

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Maybe Chapter 1

## Chapter 1

“Attention, boys and girls,” said the teacher as the final bell rang and all the students scrambled to put their things in their bags and run out of the classroom. “Attention for just one moment. Before you leave today, I need you to come up to the front and get one of these permission forms for your parents or guardians to sign.”

Harry Potter finished stuffing his books into his frayed bag and made his way to the front of the classroom slowly, so as not to get in his cousin Dudley’s way. The rest of the class ignored him, as was customary. He was the last person to take the form off the teacher’s desk.

“Come on, Potter, if you don’t hurry up Mum’s going to leave you here!” Dudley shouted back at him.

*Don’t I just wish.*

Harry walked down the hall, reading the form as he went.

***Due to a policy recently passed by the School Board, all students must have a five-minute meeting with the new school counselor (Miss Alice Anderson) before the end of the year. Any and all information divulged in these meetings remains totally confidential. Please sign and return the form below.***

Harry tucked the form into his bag and speeded up. He didn’t want to make his Aunt Petunia wait too long.

*So I have to talk to a counselor.*

*I wonder if she’d believe me if I told her the truth.*

“There you are,” snapped his Aunt Petunia as Harry walked out the door of the school. She was leaning out the driver’s side window, looking annoyed. “Get in, we’ve been waiting.”

*Probably not.*

Harry got in and put on his seat belt. The truth was that the Dursleys loathed Harry, and had since they’d woken up to find him on their doorstep nine and a half years ago. He’d lived with them ever since...

Harry shook his head, frowning. *Maybe I should ask the counselor about this. “Excuse me, Miss Anderson, but I think I’m going out of my mind, or maybe I just have amnesia...”*

The fact was that Harry couldn’t remember most of his life very clearly. It didn’t interfere with his ability to do his schoolwork or his chores, and no one cared enough about him to ask, so he hadn’t told anyone. He assumed he’d taken one too many hits from Dudley somewhere along the way. Whatever the reason, his only clear memories were of the three months or so since Christmas. Everything before that was somewhat muddled.

*But I know I’ve been living with my aunt and uncle since I was a baby. They tell me so often enough. And complain about how much I cost to keep.*

*Though they certainly do their best to keep the cost down.*

Every piece of clothing Harry owned had once been Dudley’s. Since Dudley was several inches taller than Harry and approximately twice as wide, the clothes didn’t fit very well, and Harry took a lot of teasing at school because of it. His glasses, too, were the cheapest make available – round, black, plastic frames. He didn’t mind that, though – he rather liked the look.

The Dursleys didn’t exactly starve him, Harry thought, but he never got quite as much to eat as he wanted, and definitely not the things he would have liked, the things Dudley got in such abundance – ice cream and candy and cake and so forth. And they always got their money’s worth out of him in housework.

*I don’t think Aunt Petunia’s done her own vacuuming since I was old enough to work the machine. And I know Uncle Vernon doesn’t do any gardening, but he takes all the credit with the neighbors for the roses and the lawn...*

*And how would it cost them any more to let me sleep in a bedroom?*

He didn’t mind sleeping in the cupboard under the stairs – not much, anyway, it could feel very cozy in there sometimes – but he did mind being locked into it. He minded so much, actually, that he wondered sometimes if this was a new kind of punishment, something that had developed recently. If it had been happening to him all his life, surely he would have gotten over his fear of it by now. But every time he heard the latch on the outside of the door click into place, unreasoning terror rose in him, and he had to press his face into his pillow so no one would hear him scream.

*But then the lion comes and makes me brave...*

Harry smiled a little at his own silly pretending. His hand slid into his bag and caressed one of the two possessions he owned that had never (as far as he knew) been anyone else’s. It was something he wasn’t even sure his aunt and uncle knew about, and he wanted to keep it that way.

It was a small stuffed lion, about eight inches long. Harry carried it with him everywhere, being very careful to keep it out of sight at school, and putting it in his cupboard right away when he got back to the house. It was the kind of present one might give a baby, and Harry cherished the secret hope that it had been a gift from his parents. It certainly looked worn enough to have been his when he was very small.

*And maybe it doesn't take away the fear, but it helps me remember that the door always opens again.*

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The boy and girl sat together in the window seat, looking out at the traffic passing. They looked like a symbolic portrait of day and night, the woman thought from her vantage point near the door.

"Only three days left," she said quietly, trying to cheer them up a bit. "Then you'll be out of here for good. Be glad to see the back of me?"

The girl shook her head. "We like you, Auntie," she said. "But..."

"We do want to go home," the boy finished for her. His face twisted wryly. "Now that we know where home is, thanks to you."

"Yes – I do believe I'll be filing a complaint about that. Standard procedure, my – er, nether region."

The girl giggled. "I know what you didn't say," she sing-songed happily.

"Little brat," said the boy affectionately, rubbing the girl's scalp with his knuckles where it was exposed in between her tight braids. She nestled back against him, and his arm slid around her chest, holding her close to him in a pose that almost brought tears to the woman's eyes.

*This kind of tenderness, this kind of love, they could only have learned it by example, and no one who loves like this could be as Dark as they're painting him – if there was only some way to introduce this as evidence –*

But she knew there was no way. The evidence would be considered without "emotional nonsense," as she'd heard it put, and the verdict rendered in the same way.

And she greatly feared what that verdict might be.

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A man sat at a table, scribbling on a piece of parchment. Work was the only thing he had to distract him from thoughts of his wife, his friends, his children, and what might happen to him three days from now. Work was good. Work was his friend.

Besides, stress appeared to spark his creativity. He'd had more good ideas in the last three months than he had in the year preceding them.

*Great, I've found a cure for writer's block.*

*Get yourself arrested for murder.*

He snorted a laugh, then went back to his work.

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A woman sat at her piano, playing bits and snatches of melodies, unsure if she played them because they reminded her of the ones she missed so or if the memories of her beloved ones prompted the music instead.

*But I'm getting close to at least one of them soon. I hope.*

*God willing, when this business is over, we can all be together again.*

She straightened her back and played on, repeating the name over and over like a charm in her mind.

*Anderson... Miss Anderson...*

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"Counselor, eh?" Uncle Vernon huffed when Dudley and Harry presented their forms for signing after dinner. "Damn fool business, waste of time and money – and a woman, too. Probably doesn't know her head from her arse." He signed Dudley's straight away, then beckoned Harry closer.

"Listen up, boy," he said, scowling at Harry. "You tell this counselor anything she shouldn't know – anything – and you'll be in that cupboard from now till Christmas, you understand?"

Harry nodded.

"Good." Uncle Vernon scribbled his name on the permission form and handed it back to Harry. "Go help with the dishes, your aunt shouldn't have to do all the work around here."

"Yes, sir." Harry went into the kitchen and started wiping plates, rubbing the back of his neck with his damp hand surreptitiously to cool it where the chain he wore felt too hot.

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She huddled on her bed, curled up around one of the two things she didn't dare let anyone see, hot tears soaking into her pillow.

Something was wrong. Somewhere, something was about to be horribly wrong, and she didn't know what. And even if she did, she couldn't tell anyone about it.

She couldn't speak.

Doctors had checked her over, pinching and poking her until she wanted desperately to scream, but she couldn't make the sound come out. Counselors asked her endless questions, and she wrote answers down when she knew them.

Her name was Jane White. She was ten years old. Her parents were dead. She didn't know if she had any other family. She didn't know where she lived or who she lived with. She didn't remember anything before she'd been found in the entryway to the Holy Family Children's Home on Christmas Eve morning, frantically clutching her one possession – her stuffed lion.

Other things she knew, but didn't tell the counselors, were that she loved music, but that sometimes it made her cry. Especially violin music, or flute. They made her cry a lot. She had told them, though, that she played the piano, because she knew that she shouldn't get too far behind in her practicing. She was allowed to practice in the music room four times a week, and she got lessons once a week from the teacher who taught everyone.

She had been placed in a handicrafts class, where the teacher had handed her needles with twenty stitches cast on, carefully guided her fingers through the basic motions of knitting, then told her patronizingly not to worry if she didn't pick it up right away – and she had proceeded to knit a square, knit a row, purl a row, with no dropped stitches and every stitch the same size.

In outdoor activities, she could throw a ball farther than any other girl her age, and harder. She'd been punished one day for hurting another girl in a game of catch by throwing the ball too hard. After that, she pretended not to be as good as she was.

The gold necklace she wore around her neck, hidden from everyone beneath her shirt, was hot against her chest – or maybe it was just her imagination.

But it couldn't be her imagination that the carvings of the lion and the wolf were glowing.

She hid her face in the pillow and silently cried.

The sun sank towards the horizon.

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Far away, the tableau was repeated in a larger size, as a woman lay weeping on a bed, feeling the pain of another and unable to help as she had always done before.

The previous two times this had occurred in this situation, they had been able to convince someone to place them in adjoining areas, separated so that he could not harm her, but so that she could still touch him. They claimed, truthfully, that having her near would help him, make him calmer. He still played at being savage, for the sake of the watchers, so that no one would realize the extent of her powers and take her away to be examined.

But someone had decided that this month, they would not be allowed to be together.

The moment was approaching. Gallant as ever, he was closing himself off, not wanting her to be dragged into the madness with him, and she had to force herself to let him go, to hide her terror that the goodbyes they were whispering would be the last words they ever heard from one another...

A sound startled her. She looked up.

A man stood in the doorway. "Come with me," he said bluntly.

The woman scrambled to her feet, biting down hard on her hope – it might be routine, it might be nothing at all –

But the corridors around her began to look familiar, and the hope rose in her, unable to be checked –

She almost didn't wait for the door to the front half of the cell to be opened before darting inside and falling to her knees at the second set of bars, reaching through and pressing her hand down hard on top of his, releasing all barriers and feeling their combined relief/hope/joy overwhelm her.

For this night, at least, they would live.

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The girl's tears ebbed as the glow of the necklace faded. Everything would be all right now, she knew.

Her eyes closed, and she slept.

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Later that night, Harry lay in his cupboard, curled up on his side around the stuffed lion, and thought about life, the universe, and everything, but

mostly about music.

Last month, for a special treat, his class had gone to see a musical show called *Annie*, which was being done by an American touring company. Harry had felt a kinship with the little red-haired heroine. Both of them were orphans, left on a doorstep as babies – both of them were eleven –

*Well, I will be, in July. But she's always eleven.*

*And one more thing. She had a silver locket – and I have a gold necklace.*

Harry pulled the fine chain out of his pajama top and ran his fingers along the different carvings on the four medallions. They were all pictures of different kinds of animals – birds, deer, different kinds of cats and dogs, a horse with wings, and even something that could have been a lizard, but Harry liked to think it was a dragon.

He sighed. *But I know my parents will never come to find me with another necklace like this.*

*Annie didn't know her parents were dead. But I do.*

Harry had always dreamed of someone coming to take him away from the Dursleys, but he knew no one ever would. They were his only relatives, and why would strangers want to take in a child not even related to them?

*But I can still dream. And something could always happen. Maybe even tomorrow..*

Harry smiled. Two of the songs in the show were called "Maybe" and "Tomorrow." He hummed the beginning of "Maybe" under his breath and closed his eyes, feeling himself falling asleep as the song began to play in his head.

*Maybe far away*

*Or maybe real nearby*

*He may be pouring her coffee*

*She may be straightening his tie*

*Maybe in a house*

*All hidden by a hill*

*She's sitting playing piano,*

*He's sitting paying a bill*

*Betcha they're young*

*Betcha they're smart*

*Bet they collect things*

*Like ashtrays, and art*

*Betcha they're good*

*Why shouldn't they be?*

*Their one mistake*

*Was giving up me*

*So maybe now it's time,*

*And maybe when I wake*

*They'll be there calling me "Baby"...*

*Maybe*

*Betcha he reads*

*Betcha she sews*

*Maybe she's made me*

*A closet of clothes*

*Maybe they're strict,*

*As straight as a line...*

*Don't really care*

*As long as they're mine*

*So maybe now this prayer's*

*The last one of its kind*

*Won't you please come get your baby...*

*Maybe*

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# Maybe

## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2

The woman known to her current circle of acquaintances as Alice Anderson walked up the steps to her second-story flat, feeling exhausted and dispirited. The school rules said she had to see the children in alphabetical order by last name, or close to it, so she'd only been able to get through A-D today. Most of the time hadn't been too bad – the usual primary school angst, friends who teased and parents who nagged and homework that was too hard or too easy – though she had come across one possible case of abuse, which she'd reported as required by law.

The last few minutes of her day, though, by some horrible coincidence, had been spent with an oversized, supercilious, idiotic brat whom she knew full well was making another child's life miserable. And she happened to care about that other child quite a lot indeed.

It had been an exercise in self-control, to listen to the boy's tiny woes (several of which involved that other child) and not laugh in his face or slap him hard and tell him to grow up.

She fumbled out her key, then paused. There were voices coming from inside her flat. There shouldn't be. She hadn't left the telly or the radio on, she lived alone...

The door opened before she could decide what to do.

"I hope you don't mind that we let ourselves in," said the woman on the other side of the door.

"Danger!" Aletha Freeman-Black dropped her bag and caught the other woman in a fierce hug. "You look terrible – how are you? How's Remus?"

"Thank you, I'm alive, and so is he – though it was close for a little while last night. Some arsehole decided to see how stressed-out he could make us by keeping us apart until the very last second, but thank God, they didn't actually make him transform without me, and they finally decided they'd tortured us for medicine long enough and released us today."

"I hope you mean tortured metaphorically."

"More or less. They didn't actually *do* anything to us except keep us apart, look at us a lot, and pound us with questions all the effing time."

They had moved into the living room by now, and Remus Lupin stood up to greet them. Aletha embraced him gently, knowing he would be suffering from the aftermath of a full moon night in stressful conditions, and repeated her question to him.

"I'm... human. Which I was beginning to doubt. Being treated like an animal for a few months has a remarkably bad effect. If I hadn't had a little voice in my head telling me jokes, I'm not sure I would have made it through fully sane."

"And from anyone else, that would make me doubt their sanity," said Aletha, sitting down in one of the armchairs. "But enough of that, I'm sure you want to know what I've found out about the cubs."

"Yes, of course, please, tell us." Danger sat down next to Remus on the couch, as close to him as she could be without actually sitting on him.

"I've found Harry, and I should be in a position to see him within the next couple of days. I also know where Draco and Meghan are. But there's still no sign of Hermione, and no one at Wizarding Family Services will tell me anything, of course." Aletha stared at the opposite wall, wondering how to break the worst of the news to her friends. "I'm afraid she may have been placed with a Muggle foster family or in an orphanage somewhere."

"She shouldn't be that hard to find," objected Remus. "Hermione Granger is not exactly a common name."

"It's possible she was placed under a pseudonym."

"But – how?" Danger looked bewildered. "She'd just tell them that wasn't her real name."

Remus looked shrewdly at Aletha. "You look angry. Tell me there's not something worse going on here."

Aletha sighed. "You want me to lie to you?"

Remus exhaled slowly. "All right. What is it?"

"Draco and Meghan were placed with their closest blood relative. Andromeda Tonks."

The Lupins both nodded. "That's not bad," said Danger. "Is it?"

"No – but the letter I got from her is." Aletha drew her wand and Summoned the parchment from her desk, then tossed it across the room. "You should read it for yourselves."

Remus opened the scroll and began to read. Danger closed her eyes – to see what he saw, Aletha had no doubt. She herself had read the letter so many times that she could probably quote it word for word.

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**Dear Ms. Freeman-Black,**

***I have been appointed guardian of your daughter Meghan and your adopted son Draco by the court. As you know, you are not permitted to approach them or have contact with them until such time as the court deems you an acceptable guardian for them, and it has been strongly intimated to me, and I do not doubt to you, that this will never occur. I wish to express my apologies for this, and to tell you that I am in the habit of reading my letters aloud, even if others happen to be in the room at the time.***

***I also wish to inform you of something rather distressing. When the children arrived at my home, they seemed somewhat confused and disoriented. Being a Healer, I naturally examined them, and discovered the source of their confusion. It seems that standard procedure at Wizarding Family Services regarding children taken permanently from their parents or other primary caregivers is to ensure – magically – that they do not grieve for said caregivers.***

***Prompt and proper care was able to reverse the changes thus induced, and the children are both well and as happy as can be expected. They seem to take great comfort in one another, since I seldom find them apart. It seems a shame that I am not legally permitted to give you their messages of love and hope that you will soon be reunited. If I were, I would add my own hope to theirs, and sign myself,***

***Very truly yours,***

***Andromeda B. Tonks***

xXxXx

Remus very carefully set the scroll aside. "In other words," he said mildly, "Hermione may not be able to tell anyone who she really is, because she may not remember herself."

Aletha gave a slow nod.

Remus began, very quietly and calmly, to swear, and kept it up for a full two minutes without repeating himself once.

Danger had dropped her face into her hands, obviously crying, and Aletha levitated a box of tissues towards her friend while marveling at the inventiveness of Remus' language. "You make Sirius sound like an amateur," she said when he was finally finished.

Remus smiled one-sidedly. "Thank you. Speaking of him, have you been able to see him at all?"

Aletha shook her head. "They're being very hard-line about it. No visitors, no letters. At least it means he won't be bothered by reporters or anything like that."

"No visitors? Not even legal counsel?"

"I don't know. But it sounds more and more like this 'trial' they're giving him will be a complete mockery. No real evidence introduced, nothing examined or checked over – just the same old story repeated and used as an excuse to put him back..." Aletha stopped, shuddering. She couldn't say it.

Saying it was too close to admitting it might become true.

Danger looked up from her tissues. Her eyes, though wet, had acquired a bit of a predatory gleam, and Aletha found herself glad that she was unlikely to ever be Danger's prey. "Not happening," she said, giving a damp smile. "Not by a long shot. Shall we show off a little, Remus?"

"I think I could do that." Remus leaned back on the couch and lifted one cupped hand. Aletha jumped as a flame suddenly flared in that hand, flickering red, yellow, blue. Danger lifted her own hand, and a matching flame sprang up there. Then, with a wave of their hands, the flames combined in midair and hung there, a burning ball of fire with nothing supporting it, no visible fuel or source. Remus blew on it gently, and it went out.

"It was a gift," said Danger, answering Aletha's unspoken question. "We had... I guess you could call it a vision. Last night. It was like one of our shared dreams, but it was... real. The two of us were gifted with this, we found out what these are good for," she tugged at the necklace she wore, a near-exact copy of Remus' and Aletha's own, "and I found out the exact definitions of my personal powers. And one of those definitions is that I can do one otherwise impossible thing to save someone I love." Her predator's smile flickered back. "I'll be at that trial. And if it turns out badly – poof!" A wave produced a flash of fire like a stage magician's effect. "He's gone."

"Gone, as in safe with us, not as in just plain gone," interrupted Remus, a humorous look in his eyes.

