrow, the Manor Den, the Landing Zone, Headquarters, Hogwarts, and every other place we had to make our calls. But that was the days before and the days after. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we spent as just us. Just the Pack, at the Marauders' Den, one last time before we all head off to work on our new lives.

"And then came my birthday." Tapping the words out on the keyboard, Sirius could not quite repress his grimace. "I don't usually mind my birthday. Matter of fact, I usually like my birthday quite a bit. There's cake, and presents, and people being nice to me. But this birthday was something a little out of the ordinary..."

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"One final gift, from an anonymous donor." Aletha passed the brown-paper-wrapped parcel to her husband. "It arrived this morning, and the owl looked like it'd come quite a ways."

"Hmm." Sirius shook the box, then sniffed it a few times. "Doesn't rattle, doesn't smell like much of anything." He frowned. "Kind of suspiciously like not much of anything. It was clean on the threat test, right?"

Aletha nodded. "No active spells, and a few passive ones, but completely harmless. Sound-producing and motion, and not at a level of either that could possibly do damage to a human being. No Muggle problems, either—it tested clean for every explosive and poison I know, and I know quite a few."

"May we?" Danger held out her hands. Sirius passed the parcel to her, and she and Remus both lowered their heads and sniffed. After a moment, Danger shook her head, but Remus had a thoughtful look on his face.

"What?" Sirius pointed at his friend. "You know something. What is it?"

"I thought..." Remus waved a hand dismissively. "Never mind, I was wrong. It's nothing. Go on and open it if you're so curious."

"Well, if you insist." Sirius tore into the parcel, revealing a shallow white box with a last name written in a looping handwriting on it. "Who'd be getting me American theme park merchandise?"

Danger began coughing, but held her napkin to her mouth and gestured for Sirius to open the box. Remus was resting his chin in his hands, looking with intense interest at his friend. Aletha, looking from one of her Packmates to the next, had begun to smile.

"What do you know that I don't?" asked Sirius suspiciously. "You didn't all get together and rig up something that's going to explode in my face when I open it, did you?"

"This isn't us." Aletha shifted her position in her chair, freeing her wand arm for a quicker draw. "But I would definitely say caution is indicated here."

"If this turns out to be your aunt sending me some kind of dog toy, I'm not going to think it's funny." Sirius set the box on the table, scooted his chair back, drew his own wand, and used it to flip the lid back.

Seven finger-tall figurines were revealed, nestled into little foam cut-outs.

"Hey," Sirius began, staring at the bearded faces, "aren't those the seven—"

Seven sets of tiny ceramic eyes blinked open.

"They're onto us, men!" shouted the figurine wearing spectacles. "Run!"

In a flurry of movement which should have been impossible for such tiny things, the miniature statues leapt out of their box, scurried across the tabletop, shimmied down the legs, and bolted for the door of Aletha and Sirius's quarters. Sirius cast a hasty Summoning Spell, but groaned as it shattered on impact with the fleeing ceramic back.

*Somebody charmed them resistant to Summoners. Which probably means I can't Banish them or Stun them or levitate them either...*

His mood was not improved by his Packmates' fits of laughter (Danger had one hand across her belly and the other on her chest, and Remus had put his head down on the table) or by what he had heard the figurines singing as they vanished into the corridor.

"Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's 'round the school we go, till Sirius Black comes and brings us back, hi-ho, hi-ho..."

*I'm going to have to physically chase them down and grab them. One by bloody one. By myself.*

*If I ever find out who sent me these damned things...*

---

"You know who sent those to him, don't you?" Aletha asked when she had enough breath to say anything.

"Of course." Remus blotted his eyes, looking over at Danger, who was still trying to regain her own breath, handicapped by the fits of giggles which recurred every time she started to calm down. "Who else could it be but the person we used to send silly little gifts of just this type, and whose name we once found on a list of the Seven Dwarves in Latin?"

"I didn't think he could have been killed between the time we saw him last and the time the battle ended." Aletha smiled, gazing out the window into the bright February morning, one hand resting on the curve of her stomach. "So he's out in the world somewhere, and in a good enough mood to repay a few debts. And to do it with style."

"I'll say," Danger finally caught enough breath to wheeze. "Did you see the look on Sirius's *face*?"

"Who wants to bet," said Remus thoughtfully, "that Grumpy the dwarf will be the hardest to catch?"

---

The day blurred for Sirius, one episode of dwarf-stalking after another. Happy was one of the easiest to find, as he'd darted into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom and settled in at the base of one of the toilets, while Sneezzy had made for the hospital wing and Bashful for the kitchens.

*Probably feels a kinship with the house-elves. They don't much care to be looked at either.*

Doc had chosen, for reasons Sirius didn't understand, to make his way up to the Astronomy Tower, from where he had been scooped up by a passing owl. Sirius had finally caught up with them in the Owlery, where the owls had been playing catch with the yelling dwarf.

*Only one of them who was happy to see me coming...*

Sleepy had been fairly difficult to find, since Hogwarts had a far larger number of beds available than Sirius had ever thought about before, but once the correct bed had been tracked down (in a guest suite near the Slytherin common room), Sirius had simply walked into the room and scooped up the snoring dwarf from his place on the pillow.

*Not sure who'd want to sleep in the dungeons, but I bet the Slytherins feel the same way about the towers.*

He'd had very little luck finding Dopey until he had the bright idea to change forms and request help from some of the castle's resident cats. Within an hour, two sleek black felines had slipped into his quarters, herding the sixth dwarf along between them.

*Six down, one to go.* Sirius tucked the now-quiescent form of Dopey back into his slot in the box and turned towards the door. *All right, if I were a grumpy dwarf, where would I hide?*

As though on cue, a silver streak shot in through the door and turned into an Augurey. *"Would you kindly come and collect your dwarf,"* it said in Professor Sinistra's voice, distinctly annoyed in tone. *"He's terrorizing the entire girls' dormitory."*

"Well, well." Sirius snickered to himself as he hurried out the door. "Wonder whose adolescent fantasies *that* could be playing out..."

He had a feeling his Packmates thought he was still ignorant of who could have sent him such a kindly present as this. In truth, it had dawned on him at some point between the second and third dwarf-hunts, and a quick sniff under the padding in the box had revealed the truth.

*There wasn't much scent caught in there, but it was enough.*

Still, he'd played the fool before to entertain his family, and didn't mind doing so again. If it amused them to believe he didn't know the origin of this gift, he wouldn't enlighten them.

*Not to mention that little girl of Charlie and Tonks's. I see them looking at me sideways sometimes when we go over to Headquarters and I'm letting her chew on my ears, or try to catch hold of my tail. They know who her blood parents were—and they think I don't.* He shook his head, amused. *Honestly, why do they think I'd care? It's not like she's responsible for what Wormtail did.*

"Besides, he finished out his life on the right side of things, Wormy did," Sirius murmured, ducking into a secret passage which would take him down to the Slytherin dormitories far more quickly than the open stairs. "He spied for us, risked his life, eventually gave it up. To screw Voldemort over, and to keep his daughter and my son safe. Everything else?" He shrugged. "Not my department."

Emerging into the dungeon corridor, he followed the sounds of screaming, pasting his best Auror-professional look on his face. Laughing at teenage girls was unwise at any time. Laughing at Slytherin teenage girls who owned functional wands was the height of unwisdom.

*And whether or not that's officially a word, it's still true.*

---

"Wise or not, I ended up the day without being hexed, though I did get a couple of little love-bites here and there." Sirius rubbed the spots on his hand and bestowed a less-than-fond glare on the innocent-looking white box, which reposed on his desk between his mug of tea and an order form for Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. "But the year rolled on, and the older kids piled into their N.E.W.T.s, those of them who decided to go that route. Fox took his from home, the way he's been handling most of his other lessons for the year, and Ron opted out entirely, seeing as he has the family business to go into..."

---



"Assuming the results hold up to it, Harry's headed for the Auror Office, and Neville's deciding between that and becoming Sprout's assistant at Hogwarts," Ron explained to Maya as they stocked shelves in the back room at the Diagon Alley branch of WWW. "Fox isn't sure if he wants to do anything outside the Den quite yet, but he figured he might as well get the tests over with while all the seventh year stuff he's been doing's still fresh in his mind."

"What about Hermione?" Maya straightened the stacks of Skiving Snackboxes. "Not that I think there's much of anything she couldn't do, but has she made up her mind about it yet?"

"Don't let this get any further than Lee, but if they'll take her, she really wants the Department of Mysteries." Ron grinned, separating the different types of firework by shape. "Suits me fine. She can think deep thoughts all day long at work, and then she'll come home and I'll help her relax, give her some laughs, let her remember there's more sides to life than just thinking."

"Which is definitely something she needs." Maya nodded. "Speaking of things people need, did you have a chance to finish that count on the possible Muggle-salable items? If that new categorization of your dad's is going into effect soon, Lee wanted to have our stock ready to go before any other store has a chance to catch up..."

---

"Which brings us around to right now." Sirius sat back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head and stretching. "Lovely, lazy summertime. Time to help Moony and Danger and Letha work up their new curricula for next year. Danger's got loads of new material, what with all the Muggles who were involved in the war somehow, and Moony has Minerva's approval to add an hour a week practicum for his upper levels, use of the potion piece for defense and offense. And Letha's adding some of those potions to *her* upper level classes as well, so there's plenty to do there. Besides that, there's just the everyday fun of living, and we also had to put the Den in order for our two new arrivals..."

"Speaking of which," said Aletha, arriving at the door with a bundle in her arms. "Someone is awake, and would very much like to see his daddy."

"Would he, now." Sirius pushed back his chair, spun it around, and held out his own arms for his son. Marcus James Black, who would be two weeks old on his big brother Harry's eighteenth birthday tomorrow, regarded his father solemnly over the corner of his blanket on which he was sucking. "And who's my big boy, then? Who's the best baby ever? Who would never even *think* of biting his daddy's fingers like his big sister, or screaming in the night like his big brother, hmm?"

"Who's probably learned a great deal from being taken care of by James and Lily for several years?" Aletha countered, resting her weight against the doorframe. Her labor had been fairly easy as such things went, but as Sirius was well aware, men and women measured pain differently.

*What she thought of as "easy" would have had me screaming my head off and begging for mercy before we'd even made it through an hour...*

He grimaced a little, then quickly restored his face to neutral as Marcus's lips trembled in distress.