"Yes, of course, don't be stupid."

"So, what do these do?" asked Aletha, bringing out her own necklace from within her shirt. "I haven't taken mine off since we made them – I felt closer to everyone, somehow, wearing it."

"That is one thing they do," said Remus. "They connect us. If they turn hot, that means someone's in emotional distress of some kind – very frightened or angry – and if they turn cold, someone's in danger of death. The carvings on the pendants all indicate different people, and whoever the warning is for, their carving will glow."

"They can also connect us more directly," said Danger. "Here, put mine on while I'm still wearing it." She pulled out a loop of the chain and tossed it to Aletha, who stared at it. It hadn't been that long before – had it?

"You might have mentioned that the chains lengthen and shorten on command," said Remus with a sigh.

Aletha placed the chain around her neck and waited.

**Having fun yet?** asked Danger.

Only – she hadn't. Aletha was looking right at the other woman, and her lips hadn't moved.

Danger grinned. **Now you know what it's like to be me, with someone else's voice in your head. This is what else they do – allow silent speech, person to person. There was also something about memory sharing, but I'm not sure what that entails.**

**All right**, Aletha thought tentatively. **I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this, though...**

**Don't worry, only the thoughts you mean to send to me will transmit. It's almost impossible to spy on someone's thoughts using these, though it can be done if someone's thinking "loudly" – that is, about only one topic to the exclusion of all else.**

Aletha nodded, still feeling a bit unsure about the topic. **I think I've had enough for the moment.**

**Fine, just sit still.** Danger tugged on her chain, and Aletha repressed a yelp as she felt the metal pass *through* her neck.

"And you might also have mentioned that they turn intangible at their wearer's behest," said Remus with a weary sigh. He looked at Aletha with a long-suffering expression. "I don't think I ever want us to get into trouble again – she gets so wild after it's over."

Danger slid a hand teasingly across his chest. "You don't seem to mind that at night."

Remus captured the hand and returned it to its owner. "We will discuss that later," he said firmly, but his mouth twitched slightly. "And in private."

The conversation turned to other topics, such as swapping stories. Remus and Danger went first.

"You remember how I insisted we perform that spell right before moonrise on the 23rd," said Danger. "The one that created these things." She tapped her necklace. "And I didn't know why I was being so pushy about it. Well, now I know why. They're to help us keep track of each other when we get separated." She sighed. "And did we ever get separated."

The Aurors had invaded the Den Christmas Eve morning immediately after sunrise, while the Pack slept, Stunned them all, and taken them to the Ministry unconscious. They hadn't been separated right away – there was so much paperwork to do that all four adults had been placed in the same holding cell, at least long enough for them to recover from the spells, realize what had happened, and say their goodbyes.

*Sirius was so scared. He was trying to hide it, joking around like always, but he was petrified. And for good reason. It would have been so easy for them just to throw him back in Azkaban...*

There. She'd thought it.

*But it won't happen. Dumbledore wouldn't let it.*

Having the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot on your side helped a great deal. Sirius had been held in the holding cells, not in Azkaban, and he would be getting a trial, over the objections of some Ministry personnel who felt he was so obviously guilty there was no reason not to throw him to the dementors immediately.

*But Vilius insisted Dumbledore recuse himself from the actual case. Because he was too personally involved. So it's going to be tried by some random judge and jury, most of whom are probably convinced Sirius is guilty anyway...*

Aletha pulled herself out of her gloomy thoughts to listen to her friends.

"I think someone in Magical Law Enforcement must have had a friend in the Werewolf Registry Office," Remus was saying. "Because those records are supposed to be completely sealed except in case of emergency. At least, that's what my family was assured when they registered me when I was a child." His face assumed the oh-so-bland look that Aletha knew meant he was both amused and annoyed. "But someone pulled those records out and identified me as a werewolf. Which meant the Healers got to look at me. And look at me, and look at me. They kept finding excuses why I shouldn't be released yet."

"And I wouldn't leave until they released him," Danger took over. "They eventually granted me quarters near his." She snorted. "If you can call things with bars on them 'quarters.' His, not mine. They were observing him every second of the day, he never had an instant alone."

Remus smiled. "A good thing I've gotten used to that, living with the Pack."

Danger growled in frustration. "You... you annoy me, you know that? You treat everything they did to you like it's nothing at all. It's not nothing. You said it yourself. They treated you like an animal, and you're acting like it doesn't matter!"

Remus wound a stray tendril of Danger's hair around his hand and tugged on it gently. "It doesn't, love. Not now. Because it's over. Us fighting about it won't make anything in the past change."

Danger laid her head on his shoulder. "I hate it when you make sense."

"How in the world did you handle full moons?" asked Aletha, finding herself understanding Danger's viewpoint rather well.

"Cautiously," said Danger. "We managed to convince them that we had a set-up at home where I could be near him, touch him even, but be safe from him biting me. I think we said my scent helped calm him."

"Which it did. Just not quite the way they were thinking." Remus sighed. "I had to tear myself up a bit the first time, unfortunately. To keep up the illusion that my mind was gone as well. The second time they had me try this new potion – the Wolfsbane Potion – it's supposed to let a werewolf keep his mind on the full moon, so I didn't have to hurt myself. But the third time..." He stopped.

"Last night," said Danger quietly. "Dear God in heaven, I hope we never have to go through that again."

"I think someone suspects part of what goes on between us," Remus continued. "They certainly seemed satisfied to see me getting more and more worried as it got closer to moonrise and Danger didn't come. Of course, they didn't know that she was telling me she wasn't allowed to come..." He looked at the floor for a moment, then lifted his eyes. "It didn't happen. I have to remember that. It didn't happen."

The women nodded, and they sat in silence for a moment, a broken, wounded Pack, but still a Pack.

*And we will heal. We will have again what has been taken from us.*

Aletha smiled as she remembered the surprise she had for them.

"So, what's your story?" asked Danger finally.

"Not very interesting, really – they took you two away, then they took Sirius..." Aletha had to stop for a moment at the thought of the desperate passion their last kiss had shared. "They sent someone in to interview me, and when we were done he told me I could go, but I wasn't to come 'bothering' them about visiting Sirius or either of you, and I wasn't to go looking for the cubs. I could file a suit to get their custody returned to me, but they made it pretty clear that wasn't likely to happen. Being married to a notorious criminal seems to have tainted me in the eyes of the law."

"So, extralegally it is," said Remus, his face harboring just a hint of mischief. "It's not as if we haven't done it before."

"Speaking of extralegally," said Aletha, "Andromeda's going to break the law tonight."

"How so?"

"She's invited me to her home."

"To see—" Danger broke off. "To see her. Of course."

"Of course." Aletha smiled. "And if two small people should *happen* to wander into the room, and she should *happen* not to remove them as quickly as she ought, well, *what happens* in that house will stay in that house, I suspect."

"Do you think she would mind if you brought guests?" asked Danger.

Aletha's smile grew. "I don't think she would turn them away."

"Wait a second," said Remus suddenly. "I've missed something here. You told us where Draco and Meghan are, and that you haven't found Hermione yet. But all you said about Harry was that you'd found him and were going to see him in a few days. Where is he?"

Aletha groaned. "Curse you, Remus Lupin, do you remember everything?"

"No, I forget things regularly and you know it. Stop trying to change the subject, Letha. Where's Harry?"

Aletha swallowed. *They won't like this.* "He's with his aunt and uncle."

Silence reigned for one very long moment. Then a fireball burst into life in the air above Danger's head, growing every second, bigger, brighter, hotter –

Remus snapped his fingers, and it vanished. "Get a hold of yourself," he said sternly to his wife.

Danger turned and stared at him hard.

"I don't like it either, but we're doing everything we can at the moment. Now are you going to behave or do I have to sit on you?"

Danger maintained her defiant pose for one more second, then slumped. "Anyone else having déjà vu?" she muttered from against Remus' chest.

"The three of us plotting how to get Harry away from the Dursleys and Sirius out of prison," said Aletha, chuckling. "Yes, I do believe I am."

"And the same rules apply," said Remus. "If we can pull it off, we'll need a safe place to go. So we have a lot to do – find Hermione, rescue everyone who needs it, get ourselves somewhere safe – let's get a list going of what we have to do, and get it in priority order, and then we can get moving."

Aletha Summoned a pad and pen and got ready to take notes.

*The Pack never dies. No matter what.*

And they were going to prove it to the world.



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# Maybe

## Chapter 3

### Chapter 3

Draco Black sat on the window seat and watched his little sister pace. Meghan paced like no one else – instead of regular steps, she danced her way back and forth across the room, taking skips and hops, twirls and leaps. In fact, it couldn't really be called pacing at all, Draco thought, since pacing implied the regularity of the walking as well as the constant motion back and forth.

"You're going to be too tired to see her when she does get here," he said quietly.

"Am not."

Draco sighed. *She's excited. I'll let her be.*

Although he wouldn't let Meghan see it, Draco was excited himself.

*Letha's coming.* The name meant as much to him as "Mum" would to any normal child – perhaps more, since the Pack was so interdependent. It conjured memories of her strong arms wrapping protectively around him, her silvery voice coaching him through a difficult passage or soothing him after a bad dream, her cool hands on his forehead when he was sick, easing his fever...

Draco pressed a hand against his chest, trying to calm himself. *At least I remember her. And the others – Padfoot, Moony, Danger – I know them, who they are and what they mean to me...*

His hand curled into a fist. *Harry doesn't. Hermione doesn't.*

With his Aunt Andromeda's reversal of the Memory Charm which had been placed on him, Draco had regained his memories of what surely counted as the worst Christmas ever. Instead of waking up on his own time with the Pack around him and the excitement of Christmas before him, he had experienced the sudden awakening that meant a spell had been used on him and looked around to see a strange room with two casewizards from Wizarding Family Services standing over him.

*I was scared to death. Must have looked it, too.*

One of the casewizards – actually a casewitch – had tried to soothe him, but he didn't want to be soothed, he wanted answers. She had brought him to a different room, where the other cubs already were, Harry looking mad, Hermione worried, and Meghan scared out of her mind. She had attached herself to Draco as soon as he walked in the door, and he wasn't unhappy about it in the least.

*It can help to have someone smaller than you to protect. It makes you less scared.*

Four or five rather large casewizards had entered the room with them and shut the doors. Then, and only then, did the casewitch explain what was going on – that their parents had been arrested, that they would be placed with their closest relatives, or failing that, in a suitable home – and that they would be "treated" to reduce the shock of their lives changing so drastically.

Hermione had been the first to realize what "treated" meant – Obliviated, their memories of their Pack erased, so that they couldn't remember the people who loved them – and she had shot to her feet, screaming, and attacked one of the casewizards. As soon as the boys realized what she was doing and why, they had joined her, as had Meghan.

They fought bravely, but the casewizards were bigger, there were more of them, and they had wands.

*But we almost got away twice. They had to hold us down before they could do it. And they had to put a Silencer on Neenie because she wouldn't stop screaming.*

The incantation the casewizards had used on them was not the familiar, simple "*Obliviate*" but something more complex, with more ramifications. Instead of merely wiping the memory away – or did it block it up? Draco wondered – this charm muddled the memory and made it hard to understand. Also, it made its victim suggestible for about an hour after its use, so that new pseudo-memories could be created to take the place of the memories that had been lost.

*That big, loud, mean bloke – what was his name? Curcio, that's right. Draco snorted humorlessly. Swap two letters and you'd be closer. How the hell did he ever get into Family Services? He's a bloody sadist...*

Casewizard Curcio, among other things, had implanted the suggestion in Hermione's mind that she couldn't speak. It seemed to amuse him to see her unable to say anything, even after the Silencing Charm had been removed.

*And he was the one who decided to send her to an orphanage instead of placing her with a foster family. I think he was just mad at her because she did a Snape on him. Draco snickered. He couldn't stand up for the next fifteen minutes.*

His momentary glee died as he remembered what had happened next, after Hermione had been taken away. Someone had apparently done their homework about Harry.

At the time, Draco had been in the rather uncaring state the modified Memory Charm left one in. Now, he growled under his breath with rage as he

remembered the casewizards making his brother believe that he had spent his entire life living in a cupboard and getting picked on by his cousin.

*Whoever organized this must really hate us. And whoever it is, is high up in the Ministry, with enough power to coordinate a big operation like this, that goes across several departments...*

The doorbell rang. Meghan froze. Draco's thoughts went briefly haywire.

*She's here – she's here –*

"Stay here," his Aunt Andromeda said firmly, looking into the room where they were. "You're not to come out until I tell you."

Draco nodded and quickly found himself a seat. His heart was racing with excitement. Meghan sat down next to him – he could feel her trembling with joy at the thought of seeing her mother again. He put an arm around her and held her close.

*Any minute. Soon. Now..*

Aunt Andromeda's voice rose from the hallway below. "What do you mean, take them away? Who are you, anyway?"

Meghan gave a shuddering gasp. Draco was on his feet and moving to the door, where he could hear better, his heart sinking. *Something's gone wrong...*

"Wizards Family Services, ma'am," said a male voice from below. "We've received word that you disobeyed your instructions about allowing these children access to their former guardians."

"None of their former guardians have seen them or spoken with them since I assumed custody in December," answered Aunt Andy firmly.

"Do you deny that you had planned to allow one of their former guardians access to your home tonight?"

A moment of silence.

"Mrs. Tonks, where are the children?" asked a female voice.

Aunt Andy sounded defeated when she answered. "They're upstairs. Will you at least tell me where you're going to place them?"

"Both foster families are ready," the female voice began, when Aunt Andy interrupted her.

"Both? You're going to separate them?"

Meghan's eyes grew very big, and she whimpered and pressed herself closer to Draco, who held her tightly, his thoughts whirling. *No, no, they can't do this, it isn't fair – not tonight, when we were finally going to see Letha again – they can't take us away from each other tonight...*

"It was bending the rules to let them stay together in the first place," the male voice answered. "And you've already proven yourself untrustworthy, so I see no reason I should let you know where we're taking them. Excuse me." It was said in a thoroughly nasty tone, as if he would push by her if she didn't get out of his way.

Heavy footsteps thudded on the stairs. Draco didn't bother to move. *I don't care if he knows we were listening. He can't do anything worse to us than he already is doing.*

He glared over Meghan's head at the man who appeared at the top of the stairs. The man raised his eyebrows. "You're the Malfoy boy, then."

Draco bit back two or three nasty things he wanted to say and simply nodded. This was not the time to argue about his name.

"On your feet, you're coming with me," the man said without preamble. "The girl too. How much do you have to pack?"

"Not much, sir," Draco said as respectfully as he could manage through gritted teeth.

"Get a move on, then, it's already late."

Draco stood up, still holding Meghan against him, and ambled down the hall at as slow a pace as he could manage without looking like he was dawdling on purpose. *I'm not taking any more orders from you than I have to.*

"Come on, Pearl," he whispered to her once they were safe in their bedroom. "No crying now. Time to be brave."

Meghan wiped her eyes and sniffled hard. "I'll try."

Draco held his hands behind his head as if they were pointed ears. "Do or do not," he said in a high-pitched voice. "There is no try."

Meghan gave a half-hearted giggle.

It didn't take either of them long to pack. Draco made sure Meghan's bag contained her lion, and that he had packed the recorder Aunt Andy had bought for him as well as his own stuffed animal. His playing for Meghan to dance had helped both of them through some of the hardest times when they missed the Pack the most. Now he'd have to play on his own.

They came down the stairs together, hand in hand, and hugged Aunt Andromeda goodbye. Meghan's face was set and firm – she seemed to have left her tears upstairs.

"I'll take her first," said the casewitch when Aunt Andy had excused herself and gone upstairs. She threw Floo powder into the fireplace in the living room, turning the flames green. "Longbottom House!" she announced, stepping into the fire with Meghan at her side. The flames whipped them out of sight.

Once the fire was normally colored again, the casewizard gave Draco a little push forward. "Go on, boy, don't be shy," he said, tossing a pinch of Floo powder into the flames again.

Draco stepped into the fire, the usual warm-wind feeling spreading over him. The casewizard joined him and shouted "Nott Manor!"

Draco's stomach turned upside down, and not just because of the Floo.

*The Notts? No, oh no, oh no...*

xXxXx

Upstairs in the hallway, Andromeda Tonks swore colorfully.

Apparently no one had ever told the Wizarding Family Services people that sound carried through heat registers.

xXxXx

Four people sat around the Tonks' kitchen table, their faces uniformly grim. Remus, Danger, and Aletha had arrived at the back door almost exactly two minutes after the casewizards had taken their cubs away again. Andromeda had just finished explaining and was now staring at the table as if she expected them to scream at her.

"They must have intercepted one of our letters, to know I was coming tonight. Andy, don't blame yourself – you couldn't have done anything," said Aletha quietly, though her face was still streaked with tears. "What were you going to do, duel with them?"

"I feel like I should have," said Andy regretfully. "They're so obviously *not* interested in the children's well-being, or in anything but their own selfish little agenda – and I have no idea what that may be."

"Nor do we," said Remus. "So all we can do is keep trying to get them back somehow. At least you were able to hear where they sent them, Andy. Meghan should be all right – Longbottom House was Frank Longbottom's home when he was... lucid, and I think his mother lives there now, with Frank and Alice's boy, what's his name, Neville. He's Harry's age, so Meghan will have some company. But Draco's another matter." His hand curled into a fist for a moment. "The Notts. Why in God's name would anyone be so stupid as to send a child to live with Patroclus and Deianara Nott?"

"How you can remember all those names, but constantly forget where you left your wand, is beyond me," said Danger with a half-smile.

"As to why, that's simple," said Andy with a bitter smile. "Money. The Notts have plenty of it."

Aletha sighed. "Oh, come on, Andy, I know the Ministry's interested in gold, but that can't be the only reason."

"They may be in debt from this little project and looking to collect," Andy countered. "Draco told me something very interesting about Harry. Apparently the Ministry found his aunt and uncle, set them up in a house, got their son back from the Muggle version of Family Services, and paid them off – all so they would take Harry back and never let him know he'd been away."

"That explains a lot," said Danger, her eyes narrowing. "Did he tell you anything else?"

"Something about Hermione... oh, heavens, what was it... her name, that's it. She thinks her name is something else."

All three Marauders sat up straight. "What?" demanded Remus. "Do you remember what?"

Andromeda closed her eyes in thought. "Don't rush me... oh, Lord, he said something about London... he thought it was funny, in an awful kind of way, that they were taking her to a children's home in London, and her name was the same as it was when you lived there..." She shook her head, opening her eyes. "But that doesn't make sense."

"Oh, yes, it does," said Danger, smiling hugely. "When we lived in London, we used the name White. And Hermione went by Jane."

Remus, too, looked enormously relieved. "Andy, you have to understand. Until just now, we had no idea where to look for her, not even where to start. And now we have a children's home in London and a girl named Jane White. I can start on that tomorrow – there can't be that many children's homes around..."

"Where do the Notts live?" asked Aletha.

"Leicestershire," said Andy promptly. "I'd be careful, though, their house is probably tricked up as far as it can be, they're paranoid about invaders – as I would be, if I were a former Death Eater..."

"We'll work something out," said Danger, flexing her fingers. "Ladies and gentleman, we are back in business."



The next day, life was back to something resembling normal for the three remaining members of the Pack. Remus and Aletha got up early to go to work – Aletha to her job as “Alice Anderson,” Remus to London, to do some research into Muggle children’s homes. Danger had a short lie-in, then got up and did some cleaning – though Aletha was a tidy woman, so there wasn’t much to do – and started a casserole for dinner. The simple, familiar tasks of the Den-keeper comforted her.

*Though I do miss Sirius. I think we all do. We don’t talk about it, but we miss him.*

*And we still haven’t figured out where we’re going to go once I spring him tomorrow. I’m going to be no good after I get us away, so I’ll need to be sure wherever I take us is safe...*

Danger knew that using the “wild” magic, her “one impossible thing,” would take so much out of her that she would lose consciousness almost immediately after using it, and remain unconscious for however long it took her to recover – the more impossible the magic, the longer she would be down for.

*And I don’t even really know what I’m doing yet, so I don’t know how long I’ll be out...*

Someone knocked at the door.

*Oh, drat. What do I do now?*

Her common sense took over. *Answer the door and tell whoever it is I’m a friend of “Alice’s,” of course.*

She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and went to open the door.

“Good morning,” said the man on the other side, smiling politely at her. “May I come in?”

Danger smiled in relief and stepped aside to allow Albus Dumbledore entrance.

“I’m glad to see you, Professor,” she said, closing the door behind him. “I assume you know most of what’s going on.”

“Unfortunately. I am terribly sorry that I could not help you more in your time of trouble.”

Danger sighed. “You kept Sirius out of Azkaban – that’s damn important – and I’m sure you didn’t know about the cubs until it was too late to stop it. But...” She shook her head, biting tears back. *I’m getting to be a regular cry machine here.* “I don’t know... I just have to wonder, why does everything happen to us?”

“It would seem to be an occupational hazard of taking care of some of the most famous children of our times, and harboring one of the most notorious men.”

Danger chuckled weakly. “Occupational hazard indeed.”

Dumbledore smiled. “As I said, I am very sorry that I could not help you more before this, and I have come with an offer that I hope will help to rectify that. If you so desire, you and the rest of the Pack may take refuge at Hogwarts for as long as you wish. With or without the knowledge of the authorities.”

Danger’s heart leapt. “You mean, *all* the rest of the Pack?”

“Indeed.” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “If the Floo is used, I would recommend entering through the kitchens. There is a suite of rooms – are you free at the moment, by any chance? There is a wizarding home not too far from here where we may use the Floo, and I have an hour or two free.”

“As do I.” Danger got to her feet. “On behalf of everyone, Professor, thank you. Thank you so much.”

*The one place no one will ever think to look for us – and the one place the cubs will need to be –*

And suddenly, she knew exactly what her “one impossible thing” would be.

*Everyone’s expecting something to happen at the trial.* She smiled sweetly. *And pranksters’ rule number one is: never, ever, do what they expect.*

*Let’s make it a true déjà vu, Alex...*

Danger smacked herself mentally. *Too much American television, girl.*

She followed Professor Dumbledore out the door and closed it behind her, locking it with her wand.

*Finally, some good news. Maybe, maybe, things are starting to turn around.*

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# Maybe

## Chapter 4

### Chapter 4

Sirius Black wasn't thinking much about what he was doing with his hands. His left hand was doodling idly on a scrap of parchment, not leaving any ink traces, since he hadn't loaded his quill. His right hand was tapping a rhythm against the table.

His mind was the proverbial million miles away.

*So. Tomorrow.*

He smiled humorlessly. *Annie may love tomorrow, but I'm not too fond of it at the moment.*

Tomorrow was the day that a judge and jury, doubtless heavily biased against him, would decide his fate. He had no illusions – he was almost certain that they would find him guilty, and decide that he either deserved to go back to Azkaban, or to be subjected immediately to the Dementor's Kiss.

His left hand dropped the quill and crumpled the parchment. *What would that feel like, to have my soul sucked out? Would it hurt? Would I know it's happening? Would I –*

*All right, stop that,* said the part of his mind that often sounded like Remus. *You promised, Sirius. You gave your word you wouldn't do this.*

One of the last things Aletha had asked of him was his word that he wouldn't give up. "I know you'll want to," she had whispered to him as they held one another tightly. "It would be so easy. But please don't. For my sake, for Meghan and Harry, for all the Pack. We'll get you out of this. I swear we will. But you have to swear to keep fighting. Don't let the fear take you. Please."

He had promised, and he had kept his word. It had been hard sometimes, through these months, but he had held onto that promise, and the one she had made to him, although he honestly didn't see how they were going to be able to help him –

*But then, you didn't think you'd ever get out of Azkaban, either.*

He started flattening the parchment he'd crumpled. *I think what I hate most is not knowing what happened to anyone else. The cubs were just gone...* He halted that train of thought before he could lose himself in thoughts and memories of the four of them, of Harry's voice and Hermione's laugh and Draco's smile and Meghan's kiss goodnight...

*We at least had time to say goodbye to Remus and Danger before someone came to take them away. And then Aletha and I had a few moments together. But that was it. I haven't even heard anything about them since.*

He tore a corner from the parchment moodily. *Apparently I'm not allowed to. Deity of your choice knows, I ask often enough. And they get downright snippy about it at times. "We're not permitted to tell you that."*

Sirius drew himself up and mimicked the posture and tone of the snippy Aurors as he might at home, with the cubs as an appreciative audience and the other adult Marauders as a tolerant one.

*Maybe talking to yourself is a sign of madness. But pretending the others are here is the only thing that's kept me sane these past months.*

A thought streaked across his mind before he could stop it.

*I wonder if that'd work in Azkaban.*

But he knew it wouldn't. He'd lose them, there. He'd lose their faces and the sounds of their voices and the touch of their hands... all his best memories, everything he loved, gone like shredded parchment in the wind...

He shook his head sharply.

*I am not going to give up. I promised.*

*The trial's not till tomorrow. And even afterwards, there's still hope.*

*Unless they give you the Kiss,* that snide little voice whispered. *There's no hope after that.*

Sirius firmly banished the snide voice from his mind, and to keep it out, pulled a fresh sheet of parchment toward him, picked up his quill, dipped it in the ink bottle, and began to write.

Not being allowed to post letters hadn't kept him from writing them. He hoped that, if everything went completely pear-shaped, the Aurors would take pity on him and post the letters for him, so that Aletha would have something of him to keep.

*But there's no way things can go that wrong. It's just not going to happen.*

He hoped.

xXxXx

Harry Potter ran through the halls of his school, not daring to look back. He could hear the yells of Dudley's gang just behind him, and he tried to look around for somewhere he could go where they wouldn't dare hurt him – anywhere with a teacher –

“Going somewhere, Potter?”

Harry skidded to a halt. Malcolm and Dennis had somehow or other gotten in front of him and were cutting him off. Dudley, Piers, and Gordon appeared from around the corner, panting, and advanced on him purposefully.

*I don't want to fight, Harry thought desperately, watching them come. I really don't want to fight...*

But it wasn't because he wasn't any good. On the contrary. He was *too* good.

The last time he and Dudley's gang had actually physically fought, he had sent three of them to the nurse and himself to the headmistress, and he'd been suspended from school for a day for fighting, even though he'd tried to explain that they'd started it – they were the ones who were hurt, and he wasn't, so he got the blame.

*Uncle Vernon was really mad. Especially because Dudley was one of the ones I hurt.*

Harry'd spent nearly a week in his cupboard when he wasn't at school or doing chores for that. It still made him shiver to think about. He didn't want to repeat that.

*Why are they still going after me? I proved I can hurt them – why won't they leave me alone?*

It was one thought too many. Harry suddenly felt his arms grabbed and pinned behind him. He struggled, but Malcolm twisted his wrist, and he stopped.

“Think you're so much better than us with your fancy moves, Potter,” sneered Dudley, his little piggy eyes narrowed with distaste. “What were you doing in my bag?”

“Looking for my homework,” said Harry.

“What would your homework be doing in my bag, Potter?”

Harry's ears caught a voice that sounded like a teacher around the corner, and he decided in an instant to take a risk. “You stole my homework last night and put your own name on it so you could get my grade,” he said loudly. “Because the whole class knows you're failing science.”

“Nobody talks to me like that,” growled Dudley, stepping closer. Harry braced himself for the blow –

“*What* is going on here?”

It was a woman's voice, strident, demanding. Malcolm let go of Harry immediately, and he scrambled to his feet and turned to look at the speaker.

She was a middle-aged black woman, with whitening hair and glasses, standing with her hands on her hips and looking pointedly at all of them. Harry recognized the new school counselor, Miss Anderson, from the school assembly two days ago where she'd been introduced.

“You five,” she said, pointing at Dudley's gang. “You come with me. Mr. Potter, back to class.”

The other boys shambled past Harry, making “we'll-get-you-for-this” faces as they passed. Miss Anderson was still looking at him. “Go on with you,” she said in a gentler tone. “I'm scheduled to see you tomorrow afternoon, we can talk about this then.”

Harry nodded and started for his classroom, his mind strangely preoccupied with the sound of Miss Anderson's voice.

*I feel like I knowher from somewhere. Like I've heard her voice before...*

It was a very nice voice, Harry decided. It made him feel safe and comforted somehow. Almost like he was home.

He wondered if she sang. It sounded like she did. She spoke with precision, like she wanted to make sure everyone understood everything she said. He knew enunciation was very important for singers...

*But howdo I knowthat? I don't sing, except in music class, and we never learn anything like that. The teacher's always too busy trying to keep everyone from hitting each other with the tambourines.*

It was just another one of those weird things that he couldn't quite understand. There were a lot of them in his life. He'd gotten more or less used to them.

*I can ask her tomorrowif she sings.*

xXxXx

Aletha was grateful that she had left her wand in her office. The temptation to curse all five of Harry's tormentors into oblivion might otherwise have been too strong for her.

She scratched her nose, pushing her glasses back into place. She didn't wear glasses, usually, but these were special. She'd enchanted them to make her look thirty or forty years older than she was, and coincidentally a great deal like her Aunt Amy.

*I don't know if they're watching the school, but after they almost caught me when I tried to get near the house, better not to take any chances.*

Only fast reflexes and good Apparition skills had kept her from being caught when she had gone for a casual walk near number seventeen, Privet Drive, in mid-January. She had received a very polite letter later that same day, informing her that if she was seen anywhere near an area where any of "the children formerly in your care" were known to be, she would be immediately arrested again.

She had turned her energies to researching other ways she could get to Harry, while trying to search for Hermione, though knowing she was unlikely to succeed with the double handicap of not knowing the name the girl was under or having any indication of where she'd been sent. She couldn't exactly ask every children's home and foster program in England if they'd had any ten-year-old girls with bushy brown hair come in around Christmas...

*But no use dwelling on the past. We know where to look now. Remus will take care of that – I do hope he finds her soon. She must be petrified, poor little mite – all alone, with no one at all...*

*We're all going to need a long time to recover from this one.*

She allowed herself a few blissful seconds of daydreaming, imagining a cozy den room, lit by the glow of a crackling fire and candles in sconces on the walls, with mattresses littering the floor and the Pack littering the mattresses, asleep perhaps, or awake and telling jokes, toasting marshmallows...

Aletha pulled herself back to reality. *There's work to do before that happens. You have a part to play. Make it good.*

She opened the door of the school office and ushered the troublemakers in.

xXxXx

Jane White sat by herself with a book in the corner of the playground, her lion on her lap, hidden by her tucked-up knees. She liked best to be by herself. The other children didn't like her.

"Don't play with Jane," they said when they thought she wasn't listening, or sometimes when she was, to hurt her feelings. "She's weird. She's strange."

But the worst of it was, they were right. They had to be. She was weird. How else could she make all these strange things happen?

Clocks ran backwards when she was around. Balloons popped. Light bulbs burned out. And once, when another girl had made fun of her for not being able to speak, that girl hadn't been able to speak herself for a whole day.

*I didn't mean to do anything,* Jane thought, staring at the words on the page without really seeing them. *But I was mad. And it just happened.*

*What if I get really mad and hurt someone?*

A wet blotch appeared on the page.

*Or what if I even kill someone?*

Another blotch. Then another.

*What if the reason my family is dead is because I killed them?*

She buried her face in her lion's fur and cried, silent as ever.

xXxXx

Peals of laughter rang out from the upstairs hallway of Longbottom House.

"What are you two doing?" called Augusta Longbottom sternly.

"We're just playing, Gran," her grandson Neville called back.

"Playing what?"

"Er, nothing."

Augusta pursed her lips. The boy was a terrible liar. She walked grimly up the stairs to see what was going on.

Neville and the little girl from Family Services, Meghan, were sitting at opposite ends of the hallway, with a potted Omnivorous Snapdragon from the greenhouse between them. They were taking turns tossing bits of wadded-up parchment at it and watching it snap at them.

Neville looked up anxiously. "We're just having some fun, Gran," he said beseechingly.

Augusta allowed him a small smile. "Put it back and clean this up when you're done," she said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Longbottom," said Meghan, smiling at her.

"Thanks, Gran," echoed Neville belatedly.

Augusta's smile lingered as she made her way back downstairs.

xXxXx

Lying on his bed with an enchanted cold pack over one eye, Theodore Nott sulked.

*All I did was ask him a simple question.*

xXxXx

In the room assigned to him, Draco Black finished rinsing out his shirt in cold water. He hung it over the edge of the counter to dry and went to put on his other one.

*He deserved that. Asking if Padfoot beats me up.*

xXxXx

Remus climbed the stairs to Aletha's flat, feeling rather dejected on his own part – his search today had yielded nothing – but sensing, as he had since the middle of the morning, Danger's glee about something.

*And she won't tell me what.*

**Brat**, he shot at her.

**You should talk. Wait until I can tell you both.**

Remus adopted his whiniest tone. **But I don't wanna.**

**You're worse than the cubs.**

**You say that like it's a bad thing.**

Danger opened the door and stepped out onto the outdoor balcony, at which Remus had just arrived. "Hello, stranger," she said aloud. "Need a place to stay?"

"As I recall, this isn't your place to be offering."

"I wasn't." Her enigmatic and highly satisfied smile appeared.

Remus groaned mentally. **What did you do?**

**Just wait a few minutes, Letha should be back soon.**

**And what am I supposed to do while I wait?**

**Are you telling me you can't think of anything fun?** Danger waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Remus raised his own. **Well, I could always go floss my teeth...**

Danger turned on her heel and went back into the flat, in what might have looked like a display of temper to a bystander, but which Remus knew was her way of getting some privacy before she laughed herself sick.

He looked down the street and spotted a familiar figure coming. **Get it over with quickly**, he advised. **She's coming, and she looks like she could use some good news.**

**Fine.**

"What happened?" asked Remus as "Alice" climbed the stairs wearily.

"Oh, I just had to break up a fight today. A whole bunch of boys picking on one little skinny one." Her eyes flashed, and Remus knew what she meant.

*She stopped Harry's cousin and his gang from picking on him.*

"Apparently, the skinny one's gotten himself a bit of a name as a troublemaker," Aletha continued with a small, wicked smile, opening the door.

"Seems he knows some self-defense. He sent three of the gang to the school nurse the last time they tried to corner him."

Remus smiled, feeling a rush of pride. *That's my boy.* He and Sirius had both been responsible for teaching the cubs the rudiments of self-defense – it was how Hermione had known where to hit Snape when she'd been seven –

He shook his head, trying to stop the sudden rush of thoughts of his Kitten, and the longing that came with them, the wish to see her, to hold her, to mark her with his scent and warn the world away from his girl-cub...

**Soon**, murmured Danger, and he felt a gentle hand in his mind, helping him close off those memories for the moment. **You'll find her soon. We'll have them all back soon. And now I can tell you what I have to tell.**

**Finally...**

Danger ignored this. "We have our safe place to go," she announced as Remus and Aletha came into the living room. "Professor Dumbledore was here while you were gone. He's offered us sanctuary at Hogwarts. For as long as we need it, he says. There's a very nice suite of rooms near the kitchens we can have – he and I went through them, they have just about everything we could need – and if we have to be back in hiding for good, then the schooling problem has just been solved. What d'you think?"

Aletha's face, young again as she removed the glasses, was quietly rapturous. "I think I'm going to hug that man when I see him next," she said.

**That was worth the wait**, Remus admitted.

**And that's not all.** "Plus, I have a plan of my own. Involving the absent member of this little fraternity."

Aletha's smile grew. "I was hoping you'd say that."

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# Maybe

## Chapter 5

### Chapter 5

Sirius wasn't expecting to sleep that night, but he would have appreciated some quiet time to rest. However, it seemed fated not to be.

*They haven't allowed me any visitors at all for three months. Why the hell are they changing the rules tonight?*

*And why for him?*

"You may leave us," said Cornelius Fudge pompously to the Auror who was standing guard nearby.

"Yes, sir." The Auror departed.

"For an ex-Minister of Magic, you seem to have a lot of pull around here," remarked Sirius.

"Not 'ex' for much longer, Black." Fudge smiled rather nastily. "Your ticket back to Azkaban is my ticket back into office."

Sirius got himself under control just in time to prevent gaping at the other man. "How nice," he said instead. "And just how will ruining my life further your career, exactly?"

"Your life deserves to be ruined," snapped Fudge, fiddling with his bowler hat. "All those other lives you ruined – you ended – make you deserving of nothing else. And what about your godson, whom you kidnapped and mistreated, or that poor woman you deceived into marrying you, or the child you fathered and abandoned?"

There were two possible reactions to this, Sirius thought in some distant, rational corner of his mind. One was to become furiously angry and try to refute Fudge's ridiculous litany. That might be fun in some ways, but it would only feed into the image of him Fudge wanted to see. So he chose the other path.

He laughed.

He laughed as hard as those statements deserved to be laughed at, which was very hard indeed. He called up images of Pack-life, of typical days in the Den, and compared them to what Fudge had claimed.

*Mistreating Harry indeed. The only thing he was ever in danger of was being spoiled, and the other cubs took care of that. And if anything, Aletha conned me into marrying her. Oh, and I'd love to know how I abandoned Meghan when she fell asleep in my arms the night before this all started...*

"Do you actually believe all that?" he asked when he could speak again.

Fudge frowned. "I do. And the jury will, tomorrow."

"And if I say it's a load of hogwash?"