*Speaking of pain, doing without Danger's help on full moons is wearing Moony down faster than I like. The Wolfsbane lets him keep his mind, all right, but it doesn't do anything about the pain those damn transformations cause, and it's so complicated in its own right that trying to add a pain-blocker to it would be more likely to ruin it than to help anything.*

"What's got you so worried?" Aletha came into Sirius's study and seated herself in the most comfortable of his guest chairs, leaning back with a little sigh of relief. "Something about Marcus, or something else?"

"Moony." Sirius rescued the corner of blanket as it began to disappear into Marcus's mouth in alarming proportions and held it out for Aletha to charm clean before substituting his Pack-pendants, which Marcus began to suck even more enthusiastically than he had the blanket. "His wolf side's...hungry, I guess would be the best word for it. Or maybe angry. His bond with Danger kept that part of him subdued for so long, and now it's back and wilder than ever. How long before it gets so bad even the Wolfsbane can't keep it under control?"

"I wouldn't panic if I were you." Aletha's eyes had drifted half-shut, as though she were thinking or remembering hard. "I'm looking for better formulations whenever I have time, and there's a reason we have the strong room in the cellar here, and in their quarters at Hogwarts. Even if the wolf gets the better of him one night, he won't be able to escape, and the only people with him will have animal forms at their disposal."

"Yeah, but..." Sirius shrugged. "It'd scare him silly, and for good reason. If the Wolfsbane can stop working for him, with everything he's got going for him, how can we be sure someone else's lycanthropy won't figure out how to mutate and get around the potion for them too?"

"Is there a particular reason you're set on borrowing trouble today?" Aletha opened one eye to regard him. "Or are you just looking for some new big problem to replace the war?"

"Why would I be—okay, maybe I am," Sirius conceded after running the last few things he'd said through the checklist he used to determine if one of his characters was being rational or not. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong, Letha. This could be bad."

"It could be, but it isn't yet, and we'll all work together to keep it from getting that way." Aletha smiled as Marcus kicked a foot enthusiastically into the air. "Even the littlest of us."

Sirius sighed. "I just hope it's enough."

His pendants warmed, making Marcus squawk in surprise, an instant before a ball of green fire burst into being in midair. "If you could perhaps lend us a hand downstairs?" said Remus's voice, carefully calm, from the center of the flames. "I'm told it's time to go."

"Well, well." Tucking Marcus into the crook of one arm, Sirius got to his feet. "On our way. You're going to have a little sister," he told the baby as the flames vanished, crossing the room in two strides and holding out his other hand to help Aletha up. "Her name's going to be Nadia, Nadia Abigail Lupin, and you're going to love her, and take care of her, and torment her to within an inch

of her life. Not *too* much, though, or she'll give you a hotfoot like you'll never forget..."

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Far away, Luna Lovegood Beauvoi stood at an upper window of her home, gazing north, towards Hogwarts.

"The one with the power to vanquish the dark curse approaches," she murmured with a smile.  
"Born to those who have long defied her, born as the seventh month dies..."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Surpassing Danger

## Chapter 69: August 8, 1998, Hogwarts (Year 7)

Almost four hours into the last day of July, in a room at Hogwarts lit only by a low-burning fire, the newest Heir of Gryffindor deigned to make her first bodily appearance, her head crowned with an abundance of damp hair and her eyes screwed shut against the indignity of birth. Cradled in Aletha Black's strong hands, Nadia Abigail Lupin drew her first breath, but before she could release it in an infant's usual wailing complaint, a golden nimbus of flame appeared around her, gently cleaning away the various fluids which coated her, and her blue eyes opened curiously, as though wondering what this warm, soft touch against her skin could be.

"Warn me the next time you're going to do something like that," said Aletha, exhaling a breath of her own. "I nearly dropped her."

"Sorry." Remus's apology was absentminded, as his eyes were fixed on his daughter. "She's beautiful. And she does have your hair," he said to Danger. "It's already starting to curl."

"Poor child." Danger opened her own eyes gingerly, blinking away the sandy deposits that had collected during her labor. "Remind me why I wanted to do this again?"

Aletha only laughed and laid Nadia on her mother's belly, Remus leaning in to gaze down at his child. Beside them, Sirius tapped his wand against the camera in his other hand, enchanting it for a smokeless flash, then snapped a picture of the stunned joy on the Lupins' faces as their daughter blinked up at them for the first time.

"My hair, but your eyes," Danger murmured, watching tiny hands curl and uncurl as Nadia tested her abilities in this strange new environment. "And don't tell me all babies have blue eyes. All babies don't have blue eyes like that."

"As long as she doesn't have someone else's eyes, we're doing well." Remus stroked his fingers along one chubby leg and lifted them to his face, inhaling his daughter's scent, enshrining it in his mind. "Hello, little darling," he said softly, returning his hand to Nadia's vicinity and stroking her right palm, so that her small fingers tightened constrictively around his larger one. "Welcome home."

At the foot of the bed, Aletha scooted back, motioning for Sirius to take over the cleaning-up as she kept her attention on Remus.

---

"Is Moony all right?" Sirius asked his wife nearly an hour later, as the Warriors of the Pride took their turns cuddling and cooing to Nadia, who absorbed the attention with the grave courtesy of one who considered it no less than her due. "You keep looking at him funny."

"He's not ill, or hurt." Aletha frowned, catching one side of her lower lip between her teeth. "The trouble is that I can't be sure precisely what he *is*. But the entire time Danger was in labor, there

have been these odd little flares through his magic. A longer one when he saw Nadia for the first time, and a *much* longer one while he was learning her scent. Every time he touches her, holds her, even looks at her, *something* happens."

"Need a comparison?" Sirius gazed fixedly at the far wall for a few seconds, then turned to look at the Pride, locating Meghan without difficulty. His little girl held her brother in her arms, guiding his baby hand to stroke gently against Nadia's. As ever, Sirius felt the tiny hitch of pride and pleasure and fear in his chest at the knowledge that these beautiful creatures had come partly from him, at the bittersweet memories of Meghan's baby years and the hope for everything that lay ahead, for her and Marcus both...

"That's certainly part of it." Aletha kissed his cheek. "But there's another component in what's happening to Remus. I'll keep an eye on him." She glanced back at little Nadia, then beckoned Luna to her side, and they began to converse in murmurs. Sirius shrugged and drifted towards Fox, who was sitting on a windowsill, watching Hermione laughingly disentangle Nadia's grasping fingers from her hair.

"Doing all right, kid?" he asked, leaning against the wall.

"Some days better than others." Fox sighed. "And the 'others' feel like they're winning, even when they're really not. Just when I think I might have it under control, I might be able to go back out in the world and do some of the things I used to like, there'll be one really, really bad day and down it all comes crashing again."

"Know the feeling." Sirius grinned at the first startled, then rueful and understanding look Fox gave him. "Forgot about that, did you?"

"I don't know how, but yes." Fox thumped his head lightly against the stonework of the window frame. "You've been there. You even had it worse, because you never got a break, day or night. I had my nights with Luna, and our little masquerading intervals to poke at people who needed it."

"But I never had to go through with the things I'd been accused of, either," Sirius cut in. "You did. So let's not play 'who had it worse', all right? We both had a pretty rotten time, it shouldn't have happened to either of us, but it did. Now it's over, and we survived it. Bruised up and scarred, yeah, we're all of that, but you know what? So's the rest of the world. They just don't always show it as much."

"Yeah." Fox sighed, brushing a finger across his cheek. "But sometimes scars hurt. Sometimes they hurt a whole lot, and it doesn't feel like anything will ever help."

"Been there, too." Sirius shrugged. "I used to go beat on my typewriter, or borrow one of the Bludgers from the Quidditch set to smack it around some, or do something that needed to be done just so I didn't feel so bloody useless. Don't know if any of that would help you, or if maybe your music would. It's different for everyone, and there are days when the only thing you can do is ride it out." A smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "A couple times Danger managed to pull me out of a mood by telling the most amazingly awful Death Eater jokes."

"All right, I'll bite." Fox rearranged himself more comfortably on the windowsill. "How awful is most amazingly awful?"

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"You know."

"You know who?"

"Yes! *Avada Kedavra!* "

Fox groaned aloud. "I should have known better than to fall for that," he chanted, shutting his eyes and leaning his head against the stonework again. "I of all people should have known..."

---

"How are you feeling?" Aletha asked, helping Danger get her arms into the sleeves of a clean nightgown behind a folding screen.

"Like I just had a baby, thank you very much." Danger laughed a little, then winced, laying a hand against her stomach. "Oof. Shouldn't do that for a while yet."

"May I?" Aletha laid her own hand atop Danger's, and the soreness in the overstrained muscles eased. "There, that should feel better." She embraced her friend gently. "I'm so happy for you," she murmured. "You've wanted this so long, and now here she is."

"I have, and she's beautiful." Danger leaned her head against Aletha's shoulder. "But the cubs, our original four, don't you think they'll be a little jealous? Feel like they're not good enough for me somehow, because I did want a child of my own blood and Remus's so much?"

"Maybe if you'd ever said or done or even hinted anything about their being 'not good enough', as you put it, to *them*, it might be a problem." Aletha held Danger gently at arm's length and looked into her face. "But we've lived together all these years about as closely as two human beings can live, and I am telling you, Danger, you haven't. Not ever. Instead you've loved those cubs with every beat of your heart, even when they were driving you mad. Yes, they've always known you wished that you and Remus could have a born child, but that was in addition to them. Not supplanting them. And if it had never happened, well, there are things in all our lives that we want, but that just don't happen." She smiled. "But this one has."

"It certainly has, and it's wonderful." Danger sighed deeply. "However. As much as I love them all, I would love it even more if they would go away for a while. We need sleep."

"As you command, my lady." Aletha curtsied, making Danger giggle again, and they emerged from their temporary seclusion to find Remus back in custody of his daughter and the Pride already congregating near the door. Hugs and kisses were exchanged, well-wishes and blessings

passed around, until finally Sirius, the last to leave, tossed a salute in the Lupins' direction and shut the door firmly behind himself.