"You're obviously lying. You have no case, no evidence, no witnesses—"

"Because no one's ever given me a chance to get anything together," said Sirius, feeling his temper rise a bit. "I haven't even been allowed to write to the people who might testify for me."

"Your friends, I assume?" Fudge looked smug. "A werewolf, and the clearly unstable woman who married him? Not to mention the even more unstable one who tied herself to you? Or perhaps your children? Oh, but I suppose no one's told you – they were sent to their relatives, or to foster families."

"They could still testify," Sirius argued. "Three of them are ten years old, that's old enough to testify in court."

"No, no, my dear fellow, you don't understand." Fudge looked to be enjoying this, and that made Sirius a bit worried. "We couldn't burden their new families with these poor damaged creatures that you and their other so-called caregivers have been warping for so long. No, the children were – treated – before they were released. I think you'd find, if you spoke to one of them, that he would treat you as quite a stranger, and cling to his new, and certainly far more loving, parents."

*Treat me as a stranger? Why? Wait –*

*Oh no.*

"Tell me you didn't Oblivate them," he said quietly, trying his hardest to keep from begging and knowing he wasn't succeeding. "Tell me their memories weren't modified."

"Oh, I'd love to, but I try never to tell lies." Fudge brushed a bit of lint off his robes and rose. "I must be going, I have a great deal to do before tomorrow – it's been such a pleasure seeing you, Mr. Black. I'd wish you luck for tomorrow, but I doubt it would do you any good."

Sirius didn't answer. As if in a dream, he heard Fudge's footsteps recede down the hall.

*The cubs – my cubs – Obliviated...*

*They won't know me. They might even be afraid of me.*

*Everything we've ever done together, all the time we've shared, our whole lives just – gone...*

He had promised he wouldn't give up.

But four of the people for whose sake he had promised no longer existed, in any real sense of the word.

Might this be a good time to break his promise?

*No.* His resolve returned with a rush. *No. I won't let them have that too.*

*Maybe they took my cubs, but they can't have me too.*

He quickly uncapped the ink and dipped his quill.

*Every condemned man deserves a last request. I'll ask them to post these for me.*

*Letha has to know*

xXxXx

At Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a hidden suite of rooms was being explored.

"This is lovely," said Aletha, poking her head out of the bathroom. "We really could stay here indefinitely."

"We may have to," said Remus, stepping out of one of the bedrooms, where he had been arranging his few possessions next to Danger's. "But there are worse fates than being trapped at Hogwarts."

Aletha nodded. "How is she?" she asked, joining Remus in the doorway of the bedroom, where Danger lay apparently asleep on the double bed.

"Her mind and soul are... elsewhere. That's the best way I know how to put it. I could go with her if she needed me to, but she says she does this best on her own, and I see no reason to doubt her."

As if on cue, Danger stirred, then stretched and yawned enormously. "Eight hours," she said, sitting up. "So if I do it now, or soon, I'll be recovered in time to run operations tomorrow."

"That's excellent," said Remus, sitting down beside her on the bed. "I was afraid you'd be out for a day or more."

"Well, I'm getting a 'good works' discount," said Danger with a straight face.

"BS," said Aletha good-naturedly.

"You got me. What it really is, is that I got some advice about what I need to ask for and do to pull this off with a minimum of effort."

*I don't want to know,* Aletha told herself. *I really don't want to know*

Except that she did.

"Advice from whom?"

"Friends. The same people I negotiate this with – though it's not really negotiating, since using the magic just takes this toll on me naturally. What they do is help me figure out what I should and shouldn't do with it – what laws I can break and which ones I really shouldn't." Danger sighed. "It's a long story. Ask me next den-night."

"So what, exactly, are you going to be doing that's impossible?" asked Remus, moving around to Danger's other side and beginning to rub her shoulders.

"I'm going to have fifteen seconds' worth of three abilities, all related to Apparition. One, I'll be able to Apparate anywhere, even places where you usually can't."

"Such as Hogwarts," said Remus.

Aletha grinned. "Or the Ministry holding cells."

"Bingo." Danger grinned back. "Two, I'll be able to Apparate blind, to a place I don't know. And three, I'll be able to Side-Along-Apparate a person my own size – bigger than me, actually – without danger of us getting splinched."

Remus chuckled. "And thus Sirius Black disappears – again."

xxXxx

Sirius paced around his cell. He was tired, but for obvious reasons, he couldn't sleep.

*What father could sleep after learning his children don't know him anymore?*

And, of course, there was that trial thing too.

He had finished his letter to Aletha and placed it, along with all his other letters and all the notes and story fragments he'd penned over the last three months, in a box one of the Aurors had supplied him with. She had promised she would post it herself if he were found guilty. It resided now on the small table in his cell, just in case he wanted to add anything to it at the last minute.

*No. I think I've written just about all I need to.*

He smiled ruefully. *Wonder how they'll react when they find out the real identity of Valentina Jett. Should I tell them at the trial or not?*

He shook his head. *If I do, they'll confiscate the royalties. As it is, Letha can keep collecting them, so I haven't left her with nothing.* He smiled again. *No one can ever say I didn't do my duty by my family.*

Exhaustion was catching up with him at random moments, forcing him to lie down and catnap until fear and worry jolted him awake again. One of those moments overtook him now, and he stumbled to the bed and collapsed on it.

His last thought was wistful.

*If anything is going to happen... this would be a good time...*

xxXxx

He roused for a brief moment, disoriented. Someone was sitting on his bed, and a small warm hand was wrapped around his wrist. "Huh?" he said intelligently.

"It's just me," said a quiet voice.

"Oh." He let his eyes close again. *It's all right. It's just Danger.*

*That's odd. I feel funny. Like I'm being squashed. That happens sometimes when you're about to fall asleep, though...*

The bed was a lot more comfortable than it had been a moment before. The room was warmer, too.

The weight on the bed was removed, and a moment later, replaced with another, on the other side. Sirius took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, savoring the scents in the air.

*Something baking. Something sweet, with a lot of spice. Gingerbread, maybe.*

*And something is nice and warm against my back. In very specific places.*

He turned over, opening his eyes, and met a pair of knowing, amused brown ones, set in a dark face with contours so well known he could have seen it in his sleep –

*I am seeing it in my sleep. I have to be dreaming.*

"I told you we'd get you out of there," murmured a musical voice. A long-fingered hand slid under his shirt, caressed his chest. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too." *Dammit, if this is a dream I don't ever want to wake up...*

A sudden sharp pain in his forearm brought the room into sharper focus.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Just trying to help you out." Aletha smiled alluringly. "You're not dreaming, Sirius. This is real. I'm real. You're here, safe, with us."

*Real. Safe. Not a dream...*

Sirius eschewed thought for a moment in favor of crushing Aletha to him and kissing her passionately. When he released her, though, one question came to mind first.

"How?"

"Danger did it. I'm not quite sure how, but she seems to have developed the ability to do just about anything. Once. Then she collapses for a while – eight hours, in this case. But it works out. She pulled you out of there without a trace, and brought a big intriguing box with her—"

"You're kidding. She saved that thing?" Sirius sat up to see that sure enough, his box was sitting on the desk in the room. "Don't read those letters, they're utterly sappy."

“That’s exactly why I will read them. But tomorrow.” Aletha’s hand returned to its place under Sirius’ shirt. “For tonight, I have something else in mind...”

Since being on a bed in very close proximity to the most desirable woman in his world, after three months of separation, had the same thing occupying a great deal of Sirius’ mind, he didn’t take much convincing.

Afterwards, they rested in each other’s arms and talked.

“I never gave up,” Sirius told his wife with a bit of pardonable pride, reveling in having her close again. “It was damn hard sometimes – not even being able to hear from you by owl – but I never let myself give up.” He swallowed. *I have to tell her.* “But I felt like it tonight, when I got a visit from Fudge.”

“Fudge visited you? What on earth for?”

Sirius growled. “He came to gloat. To tell me that I was his ticket back to power. And he told me something else.”

“What?”

“The cubs.” How could he tell her this? “He said... the Family Services people...”

“Obliviated them?”

Sirius exhaled in guilty relief. “You know, then.”

“Yes. I’ve known for months. Draco and Meghan were sent to Andromeda, Sirius. She’s a Healer. Not only did she figure out what was wrong with them, she managed to reverse it.”

Sirius sat up in shock. “Reverse it?”

“Yes.” Aletha sat up as well, smiling at him. “She was able to reverse the Memory Charm. Draco and Meghan know who we are, they remember everything. And we know where they are, and we’re going to get them tomorrow or the day after. We know where Harry is too, and we have a good lead on Hermione. We’re going to get them back, love. And Andy thinks she can help Harry and Neenie too.” Her hand ran through his hair. “We’ll be the Pack again. Just like we were before.”

Sirius allowed himself to fall backwards onto the bed in relief. Half of the horrid images that had been tormenting him – Meghan shying away from him in fear, Draco staring blankly at him – were gone. The ones featuring Harry and Hermione were still there, but he could ignore them more easily now.

*I trust Andy. She knows what she’s doing. We’ll have our cubs again. Soon.*

“Where are we?” he asked suddenly, realizing the room was unfamiliar.

“Hogwarts. A guest suite, near the kitchens, with a passworded door – the portrait is of a woman in yellow, and the password’s ‘chocolate chip,’ just in case you need to get in by yourself.” Aletha draped herself over him. “I think this is Dumbledore’s way of apologizing for not being able to get you out of there sooner. He says we can stay as long as we need to.”

“Huh.” Sirius thought it over. “There are worse places to be stuck than Hogwarts.”

Aletha laughed. “That’s what Remus said, almost exactly.”

“Where is he?”

“In one of the other bedrooms, probably asleep by now. You’ll see him in the morning.”

“Do I have to?”

“Well, I suppose you could stay in here and hide under the covers.”

“What a good idea.” Sirius slid underneath the sheets, tugging Aletha under with him.

After three months, once wasn’t nearly enough.

xXxXx

Harry lay awake, clutching his lion and staring into the darkness. He couldn’t sleep. His stomach hurt. And the click of the latch on the outside of his door was still ringing in his ears.

“I’ll teach you to get Dudley in trouble at school,” Uncle Vernon had snarled, shoving Harry towards the cupboard. Harry hadn’t tried to fight back, since the one time he had, he’d been left with a set of bruises that didn’t fade for two weeks. “No meals for you, boy. Not until tomorrow’s dinner. Now get in there.”

Harry turned onto his side and curled up, closing his eyes. One tear slid down his face and onto his pillow.

*Maybe I can tell the counselor. Maybe she'd believe me.*

*But I'd still have to come back here after school, and Uncle Vernon would know..*

No, the best thing to do was just to keep everything the way it was.

Life might be bad, but it could always get worse.

Besides, there were good things in his life now. Like his special dreams.

Harry shook his head slightly, then stopped, as the movement made him feel dizzy. *If dreams are the best thing in my life, that's not good.*

Still, he hoped he would have one of the special dreams tonight. They always made him feel better.

They were never quite the same, but always similar. He had a different home, not the perfectly neat and almost sterile house on Privet Drive, but a big comfortable house on the outskirts of a village, where things sometimes got messy and nobody cared, as long as it wasn't in their way. He had not just one mother and father, but two of each, and a brother and two sisters as well, and a best friend who was always ready for an adventure...

*Maybe I shouldn't want those dreams anymore. They don't help anything. They just make me want something I can't ever have.*

But he couldn't bring himself not to want the dreams.

He was being like Annie, Harry thought drowsily. He knew there wasn't really much chance of anyone ever coming to take him away, but he couldn't help hoping...

xXxXx

Jane White lay in her bed, curled up around her lion, her eyes glinting in the moonlight. The bed next to hers was empty. Amanda, who used to sleep there, had been adopted today.

*I'll never get adopted. No one wants a freak like me.*

She squeezed her eyes closed hard, but one tear still escaped, dropping onto her pillow.

*Maybe I'll have the good dream tonight. The one where I have a family.*

She thought of dream brothers, both her own age and horrid pests but also her best friends, and a little sister who looked up to her so trustingly; of a woman who looked much like her and a man who smiled at her proudly; of a woman who laughed easily and often and a man who told stories and tickled; of friends who always wanted to stay at their big, friendly house a little longer...

Another tear joined the first.

*At least I can't hurt anybody in my dreams.*

xXxXx

Meghan lay asleep, her lion tucked by her side, her eyes moving under her closed lids.

She was dreaming of her mother singing to her.

*Betcha he reads*

*Betcha she sews*

*Maybe she's made me*

*A closet of clothes*

*Maybe they're strict*

*As straight as a line*

*Don't really care*

*As long as they're mine...*

xXxXx

Draco sat cross-legged on his bed, playing softly on his recorder.

*So maybe now this prayer's*

*The last one of its kind*

*Won't you please come get your baby...*

*Maybe*

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# Maybe Chapter 6

## Chapter 6

It took all Aletha's self-discipline to get up the next morning when her alarm clock went off. She so wanted to stay where she was – cradled against Sirius, his breath warm against her ear, with one of his arms under her neck and the other draped over her chest.

*I have a feeling we'll be doing a lot of cuddling for a while. In and out of bed. We're Pack – we need touch – and it's been denied to us for what feels like a very long time.*

*The cubs don't even know that they need it... at least, not Hermione and Harry...*

That was what finally got her moving – the thought of Harry, and the sudden recollection that she'd see him today.

*And once he's in my office... just have to play it by ear.* She smiled at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. *I should be good at that.*

She finished with her preparations in record time, scribbled a note to leave on the table, and knocked twice on the inside of their door to the hall.

"All clear," called the voice of Serpina, their portrait guardian. Serpina had had family troubles of her own when she was alive, and had gladly taken on the job of letting the Pack know when it was and wasn't safe to leave their Den.

"Morning, 'Pina," said Aletha, closing the portrait behind her.

"Good morning, love, how are you?"

"I'm just fine. A little sleepy, but on my way to rectify that."

"You go on, then, and have a good day."

"I'll try."

Aletha walked three paintings down and tickled the pear, granting herself admittance to the Hogwarts kitchens. Two or three house-elves immediately stopped what they were doing to wait on her, and she got the croissant and mug of tea she wanted in less time than she would have believed possible.

*Living here has distinct advantages.*

She ate quickly, catching the crumbs with her hand. She had to be at work in less than fifteen minutes, more to keep up appearances than anything. Harry was her last appointment for today – she'd had to play around with the schedule quite a bit to make that happen, but she'd done it.

*Just this one day. That's all.*

*Then I can finally make my move.*

She Flooed from the kitchens to the Leaky Cauldron, putting on her glasses in a dark corner there and emerging as Miss Alice Anderson, school counselor.

*Here we go.*

She Disapparated, fixing her flat in her mind. From there, she knew, it was only a five minute walk to the school.

xXxXx

Some time later, Sirius roused, momentarily confused as to where he was and why he was so comfortable.

His eyes snapped open as he remembered. *The trial – it's today –*

Then he grinned as he remembered further. *They're going to have to reschedule it, I think. Can't have a trial without a defendant.*

And he wasn't planning on showing up.

He sat up and took a look around the room. It was fairly small, but in a cozy sort of way. It made him feel as if he was really in a den – he suspected it was underground.

*Wonder what the rest of the place looks like.*

*Only one way to find out.*

He got up and meandered out into a comfortable living/dining space, somehow not surprised to see Remus and Danger already there. "Morning," he said noncommittally.



“Good morning,” answered Remus over the top of the *Daily Prophet*. “You’re not in the paper – I suppose they hadn’t found out yet by the time they printed it.”

Sirius grinned. “I can’t wait to see what they have to say about me this time.” He walked around behind Danger, knelt beside her chair, and bowed his head to her. “I am your most humble servant, my lady,” he said melodramatically. “Command me.”

Danger groaned and rapped his head with the end of her teaspoon. “Get up.”

“That’s a command, I must obey.” Sirius got up and seated himself at the table, which he now noticed had eight chairs around it. *Optimistic thinking, that.* “You should start a club,” he said. “The ‘I saved Sirius Black’s arse’ club. You two and Letha could be the founding members.”

“We’d be unlikely to get any bigger,” said Danger through a mouthful of porridge. She swallowed and continued. “Considering most of the country wouldn’t lift a finger to help you if you were falling into a volcano.”

“Thank you for that lovely image right before breakfast.”

“Speaking of which.” Remus folded the newspaper and picked up a small silver bell which Sirius hadn’t noticed on the table. He gave it a quick shake, and before the ringing had entirely died away, a house-elf had appeared in the room.

“What would sirs and ma’am like?” it squeaked.

“Cornflakes for me, please,” said Remus. “And a refill on the tea.” He tapped his mug.

“Erm, porridge, please,” said Sirius. “With brown sugar if you have it.”

“Of course, sir. Right away.” The creature disappeared.

Sirius regarded the place where it had been. “Room service. Very nice.”

“I’ll give you the guided tour after breakfast,” said Danger. “Remus is going Hermione-hunting.” She looked away for a moment, obviously worried, a sentiment Sirius couldn’t help but share. He cared deeply about the girl, even if she was primarily Moony’s Kitten.

*Poor little thing... hope she’s all right.*

xXxXx

Jane picked at her breakfast. She wasn’t really hungry, but she knew she had to eat. If she didn’t eat, they would think she was sick, and there would be more doctors and more pinching and poking and questions.

She was sick – sick of questions. She had lots of questions herself, but nobody had any answers.

xXxXx

The Nott’s house-elf, whose name Draco had yet to learn, brought him a tray in his room. He thanked it politely, and it stared at him before disappearing.

*I guess it isn’t used to people being polite.*

xXxXx

Harry was able to steal a piece of toast when no one was looking. He pretended he’d forgotten to make his bed and crawled back into his cupboard, where he ate it quickly, trying not to get crumbs on the sheets.

*I should be all right now. I never much like what Aunt Petunia packs me for lunch anyway.*

xXxXx

Augusta Longbottom sipped her tea and listened to her grandson and the foster child talking.

*Perhaps this is what the boy needs. Someone to listen to him, to drawhim out. They do seem to have common interests.*

Augusta allowed herself a small smile – a rare occurrence, twice in two days – as the girl’s laugh rang out clearly from the other end of the table.

*I believe I like this child.*

xXxXx

At the Ministry of Magic a bit later that morning, all was chaos.

“*WHAT DO YOU MEAN, GONE?*” bellowed Lars Vilias.

“Lars, please calm down,” said Amelia Bones, feeling an awful sense of déjà vu overcoming her. They’d had something very like this conversation nearly nine years before, only then he had been telling her the news. “I mean, gone. As in, he wasn’t there this morning.”

"How the hell could this happen?" Lars snapped at her. "Are your Aurors that damn incompetent?"