**Well**, said Danger silently, accepting the sleeping Nadia from Remus and scooting over in the bed to make room for him. **That was...I don't know that there are words for it. Except a cross between "WOW" and "Oh God NOW what do I do?"**

**Now, we sleep.** Remus removed his shoes, swung his legs onto the bed, and drew his wand, reshaping mattress and pillows subtly until the three of them lay in a cushioned, cup-shaped depression. Its sides were angled perfectly to support the adults' backs while allowing the infant to lie on her mother's chest without fear of falling, though Remus whisked a quick Safety Charm over the two just to be certain. **As long as she'll let us, anyway. That part I didn't forget.**

**We do have the house-elves to help us, if need be. But I find I'm a very selfish mother.** Danger lowered her lips to the top of Nadia's head. **I want us to keep her all to ourselves, just for a little while.**

**That makes two of us.** Remus turned onto his side, contemplating his own private miracle. **Have I told you lately how beautiful you are?**

**If I'd ever been uncertain as to whether or not you were besotted with me, that comment would remove all doubt.** Danger laughed silently. **No woman is beautiful two hours after giving birth.**

**Except the woman with whom one happens to be in love.** Remus flicked his fingers at the windows, which obediently let the curtains fall across them, and reduced the flames in the fireplace to glowing embers with a wave of his hand. **But we won't argue that anymore. Instead I'll do this.** He leaned over and kissed Nadia gently on the side of the head. **And this.** The second kiss, bestowed upon Danger's lips, took a bit more time to complete to the satisfaction of both parties. **And then...**

A soft blanket of warmth surrounded the bed, and Danger sighed in contentment, closing her eyes and consciously calming her mind. There were still fears and worries to be dealt with, she acknowledged, but they could wait. Everything could wait.

**We have each other, and we have our Nadia.** Remus let both the name and its meaning reverberate through the link. **And for tonight, that's enough.**

Around them, the castle hummed lullaby, coaxing the parents to follow where their child had led.

---

In the corridor, Aletha laid her hand on the wall, trying to get a read on the currents swirling through Hogwarts's magic. Her talk with Luna had answered a few of her questions at the same time it had raised others.

*And it's just a little over a week until full moon...*



"Back me up if I recommend we stay here for a few days?" she said quietly. "Danger would argue with just me, or with just you, but the two of us together she's more likely to listen to."

"You know I will, but why?" Sirius had his head cocked to one side. "I'm not sensitive the way you are, but even I can hear there's something going on. That part of it?"

"It could be." Aletha took her hand away. "And if it's what I think it might be, Remus will need all the magic the castle can possibly give him..."

---

After a day and a night of trading off sleep and baby duties with Danger, Remus had no trouble spotting the manipulation tactics Sirius and Aletha were bringing to bear, but found himself more in sympathy with them than otherwise. He'd drawn off some of Danger's pain during the most difficult parts of her labor, and knew from that just how exhausted and sore she must be.

*And within a week, I'm going to have my own source of "exhausted and sore", so staying at Hogwarts, where the house-elves are only too happy to handle the basic chores for us, makes perfect sense until we've both had a chance to recover. At least it didn't happen the other way around. If Nadia had waited another two weeks, things would have been very hard on everyone.*

But his little girl's timing was as perfect as the rest of her, if Remus did say so himself, and Danger allowed herself to be convinced without much of a fight. The Pack would stay at Hogwarts until after the full moon, which thrilled the house-elves and gave the humans leisure of a kind which had been something of a rarity for them in their adult lives.

"It seems so crazy to me now," said Danger one warm, golden afternoon as she and Remus walked near the edge of the lake, Nadia drowsing in the sling Danger wore across her chest. "The way we dived into raising children, when looking back, we were barely more than children ourselves. And that one of them, and later two of them, were *famous* children, who had to be kept hidden and safe..."

"I think it was rather like accidental magic." Remus reached across to stroke Nadia's soft hair, releasing a drift of her sweet baby scent, which thrilled him even as it calmed certain parts of him which grew ever more restless with the waxing of the moon. "We didn't know that we shouldn't be able to do it, so we went ahead and did it anyway."

"That, or desperation. There just wasn't anybody else." Danger lowered her own hand into the sling, allowing Nadia's fingers to curl around it. "And look at us now. We've won a war, those children we shouldn't have been old enough to raise are off setting up lives of their own, and you've got quite an impressive list of titles waiting for you when the first of September comes." She chuckled as Remus felt himself flush. "Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Head of Gryffindor House, and Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts. And all before you're forty!"

"I wonder sometimes what Minerva was thinking." Restless, Remus scooped up a rock from the ground and let it heat in his palm, then skipped it across the lake, little trails of steam rising from every place it struck. "We got away with it this past year simply because everyone was so dazed

from the end of the war, and awed at the reemergence of Heirs of the Founders, that they didn't have a chance to realize who *else* I was. But now they've had that chance, and when the back-to-school letters start going out under my name..." He shrugged. "I only hope it doesn't wreck everything we fought so hard to win."

"Pessimist." Danger pounded a fist lightly against his shoulder. "The parents may balk a bit, but the kids who've had you in class will bring them around. Or not, in which case we may have children running away from home to come to school." She frowned. "Which seems distinctly unnatural, but what else is new with us."

"Oh, really?" Remus wound his hand into Danger's hair. "And here I was thinking what we had was one of the most natural things in the world. Human beings are meant to care for one another. To stand by one another."

"Ah, but you're not just a human being." Danger leaned into the caress. "You're also a werewolf, and one of the pillars of your curse is that you should be outcast from the ranks of humanity forever." With a regretful sigh, she reached around and disentangled his fingers. "So, off you go. Shoo shoo. Into the Forest, to tease the centaurs and plague the life out of Sangre and start going on all fours even when it's not the full moon..."

"I could always move in with the wise wolves," Remus returned, entering into the spirit of the game. "They'd probably accept me, after I'd proved myself as not being a threat. I might start spending more time as Moony, though do you know, I've never experimented with going straight from Animagus form to wolf? That might be something to explore—maybe it would hurt less, since the basic shape is so much closer..." Laughing, he shook his head. "But you don't get rid of me that easily, love, not now. Maybe years ago, when we were still so unsure of ourselves, never mind one another, but now we're in this for the long flight." He sighed, his good mood dying away. "Assuming I keep on surviving full moons. They're getting worse, you know."

"Yes, I do." Danger met his eyes levelly. "And I also know that things always get worse just before they get better. So we're not giving up just yet."

"Agreed," Remus said aloud, and shielded his thoughts carefully in the back of his mind.

*Sometimes things get worse before they get better.*

*And sometimes they just go on getting worse.*

*I'll have to make sure Letha's still looking into ways to break that symbiosis bond between us...*

---

The day before the full moon came around at last, and Remus found himself disinclined to do much of anything, as it had been in the years before Danger entered his life. An impromptu den day was declared, with Sirius and Aletha coming by to sit and talk and try to top one another's reminiscences of times gone by, while Marcus and Nadia alternately napped and kicked companionably at one another on the soft, fleecy rug in front of the fireplace. It was such a

bizarrely normal day that Remus occasionally had to resist the urge to pinch himself.

*If it is a dream, I think I'd rather not wake up.*

*There are so many worse places I could be.*

*Back in that closet I used to use for full moons before any of this began comes to mind...*

As the sun began to sink in the west, he frowned as a happy surge of magic from Hogwarts made itself known. "What is the Pride doing here?" he asked. "They know we can't have a den the way we usually would. It's too risky, with the Wolfsbane not working right for me."

"What makes you think they want to have a den with you anyway?" Sirius retorted. "You're *old*."

"Not as old as you," Remus shot back. "And my question remains."

"They're going to have a den of their own, down in the Heart of Hogwarts," said Aletha, giving one of her best quelling looks to Sirius as she scooped up Marcus, who was beginning to fuss. "They didn't tell me why, and I didn't ask, but I suspect it has something to do with Ginny and Luna and Meghan coming back to school next month, and the rest of them starting jobs or settling into den-keeping. They'll be apart, in a way they haven't been for quite a while, so it seems only fitting they take a little time to get their feet firmly planted on who they are now, before that starts to change."

"That makes sense." Remus nodded, and levered himself upright. "I'd ask them to pop up here and say hello, but I don't think we have the time. So if you happen to see them..." He kissed his fingertips and puffed air across them in Aletha's direction. "From me, to them, with love, and maybe we can get together for breakfast tomorrow, if they think they can put up with my morning-after temperament."

"I'll pass that along." Aletha crossed the room to give Remus a one-armed hug, then held Marcus up to have his nose booped. Her own nose wrinkled at the aroma drifting from her son's lower half, and she turned and handed him to Sirius. "Service, please," she requested. "And check on yours, would you, Danger? Since they seem to be doing everything else together."

"Phew." Danger coughed as she lifted Nadia from the rug. "You weren't kidding."

"Come on, kiddos." Sirius swung Marcus gently in his arms. "Two tables, no waiting!"

Remus waited until Danger's back foot had cleared the doorframe before asking Hogwarts to keep whatever was said in this room from passing beyond its walls, then locking down the bond between himself and Danger. "Give it to me straight, Letha," he said quietly. "How much of a chance do I have of making it as far as breakfast time?"

Aletha's lips compressed, but her eyes stayed steady. "As things currently stand, fifty-fifty. At best."

"That's what I thought." Remus sank back onto the sofa. "I should have known it couldn't be this

easy."

"Do me one favor?" Aletha sat down beside him. "Don't give up on yourself yet. Or on me. The potion I put together for you this month has a few new refinements in it, and they might help turn the trick. And..." She paused, as though trying to choose the proper words to get her point across. "There have been changes in you, physical changes, since Nadia was born," she said at last. "I haven't been able to pinpoint exactly what they are, but I do know your curse doesn't like them, not in the least."

"So it's mustering up all its strength to hit me as hard as possible tonight?" Remus closed his eyes, thinking of the ravaging fury he had been able to sense behind the ever-thinning shield the Wolfsbane afforded him during his last few full moon nights. "Wonderful. But that doesn't really change anything, does it?" His options shone gold behind his eyelids, as if written there in letters of fire. "I can either fight it, or I can give in. But if I give in, the chances of my surviving are far less than that fifty-fifty you gave me. And worse than that." Opening his eyes, he gazed at the wall, seeing instead a vaulted room at Malfoy Manor, where a high, cold voice spoke impossible words of truth. "Live or die, if I surrender to the curse, Voldemort wins after all."

"And if you fight?" Aletha prompted quietly after several seconds of silence.