*Just like children – whenever they do something wrong, they're my Aurors.* "No, they're not. But Black obviously knows some kind of Dark magic which allows him to escape our custody. Either that or he has powerful friends."

xXxXx

The tiny figure of the Minister of Magic waved its arms in the bowl. "More powerful than the entire magical government of Britain?" his voice demanded, a bit tinny because of the spell that was reproducing it. "More powerful than our best warding spells?"

"I've seen enough," said one of the two occupants of the small, dark room elsewhere in the Ministry with a long-suffering sigh. "Turn it off."

The other man complied.

"This might actually be a lucky break for us," the first man said, standing up and beginning to pace around the room. "It makes Vilius' administration look incompetent. But I do want Black brought to justice." He twisted the hem of his cloak in his hands as if he wished he were wringing Sirius Black's neck. "You said you had kept track of the others?"

"Yes, sir. I'm not entirely certain where Black's wife is at the moment, but the werewolf and his woman were spotted in Surrey. They won't get near the Potter boy, though – we've got surveillance on him at all times."

"Fine. The Muggleborn girl?"

"Still where we left her, no sign of a change."

"Good." The man continued to pace. "I want you to go around the children today, Curcio," he said. "I want you to check on them all. Make sure they're... adjusting properly to their new homes. You know what I mean."

Christopher Curcio smiled. It was not a nice expression. "Yes, sir, I do."

xXxXx

After he finished his breakfast, Draco decided to go exploring. He started small, getting to know the area of the house where his bedroom was, then gradually expanded his search radius.

"...anything?"

It was Mr. Nott's voice. Draco flattened himself against the wall instinctively and listened.

"No, nothing at all."

Draco's breath caught. He knew the other man's voice as well – and he didn't like it.

*Who is that?*

"Strange. Yesterday, he blacked Theodore's eye after Theodore asked him a question about Sirius Black. Theodore bloodied his nose, of course."

*Just barely.* Draco allowed himself a smug smile. *And I really nailed him...*

The other man grunted. "I don't like that. May I see him?"

"Of course. Let me send Brilly to get him."

Draco made tracks towards his room, having no wish to be found by Brilly, whatever that was, listening to what was obviously supposed to be a private conversation...

"Little sir," said the house-elf, appearing in front of him. "The master wants you in his study. Brilly is to take you there, sir."

"Thanks." Draco followed the creature back the way he'd just come, thinking about what he'd heard.

*That bloke, whoever he is, doesn't like something. Something about me? Me and Padfoot?*

Suddenly the voice triggered the relevant memory in his mind, and he growled under his breath, stopping dead.

It was the same voice that had convinced Hermione that she was an orphan named Jane with no one to love her, the same voice that had told Harry that he slept in a cupboard every night.

*Curcio!*

*He knows – or maybe he just suspects – that Aunt Andy got the Memory Charm off me – he must be here to do it again!*

Draco's mind raced. *What should I do, what should I do...*

"Sir?" the house-elf – Brilly – questioned, looking up at him anxiously. "Master does not like to be kept waiting, sir."

"I'm coming."

xXxXx

"Ah, there you are," said Patroclus Nott as the boy walked into the room. "Draco, this is Mr. Curcio, from Wizarding Family Services."

Curcio laughed internally, while presenting the outward demeanor of the concerned casewizard and extending his hand for the boy to shake.

*Ah, child, if you only knew what happened the last time I saw you.*

*But do you?*

*That's what I'm here to find out.*

Nott left the room, and the boy sat down on one of the chairs, looking at him curiously.

"So, Draco," Curcio began. "Who did you live with before you came here?"

"My Aunt Andy."

"And who before her?"

The boy frowned. "I'm not sure. It's all kind of mixed up in my head."

*Good. Excellent.* "Tell me, Draco, have you ever met Sirius Black?"

Draco's frown deepened. "No. I hit Theodore yesterday when he asked me that. He was being stupid, acting like I lived with the man. Just because our last names are the same doesn't mean we lived together."

*Better and better.* "And do you know Harry Potter at all?"

"The Boy Who Lived?" Draco shook his head. "No, sir. I wish I did, though. That would be kind of neat, knowing him."

*Perfect. Just what we need.* "Thank you, Draco, that's all I need to know. It was nice meeting you. You can go now." He stood up and shook the boy's hand again, and watched him leave the room.

Nott came back in. "Is he all right?" he asked without preamble.

"Couldn't be better."

"I still am not quite clear on why your people have chosen this sort of revenge," said Nott, seating himself at his desk. "Why this game with the children, for instance?"

Curcio smiled. "According to the people we interviewed, Black is a devoted family man. Dotes on his children. What better way to torture him than, first, make him wonder what's happened to them for months, then, second, just when he thinks he might have a tiny chance of getting them back, tell him they don't even know him any more?"

Nott nodded. "I see. And Black's friends..."

"The werewolf deserved everything that happened to him and more." Curcio shuddered. He hated things which were not human, but looked it. "And any woman insane enough to *marry* one... well. And Black's woman is a good little wife and mother, loves her children and her husband to death. What could be worse for her than being free as a bird, but not able to get near any of them?"

Nott chuckled. "I like the way your mind works, Curcio. If you should ever get tired of Ministry work, do send me an owl. I could always use a man like you."

xXxXx

Curcio's next stop was at Longbottom House. But here he met an unexpected snag.

"Why do you want to see the girl?" asked the older witch who must be Mrs. Longbottom, looking at him challengingly.

"It's just a routine check-in, ma'am. To make sure she's settling in well."

"She is settling in perfectly well. She and my grandson are in the greenhouse at the moment, tending to some of the plants. It's delicate work, and I don't want them disturbed. You can come back this afternoon if you must."

And before Curcio could muster a protest, the door was closed in his face.

He stared at it for a moment, then shrugged.

*I can always come back. It's not like it matters what order I do these in.*

xXxXx

Augusta Longbottom gave a satisfied nod. It had pleased her greatly to send the sly-looking young man packing. She didn't trust him.

She resolved to say that Meghan was taking a nap when he returned.

xXxXx

Curcio headed next for the primary school in Surrey where he knew the Potter boy should be. Sure enough, as he approached the playground, he saw the black-haired boy sitting off to one side, staring wistfully at the other children running and playing.

"Hey, you," he hissed.

Potter jumped. "Me?"

"Yeah, you. Come here a second."

Warily, Potter approached him.

"I just want you to look at something." Curcio held it up.

The boy looked at it through the chain-link fence that separated the playground from the next lot over without comprehension.

"Thanks," said Curcio, putting his secret weapon back in his pocket. *We're still good here.*

"Er, you're welcome." The boy sat back down where he had been.

xXxXx

*That was weird,* Harry thought. *Why'd he want to show me the name of a star and some bloke from ancient history? And why'd it say they were dead?*

He shook his head, very carefully, since he was feeling more and more dizzy as the day progressed. *He's probably high or drunk or something. Not my problem.*

xXxXx

The Fat Lady returned to her portrait around lunchtime after a pleasant visit with Violet on the ground floor and discovered a big black dog sitting across the hall, staring at her wistfully.

"Oh, what do you want," she said, marching to the fore of the portrait and looking out at him. "Do you want to come in? Is that it?"

The dog wagged its tail.

"Well, do you know the password?"

The dog looked dejected.

The Fat Lady sighed. "Poor thing. But it's the rules. No one goes in without the password."

The dog lay down on the floor, looking excessively sad.

A couple of fourth year girls came down the hall. "Ooh, look at him!" cried one of them, pointing at the dog. "He's so sweet!"

"I just want to love him to death," said the other, already petting the creature, who perked up immediately with the attention.

"I wonder if he could get through the portrait hole?" asked the first one.

"Only one way to find out," said the second. "Seafoam green," she said to the Fat Lady.

"You're responsible for him," the Fat Lady warned them as she let the portrait swing open. "Anything he tears up, you'll have to answer for."

"Oh, he won't tear things up," said the first one, hugging the dog. "He's just a big sweetie puppy, aren't you, cutie pie?"

The Fat Lady thought she detected a hint of chagrin in the dog's eyes before it passed out of her sight.

xXxXx

Draco felt alternately proud of himself and dirty. Proud, for being able to pull off the scam that he was still Obliviated – dirty, because he'd shaken the hand of the man who had done such awful things to his family. Twice.

*I did what I had to.*

But he still felt horrid.

*I wonder if they have a library here.*

He climbed off his bed and went to go look.

xXxXx

Outside, the bushes at the edge of the Nott estate stirred as something invisible brushed past them.

**I'm here**, the invisible something said silently. **What kinds of wards do you think they might have?**

xXxXx

Jane was in the library of the Holy Family Children's Home, curled up in one of the armchairs, her lion on her lap and a book in her hands.

Suddenly, one of those things was no longer true.

"What's this?" sneered one of the newer girls, Carolyn, holding the lion out of Jane's reach. "You like to play with stuffed animals, White? That's baby stuff. You need to grow up some. What say I help you? Flush this little baby down the loo?"

xXxXx

**I don't know**, answered Remus as he strolled down a London street, headed for the next children's home on his list. He was going in reverse alphabetical order, and he had just finished at the Infants' and Children's Home. **Just keep your eyes and ears open, and set decoys if you possibly can –**

As he turned in at the entrance to his destination, nodding to the other man who walked in a moment ahead of him, his pendants flared hot, hotter than he had ever felt before. He dropped to one knee and bent over, trying to get the hot metal away from his skin.

*Who on earth –*

Someone screamed inside the Home. That was the only warning.

Every window in the place blew out, showering the courtyard with broken glass. Remus, down on the ground near the courtyard wall, was out of the way of most of it, but he still felt the sting of one piece in his arm, and the other man yelled in shock and pain. The pendants were still burning hot as Remus managed to get them out of his shirt to see –

*Hermione. Something's wrong with her.*

The other man, bleeding from multiple cuts along his arms, swore and started running toward the front door of the Home. "Accidental magic," Remus heard him say, and suddenly everything made sense. *She's here – that was her – someone must have frightened her or made her angry somehow – God, I hope she didn't hurt anyone –*

He followed the other man at a run, vaguely hearing Danger's half-excited, half-worried thoughts as she threw herself open and tracked with him, using his senses, sharing his mind –

**She's more like you than you know**, he said, smiling grimly as he followed the screaming, which hadn't let up. **Shattering glass by screeching at it.**

**Shut up and run.**

Remus rounded the last corner and froze at the sight that met his eyes.

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# Maybe

## Chapter 7

### Chapter 7

The room was a shambles. Freestanding bookshelves had been knocked over, books lay in piles on the floor, and all the chairs had been overturned. Four or five adults were milling around the room, staring at the mess in dismay. One woman was trying to calm the screaming girl, who was pointing at one of the wall-mounted bookshelves.

“Her!” the girl shrieked. “She did it! She made this happen!”

Remus followed the girl’s point with his eyes and felt a surge of elation. Crouching on the top of the bookshelf, almost too far back to be seen, was a small person with a great deal of brown bushy hair.

**Neenie!**

But even as Danger’s joyous thought came to them both, the girl on the bookshelf advanced slightly, and her face came into the light.

**Oh my God.**

**No. That can’t be her.**

Remus didn’t reply, focusing his mind instead on remaining where he was, on not rushing forward to comfort his Kitten. It wasn’t easy. Hermione seemed torn between cowering in fear and leaping down to attack. When she noticed him watching her, her lips peeled back from her teeth, and she hissed deep in her throat, as a cat might, before retreating back to her dark corner.

“Jane,” said one of the other women in the room, moving toward the bookshelf. “Jane, won’t you please come down? This must have been an accident, no one blames you – come on, you can come down—”

The figure on top of the bookshelf seemed to shrink into itself more.

Impulsively, Remus stepped into the room. “Let me try, ma’am?” he asked. “I’ve had some experience with things like this.”

“You certainly can’t hurt,” said the woman with a weary sigh, stepping back. “Best of luck.”

Remus found a spot where he could stand to see Hermione without having to crane his neck too much. “Hello up there,” he said politely. “Would you like to come down?”

Hermione took a small scoot forward, bringing herself into the light. She looked down for a moment, then shook her head no.

“All right. If you’d rather stay up there, I understand. You feel safe up there. I imagine you feel like a cat up in a tree – you’re safe and you can see everything.”

A pause, then a nod.

“But you’re a very little cat still. More like a kitten, really.”

Another pause, this one longer. Then Hermione gave a very slow nod.

“I won’t hurt you, little kitten.” Remus put as much persuasion as he could manage into the words. “I only want to talk. I’ll stay over here, if you like.” He took three large steps away from her bookshelf. “But talking to you up there is putting a crick in my neck. It would really help me if you’d come down.”

A long moment. Everyone in the room seemed to be holding his or her breath. Even the crying girl had stopped sobbing and was watching. Then two small feet appeared over the edge of the bookshelf, feeling for the next shelf down, and everyone relaxed.

“Thank you, sir, so much,” said the woman he’d spoken to as she watched Hermione climb down, using only one arm, the other being tucked around what Remus recognized belatedly as her stuffed lion. “You’re a miracle worker – it usually takes us half an hour or more to get Jane down when she climbs something.”

“Oh, this has happened before?”

“Never like this, with everything knocked over. But when she’s upset or frightened, she’ll often climb up things – wardrobes, bookshelves, trees – and stay up there until she feels safe enough to come down.”

Remus smiled sadly. **Just in case we were wondering if this is really Hermione or not.**

**Yes – I have a bit of a problem here. I tried getting across the boundary here, but the wards physically won’t let me pass. Ideas?**

**Can it wait?**

**Of course.**

Hermione's feet touched the floor.

"Thank you, that's excellent, I'll take it from here," said the man Remus had followed into the room, striding forward.

**Look out!** Danger shouted, but an instant too late – ropes were already flying from the wand in the man's hand, and Remus hit the floor hard, bound and gagged.

He swore, struggling against the bonds. **I should have known, I should have known it was too good to be true – just finding her this way –**

**Settle down,** Danger snapped. **As soon as he's not looking, burn them off.**

**Oh.** Remus felt extremely stupid. **True – what's the point of fire power if you don't use it?**

"*Oblivians Condicionis!*" intoned the wizard, as he must be, sweeping his wand in an arc around the room.

**Oblivians what?**

**It's a variation on the Memory Charm, usually considered fairly Dark – I think it forces you to accept whatever you're told directly afterwards, for up to an hour –**

**Is it possible this is what was used on the cubs?** Danger asked, her voice, which had been sharp, growing frighteningly soft. **To convince them that they don't know who they are, or where they come from?**

**It might.**

"You will leave this room immediately and not return for three hours," the man was saying quietly to his audience, who were gazing at him raptly. He had pulled Hermione aside and was very carefully not looking at her. "You will keep everyone else out of this room for that period of time. You will not notice any unusual noises coming from this room for that period of time. *Vergo Adfecti.*" His wand swept across everyone except Hermione.

"Come on, Carolyn, let's get you to the nurse," said one of the women to the girl, and a buzz of other voices sprang up as the women and the other girl filed out of the room, all of them completely ignoring Remus, Hermione, and the other wizard.

"Now, then," said the wizard in a very self-satisfied voice, turning to Remus. "Hello, werewolf. Come to see how we're civilizing your precious *cut*, eh? I recognized you as soon as you stepped in the room, but I thought I should let you get her down for me first. Thank you for that."

Remus glared at the man.

"Vicious little thing. Your influence, of course. I think I'd better get her under control before I arrest you for being closer to her than you're allowed by law. Reinforcement first." The man leaned close to Hermione. "Your name is Jane White. You're an orphan. You have no family. No one loves you. You cannot speak. Do you understand?"

Hermione opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again and nodded docilely. Red-hot anger rose in Remus – he felt its counterpart in Danger, and had a flash of inspiration. **Use it,** he commanded her.

**What?**

**Your anger. The fire. Use it. Pass the wards with it. Do it now.**

**What? I can't do that!**

**Not while I'm looking straight at the man who stole your baby sister and caged her in solitude and silence?**

**All right, I think that did it.** He felt her power building, building, coming to a peak – **No, it's not quite enough yet,** she sent, sounding not only angry but frustrated. **I can still feel resistance.**

"Now for the new part," said the wizard, and Remus turned his attention back to the man. "You have nothing special that you care about. This toy means nothing to you." He plucked the lion out of her arms. "It was wrong of you to fight for it. You will let me take it away, and you will never show anger like that again. If you feel it, you will keep it hidden. Do you understand?"

Hermione gave a small, defeated nod.

Remus growled silently, feeling anger pulse through his blood at the sight of this madman turning his Kitten's brilliant mind against itself. Danger snarled in pure rage, and Remus felt her shock, quickly replaced by glee, as she was suddenly surrounded by flame, like a fire goddess of old. She took one step forward, then another, and the wards around the Notts' estate fell away from her, allowing her access to their grounds. She touched off fires in the bushes as she moved.

**Good,** said Remus, a growl of appreciation for his strong mate. **Now my turn.**

He summoned fire and sent it to two very specific places.



One, of course, was the ropes binding him – he sighed with relief as he felt them drop away from him, and flexed his fingers in preparation.

The other –

“And now to make those changes permanent,” the other wizard was saying. He raised his wand hand. “*Vergo* – ”

The sleeve fell off his coat. A second later, the coat itself followed, along with every other stitch of clothing the man was wearing except his shoes. He gaped down at himself for a moment.

The moment was enough. Remus lunged for his wand and made it. “*Expelliarmus!*”

The wand flew from the other wizard’s hand. Remus tied him up quickly, adding a gag for good measure.

The other place he had sent the fire was to the threads holding the man’s clothing together.

Hermione was still standing where she had been, staring into the distance.

“How can I reverse what you did to her?” Remus demanded, Vanishing the man’s gag.

“Why should I tell you that?”

Remus twirled the man’s wand between two fingers. “Wands are amazing things,” he said idly. “So powerful, yet so delicate. So easy to break.”

The man scowled at him. “Go ahead. See if I care. I can always get a new one.”

“Bones break very easily as well.”

“I thought you were supposed to be all nice and civilized,” the man sneered. “A *tame* werewolf.”

“Any animal defends its cubs,” said Remus blandly. “Are you going to tell me or not?”

“Not.”

“Very well.” Remus stepped closer to the man, wondering in the back of his mind how far he was actually willing to take this –

When something struck him.

“On second thought, never mind. I don’t need you.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I don’t.” Remus aimed his wand at the man. “*Silencio* . ” He turned to Hermione, wondering if this could possibly work.

*The others obeyed the commands he gave them while they were in this trance state. So maybe, just maybe...*

“Answer my questions,” he commanded. “Aloud. Can you hear me?”

“Yes.” It was Hermione’s voice, but sounding very distant and dreamy.

“What is your real name?”

“Hermione Jane Granger.”

Relief spread over Remus in an all-encompassing wave. *She knows. She remembers. She can remember.*

*Now I just have to figure out how to word this...*

He wished he could command her to forget the past three months, to be again the innocent child she had been before all of this happened.

*But that would make me no better than him. She deserves her own memories. All of her own memories.*

“Hermione, are you listening to me?”

“Yes.”

“Will you do as I say?”

“Yes.”

“Then – *remember the truth*. Remember who you are and where you belong. Remember who loves you. Remember the truth.” He pointed his wand at her, praying this would work. “*Vergo Adfecti* . ”

Hermione’s eyes rolled back, and she collapsed. Remus jumped forward to catch her and laid her gently on the floor, feeling a shiver of worry.

Relax, advised a voice. Those were some heavy-duty orders you gave her. Her mind needs time to recover.

**Where have you been?**

**Fighting off defensive spells, thank you very much. The Notts have this place tricked up like you wouldn't believe – but I'm in. And I'm all in. I'm going to find a room and take a nap.**

**Be careful. Please.**

**Don't be such a worrywart – I've got the Invisibility Cloak and I can burn anything that tries to touch me. What could possibly go wrong?**

**Do you really want me to answer that?**

**No. Just deal with that bastard you've got there.** Her anger flared up again. **Hexing him into the next century, and to the next galaxy, would be nice. But I'll leave that one to you. Granger-Lupin out.**

Remus nodded and turned back to the wizard, who was staring at him with an expression composed half of astonishment, half of rage. He lifted the Silencer. "Something you want to say?" he inquired politely.

"You'll never get away with this. You're in violation of so many laws – so many statutes – we'll find you. You can't hide forever. You won't get away with this."

"I see. By the way, what's your name?"

The wizard scowled at him. "None of your business."

"All right. If you insist." Remus put away his own wand and picked up the other wizard's, examining it. "I wonder," he murmured as if to himself. "I wonder."

"You wonder what?"

"There's a certain incantation that one can use to preface most common spells. It makes the spell specific to the wand that cast it, so that only that wand can be used to alter or reverse the spell. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

*"Specificatum Rudis,"* said Remus, still stroking the wand. "You use it like this."

Abruptly, he pointed the wand at its owner. *"Specificatum Rudis Silencio!"*

The other man stared at him, his mouth working furiously, but unproductively.

"Of course," Remus went on nonchalantly, "it's a rather risky spell to use. If, say, the wand that cast it gets... damaged..."

The snap was clearly audible.

Remus knelt beside the furious wizard, feeling a fierce satisfaction at the expression which replaced anger on the other's face.

*Let's see. I'm a werewolf, I have power over fire, and I have a working wand available to me. You are naked, tied up, unable to speak, and you hurt my cub.*

*Yes, I'd say you should be very, very afraid right now.*

"There is a word for what I have just done to you," he said quietly. "It's called justice. You stole my Kitten's voice from her, so I took yours from you. But you also stole her memories. And I don't want to steal your memories. I want you to remember everything that's happened here today. So I have another idea."

He placed the splintered edge of the broken wand against one of the just-scabbing cuts on the wizard's arm and dug it in hard. The wizard flinched as fresh blood broke through the scab.

"What I did to you before was justice," Remus repeated. "But this – this is something else." He smiled again, allowing all the frustration and anger and even hatred he had repressed for three months to come to the surface in that one smile. "This is called revenge."

He spat onto the wizard's arm.

Directly into the open cut.

"See a Healer whenever you get yourself free," he advised, standing up. "And start stocking up on pain relievers for the full moon. You're going to need them."

He savored the horror on the other wizard's face for one second before turning away, lifting Hermione in his arms, and walking out of the room, leaving the other man for anyone who found him.

*And since he cast that spell to keep everyone away from here for three hours...*

Hermione was light in his arms. Too light. *She hasn't been eating properly. But we can fix that.*

They could fix everything. Not perfectly – their lives would never be the same again – but if he could judge by his own reaction, being together again would make all that had passed seem unimportant. Seeing Hermione's face, even so pale and still as it was, made him feel more human than he had in a long time.

*I wonder if she has anything here she'd miss –*

He wanted to hit himself, but his arms were full of girl. *Of course – her lion.*

Rather than go back to the library, he set Hermione down on her feet, holding her against him with one arm, and pulled out his wand with the other. "Accio Lion," he said, and a moment later, he caught the stuffed toy as it hurtled toward him and tucked it into a pocket.

Suddenly he felt the girl stiffen against him. Quickly, he dropped to one knee, steadying her with both hands. *Oh God, please let her be all right... please...*

Hermione blinked at him, orienting on his face. Her lips parted, then closed.

"Mmm... Moony?"

It was the quietest of sounds, high-pitched and wistful, the voice of a little girl hardly daring to hope – but to Remus, it was accompanied by trumpets and choirs of angels singing.

"Yes, Kitten," he whispered, crushing her into a hug. "It's me. I'm here."

"Will you take me home?"

"That's – that's the only reason I came."

What was the matter with his voice, Remus wondered – why did it sound broken up? And what was happening to his eyes? Why couldn't he see properly?

The shoulder of Hermione's blouse developed a dark spot. Then another.

*Oh.*

"Come on, Kitten," he said, swallowing hard and reaching into his pocket for his handkerchief. "Let's get going. We have a train to catch."

xXxXx

"There you are," panted Theodore Nott, bursting into the library. "Come on, we have to get downstairs."

Draco closed the book he was reading, confused. "What?"

"There's been a security breach. Invader in the house. Father thinks it might be Sirius Black or one of his friends. We're supposed to go to the safe room and wait."

Draco shook his head, feeling a smile start. "No."

Theodore looked confused. "No?"

"No. I'm not going to. You go."

"Why?"

"I'm going to go find whoever it is."

Theodore's mouth fell open. "You can't! If it's – him – he'll kill you! Or kidnap you to torture you or something! I remember the stories—"

"What stories?"

"Father used to tell me stories about you. Stories about what happened to you. And they were always awful." Theodore looked – worried, Draco decided. "I don't want them to come true."

Draco sat down on the arm of the chair. "Do you want to know what I would do if Sirius Black appeared in this room right now?" he asked conversationally.

Theodore stared at him, then nodded.

"I'd walk up to him. I'd look him in the eye. And I'd ask him..." Draco paused, enjoying the expression on Theodore's face. "What took you so long?"

Theodore backed slowly out of the room. "You're out of your mind," he said shrilly. "You're completely out of your mind."

"I know." Draco lolled on the chair, waiting until the running footsteps of the other boy receded.

Then he took off running himself, headed for his own bedroom.

*If someone is here for me, I'll need to be packed. We might have to leave fast.*

He ran through his door and stopped short.

There was a distinct smell of smoke in the room.

And he had just heard a small gasp.

Instinctively, he got his back to the wall. "Is someone there?" he called out, scanning the room for places a person could hide.

"No," answered a woman's voice. "No one at all."

Draco stifled a gasp of his own. He knew that voice.

One word escaped him. But one was all that was needed.

"Danger?"

A shimmer as of silvery fabric – and then she was there, standing beside his bed. Her arms were open, and no one could mistake the welcome – the love – in her face.

With a little yip like a fox kit greeting its dam, he shot across the room.

xXxXx

In the hallway, Theodore Nott listened intently.

"Rowdy as ever, little fox," said a woman's voice with laughter in the tone, and there was a series of thumps. Theodore peered through the hinges on the door and saw something incredible.

Draco Malfoy – Draco Black – and a woman with bushy brown hair appeared to be fighting on the floor, trying to pin each other down. But their faces looked all wrong for fighting. They didn't look angry. They looked... happy. And sad at the same time. The woman had tears in her eyes, at any rate. And she kept kissing him on the head...

The woman got Draco pinned on the floor with one hand and her legs and started tickling him under his arms with the other hand. He squirmed, laughing uncontrollably, and got a hand free to reach up and tug on a handful of her hair. She yelped and let him go, and he jumped up, ran around her, and leapt onto her back. "You smell like smoke," he said, clinging to her.

"I know. Do you want to see why?"

"Yeah."

She chuckled. "You have to get off me first."

Draco relinquished his hold, and the woman adjusted her position so that she was sitting with her back against the bed, her feet out at angles in front of her. Draco sat down between her legs, letting his head rest against her chest, and she held him close with one arm. "Watch," she said, holding out the other hand.

Draco and Theodore both stared as flames appeared in that hand, played around it, leapt into the air above it, then vanished. "Wow," said Draco in amazement. Theodore silently agreed.

"That's how I got in – but I'm going to hope getting out will be easier. Are you ready to leave?"

"Five minutes."

"Make it three."

"Yes ma'am."

"That's my boy."

Draco pulled a duffel bag from under his bed and began stuffing things into it. Theodore watched as the other boy added the stuffed lion that sat on his bed, the musical instrument he played sometimes, a clean shirt and socks, then disappeared into the bathroom.

*What do I do now?*

Draco came back out into the bedroom, zipped the bag shut, and slung it over his shoulder. "I'm ready."

"Two minutes. Very good." The woman nodded approvingly. "All right, we're going out invisible. But the Cloak doesn't block sound or touch, so we still have to be careful." She picked up a silvery pile of material, which must be an Invisibility Cloak, Theodore realized. "Stay close to me, and if you see something you think I don't, point it out to me – quietly. And don't be afraid of the fire – I've told it not to burn me or you or anything of ours. So we can walk right through it without getting hurt. Clear?"

"Clear. Where are we going?"

"Train station. We'll walk part of the way, and I'll Apparate us the rest – we have a connection to make."

"All right."

"Here we go, then." The woman pulled the Cloak over them both, and they vanished. Theodore dodged quickly into one of the other rooms along the hall and listened for the sounds of footsteps passing his door.

Once they were gone, he took off running again, in the opposite direction from the one they had taken.

"I'm sorry, Father," he practiced in his mind as he ran. *"I couldn't find Draco anywhere. I looked all over – in the library, in the study, in his room..."*

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# Maybe Chapter 8

## Chapter 8

Harry leaned his head back and closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of what sun there was on his face. Recess would be over soon, and he'd have to go back inside and face the afternoon classes before going to see the counselor.

*I wonder what kind of questions she'll ask. Probably if I like my aunt and uncle.* Inwardly, he practiced his sincerest expression. "Yes, ma'am, I like them. I have everything I need and they take good care of me."

Some inner prompting made him open his eyes – or perhaps it was the half-heard sound of several pairs of feet thudding his way. Dudley's gang was charging towards him, obviously intending to take advantage of the momentary absence of the recess monitor – the teacher must have gone inside for some reason.

Harry leapt to his feet and ran.

xXxXx

"Oh, Miss Anderson," called one of the other teachers – was it Mrs. Easton or something like it? – catching sight of Aletha as she rounded a corner. "Would you mind nipping outside and keeping an eye on the students on the playground? I'll only be a moment – thank you so much."

She was gone before Aletha could say anything.

"I suppose I will, then," Aletha said half-aloud, chuckling to herself as she made her way toward the playground doors.

Her good mood lasted for precisely one second after she stepped outside.

The playground was silent, every child staring at a point to Aletha's left and above her. Reluctantly, Aletha turned to look as well.

A familiar figure was silhouetted against the sky on the roof of the school kitchens.

"Miss Anderson!" Piers Polkiss ran up to her, practically dancing. "Potter's on the *roof*, Miss Anderson. We're not allowed on the roof. Is he going to be in trouble?"

"Hush," said Aletha authoritatively, and Piers fell silent. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Everyone inside!" she shouted. "Back to your classes!"

There was a collective groan, but the children obediently trooped towards the doors. Dudley Dursley had a wicked grin on his face – he was obviously thinking about how much trouble Harry would be in at home for being found on the roof of a school building. Aletha stifled a grin of her own.

*If you only knew, boy...*

When the playground was clear, she walked out into the middle of it and looked up at Harry.

"Hello," she called.

"Hello," Harry called back.

"Are you all right, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm fine."

"Did you climb up there on purpose?"

"No, ma'am."

"It was an accident, then?"

"I think so."

"All right. Hold still, I'll get you down." After quickly checking to see that no one was watching, Aletha pulled out her wand. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

She could see Harry's eyes widen in surprise as he felt himself lifted from the ridgepole where he was sitting. Carefully, she guided him outwards, then down, halting him a few inches off the ground. He extended his legs and stood up without having to be told, and she quickly ended the spell.

"Here I am, I'm back—" Mrs. Easton rushed out onto the playground and looked around in dismay. "Good heavens, what's happened?"

"There was a slight emergency involving Mr. Potter here, I had to send the other children inside, but everything's all right now." Aletha decided to seize her opportunity. "Mrs. Easton, would you happen to know what classes Mr. Potter has this afternoon?"

Art, mathematics, and history," answered Harry on his own account.

Aletha smiled at him. "My apologies, I should have asked you first. Are you behind in any of those classes?"

Harry shook his head.

"Mrs. Easton, would you do me an enormous favor?"

"What sort?"

"Inform Mr. Potter's teachers for those subjects that I'm kidnapping him for the afternoon? I think he would benefit from a session right away, and perhaps a bit longer than my usual chats with the students." Aletha beckoned the other woman closer. "He was on the roof of the kitchens," she whispered. "Claims he got there by accident."

"Oh – my. Well, yes, in that case. We can't have that, no indeed. I'll certainly do that for you, Miss Anderson."

"Thank you, Mrs. Easton, very much. Goodbye, now." Aletha beckoned Harry to follow her, and they reentered the school building.

"Thank you," said Harry quietly as they passed through the doors.

"For what?"

"For getting me down."

"You're welcome."

They walked in silence for a moment. Then Aletha froze, feeling her pendants heat. Quickly, she pulled them out and sighed. *Hermione. But I can't do anything about her now.* She murmured the spell that let the pendants know the message had been received and tucked them away again as they returned to normal.

She looked back at Harry. He was leaning against the hallway wall, rubbing his chest where the pendants would hang, and Aletha suddenly noticed how pale he looked. "Mr. Potter. Are you all right?"

Harry jumped and looked at her guiltily. "Yes, ma'am."

"You look tired."

"I'm just... I'm fine."

Aletha fixed him with a look. "What did you eat for lunch?"

Harry looked at his shoes. "I didn't eat lunch," he said in a mumble.

"Why not?"

"My aunt forgot to pack me one."

"Why didn't you buy one?"

"I didn't have any money."

"All right. What did you eat for breakfast?"

Harry's shoes were still fascinating him. "A piece of toast," he muttered even more quietly.

Aletha put her hands on her hips. "No lunch and almost no breakfast. Did you have dinner last night?"

An almost imperceptible shake of the head.

*Now the million-Galleon question...* "Why not?"

"I wasn't hungry."

*Wasn't hungry indeed. Being punished, more likely.*

Aletha restrained her anger. The Dursleys could suffer later. Her cub needed feeding now.

"Well, hungry or not, you have to eat. Come with me." She set off in a different direction.

xXxXx

Fifteen minutes later, Harry was sitting in the counselor's office, on a rather comfortable couch, finishing his first full meal in a day.

He felt quite a lot better.



He hadn't known what to expect when Miss Anderson pulled him out of his classes for the afternoon, but he certainly hadn't been expecting her to take him to the cafeteria and tell him to get himself what he wanted and she'd pay. He had been a bit worried, when he took his loaded tray up to the cashier, that she would renege when she saw how much he was getting, but she had paid without a murmur – in fact, he'd gotten the impression that she felt he could have used a bit more still.

Miss Anderson was sitting behind her desk, eating a chocolate bar and reading a book. Harry looked at the cover. *"Long Journey Home." I wonder what it's about.*

He set his empty tray aside on the end table beside the couch. The sound attracted Miss Anderson's attention. "Finished?" she said, closing her book.

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

"You're welcome." She came out from behind the desk and sat in an armchair off to one side. "Now, according to my job description, I'm supposed to talk to you. But I don't want to do anything you don't want to do. So do you want to talk to a boring old woman like me?"

Harry smiled, hearing the joking tone in her voice and deciding to return it. "I'd rather talk to you than go to classes."

"I'm flattered," said Miss Anderson dryly. "So. Harry Potter. You live with your aunt and uncle?"

"Yes, ma'am. My parents died in a car crash when I was a baby."

"Is that so."

Harry looked up, a little startled at what sounded like anger in her voice. "Is something wrong, ma'am?"

"No, not at all. I'm sorry. Go on."

"Go on?"

"Tell me about your aunt and uncle."

Harry felt nonplussed. How could he describe them in any way that would both be truthful and not get him more time locked in his cupboard? "My aunt is... thin. And blonde. She likes to talk, and she keeps the house very clean. And my uncle is a big man with a mustache who likes driving his car. And my cousin Dudley – he's my age – he likes... eating."

Miss Anderson's mouth twitched. "Yes, he most certainly does," she agreed in a very bland voice. "I think anyone who has to go through doors sideways likes eating."

Harry stared at her, then realized she was ragging on Dudley. Tentatively, he smiled, and was relieved when she smiled back.

"Do you like living with them," Miss Anderson continued, "or do you think you'd rather live somewhere else?"

*Somewhere else. Anywhere else.* Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I never lived anywhere else."

Miss Anderson nodded. "I see. Do you feel that they treat you fairly? Do they let Dudley have more privileges because he's theirs, or do they treat the two of you the same?"

*We've never had anything the same. I always get the leftovers, whatever he doesn't want, and I don't think he's ever done chores in his life.* "I don't know. I do a lot of chores, but my aunt and uncle did take care of me when I was a baby, so I do owe them for taking care of me. I don't really mind it."

Miss Anderson got up and went to her desk, picking up a pencil and a notepad. She stood for a moment, her face turned away from Harry, then returned to her chair. "Do you like your aunt and uncle, Harry?"

No. "Yes, ma'am."

Miss Anderson shook her head. "You're lying," she said, not accusingly, just stating a fact. "The truth, please. Do you like them?"

Harry's stomach sank. Playing for time, he looked at his fingernails as if they might give him answers. *What do I do now?*

"You don't have to worry, Harry. I won't tell anyone what you tell me here. It's private. Your aunt and uncle will never know what you tell me. But I need to know the truth."

Twice, Harry took a breath to speak, then closed his mouth again. Something seemed to be telling him to trust Miss Anderson, to tell her everything – but another part of his mind was playing Uncle Vernon's words back to him, reminding him of the terror of even one night locked in, and asking if he could stand months of that, every night, and every day that he didn't have school or wasn't needed to work around the house.

Quietly, Miss Anderson began to hum. Harry almost didn't hear it at first, but when he did, he stopped thinking about his problem and listened interestedly. It was a quiet kind of a tune, like a lullaby, and he thought he knew the words. He could almost hear them, at the corner of his mind, hovering there – a woman had sung them to him, a long time ago, a woman who loved him very much...

"I don't like them."

He was almost surprised to hear the words come out of his mouth.

“What do you like, Harry?” asked Miss Anderson gently.

“I like... running. I like to feel free like I'm flying.” He looked up at her, meeting her eyes – this was something he could tell. “I want to learn how to fly someday. I have dreams about flying.”