"If I fight, I have that fifty-fifty chance. At best. The bond between us won't hold through another shock like my dying again, especially not when it's blocked off the way we've had to do on full moons lately. It'll break, and that means I truly will die." To his own surprise, Remus found himself smiling, small but true. "But I could think of worse fates than heading off to a beautiful castle to mastermind all your lives from afar for the next fifty years or so. I'd rather be here living it with you, but if watching is all I can get, watching it shall be." He held out his hand, and Aletha took it. "Just do me one favor in return. Take care of them, whatever happens tonight."

"You have my word." Aletha leaned over to embrace him. "And you, take care of yourself. Remember we're all thinking of you, even if we can't be with you in the too, too solid flesh."

"No melting or resolving into a dew, now." Remus lifted the silence charm from the room just in time as Sirius came back in, making faces at Marcus, on his left arm, and Nadia, on his right, while Danger peeked at both of them over his shoulders. "That stuff takes hours to get out of the carpets, and the house-elves would never forgive us..."

When the silliness was finished, Sirius and Aletha took their leave, Sirius turning back long enough to pound a fist lightly against his chest, Marauder sign for 'stay strong'. Remus nodded, then turned to Danger. "Shall we?" he asked, and she held out her hand silently. Together, they walked through the suite, to the small room near the outside balcony which had been carefully strengthened to resist the depredations of a werewolf.

"I love you, Remus Lupin," Danger said quietly, her eyes on his. "Whatever happens, I won't regret that. I won't regret the time we've had together. The friends we've helped, the children we've raised, this child we've made. Together." She held Nadia against her heart, the little girl's bright blue eyes gazing solemnly at her father. "I want more of all of that. More of you. More time, more

friends, more children, with you. But if I can't have what I want, if this is the end for us, then I swear to you that I will do my best to go on living, and to make the most of my life without you." She smiled suddenly. "Although I won't swear to be happy about it."

With a laugh, Remus drew his wife into his arms, feeling their daughter nestle close to both of them. "I love you, Danger of my life," he murmured. "Whether I live or I die tonight, I will never stop loving you. And I will see you again." His own scent, rich with woodsmoke and pepper, hers, of flowers and baking bread, and Nadia's, the milky unformedness of the infant with a hint of sweet smoke and spices to speak of what she might become, mingled in the air around them until he felt all but drunk on its power.

"In your name," he said a trifle unsteadily, laying his hand on Nadia's head, "and in hers, I fight."

"Then take this, as our favor." Danger summoned a flame and burned through one of the loops on the soft red blanket in which Nadia was swaddled, the blanket she had made with her own hands through the long winter nights of her pregnancy, then unraveled a length of yarn three times that of her hand, snapped it off, and tied it around Remus's arm. "Now, go."

Remus kissed her once more, then turned and stepped into the strong room, feeling the protections snap down around him as Danger carefully closed the door. Kneeling down in the center of the bare wooden floor, he let his eyes drift shut, his thoughts roving where they would, plucking out memories of happiness and laughter from the sixteen years and more he had spent with his friends, his family, his Pack.

In the back of his mind, he felt Danger sealing off the bond between them with as much care as she had closed the door of the strong room, and began to do the same for himself. No part of the pain, the fury, the hatred which battered at him from the curse of the werewolf could be allowed to bleed over to her...

***Allowed?*** hissed a harsh, snarling voice from another place altogether. ***You think your puny potions and magics give you power to defy me? It is time, little boy, that you learned your proper place!***

An instant of choking darkness—

Then light, brilliant, blinding.

Remus gasped for air, coughing and gagging as he got half a mouthful of salt water instead. Forcing back his elementary panic, clearing his throat, regaining his breath, took all his concentration for several seconds, during which his eyes had time to adjust.

He was nowhere he had ever seen before, his back against a low-lying spur of rock sticking out of the sea, waves crashing against its other side behind him, showering him with spray, then rebounding from the nearby shore to lap at his feet. Silver chains bound him hand and foot, holding him in place, helpless to stop what he could now see with pitiless clarity on the cliff-ringed beach before him.

A wolf larger than any he had ever seen before, her fur moonshot with age but her movements as sleek and sinuous as though she were still in her prime, stalked slowly, relentlessly, towards the woman whose back was pressed against the rocks at the beach's other end. Remus needed no sight of her bushy brown hair, nor the bundle wrapped in a frayed red blanket she held in her arms, to know who stood before him, and in what peril of their lives they now lay.

***You will watch, little boy, as I take what is mine,*** the voice rasped inside his head, as the wolf turned to give him a glare sharp with triumphant hate. ***What should have been mine more than sixteen years ago, and what never should have existed at all. Where will all your brave words be then, when you wake in the morning light to find their bodies broken and bleeding at your feet, their throats bearing the marks of your fangs? For it is not your life I seek to destroy, nor has it ever been. It is your heart, that it be rent as mine was rent, to see one for whom I loved and sacrificed turn upon another and destroy him!***

The wolf threw her head back and howled—

And an answering snarl came from the end of the beach, as wolf-Danger bared her fangs in warning, her tan-furred body crouched for battle between the attacker and the tiny, whimpering cub who lay now on the sand. Over the silver wolf's head, her eyes met Remus's, and one desperate instant of contact arrowed between them.

**The story—four, and three—**

Then her jaws were snapping at the other she-wolf's shoulder, and Remus tore his gaze away and forced himself to think. "The story," he mumbled, barely aware that he was speaking aloud until the sound of his voice came to his ears over the clatter and snarls of battle. "Four, and three. But four and three of what? And which story?"

Seeking inspiration, he looked up into the sky. The light which had seemed so blinding moments before, he could see now, was cast by an impossibly large full moon, beside which the red disc of Mars blinked balefully at him.

*Mars. The father of Romulus and Remus, by the priestess Rhea Silvia. Who cursed her living son to be a beast in body and in mind as he was in soul, for surely only a beast would kill his brother for no better reason than a foolish child's prank—*

With a rush, Remus's mind cleared, and he tightened his left hand around the chain which held his arm to the rock. "Tell me," he demanded, turning his head to avoid another rush of spray. "Tell me what you are!"

*I am the first pillar of Rhea Silvia's curse, came the answer, whispered in the language Remus had come to know from watching Danger and Padfoot and Wolf play together, and joining their play in his own semi-lupine shape. That you shall take on the shape of a wolf from the rising of the full moon until its setting, for every full moon from your infection until your life's ending.*

"Yes." Remus blinked salt from his eyes and looked down at his left leg. "And you? Which one are

you?"

*I am the second pillar of Rhea Silvia's curse, the answer came, this time in a voice which reminded Remus strongly of Fenrir Greyback. That while you are transformed, you shall be the beast you appear, in your mind as well as in your body, savage, cruel, and merciless.*

"Fair enough." Forcing himself to ignore Danger's yelp of pain from the beach beyond, Remus turned his head to the other side. "What about you?" he demanded of the chain holding his right arm.

*I am the third pillar of Rhea Silvia's curse, the chain responded, in tones which could easily have been mistaken for those of Lucius Malfoy. That you shall be, by reason of this curse and the madness it brings upon you, eternally exiled from the family of humankind, an abomination to adults and a tale of terror to children.*

"Right." Remus allowed himself a brief, savage grin before looking down at the final chain, wrapped around his right leg. "And you would be the last pillar, yes? The 'mercy' Rhea Silvia showed those to she cursed?"

*I am, whispered a voice startlingly like that of Lord Voldemort. And what could be more merciful than to ensure that those who must suffer and die in such a horrible way will not perpetuate their misery into another generation? Children would be as much a terror to you as you are to them...*

"Let me get back to you on that." Remus braced himself against another shower of spray, then spat seawater and returned his attention to the chain binding his right arm. "You," he said with all the authority he had learned in his sixteen years, "are a *lie*."

*I am the truth!* the chain protested. *Werewolves are forever outcasts, to all but their own kind—*

"Does this look outcast to you?" Remus summoned all his memories of Hogwarts, of the foolish pranks and silly jokes he had shared with James and Sirius and Peter, of their defense of his strange absences from class and his sickly appearance afterwards, of the endless hours of study the three other Marauders had put into their Animagus transformations, all of it for him. "They were my friends. My brothers."

*Brothers who betrayed you, perhaps, the chain snapped back, retaliating with images of the Potters' shattered cottage, Peter and Sirius's confrontation in the street, the devastation which had followed. They thought the worst of you, that you could be a traitor and a spy, for no reason other than what you are.*

"Because they're human, and humans make mistakes. I've forgiven them for that, and we've moved on. And they're not the only ones who love me, who refuse to turn away from me because of something I can't help." Remus allowed himself one fleeting glance towards Danger, her fur now streaked with red but still holding her own against her larger attacker. "I have a wife, and a sister to go with my brother, and together we have children. Cubs, we call them, to make a joke out of this curse. Nothing is as terrible when you can laugh at it." He forced the smile back onto his face.

"And I can laugh at you. An outcast? An exile? That couldn't be further from the truth. No, my friend. You..." He clenched his fist and summoned all his strength. "...are a *lie* ."

With a wrench and a half-strangled yell, he tore the chain free from its anchor points in the rock, flinging it from himself like a snake and watching it sink into the sea beneath his feet.

"And as for you." Remus turned his attention to the chain digging into his left leg. "I haven't lost my mind on a full moon in years, except for the time I was a fool and *called* the wolf. And still, my Danger called me back again, and no true harm was done."

*What do you think this is, if not madness?* the chain countered. *And do you really think your puny potions, or your reliance on a woman, mean you've defeated me? It's cheating, that's all it is, letting someone else do the fighting for you!*

"Oh, because you fight so fair." Remus shifted his weight, digging his heels into the rock behind him. "Pitting metal against flesh, when you look like this, or a centuries-old curse against the strength of one mind when you don't. The potion just puts things back on a level playing field, that's all, and Danger's power did the same. To let me choose for myself which side I'll take. The human, who can think about what happens to him and decide how best to respond, or the beast, which simply reacts to what's going on around it, destroying anything which looks like easy prey. And tonight, live or die, I choose to be human."