“In an airplane?”

“Er... no,” Harry admitted. “A different way.”

“Will you tell me?”

He felt silly, but she had said she wouldn't tell anyone. “On a broomstick.”

“Does it go fast?”

“Very fast. And I can do anything I want. Turns, loops, dives... those are my favorite dreams, the ones about flying – well, no, they're not really, but they're my second favorite...”

Harry trailed off, realizing he'd said too much, and there was only one question she would ask next...

“Second favorite?”

*Well, she didn't laugh at flying on a broomstick. Maybe she won't laugh at this.* “My favorite dreams are the ones where I have a family. But it's a crazy mixed-up family, so I know it has to be a dream.”

Harry's awareness of being in the room seemed to slip away. He was barely conscious of his listener shifting in her chair. The story seemed determined to tell itself. “I have two mothers and two fathers, they're married – not all of them, one of the men with one of the women and then the other ones – and there's me, and another boy and a girl my age, and then a littler girl who always tries to keep up with us, and we have friends who live nearby, and we go out and have adventures with them and then we come home and have dinner and stories and music...”

“You like music?”

Harry nodded. “We went to see *Annie* a while ago. I really liked it. Especially the one song, ‘Maybe.’ Do you know it?”

“I think so.” Miss Anderson hummed a bit of the tune, and Harry joined in, singing the words. She had a nice voice, he noticed, strong and pretty, and it did sound like she'd had training.

They sang almost the entire song together, until the very last lines, when Miss Anderson stopped, letting Harry finish alone.

*“Won't you please come get your baby... maybe...”*

“You sing very nicely,” said Miss Anderson into the silence.

“So do you, ma'am.” Harry decided to take a chance. “How did you get me off the roof?”

“The same way you got up there.” Miss Anderson smiled. “Magic.”

“Magic?” Harry repeated, staring at her. “Are you my fairy godmother or something?”

Miss Anderson looked highly amused. “Not... exactly. But tell me this. Do you wish your dreams would come true? That you would have a family? Someone to come and get you... maybe?”

Harry looked at the floor. “Yes,” he admitted very quietly. “But it won't ever happen.”

“Maybe not. I'm sorry, this is upsetting you. We won't talk about it any more. New topic. School. What's your favorite class?”

They talked for quite a while. Miss Anderson was easy to talk to, Harry found – she was a good listener, always interested in whatever he had to say. He was very embarrassed when he caught himself yawning in the middle of a sentence.

Miss Anderson yawned herself, then chuckled. “The darned things are contagious, you know. You can lie down if you like, Harry, there's no rule that says we have to talk all the time you're here. If you could use some sleep, you go ahead. I'll wake you when it's time to go home.”

The couch was very soft and inviting, and Harry hadn't slept at all well the previous night, with the combination of hunger and the horrid knowledge of being locked in. Also, for some reason he couldn't quite pinpoint, Miss Anderson made him feel safe. He almost wanted to sleep near her, because doing that meant he was home...

*I must be tiredder than I thought.*

He took his glasses off, set them on the end table beside his cafeteria tray, and rummaged in his schoolbag, coming out with his lion. “I have to have it to sleep,” he explained.

Perfectly all right. I know a little girl who has trouble sleeping if she doesn't have the family dog next to her."

Harry smiled and lay down, kicking his shoes off. "Thank you, ma'am," he said, closing his eyes.

"You're welcome, Harry."

Miss Anderson began to hum again, then added words to her song, and Harry felt himself drifting away to sleep, lulled by a song he knew he knew, but couldn't remember where he knew it from...

*Oh my love, you are my child,*

*Though you bear another's name,*

*Wherever you go, all throughout your life,*

*I'll love you still the same;*

*And if you should cry, I'll hear you,*

*And if you should call, I'll come,*

*For although you were not born to me,*

*You are my little one...*

xXxXx

Harry's dreams were odd and full of motion. First he was walking, in a sort of half-awake trance, down familiar hallways and stairs. Then there was a ride in a cab, with the driver's face peering back at him when the cab stopped at a red light. "Your little one, ma'am?"

"Yes, my little Jamie. I'm taking him home for a while to rest up, he's been ill."

Then a period of waiting with his body lying on a hard surface, but his head on something soft and warm, and then one more walk, up a few steps and down an aisle and onto a seat which wasn't quite as comfortable as he would have liked, but it was good enough...

*That's funny. I feel like I'm waking up, but this must be another dream. I still feel like the room is moving.*

Harry opened his eyes.

The room ~~was~~ moving. It wasn't a room at all. He was in a compartment on what must be a passenger train, he could feel the rhythm of the wheels on the rails below him – by the light outside, it was still afternoon, not evening yet – his schoolbag sat on the end of the seat he was on, his lion just visible within –

And Miss Anderson was sitting across from him, once again eating her chocolate and reading her book.

*This has to be a dream.*

Harry sat up and pinched himself.

*Ow.*

Nothing changed.

"Oh, you're awake," Miss Anderson said, lowering her book. "Good."

Harry stared at her. "You – you *kidnapped* me!"

She nodded matter-of-factly. "Yes, I did."

All the stories of child abduction he had ever heard flitted through Harry's mind. This was not how it was supposed to go...

"*Why?*" he blurted. "My aunt and uncle won't pay anything for me – they'd probably pay to get rid of me – and I'm not special. I'm not smart, or handsome, or important, or – anything. I'm... just plain Harry."

"And just plain Harry is exactly the person I want," said Miss Anderson softly. "Three months I've been figuring out how I could get close to you. How I could get around the people who were trying to keep you at your aunt and uncle's. I nearly got myself caught twice. I had to invent a whole new identity, get a flat, make myself believable as a counselor – and then find the time to be alone with you long enough..."

Harry suddenly remembered another part of the stories. "Did you drug me? The food you got me, at the cafeteria, was that drugged?"

"No. It was not. You fell asleep of your own accord. I admit that was a stroke of luck – I didn't have to convince you to come with me, I just had to help you walk – oh, by the way, there's a disguising spell on your glasses, so don't take them off in public." She dug in her bag for a moment, then handed him a mirror.

Harry stared at his reflection. His skin was the same color as Miss Anderson's. His hair was streaked blond, and the features of his face were subtly different than they had been.

"Why?" he repeated, looking up at her in confusion. "Why do you want me?"

Miss Anderson sighed, looking tired and – hopeful, Harry decided after a moment of thought. "Would you believe that I love you?"

This put Harry's brain into information overload. "Who are you?" he asked a bit dazedly. "Who are you, really?"

Miss Anderson gave a rather sad smile. "You were closer than you knew when you said 'fairy godmother.' I'm not a fairy, of course – fairies are little flying pests, about so big." She measured with her fingers. "But I am a magic user, a witch. And I'm not your godmother, but I would have been if I hadn't been away when you were born."

"You knew my parents?"

"Yes. I was a friend of your mother's."

Harry closed his mouth, finding it open.

*She was a friend of my mother's. She could have been my godmother.*

*And she says she loves me.*

It was almost too much for him to comprehend all at once.

"I want you to understand something, Harry," Miss Anderson was saying now. "I don't want to do anything that you don't want. So if this is too much, if it frightens you – if you want to go back to your aunt and uncle – just say the word. We'll get off at the next stop, I'll buy you a ticket back, I'll even go back with you to make sure you get there safely–"

"No," said Harry, finding his voice.

"No?"

"No. I don't want to go back. I don't ever want to go back. They hate me. They're – scared of me?" He realized it was true as he said it. "They're scared of me. Because... because I..."

The pieces were beginning to fall into place.

*"How did you get me off the roof?"*

*"The same way you got up there..."*

"Because I have magic," Harry Potter said, feeling his world beginning to change.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Maybe

## Chapter 9

### Chapter 9

"I'm sorry, Father," panted Theodore, running up to his father in the hallway. "I couldn't find Draco anywhere. I looked all over – in the library, in the study, in his room..."

"Very well. Go to the safe room, Theodore. I will tell you when you may come out." Patroclus Nott walked away.

Obediently, Theodore went. But as he walked, he kept seeing and hearing little bits of things in his head. Things like the way the woman had wrestled with Draco. Or the way he had leaned against her chest, looking so at home there. The woman calling Draco "little fox," and saying things like "That's my boy."

He started running, trying to get away from the thoughts. But others came in their place.

*What have I done? I lied to my father – I lied to my own father – and for what? For who? For a boy who hates me – who gave me a black eye yesterday – and a woman I've never even seen before, who invaded my house! Why did I do that?*

He turned into the safe room, and the door closed behind him with a satisfying slam.

Theodore sat down with his back to the wall and let his head rest on his knees.

*She didn't want to hurt anything, whispered part of his mind. She came to get him, that was all. She didn't come to steal or hurt anyone – she just wanted to get him and get out. That's why you did it. Because she wasn't going to hurt anything, and because they were happy together.*

*No, that's stupid, he tried to argue. Happy or not, she broke the law by breaking in here – and she's obviously powerful –*

*He latched onto that idea. That's it. That's why I lied. I didn't want my father to have to face someone that powerful. I didn't want him to get hurt. If I had told him she was here, he would have gone to fight her, and she might have hurt him. So I lied to him, he doesn't know she's here, and she and Draco will probably just leave and...*

*And what?*

He stared at the other wall of the safe room and wondered.

xXxXx

"I look like Ron," said Draco, examining his new face in the mirror Danger had conjured as he walked.

"That was the general idea." Danger had given both of them freckles and red hair, though her own was less flaming than Draco's. "You're not quite tall enough to double for him, but anyone who's never seen him might mistake the two of you."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Ha ha."

"Thank you. How are you, Draco?"

Draco looked at the familiarly strange face that was Danger's. "A lot better now than I was about ten minutes ago."

"Nice to hear, but uninformative about what I really want to know, and you know that. Spit it out. How have you been?"

Draco looked down at the road for a few strides, then back at Danger. "Lonely," he said quietly. "And very scared. And I couldn't ever let it show. Because Pearl needed me to be strong for her. And then when we got split up, and I got sent there," he jerked his thumb back towards the Notts', "I was even more scared." He grinned suddenly. "Until Theodore insulted Padfoot. Then I was just mad."

Danger sighed in a long-suffering kind of way. "What did you do?"

"Blacked his eye."

"Good boy."

"He gave me a bloody nose, but it didn't last long, and I rinsed it right out."

"What, your nose?"

"No, my shirt."

"Oh, good."

They were both chuckling now. Danger reached over and affectionately knuckle-rubbed Draco's head. "I've missed you a lot, little fox," she said softly. "I think I may have missed you the most. You always seem to know what to say to make me laugh."

"I wished you were there a lot," admitted Draco. "At night the most, I think. Especially on full moons. My necklace and Pearl's would sometimes get hot then." He frowned. "Actually, they got hot other times too. And some of the pictures on them glowed. Why do they do that?"

"When someone's upset. Did you feel it heat up a few minutes before I came in to get you?"

"Yes, and the picture of the cat was glowing. Does that mean something?"

"Hermione. I assume because Moony always calls her Kitten. Oh, and just so you know – she's all right again. She has her memories back. Moony has her right now, and they're getting ready to leave London."

One of the weights dragging on Draco's heart seemed to lift. "How's everyone else?"

"Just fine – or getting that way rapidly. Padfoot, for instance, is a lot better this morning than he was last night." Danger wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Yeah – Theodore seemed to think it might be him in the house – but I thought he was still in jail..." Draco trailed off. "What did you do?" he asked, mimicking the tone Danger had used on him a minute before.

"That's a big assumption, fox – assuming it was me..."

Draco shook his head. "Not an assumption. You're smiling like you do when you just pranked Moony."

Danger laughed. "All right, you caught me. I did indeed break that ungrateful mutt out of jail – though I shouldn't call him ungrateful, since he went down on bended knee to me this morning and told me he was at my command."

"What did you do?"

"Hit him on the head with my spoon and told him to get up."

Draco smiled, very well able to imagine this. "Letha?" he asked next.

"She's just fine – she was disappointed, of course, that she wasn't able to see you and Meghan a couple of nights ago. So were Moony and I – you two would have had a nice surprise if the casewizards hadn't shown up, we were with her that night."

Draco's hands briefly balled into fists. "Why did they do that, anyway?" he asked angrily. "Why did they do all of this? Why do we have to sneak around in disguise and run away and hide? It's not fair."

"You, of all people, should know life isn't fair, dearest." Danger laid a hand gently on his shoulder. "If life were fair, Harry's parents would never have died, neither would mine, and you would have been born to Moony and me instead of Lucius and Narcissa."

Draco gave a small laugh. "I would have liked that," he said quietly.

"So would I." Danger stroked his cheek. "But you have the next best thing. You're our cub, no question about it, and don't you forget it."

"I won't," promised Draco. "As long as no one makes me."

Danger winced. "Yes. As long as no one makes you."

They walked in silence for a few moments. Then Draco realized he hadn't yet asked about one person. "How's Harry?"

"What do you know already?"

"I know they tried to make him think he'd been living with his relatives all along. Did they send him back there?"

Danger nodded sadly. "Back where he started from. And just to make things weirder, they're living in my old house, the one I lived in when I met Moony."

Draco made a face.

"Agreed." Danger sighed. "But Harry will be all right – and I do really mean that." She smiled mischievously. "His school's recently hired a new counselor. A very nice woman, really she is – except that she has plans to kidnap one of the students..."

Draco returned her smile. "Letha?"

"No one else." Danger turned off the road into a clump of trees, and Draco followed her. "We're going to need to Apparate a ways from here. Hold on to me tight now, and don't forget to take a deep breath."

Draco grimaced, but grasped Danger's forearm tightly, realizing with a little shiver that he was not all that much smaller than she was anymore. And the bigger the other person was in Side-Along-Apparating, the slower the transit tended to be...

*Just as long as we don't get splinched.*

The familiar feeling of being squeezed through a rubber tube, but it seemed to take forever – his lungs were screaming, his throat burned –

And then they were there, and Draco gasped in air gratefully. Danger, too, looked a bit blue, and staggered a little as her feet touched the ground, but Draco steadied her until she caught her breath. "Everything still attached?" she asked.

Draco checked himself over, then nodded.

"Good. Let's get moving, then – we're closer to town, but not there yet, and our train leaves in twenty minutes."

They set out.

xXxXx

A man and a girl rode the London Underground together, sitting very close together. Whenever they got up to change trains, or whenever someone new got onto their car, the girl clung to the man as if she were terrified. He, for his part, held her close and stroked her dark and flyaway hair, comforting her.

They departed the Underground at one of London's major train stations. Their first stop there, of course, was the ticket window, where the man purchased tickets for a certain town, first consulting a piece of paper in a woman's elegant handwriting. Next, they stopped at a souvenir store, where the man bought a small bag for the girl to carry, into which they put their other purchases – two toothbrushes, two pairs of socks, and two children's T-shirts. The girl kissed the stuffed toy that the man took out of his pocket and gave to her, then added it to the load in the bag, and the two of them left the store and went to find someplace to eat.

They were in physical contact at all times, hand in hand, his hand on her shoulder, her hand around his arm. It was as if the two were glued together – which, truth to tell, neither would have minded at this point.

*Perhaps we're being paranoid*, Remus thought, managing his hamburger with only one hand because the other arm was around Hermione's shoulders. *But better paranoid than separated again*. He repressed a shudder.

After they were finished eating, they went to wait for their train.

"Tell me a story, Daddy?" murmured Hermione, lying down on the bench with her head in his lap.

"What kind of story do you want, Kitten?"

"Tell the one about the wolf who made a Pack for himself."

Remus smiled. "All right. Once upon a time, there was a wolf – Won-tolla, they called him, an Outlier, a wolf who answered to no Pack. But he answered to no Pack not because he was proud and wild, but because his Pack was scattered and gone – his Packmates slain or taken by hunters, and the one cub of their Pack, the boy-cub of the alpha male and female, missing. He mourned them day and night with howls and wild cries, but not all his howls could make them come back.

"But his howls did bring a female wolf to him, and by some chance it was she who had taken his dead alpha's cub and cared for him as her own – although she was no mother wolf, but only the older Pack-sister of another cub, this one female. Their Pack, too, had been slain by hunters, and the sisters were trying to live by themselves.

"The wolf returned to the female's den and saw there the two cubs, playing as littermates, and he loved them." Remus stroked Hermione's hair away from her face. "He had already known he loved the boy-cub, but there in the den he learned to love the girl-cub as well, and he took the older sister as his mate and loved her too.

"Together, they sought out others. They saved the wolf's Packmate who had been taken by hunters, for the older sister was clever and knew how to open traps, and reunited him with his mate, who had been sorrowing by herself in the forest, much as our Won-tolla had. But he was no longer Won-tolla, the Outlier, for he had a Pack now – and he was the alpha of that Pack, for he had been the one who brought them together.

"The alpha wolf, then, watched over his Pack and loved them. He could not breed himself, though that is the alpha's right, for he had been ill as a cub and could not beget cubs of his own. So instead, he gave his Packmates permission to bear cubs." Hermione giggled, as she always did at this point of the story, and Remus tapped her neck admonishingly as he always did. "The result was a little girl-cub, healthy and beautiful, and all the Pack loved her as they loved the other cubs.

"And then one day the Pack met another Pack, a Pack with strange ways. The true way of the Pack is to shun the hunters and fight them, but this Pack had allied itself with the hunters, and would have pulled down our Pack and delivered them to the hunters. But the alpha female of that Pack rose up and said it would not be so, and she fought her alpha male and defeated him, and brought him to the hunters instead, for the hunters did not care which wolf it was they hunted, only that it was a wolf.

"That alpha female left a cub behind her, a frightened and lonely boy-cub who had never known the ways of a true Pack, only the twisted ways of his strange and unnatural Pack, and asked our Pack to take him as one of their own, in return for her delivering them from the hunters. They agreed gladly, for not only did this save them, but it also saved the innocent cub, who had done no wrong. They taught him the ways of the Pack and treated him as a littermate to the others, and in time he grew to be no different than they."

Remus looked up as their train came chuffing in. "And so the Pack lived, and thrived, and the cubs grew strong and brave, and even when the hunters came and captured and separated them, the Pack found one another again. For the strength of the Pack is the wolf..."

"And the strength of the wolf is the Pack," recited Hermione drowsily, sitting up. "Is this our train?"



"Yes." Remus covered Hermione's ears as the brakes squealed on. "We'll be taking it a short ways, then changing, and with any luck, our beta female and the first boy-cub will be on the one we change to. Will you like seeing them again?"

Hermione nodded eagerly.

"Remember, the boy might not know you," Remus cautioned as they boarded the train. "And I'm afraid I'm not willing to try doing with him what I did with you. I don't know the exact specifications of that spell, and because of what it is, if I did it wrong, I could make it worse instead of better."

Hermione nodded again. "I understand. I'll be careful about what I say. I promise."