He reached over and wrapped his now-free hand around the chain, pulling steadily at it, straining with all his might. His fingers tore and bled, his leg screamed with pain, but he refused to let go, and just as he had no more left to give, the rock shattered and the chain slid free. For one panicked instant, Remus thought it would catch on his foot and drag him down into the water below, but he managed just in time to kick it off, and it slithered after its brother, its howls of defeat mingling strangely in his ears with the ongoing duet of snarling on the shore.

*And where will you turn next?* whispered the chain binding his other leg. *My remaining friend you cannot deny, for you do transform at the full moon. And as for me... It laughed, soft, cold, deliberate. You have a child, yes. And you, or the curse which binds you through us, will shortly end her brief existence, and that of the woman who bore her. Will you still claim victory over us when you awaken with the taste of their blood in your mouth, and their last cries for mercy ringing hopelessly in your ears?*

"What makes you so sure that's going to happen?" Remus returned his attention to the battle and saw, with a rush of relief and gratitude, that Danger was still holding her own, though he could tell she was starting to weaken. "She's fighting here, yes, but in the real world she's nowhere near me..."

*Fool, the chain sneered. Fool and blind. She lies just outside the room where you are imprisoned, with your child in her arms, for both of their minds were snatched into this dream along with yours! And even should those walls contain you safely as the wolf, to die in dreams is to die in truth, and your woman grows weaker by the minute. It laughed once more, a sound of ultimate satisfaction. And when she is dead, that tiny, helpless creature beyond will spill its blood into the*



*sand as well, and my victory will be complete, for you will be left with nothing...*

"You're wrong." Remus closed his eyes again as a wave of purest human fury rose inside him. "You were wrong before, you're wrong now, and you will always be wrong. Danger promised me that she would fight to go on living without me—do you think I would dishonor her by refusing to do the same? Even if she dies tonight, even if she *and* Nadia die, I will not meekly lie down and accept that as the end of my life as well! They will never be truly gone from me, nor I from them, not while we still love, and that you can *never* take away from me!"

The chain began to speak again, but Remus was in no mood to listen. With a snarl of his own, he closed his fingers around it, hooked his foot into it, and heaved with all his might. An almost human scream burst forth as it gave up its clutch on the rock and slid down his leg, pooling around his ankle, jerking his entire weight against his one remaining anchor point—

The fourth chain snapped off short, plunging Remus into the ocean below. He caught half a breath as he fell, before the weight around his ankle tightened viciously, to the point of pain, dragging him into the depths of the sea.

*You were doomed from the moment you were bitten, the chain crooned to him as he sank. No matter your struggles, you will die. Why fight it any longer?*

*We're all doomed to die from the moment we're born, no matter what we are or are not cursed with. Remus wrapped the shortened arm chain around his wrist, tucking it out of his way, and curled himself into a ball around his right leg. The only questions are 'when' and 'how' and 'why'. But a man who has children, whether by blood or by love or by teaching and inspiration—some part of that man will never die. And for my 'when', I choose—* he seized the chain and yanked it free of his leg as new strength rushed into him—*not bloody well right now!*

With a scream, the chain plummeted beyond recall, as Remus stroked desperately upwards. His lungs screamed for air, the one remaining chain around his arm felt heavier than lead, but he dared not stop—

His face broke the surface, and he coughed out the last of his old breath and gasped in a new in the same moment he stripped the water from his face with his hands to see what there was to be seen.

A weight heavier than any chain slipped from his heart as he saw Danger still crouched protectively over the brown-furred cub which was Nadia. One of Danger's front paws was held above the sand at an awkward angle, her fur looked almost more red than tan, but her teeth dripped red as well and her defiant, warning growl rang out unchanged. The silver wolf, her own coat marked in a few places, seemed nonplussed by such a fierce opponent.

"And now for something completely different," Remus said under his breath, sucking in another huge gulp of air and diving under the surface to swim towards the shore. *Do you still do what you have always done?* he asked the chain which remained around his arm.

*I do,* came the answer, dryly humorous. *Did you expect I would have changed?*

*Never hurts to check.* Coming up behind the silver she-wolf, Remus found the sand under his feet and waded ashore as quietly as he could manage. *All right, go ahead with it, then...*

The transformation, though more painful than an Animagus, hurt far less than Remus had come to expect from his full moon nights, and the result was everything he could have hoped for. As the silver wolf lunged forward, her fangs aimed for Danger's throat, he let loose a snarl of his own and bounded across the rocks, interposing his body between attacker and attacked. *Mine*, he informed the she-wolf in terms more direct than any human words could be, shoving her away with all the strength of his moonlight madness. *My mate. My cub. Not prey for you!*

The silver wolf stumbled backwards, whining in shock. Remus couldn't blame her. Where she'd expected an easy kill, against another female worn down by a running battle and a cub too small to fight back, now she was faced with a new and unexpected opponent. His grey fur might be matted down with seawater, a broken-off chain might dangle from one of his front paws, but four-pawed and defiant he stood before his mate and their cub, growling his warning to her in no uncertain terms.

*Mine*, he repeated, in case she'd missed the first iteration, and feinted a little rush towards her. *Go away, and I will not fight.*

*You—you cannot be here.* The she-wolf pawed at her face, as though doubting her senses. *You cannot—be—HERE!* Her howl would have been a scream of disbelieving fury in a human, and she charged at him with her teeth bared and snapping. Remus dodged her first lunge and used his weight once more, hitting her squarely in the chest and knocking her off to the side, then slashed at her with the sharp, retractile claws werewolves shared with cats rather than dogs. She yelped and scuttled back, her whole body quivering with indignant shock and anger.

Glancing behind him, Remus risked opening a channel he'd been careful to this point to hold shut. **Are you all right?**

**Sore, but I'll live,** Danger answered promptly. **Nadia wasn't even touched. Do you know who she is?**

**Assuming you're right, which you usually are, yes.** Remus crouched, eyeing the she-wolf, who was pacing back and forth out of his range, breathing in short, sharp pants. **Be ready. I still may not win this...**

**Win or lose, we're with you.** Danger's head rested for a moment against his shoulder. **But I think she's almost out of tricks. If you can get her to change back—**

**Change back,** Remus repeated thoughtfully. **I wonder...**

Danger snorted once as she caught the edge of his idea. **Risky, but it might just work. I'm game if you are.**

**On three.** Remus sank onto his haunches, preparing himself for a quick spring. **One, two, three.**

The return journey to human form, like the trip there, hurt more than traversing the distance between Moony the lion and Remus the human being, but far less than any full-moon morning he could recall when Danger's power had not been in play. Remus rose onto his own two feet only a few moments after he'd willed it so, steadying a bruised, bleeding Danger through the same process, though her wounds, he noticed in some surprise, were already starting to scab over. In her uninjured arm she held Nadia, still a wolf cub, but starting to squirm uneasily at the strange scents around her—

**Kiss her**, Danger said, holding their daughter out to Remus, then grasping her injured wrist and straightening it with a little hiss of pain. **It's how I got her to change the first time.**

Remus laid his lips against the soft baby fur, and with a wriggle Nadia shifted her shape back to that of his human child. He was about to chuckle at the ease with which she accomplished the all but impossible, when another strangled whine brought his head up, and for a moment he could only stare.

A noble-featured woman, her gray hair falling in tangles over her robed shoulders, stood a few feet away with her hand against her mouth, gazing at him in mingled horror and hope. "Remus," she breathed. "But...you died."

Light more blinding than that of the moon burst over Remus, and he nodded once. "Yes," he said simply. "I did. But now I'm alive."

"Your brother." The woman shook her head, her breath coming faster and faster. "He betrayed you."

"He did." Remus let his mind drift to Peter, to Sirius and James, to the terrible anger and loss he'd felt at the ways in which they'd hurt him, and to the conclusion he'd finally, reluctantly, reached. "But I've forgiven him for it. And I wish you could do the same, Mother. Your curse may have been merited in the beginning, but since then it's caused a great deal of harm, to a great many innocent people."

"Even to you." Rhea Silvia, princess of Alba Longa and beloved of the god Mars, sank to her knees on the rocky shore. "My own son, whom I sought to avenge. But what can I do? No magic can turn back time and undo the harm which has been done..."

"But what magic can lay, magic can take away," said Danger, stepping up beside Remus. "And every curse can be broken, or turned." She smiled, stroking Nadia's hair. "Even this one."

"Yes." Rhea Silvia stared hungrily at the little girl, and Remus moved a few steps closer, kneeling down so that she could see more clearly. "Yes. A child is hope, a child is joy. And I wanted those I cursed cut off from such things forever. But you, my son, my wonderful son, you defied even death itself to save the ones you love." She exhaled slowly, and reached out to lay her hand on Remus, on the place where the chain was wrapped around his arm. "And so, this night, my curse is turned, for you, my Remus, and for all those who can do what you have done. Those who defy their loneliness and outcasting by every sort of love, who accept what help they need to fight their

wild and bloodthirsty natures, and who dare to believe in the future enough to do their part towards its building."

"Because when three pillars of your curse are broken," Danger murmured, "the fourth can no longer hold."

"Precisely, daughter." Rhea Silvia smiled, as the chain glowed silver where it touched Remus's skin, as it grew what would have been, for anyone else, uncomfortably warm. "For them, as for my son, the curse shall be turned so far as to become in its way a blessing, that in time good may come where evil has flourished..."

Remus was about to ask what this might mean when darkness overwhelmed him once more.

When he could see again, he lay on his side in the dimness of the strong room at Hogwarts, furred and four-legged—

*But human. Thinking like a human. Not a trace of wolf-mind, not anywhere.* He eased himself upright, unsurprised to find his body sore and aching, his limbs trembling at every joint. *And the door, oh, thanks be to whoever was watching, the door hasn't budged, it's not even cracked—*

The latch rattled once, and hinges creaked, allowing a sliver of firelight to fall onto the floor.

"Come outside, love," said Danger, her voice not quite steady as she peered into the room, Nadia blinking drowsily in her sling. "It's a beautiful night."

After giving her a very old-fashioned look, Remus did as he was asked, pacing out into the main room of their quarters.

"I want to try something." Danger had her hand on the thick drapes which covered the door leading out onto the balcony. "I think I know what she meant by a blessing. But if you're not ready, or you think it'd be a bad idea..."

*You'll nag me into it anyway, so let's give it a go,* Remus couldn't help finishing.

"I beg your pardon!" Danger glared at him. "I do not nag!"

Remus blinked in surprise. **You heard me?**

**You were loud.** Danger started to cross her arms, scowled momentarily at the baby in the way, and planted her hands on her hips instead. **And as I was saying , I think I know what's going on here. If you don't mind?**

**As you command, my lady.** Remus padded towards her, wondering at the vast sense of amusement in the back of her mind.

"All right." Danger waved him a little ways to one side, then grasped the drapery again. "And... now."

With a whisk of her arm, she threw the curtains wide.

The light of the full moon shone down from the night sky above, and picked out glints of silver under the fur of Remus's front left leg. He stared at it, feeling again the warmth he'd felt when the broken chain wrapped around his arm in the dream—

*Or was it a dream after all?*

Slowly, he rose onto his hind legs, feeling the transformation begin. Pain rippled through his torso, ran up and down his arms and legs, squeezed tightly inside his head, but pain, as he knew all too well, could be borne.

*Especially when it ends where this will.*

For the first time in thirty-five years, Remus John Lupin stood human in the full moon's brilliant light.

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On a broad stone terrace under a bright full moon, they danced.

She was all in white, with lilies-of-the-valley in her hair. He wore black and red, with a tiny sweetheart rose in his buttonhole. The child cradled sleeping between them was dressed in gold, her hair crowned with a circlet of flowers. They had eyes only for each other.

In the shadows, an unseen figure raised his glass, toasting them.

"And they all lived happily ever after," murmured Alexander Slytherin. "The beginning..."

## Surpassing Danger Epilogue: That They Lived

"Today," said a smooth, precise voice, "we will study werewolves. Turn in your books to page 394."

"But Professor Snape," a girl objected, "I thought werewolves were extinct!"

"Not quite yet, Miss Kettleburn, though certainly that end is within sight. However, the photograph you will find on page 394 was taken more than eighty years ago, when lycanthropy was still an active and deadly threat. If you will turn to it, please."

The Headmaster of Hogwarts smiled to himself at the lesson on which the castle was allowing him to eavesdrop on this cool and rainy day in March, and leaned back in the armchair behind his desk. *I know now why Albus and Minerva enjoyed this chair so much. It's charmed to keep its user comfortable, aching bones and all. Godric's work, I'd imagine, with Rowena to help him, to be sure Helga didn't have to battle her own body as well as holdouts from Salazar's forces and well-meaning but foolish parents...*

"Here we have a photograph of Remus Lupin, the first man to ever successfully bring his curse of lycanthropy under control," Professor Snape announced as the rustling of turning pages subsided. "As you can see, although the photograph was taken by the light of the full moon, he remains entirely human in both appearance and nature."

"He's sleeping," said a boy's voice, sounding disappointed. "How come he's sleeping?"

"Some people, Dobson, consider nighttime appropriate for sleeping." The Professor's tone was quite acerbic. "Others, as I'm well aware, would rather be caught exploring forbidden areas of this castle, and lose points for their House and Clan. If we may proceed?"

*"Clan". Another word like "Pack" or "Pride", that began as a joke, and has come to mean so much more.*

"The little girl you see sleeping on Lupin's chest is his daughter Nadia, the first child ever born to a werewolf, and an important part of the series of treatments which have become known as the Black Treatments," the Professor went on. "Unknown to Healers for hundreds of years, the key to helping werewolves control the transformations which ravage their lives if left unchecked is neither a wanded spell nor a potion, though both of those can be and are involved. It is, instead, an

act of deep magic, which must be performed by the werewolves themselves, and involves the acceptance of certain wolfish instincts and the denial of others."

"How does that work, Professor?" asked another girl's voice curiously. "I mean, aren't instincts very strong and hard to fight?"

"They are. And yet we, as human beings, have learned to combat those of our instincts which conflict with the lives we have built for ourselves with our minds. For instance, Miss Weasley, if one of your brothers irritates you, your instinctual response would be to strike him or push him away. Your learned response, in contrast, is either to ignore him or to engage him in conversation. The instinctual response is more satisfying, it *feels* better, and its results may be quicker, but it might also spark a violent conflict between you, and such conflicts can be damaging to all involved. The learned response is more difficult to maintain, and often feels futile and frustrating, but its end results will be far more productive."

"But some instincts are good," the same girl persisted. "Like the ones that tell us not to eat spoiled food, or tease a hippogriff."

"That is certainly very true," the Professor agreed. "One of the greatest challenges for any human being is discerning between those instincts which are helpful in a given situation and those which are not. For werewolves, the challenge is even greater, since they have both their human and their wolfish instincts in play, and the curse of lycanthropy was designed to invoke specifically the predatory instincts of the wolf. Fortunately, potions and spells have been developed which help, as Remus Lupin said himself, to 'level the playing field', to allow all sides of the argument an equal say."

"All sides?" This voice was a boy's, and deeply skeptical. "Wolves are killers! What other side is there?"

"True wolves do hunt and kill, Smith, but their hunting is almost exclusively for food." The Professor's tones turned to ice in an instant. "They attack human beings only if they are desperately starving, or if they perceive a threat from the human involved. Healthy wolves are dignified creatures, but also have a playful side. They form strong bonds to their mates, and they defend their pack and their cubs with their lives. And it is precisely these wolfish instincts, coupled with similar instincts in the human mind, which allow for the alteration of the werewolf curse into a form so much less harmful to both its victim and other people that it amounts to a cure for lycanthropy. If you will turn the page, please..."

More rustling of paper, before the Professor continued her lecture. "Here we see photographs of some of the other early werewolves to follow the steps of the Black Treatments. Maya Jordan, the first female werewolf to bring her curse under control, with her husband Lee and their son Graham, and Brian Li, with his wife Corona and their son Andrew, as well as their daughter Ella—you know her today as Professor Runcorn, your Transfiguration teacher and the Head of Ravenclaw House."

A ripple of laughter and a few awed whispers went through the class at this.

"Yes, Miss Davies," said Professor Ariana Snape. "You had a question?"

"What *are* the Black Treatments, exactly, Professor?" asked Selena Davies, who had been named for her great-grandmother. "I mean, we know they're for curing werewolves, but how do they work?"

"Very well, thank you." The Professor chuckled over the groans of her class. "But that is certainly a fair question. In simplest terms, the Black Treatments cure werewolves by giving them the tools to cure themselves. Those tools include the various formulations of the Wolfsbane Potion, which allow werewolves to retain their human minds on the full moon; training and tips from other lycanthropes on resisting such wolfish instincts as responding violently to provocation; and assistance from existing family and friends, as well as encouraging the formation of healthy new friendships or relationships. The better instincts of both wolf and human are strengthened by the existence of such bonds, and the worse instincts weakened."

"But what does any of that have to do with having kids?" another boy objected. "And what about the parts where they almost die?"

"Becoming a parent changes a person, Wood. The physical changes involved in a woman's pregnancy are well-known, but certain elements in a man's body also shift when he sees or touches a child he has fathered. The emotional bond between parent and child adds further factors to these changes, to which werewolves are especially susceptible, since true wolves defend their cubs so strongly. And in those werewolves who have undergone the Black Treatments, who have used both Muggle and magical means to subdue their harmful instincts, and who have accepted help from friends and family, the positive changes induced by the birth and nurturing of a child are usually enough to make control of the lycanthropic curse possible.

"But bear this in mind, students. Possible does not mean easy."

The silence seemed to ring with the echo of these words, and the Headmaster nodded in approval, his mind drifting into the far past, recalling a rocky seaside mindscape and the tight clutch of silver chains, his struggle to free himself from their grasp in time to save the woman he loved better than life, as she fought to defend herself and their daughter from the embodiment of his curse.

"All Healing involves risk. Risk of the treatment failing to work, risk of its making the ailment worse, risk of its introducing some new element and creating a fresh problem. And the Healing of the mind and the soul is often even riskier than the Healing of the body. Some werewolves enter the last stage of the Black Treatments less ready than they think they are. Others have unexpected troubles crop up at the last moment. It is, often literally, the final battle of a war between human and curse, and the human who loses that battle may well die. But I think you may also have meant the more preliminary stage which involves a risk of death?" After a pause, most likely for young James Oliver Wood to nod, the Professor went on.

"One of the physical attributes of lycanthropy has long been the inability to conceive a child, and this is indeed addressed in the Black Treatments. However, the cure is dangerous in and of itself,



as the potions which must be used to restore a werewolf's fertility are so poisonous that they can only be administered on a body which is not currently functioning—that is, in the general meaning of the term, dead. And while Healers can, in the vast majority of cases, preserve the integrity of the brain and safely restore the body to working order after the potions have been administered, there is a small possibility that the body will not respond to those spells."

"How small?" asked Brianna Weasley.

"As far as I am aware, out of the several thousand people to undergo this procedure in the last eighty-three years, fewer than fifty were unable to be revived. Look up the exact number for next class, if you would, Miss Weasley. Now, werewolves who fear this outcome may pursue what has become known as the Corling Option, after Alexandria Corling—her picture is on the next page in your book, if you turn the leaf over—the first werewolf to successfully control her curse without conceiving a biological child. Instead Ms. Corling adopted the children of her partner, becoming both legally and emotionally a mother to them, and a potion was brewed for her which induced the necessary physical changes..."

**And once we had that potion available to us, we were able to stretch the magical definitions enough to include big brothers and sisters as parental figures, and that handled the werewolves who weren't ready for children of their own, at least among the Clans,** murmured a voice which was not Ariana's, though it bore a distinct resemblance to hers. **We seldom have a shortage of little ones who need taking care of.**

**Awake, are you, love?** Headmaster Remus Lupin sent a caress through the much-worn mental link between himself and his wife. **I'm never sure these days.**

**Just listening to our baby girl talk about the reason she's alive.** Danger's mind drifted sleepily through time, from the day she'd borne Ariana and her twin Alexander, back to the birth of their older brother John, then forward through the growing up of the Lupins' four biological children, side by side with the Blacks' Marcus, Ruby, and Liam. **Though I should hardly call her a baby anymore, when she's well past seventy—and that reminds me, you owe me a kiss.**

**Do I, now?** Remus smiled. **And why might that be?**

**I bet you one on our wedding day, that we'd make it five times sixteen years together. Five times sixteen is eighty, and that was eighty-four and a half years ago.**

**Never forget the half.** With a soft laugh, Remus levered himself slowly out of the chair. **Would you like your forfeit now, madam, or at some later date?**

**Pay up, slacker,** Danger retorted. **Or I'll come and get it.**

**On my way.** Turning to his right, Remus stepped through a small door which the Headmaster's office had opened for him nearly two years earlier, when Danger's health had begun to fail alarmingly. The Heirs of Ravenclaw, led by their patriarch Marcus, had placed a gentle spell of sleep on their Clan-mother's body, which lay in this room in what any Muggle child (and most

magical ones, these days) would have recognized instantly as a glass coffin like Snow White's.

**Only I prefer Sirius's version of the story, where Snow is under the Imperius when she bites that apple rather than being stupid enough to open the door voluntarily, and the prince is a wandering Healer who takes her on as an assistant after he saves her from the curse. And then they fall in love.** Danger sighed silently in contentment as Remus lifted the coffin's lid with his wand, bent carefully, and lifted her hand to his lips. **Reshaping the world, piece by piece, through happy stories and happier lives.**

"It's been an eventful little ride," Remus agreed, sitting down in the cushioned chair by his wife's side. "Do you remember just after Camelot first opened, when Fox had the idea of using some of the money from the Death Eaters' vaults, the ones who didn't have any heirs of their own, to sponsor immersion trips for young purebloods into the Muggle world? Three months' preparation, living with a mixed Muggle-magical family, and then six months to a year where they had to live exclusively as Muggles. No magic whatsoever, except for emergencies."

**We'd help them get a job to start with, but if they lost it, they were on their own, and the same went for housing, food, and the like.** Danger laughed mentally. **A few of them tried to stretch the definition of "emergency", but not many, not when there was a cash prize at the end if they could prove their wands hadn't been used for the time period specified...**

"And while some of them had a miserable time and ran away as soon as they'd won, or tapped out early and forfeited their prize, a surprising number of them discovered the truth in what we'd been saying all along." Remus closed his eyes, calling up memories of the Pack's earliest days in London. "Muggles and wizards, by and large, are far more alike than they are different. We ended up with quite a lot of friendships out of that program, and not an inconsiderable number of marriages, either."

**Thus, the growth of the Clans, as these young purebloods realized that the society in which they grew up wouldn't accept the people they now loved, and looked around for something else to replace it. And we were the only game in town.** The image of the banquet hall at the Manor Den, filled almost to bursting at a Christmas party a few years after the end of the Second War with Voldemort, came to Danger's mind. **Not that we were a game with many rules, to begin with...**

*"More and more people keep wanting to come to these little get-togethers of ours,"* Harry's voice rang out clearly over the laughter and talk of the crowd. *"It's like a gathering of the clans!"*

"One has to wonder just how many cultures can say they were launched by a joke." Remus took control of the memory image, hanging the walls of the banquet hall with colorful banners. "And how many have then been perpetuated by a literal game."

**We had ourselves an entire generation whom we'd trained and drilled to fight,** Danger retorted. **If we hadn't come up with some way to harness those skills for peacetime, they probably would have started inventing reasons to go back to war! Fortunately, Lee and Maya, with help from Crystal and Ron, were able to reproduce Fred and George's plans for**

**those dye-squirting wands, and potion pieces shoot whatever you load in them...**

"And thus was born the Society for Combat Approximation." Remus allowed his lady to take over the summoning of images, since her memory for fine details was better than his these days. Figures in robes, belted in or tucked up to allow for better movement, stalked one another through corridors, ambushed one another in fields, laid siege to one another's homes while shouting outrageous insults. "Very rough-and-ready teams at first, just groups of friends or people who'd fought together in the actual war, but then it began to solidify, building from Harry's little quip about clans..."

**People love to feel they belong to something, and the war games the Society plays are fun. Not to mention, the weapons may be magically created, but they require no magic to use them. So it's something Muggles can do just as well as wizards or witches, though I admit it helps on a scouting run to be able to Disillusion oneself or cast a quick Banishing Charm to knock a few things over for a diversion.**

"Or take wolf form and slip up on them that way." Remus nudged at the image Danger was casting, and she obligingly shifted it, moving it from a mock battle in the twists and turns of a maze (grown on the Manor Den's Quidditch pitch for the occasion) to the feast which had been held in the banquet hall afterwards. "And then the purebloods began to weigh in, suggesting things from their own heritage. Teaching everyone the pattern dances, for instance, as part of the celebrations after battles. Rediscovering heraldry, personal coats of arms, to be able to tell people apart on the battlefield. From there it was only a short step to heraldry for the Clans as well."

**At which point it got settled that there would be six main ones, and someone had the oh-so-charming idea to name them after us .** The disgust in Danger's tone made Remus chuckle under his breath. **Oh, don't you dare laugh. You were just as embarrassed as the rest of us when those kids marched forward with that bright red banner and announced that henceforth they would be known as the Clan of the Lion!**

"More startled than embarrassed, but I take your point." Remus returned the focus of the memory scene to the banners which lined the inside wall of the banquet hall, hanging in the order of the rainbow, Lion Clan's red to the farthest left and the violet of Wolf Clan on the other end. "Though when they started working up rivalries with each other, we had to step in and place limits on the feuding before it got out of hand."

**With the result that nowadays, a proper young Clanner would consider it unspeakably gauche to settle an argument in any other way than trial by combat. Like the challenges the cubs used to offer each other, only far more formalized, and with *all* sorts of "weapons" available to the competitors. There've been joke-telling competitions, displays of skill in art or music—Deer Clan's always had a fondness for dance-offs, and one of the ways to gain rank and honor in Cat Clan is to prove you've read more books than your rivals!**

"Whereas in Fox Clan..." Remus summoned the image of the young man of that name dressed in robes of his Clan's foresty green, his hat ornamented with a living feathery decoration, his gray eyes wide and guileless as he steadfastly denied all knowledge of it. "'What owl?' has practically

become their Clan motto, and they get along better with the goblins than any other Clan except Wolf. I don't think that's coincidence."

**Of course it's not. They think alike. And for the same reason, Deer and Horse Clans have strong ties to the beings who live outdoors, the centaurs and merfolk and the like.** The banquet hall melted into the Forbidden Forest, where a fully adult Neville nimbly disassembled his potion piece for the edification of a small herd of centaurs, while two little boys who bore a strong resemblance to Meghan, their robes hanging open to show rather dingy golden-yellow shirts and blue jeans underneath, romped happily with the centaur colts nearby. **Which leaves Cat and Lion Clans to be affiliated with the indoor types like house-elves, and with the ones who started out standard human. The vast majority of the former werewolves out there wear orange or red at gatherings, and that's no more a coincidence than the rest of it...**

"You're getting tired, love," Remus murmured. "You should rest. We both should. Tomorrow's a big day."

**I know.** The feeling of a blown kiss drifted past Remus's cheek. **Sleep well, and I'll see you in the morning.**

Silence fell over the small chamber, as the touch of Danger's mind slipped away once more into dreams. Remus held to wakefulness for one moment longer, letting his thoughts spread out through the castle, through the busy and the bustle of the living, breathing entity that was Hogwarts. His children, grandchildren, great-grands and great-greats were here, more of them even than usual, as they planned to surprise him and Danger with a family party tomorrow.

*They know I prefer to celebrate my actual birthday quietly, without a lot of people around. We used to hold a party for just the original Pack and Pride on that day, but by some bizarre quirk of fate, or maybe that should be sheer contrariness, we're the last ones left of the twelve who stood against Voldemort.* He smiled to himself. *The last ones left here, at any rate.*

*And that brings it full-circle beautifully. A celebration of the lives we've built, and the legacy we'll leave behind, before it's time for our next great adventure.*

*What could be more fitting than to embark on it one hundred years to the day after our first one began?*

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The party to celebrate the one hundred twenty-third birthday of Remus John Lupin, Head of the House of Lupin and Founder of the Clan of the Lion, lasted until two in the morning and was filled with laughter, story, and song, as the descendants of a man who'd once thought he would never have children rose one after another to share their memories of him, to salute him and thank him for his gifts to them, to listen raptly as he told them, once again, about the way the world had been when he was young. At last the final toast was drunk and the merry revelers speeded on their way, leaving Remus alone in the banqueting chamber with Nadia, John, Ariana, and Alexander.

"You're leaving tonight," said John in his usual direct way. "Aren't you?"

"That was the plan." Remus permitted his smile to surface, and felt Danger laughing in the back of his mind. "Since when do you four understand us so well?"

"Since we learned from the best." Ariana stepped up to hug him. "Both of you watch out for Uncle Padfoot," she murmured into his ear. "He'll probably have something special set up for you."

"We'll miss you, but you're not going far," said Alexander, the easy insouciance which had somehow transmitted itself from his namesake to him lighting up his grin. "And it never hurts to have an in or two with the authorities."

"I hope they know better than to cut *you* any breaks." John shoved his younger brother lightly, then embraced his father in his turn. "Safe crossing, Mum, Dad."

"Goodbye, Daddy," Nadia whispered as she held him tightly. "Goodbye, Mummy. I love you."

"We love you, too, baby." Remus stroked his fingers along his cheek, then traced a rough circle lightly on his daughter's forehead with them, repeating the sign on each of his children. The Pack and Pride's original scent-touch had been modified by the Clans so that Lions signed one another's faces with a stylized mane, while Cats used two outward brushes of the fingers to denote whiskers. Deer symbolized hooves with two touches of those same fingers, slightly separated, while Horses drew the simple curve of a horseshoe. Foxes swiped their fingers to one side, like the plume of their namesake's tail, and Wolves sketched a line down the center of the forehead which could have been either pricked-up ears or a scar like a bolt of lightning...

**Speaking of which**, said Danger as the door closed behind their children. **Time to break the spell, wouldn't you say, love?**

**Yes, I would.** Remus started towards the fireplace, then stopped. From a spot high in the air above his head came a song he hadn't heard in more than eighty years.

"Hello, Fawkes," he said, lifting his arm to welcome the phoenix. "Come to see us on our way?"

Fawkes landed gently on Remus's proffered wrist and peered into his eyes, then half-spread his wings and sang one penetrating note. Remus braced himself as he felt flame, wilder than any he could conjure for himself, rising up all around him—

And then he stood in Danger's antechamber, Fawkes ruffling his feathers back into place.

"Well, thank you. That was very kind." Allowing the bird to sidle onto the back of his armchair, Remus crossed to Danger's side and bent over her. "I married you last night," he murmured, and touched his lips to hers, feeling her stir as words and gesture worked together to banish the spell she lay under. "Are you ready, love?"

"Wake up, it's time to go to sleep." Danger sat up slowly with Remus's support, the side of her glass coffin vanishing so that she could set her feet on the floor. "But then I suppose that makes as much sense as any other part of our lives."

"No part of my life has ever made as much sense as loving you." Remus drew her close. "One hundred years today, since while it may not have been love at first sight precisely, it didn't take me very much longer than that..."

Holding one another, the Lupins rose and moved to the middle of the room. Fawkes spread his wings and lifted off from the back of the chair, flying tight circles about them and beginning once more to sing, streamers of fire trailing from him and closing in around them—

With a rush of wind, the flames dissipated, Fawkes turning on a wingtip and settling onto a tree limb. They stood now in a quiet cluster of trees, with a moss-softened slab of rock at its center, just the right size for a human being to lie upon. Remus helped Danger to take her seat on it, then accepted her help in return to sit down himself. "It's been quite a hundred years, hasn't it?" he asked, his hand twining with hers. "But I wouldn't change a single day of it for anything."

"Are you sure?" Danger's eyes danced. "Not even for another thousand years together?"

"We get that anyway." Remus tapped her chidingly on the top of the head with two fingers. "Stop trying to confuse me, woman. I'm old."

"And how is that my fault?" Danger paused, frowning. "Other than my being the one who insisted on saving your life all those years ago..."

Laughing, the Lupins lay down side by side, and still smiling closed their eyes, as Fawkes crooned them a lullaby.

Far away, in the Clanhall of the Lions, the pair of names at the head of the first clan tapestry changed from warm red to soft, pale gold.

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Remus came awake all at once, Danger's breath warm against his neck. The sun shone high overhead, birds were singing nearby, and he felt...

*Good, he decided after a brief mental inventory. Surprisingly good. One tends to forget just how many aches and pains one has collected over the years.*

**You may forget, but I didn't,** mumbled a sleepy voice from beside him. **Where do you think you were shunting everything you didn't have time to deal with?**

**Was I? I never realized.** Remus sat up, arching his back with a groan of pleasure. **I'm sorry.**

**Not your fault.** Danger opened one eye to regard him, squinting against the brilliant sun. **You still had work to do, and I was napping most of the time anyway, so I didn't mind.** She adjusted her posture so that she could use both eyes, frowning slightly. "You look about fifty or so," she said, sitting up herself. "Which would put the cubs in their late twenties, if we're maintaining the same differences we did before."

"I'd certainly prefer to." Remus shook his head, looking around him in wonder. "Guardians over the wizarding world, and probably a good deal of the Muggle one as well, given how closely they're running these days. How *did* we get ourselves into this?"

"We made promises to each other." Danger slid off the rock and got to her feet, her hum of pleasure at the ease of her body's movement bringing a smile to Remus's face. "And we kept them."

Hand in hand, they walked through the Forest together, wending their way towards the friends and the family who were waiting for them, towards the destiny for which they had accepted being chosen. The trees around them grew gradually smaller and thinner, until in the soft light of midafternoon Remus pushed aside a final branch to allow himself and Danger to step onto the lawns of the Founders' Castle.

"Are we going to leave it as Hogwarts?" Danger wondered aloud, gazing up at the towers of her once and future home. "A link between our past and our future?"

"That seems right, and respectful." Remus nodded. "Those who come after us may choose to change it, but that will be up to them."

"Fair enough." Danger shaded her eyes to look over at her husband. "But now for the really important question. Which way are we going in?"

"*Not* the main entrance." Remus's answer was immediate, and vehement. "Not when Sirius has had nearly fourteen years to think about how he was going to welcome us home..."

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"Well, damn," said Sirius from the top of Gryffindor Tower, tapping his wand against the tube of his Invisible Extendable Ear to coil it up. "Scratch plan A, go to plan B."

"There's a plan B?" Fox looked awed. "I didn't know there was a plan B."

Hermione sighed. "There's always a plan B," she said patiently. "Even if it's just this." She extended her hand at waist level. "Up!" she said sharply, and a broomstick snapped into her palm. With a nod to the Marauders and Warriors gathered on the tower, she mounted the broom and kicked off. "Moony! Danger!" she called out, sending the broom into a steep dive. "You're here!"

Fox, Ron, and Harry exchanged shrugs and grimaces, then one by one conjured their own brooms to follow, as Neville and Meghan emerged from the greenhouses to converge on the newcomers, as Luna swooped down from Ravenclaw Tower where she'd been perched as Starwing and Ginny hurried out of the shed where her clay and kiln were kept.

"Knut for them," said Aletha, stepping up behind her husband and wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Oh, nothing much." Sirius leaned his head back to lay a kiss on his wife's neck. "Just thinking

back over all of it. Everything we've done, with the Clans and all, and everything we *didn't* do. Like keep the spirit of the Statute of Secrecy, even if we were always careful about the letter."

"The more intelligent Muggles who know about the wizarding world, the less likely witch-hunts are to start again." Aletha moved up to stand beside Sirius, watching as the Pride danced gleeful circles around a laughing Danger and Remus. "And especially the more Muggles who have magical relations, the better. That's why you set up that fund with the royalties from your books, to help mixed couples outfit their homes with the latest magical gadgets, isn't it?"

"You set it up. I just nodded a lot."

"You had the idea, and I helped you execute it," Aletha countered. "And just think about the people who took advantage of it. Percy and Crystal, to start with, and then Blaise Zabini with her sister Michelle. Cho Chang with her young man, Daphne Greengrass with hers—and wasn't *that* a surprising outcome from those little immersion tours—and that was only the beginning, Sirius. We made a difference. We left the world better than we found it."

"I'm still proudest of that prank I pulled at Camelot, couple years after it was founded." Sirius grinned. "Do you know it's still there? Everyone likes it so well that they've left it up, all these years."

"Of course they have." Aletha laughed. "Who wouldn't love a sign that says 'Welcome to Camelot, 'tis a silly place', over an archway that's been charmed to change their clothing into medieval style for five minutes?"

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Below, on the lawn, the Pride had spread out to surround Harry and Remus, both of whom had their wands out. "My Clan's going to whip yours at the Midsummer War, old man!" Harry taunted, tossing invisible curses between his words, including a Jelly-Legs which took partial effect, sending Remus wobbling to one side. "Not even that alliance with Horse Clan's going to save you!"

"Are you sure about that?" Remus unjinxed his legs and began to circle left, firing his curses consistently just to one side of Harry. "There's more than one way to win a war. Like keeping all the Healers for myself."

"All the Heir-Healers, maybe." Harry shrugged. "We're allied to Deer Clan, and they keep popping up some pretty good wand-Healers." He winked at Meghan, who bounced in place, grinning. "Not to mention they can sneak like nobody's business..."

Remus quickly focused his eyes on the ground where he would have been walking in a very few moments' time, and sidestepped the mudpit which had mysteriously appeared there. Neville raised an eyebrow at Harry. "Giving the game away much?" he inquired. "Speaking of which—"

Harry started to open his mouth, and stopped, as the tip of Danger's wand pressed against the back of his neck. "Hands up, little boy," she murmured into his ear. "You're finished."



"Aww." Harry obediently held his hands above his head, letting his wand drop. "And I was so close, too!"

Ginny sighed. "Is he ever going to learn?" she asked Ron.

"Lemme think." Ron started counting on his fingers. "Seventy-five years down there, almost ten years up here...ah...no. He's not."

"That's what I was afraid of." Ginny shook her head. "Besides, you're all discounting the *real* power at the Midsummer War." She grinned over at her brother and Hermione, then across the circle at Fox and Luna. "The alliance of Cat and Fox. Brainy, sneaky, and definitely my favorite to win."

"Traitor," Harry muttered, retrieving his wand and sliding it away. "Is it too late to get a divorce?"

"Technically we're not even married anymore," Ginny pointed out. "Our vows said 'as long as we both shall live', and we've both died. So by the letter of the law, we're through."

"But yet, she'll still hex me if I try and run around on her." Harry appealed to the circle at large. "How is *that* fair?"

"Do you want anyone else?" asked Luna reasonably.

"No."

"Wise answer." Fox assumed a sage demeanor. "Never deny your desire for the woman who has access to the place in which you sleep."

"Yes, and that's another thing." Harry circled a hand above his head. "All of this—the castle, day and night, eating meals, sleeping in beds—we're *dead*. Why do we need any of it?"

"Because it keeps us closer to the people we're looking after?" Hermione hazarded. "They need those things, so we set things up to need them too, to remind us of what we have to try and make sure they get."

"Why do I get the feeling this conversation's been had a few times before?" Danger asked, coming to stand beside her sister.

"Probably 'cause it has." Ron shrugged. "We go over it every so often, but it's too much work to try and change things around, and besides, it's fun to do things like we've always done. Just a little better than they ever were before. Harry!" he called out. "Five Galleons says Cat and Fox whip up on everyone else at the War!"

"Make it ten," Fox added, jingling gold coins in his palm. "And a forfeit to be named later."

"Nothing involving nakedness, and you're on." Harry dug into his pocket. "The library's full of stories about, well, us," he said to a startled Danger. "I think it's what the Founders did when they

got bored, is make stuff up about the way it *could* have happened. And one of them had this thing where Fred and George lost a bet and Gryffindor had to play Quidditch naked..."

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As the daylight began to fade, the Pack and Pride gathered at the high table in the Great Hall, the feast which Harry, Ginny, and Danger had prepared spread out before them. Remus got to his feet at the head of the table, gazing down its length, at Aletha, Sirius, Meghan, and Neville on one side, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Harry on the other, to Danger facing him from the foot. She winked once, and the feeling of a kiss brushed through his mind.

"A toast," he said, picking up his wine. "Raise your glasses...the other ones, please, Harry."

Amid snickers, Harry restored his round-framed spectacles to his face and adjusted them carefully before joining the other Marauders and Warriors who held their goblets high.

"Thank you. Now then." Remus smiled, thinking back through the hundred years he had shared with those at this table and the thousand years to come, and the proper words floated to the top of his mind as though conjured there.

*We end, as always, where we began.*

*Only better.*

"Ladies and gentlemen, Pack and Pride, friends and family all...happy damn birthday to me."