"Thank you, Kitten. Then, later this evening, we'll rendezvous with a certain older sister wolf and her boy-cub..."

**Older sister wolf indeed.**

**And how exactly is that derogatory?**

**If you have to ask, you'll never understand.**

**Probably true. Are you aboard?**

**All aboard and shipshape – as much as that's possible on a train.** Danger gave Remus a glimpse of their car and Draco's face, looking rather oddly Weasleyish, but unmistakably, at least to the eyes of the alpha, his cub.

**Excellent. Let us know where you'll meet us, and give my love to Draco.**

**And mine to Hermione, and Harry and Letha when you see them.** Danger blew him a mental kiss and closed the connection.

"When are we getting the baby cub?" asked Hermione as the train began to move.

"She's less urgent at the moment, sweetheart, since she's with a family we trust." Remus had filled Hermione in on everyone's whereabouts as they traveled, explaining fully about Harry, not without a pang – but if Hermione didn't know the truth, she would either figure it out or imagine something worse.

*Though I don't know what could be much worse than that for him.*

"But we will get her soon. Probably tomorrow, after we all have a night to rest up from today."

xXxXx

Neville looked up from the potted lavender plants and noticed Meghan bent over a different plant. Its inch-long, straight leaves stuck out on all sides of its tall, rather thick stems, and it didn't have flowers on it now, but he knew when it did they would be a delicate blue.

She was stroking the leaves and whispering something. Curious, he moved closer.

"Rosemary," Meghan murmured. "That's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember." She closed her eyes. "I remember the Den," she said like a prayer. "I remember Dadfoot and Mama Letha and Moony and Danger. I remember Harry and Draco and Neenie. I won't forget them, so they won't forget me. And they will come for me."

Neville turned away, feeling terrible, as if he was intruding on something private.

*She wants to go home.*

*But I kind of hoped she could stay.*

*I like her.*

*And now I'm mean, because I want to keep her from doing what she wants to do, just to make me happy...*

He felt even worse now.

xXxXx

Sirius lay in front of the fireplace in Gryffindor Tower, reluctantly allowing a bunch of cooing girls (the original two had multiplied to about six) to pet him, rub his belly, and scratch behind his ears. Not that he didn't appreciate the attention, but he rather wished they'd go away. He was a man – or, at the moment, a dog – on a mission.

Fred and George Weasley were Gryffindors. They were also the current owners of a very useful item. Sirius had come to retrieve that item – it couldn't really be called stealing, he argued to himself, since he was one of the item's original owners and manufacturers. But he couldn't very well go up to the dorms with the girls hanging over him like this.

Fortunately, one of them suddenly recalled that they had class, and all of them frantically scurried for the portrait hole, completely forgetting Sirius.

*Perfect.*

He got up, stretched, yawned, and started sniffing around, to make sure he wouldn't be surprised by any stray students. The boys' staircase smelled clear, with no scents less than about an hour old. Up he went, stopping at each landing to see if he could get a whiff of two scents almost, but not entirely, indistinguishable – twins.

The first and second floors yielded nothing. The third – well, it wasn't twins, but it was something, Sirius thought, intrigued by one of the scents he was catching. It was familiar, but in a distant way, as if he hadn't smelled it for a long time. Animal, small well-fed animal, with just the faintest overtone of human...

Sirius froze, the answer crashing in on him.

*No. No. This is not possible. This cannot be happening.*

But it was.

Very cautiously, he pawed the door open and slipped inside.

It looked like any other room inhabited by five or six fourteen-year-old boys – messy. Except for one part of it. One bed was scrupulously made, one wardrobe filled with neatly folded clothes, one nightstand shining clean. And on that nightstand sat a cage. And in that cage...

*Good. He's asleep.*

Sirius needed only the briefest of looks to confirm what his nose had already told him. Quickly, he turned and left the room.

*I need someone with a wand. Someone who trusts me. And someone I can get to easily.*

He snorted, the dog's way of chuckling. *Narrows it down quite a bit, doesn't it?*

*Only one person in the castle right now who fits that description...*

xXxXx

Minerva McGonagall was sitting at her desk grading papers when she heard a scratch on her door.

"Come in!" she called.

The handle turned, and in came not a student, but an enormous, bear-like black dog.

"And just what are *you* doing here?" demanded Minerva, not quite as displeased or surprised as she sounded – she had suspected something was up. Albus had been looking altogether too pleased with himself when he had left to "assist" the Ministry in their second frantic search for an escaped Sirius Black. *He's been so discouraged by not being able to help them – but Vilius has been watching him like a griffin, I think he may suspect where Albus' true sympathies lie...*

The dog pushed the door closed with its back paw and changed forms. "Are you aware you have a murderer living in Gryffindor Tower?" asked Sirius Black without preamble.

Minerva gaped at him. "*What?*"

"Peter Pettigrew. A fourth year boy has him as a pet. A very neat fourth year boy."

"Percy Weasley," said Minerva without having to think about it. "You're certain?"

"I'd bet my life on it. Or Harry's." Sirius growled slightly. "But since I don't have my wand at the moment, there's not too much I can do about it. Except inform the appropriate authority. Which I have now done."

"Indeed you have." The shock had worn off, and Minerva was now furious. *How dare he live under the protection of this school's roof – in my Tower, no less? This will not be tolerated!* "I shall return," she said grimly, standing up. "Unless you'd care to come with me?"

Sirius looked tempted, but shook his head. "If he wakes up and sees me, or smells me, he'll know something's up and try to run. I was lucky he didn't wake up when I was there the first time. I don't want to take chances."

*And that is something I never thought I would hear you say, young man. Marriage and fatherhood have been very good for you.* "Very well. I will be back soon."

Almost purring to herself with the thrill of the hunt, Minerva left her office, closing the door behind her.

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# Maybe

## Chapter 10

### Chapter 10

Miss Anderson smiled at him. “You’re a wizard, Harry. That’s the word for it. And where we’re going, just about everyone is a wizard or a witch. I think you’ll like it.”

Harry nodded. “I think I will too.”

Something occurred to him. “Are your glasses a disguise too?”

“Yes. Would you like to see my real face?”

Harry nodded.

“I think I can risk it for a moment.” She took the glasses off.

Harry gasped.

“What is it?”

“You’re in my dream. About my family.” He stared at her, a sudden excitement growing in him.

*If she’s real... does that mean all of it is?*

Miss Anderson quickly put her glasses back on, and Harry had to bite back a very Dudley-ish whine that he didn’t *want* her to, that he liked her other face better. “Will you tell me more about this dream?” she asked.

Harry looked out the window, embarrassed. “I... don’t remember very much,” he confessed. “I told you most of what I remember back at the school.”

“But you recognized my face. Would you recognize the other people if you saw them?”

“I think so.”

Miss Anderson (that couldn’t be her real name, Harry realized, recalling that in the dream she was married) dug around in her bag, coming up with what looked like a blank piece of stiff paper and a polished stick. She tapped the paper with the stick, and suddenly it wasn’t blank – there was a picture on it, it was a photograph – except that the little people in the picture were –

“Are they moving?”

“Oh – yes. Don’t worry about it. All magical photos move. They’ll hold still when they see you want to look at them. They’re rather vain.”

Harry accepted the photo and looked at it with intense interest. To his amazement and delight, every face he saw was familiar. The two men: one taller, darker, and very energetic – he was Miss Anderson’s husband, Harry remembered, when he saw her, as she really looked, kissing the man in a back corner of the picture – and the other with brown hair going slightly grey and intense blue eyes that Harry stared at for a few moments, almost mesmerized. He wanted the real versions of those eyes to look at him and approve of him... he wanted to be accepted by their owner, accepted as one of the...

He stopped, confused. *One of the what?*

He went back to looking at the photograph. The other woman in the picture, besides Miss Anderson (he’d have to ask her for her real name soon, Harry thought) was also brown-haired, but hers was wavy and bushy and stood out from her head a bit on all sides, making her look slightly unkempt in a nice way. She and the blue-eyed man danced a few steps together, and Harry recalled that they too were married in his dream.

And then there were the children. A girl who looked a lot like the white woman, who ran into the picture and to the blue-eyed man, who picked her up and twirled her around before mock-tossing her to the darker man. A littler girl, dark like Miss Anderson, who ran to the other man to be likewise picked up, and he did throw her into the air and catch her again. And a boy with a pale, pointed face and very light hair, who walked into the picture politely but with an air of knowing exactly where he was going.

That was everyone from the family Harry recalled from his dream. He handed the picture back to Miss Anderson. “They’re all there,” he said.

“Everyone’s there. Can I ask you something?”

“Yes, you may.”

“Is – Miss Anderson – is that your real name?”

“No. Would you like to know what to call me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ma'am is out, for one thing. It makes me feel as old as I look." She winked at him, lightening the severe tone in which she had spoken. "You can call me Letha. In here, that is. When we change trains – which we will in just a few minutes – you should call me Mum, and I'll call you James. Just to be safe. There are probably still people looking for us, and will be until we get to where we're going."

"Where are we going?"

"To a school, up in the north. A magical school called Hogwarts. It's a secondary school, and everyone with magic in the British Isles gets accepted there when they turn eleven." She correctly interpreted Harry's amazed look and chuckled. "Yes, even you. Especially you. You'll be getting your letter on 31 July, don't you worry."

Harry hid his surprise that she knew his birthday. "Why are we going there now?"

"Because we're living there. We've been allowed to use one of the guest suites. I think you'll like it."

Harry nodded. Something seemed to be tightening inside him. A question, it was a question he had to ask, and he had a feeling he wouldn't much like the answer, but if he didn't ask it soon he wasn't going to be able to ask it at all. "Miss – Letha?"

"Yes?"

Harry swallowed hard against the tightness. "Why didn't you ever come for me before?"

"What?"

"If you really – want me – why didn't you come and get me when I was little?"

For a moment, Miss Letha (the combination of names seemed to have stuck in Harry's mind) scowled angrily. Harry couldn't quite suppress a wince.

"I'm not angry with you, Harry, I'm angry with me," she said hastily, her face clearing. "You don't understand. And that's my fault. I'm sorry, I've probably confused you terribly. Let me try to explain?"

Harry nodded.

"Harry, we *did* come to get you when you were little. Before you were even two. Moony and Danger – they're the other couple in this picture, the ones with brown hair – they went to your relatives' house and stole you away from them in the middle of the night, and brought you home to me. Padfoot – my husband, your godfather – joined us there a couple of days later." She smiled wryly. "This is the incredibly short and quick version, by the way, I'll expand on it later. We lived there, in my home in London, for five years, until you were almost seven. Then we traveled abroad for a few months, visited my aunt in America, and then we moved to Devon and lived there until this past December."

Harry stared at her, utterly baffled. "I don't remember," he said slowly. "Why don't I remember?"

"Because of what happened in December." The anger was back on Miss Letha's face, but Harry was quite sure it wasn't directed at him. "You were stolen from us. All of our – children – were. And the people who stole you used magic on you to lock away your memories of us and make you think you'd spent your entire life with your relatives. The truth is, Harry, you've only been living with them for three months."

"Since Christmas?"

Miss Letha nodded. "Since Christmas."

Harry felt his breathing coming faster with excitement. "I thought there was something wrong with me," he said carefully, "because I couldn't remember anything that happened before Christmas. It was all fuzzy in my mind. It still is."

"Yes. That's the Memory Charm working on you. It couldn't get rid of those memories entirely – we were so much a part of your life for so long that I don't think there would have been anything left. So it blurred them and made them hard to understand, and someone told you what you were supposed to believe – and because of the spell, you did."

Harry's stomach churned. He didn't much like the sound of this magic. "Is there any way to get it off me?" he asked hesitantly. "So I can remember again?"

Miss Letha nodded again. "We have a Healer friend who says she can reverse it. But I'm afraid it may be a few days until we can get in touch with her." She reached across and placed a hand on Harry's knee. "I'm sorry, Harry. We'll do everything we can to make it soon."

Harry stifled a sigh. Complaining wouldn't do any good. "I know."

An announcement echoed through the train. Harry couldn't make much sense out of it, but Miss Letha started gathering her things. "This is our stop," she said. "We change trains here. Ready to go?"

Harry picked up his schoolbag, and they watched the station come into view out the window as the train slowed down and stopped. Miss Letha led Harry from the compartment, down the aisle, and out the door at the end of the carriage onto the platform. "Our next train leaves from platform 4 in fifteen minutes," she said. "Are you hungry, Jamie?"

"Yes, Mum." It felt weird saying it, but Miss Letha winked at him as they made their way into the station and found a place that sold sandwiches.

Ten minutes later, they were boarding their new train. The hunger was gone, but Harry was grappling with a new feeling – worry. What if the magic on his memory was permanent? What if his family decided that they didn't want him without his memories and sent him back to the Dursleys?

He tried to tell himself that was stupid, that Miss Letha would never have come after him if his family didn't want him back, but the worries kept coming, and new ones arose every minute. What if Miss Letha was lying, and this was all a joke or a game? Or what if she was really kidnapping him for some horrible reason?

As the announcement of the different stops the train would be making crackled over the intercom system, a man opened the door of their compartment partway. "Excuse me, ma'am," he said to Miss Letha, "but do you have room for myself and my little girl in here?"

Miss Letha sat up very straight, her eyes sparkling. "I do believe we can manage that," she said.

The man opened the door farther and motioned the girl in before him. She wasn't so little, Harry thought – she was about his own age, a bit timid-looking, with long, bushy black hair. She took the seat beside Miss Letha. The man, likewise black-haired, came into the compartment, shut the door, and sat down beside Harry just as the train began to move.

"So, Letha, I see you were successful," said the man with a warm smile.

Miss Letha smiled back. "Indeed I was, Remus, and I see you were too."

"Yes, Danger and I both – and I was more successful than I could have hoped. Letha – *she remembers*."

Miss Letha's face lit up, and she turned to the girl expectantly.

"Yes," said the girl, her voice a bit hoarse but firm and joyous. "I remember. I really do. I remember the Pack and the Den and everyone and everything."

"Oh, Neenie, I'm so glad!" Miss Letha embraced the girl, holding her tightly, and Harry experienced a sudden and almost stunning flash of jealousy. It shook him so much that he nearly fell off the seat – he would have fallen, if the man hadn't grabbed his arm.

"Harry, are you all right?" the man asked him. No, he wasn't just 'the man' – Miss Letha had called him something –

"Is your name Remus?"

"Yes, that's me."

Harry frowned, thinking back to the playground, and the man who had showed him something. "Do you know someone named Sirius? Like the star?"

"Yes."

"I saw a piece of paper that said you were both dead." He looked at Remus. "You don't look dead."

Remus chuckled. "I'm glad you haven't lost your sense of humor. No, I'm not dead, neither is Sirius. You usually call him Padfoot, by the way, and me Moony. But you can use my name if you like."

"Moony." Harry tried it out. It felt... right, somehow. "I think I like that better, sir."

"Then use it. No 'sir.' Please. It makes me look around for the old man you're talking to." Moony smiled at him, and Harry looked at his face and noticed that his eyes were the same as they were in the picture – intensely blue, almost captivating – but they were different as well. The picture hadn't shown the little swirls of brown in them. And the picture hadn't shown – hadn't been able to show – the way they could seem to look right down into one. Harry found himself half-wanting to run away from those eyes, but his other half wanted to stay right there and meet them face on – he had nothing to hide...

But he did. He was jealous. That was a bad thing. He didn't want Moony to see that. As soon as he realized that, Harry tried to hide the fact that he was jealous of the girl called Neenie, who was now lying on the seat with her head in Miss Letha's lap, having her hair combed and a song sung to her...

"Harry," said Moony quietly. "What's wrong?"

The feelings magnified a hundred, a thousand times, and the compulsion to hide them likewise – they were so intense that Harry wanted to scream and shout, or writhe on the seat, or run away and hide and never come out again –

"Come here." The command was quiet and gently stated, but it was a command, and Harry's body obeyed it while his mind was still trying to figure out why it should or shouldn't do so, moving him over to sit right next to the man. Moony took out a polished stick like Miss Letha's and waved it around the two of them, saying something Harry didn't quite catch. Abruptly, the air between them and the other two occupants of the compartment seemed to thicken.

"Privacy Spell," explained Moony. "Now they won't hear or see what happens over here."

Harry nodded to show he understood.

"Harry." Just the calling of his name seemed to have power. He looked up into Moony's eyes and was caught by them again. "Tell me what's

wrong.”

Harry licked his lips. “Nothing,” he said quickly.

Moony raised an eyebrow. “The truth, please, Harry.”

It was uncanny, Harry decided, how well these adults could tell when he lied. None of his teachers had ever seen through his lies about his aunt and uncle, even though he hadn’t tried very hard to make them believable – he’d been secretly hoping one of the teachers *would* see through them, would find out what was going on and do something about it –

Before he knew it, Harry was blurting out everything that was in his mind. His worries about not being wanted if he didn’t get his memories back, his jealousy of the girl, his little nagging fear that this was all some kind of joke or game or that something awful was going to happen –

“May I show you something, Harry?” Moony asked when Harry paused for breath.

“Er – all right.”

Moony pulled a fine gold chain from his shirt. Hanging from it were four small medallions. Harry stared at it. “You’ve got one like mine!”

“Yes. We created these the night before all of this started. We didn’t know why, then. Now we do. These necklaces are magical, Harry. May I show you one thing that they do?”

Harry nodded.

“Hold still, then.” Moony tugged at the chain, and Harry watched in amazement as it grew longer in his hands – or was it just a trick? No, the chain on the outside of his hands wasn’t moving, but the section in between them was definitely longer than it had been –

And while Harry was still working that out, Moony slipped the chain, which he was still wearing, over Harry’s head, and something changed.

**Do you hear me, Harry?** Moony’s voice said. But the man’s mouth was closed, he hadn’t moved his lips at all...

“Yes, I can hear you – what is this?”

**This is magic. It’s connected our minds in a very small and limited way, just enough for us to talk like this, silently. You try it. Just think towards me.**

**Like... this?** Harry sent, surprised by how easy it was. It did feel just like talking.

**Yes. Exactly. Now I want you to try something. Tell me that this seat is green.**

Harry looked down. **But it’s not green. It’s kind of a burgundy color.**

**Try it anyway.**

**All right. This seat is green...** Harry stopped. The word “green” had had an odd sort of echoing sound to it, as if someone had shouted it into a cave or an empty auditorium.

**Now say what it really is.**

**This seat is burgundy colored.** This time, nothing happened.

**Do you understand what this means?**

Harry shook his head. **Not really.**

**Listen to me try it. Harry, you have brown eyes.**

This time, “brown” had that echoing sound to it. Harry frowned. He felt as if he should be able to figure this out, but it just wasn’t connecting for him –

And then suddenly it did.

**We can’t lie, he said. We can’t lie, talking like this. You can tell if I lie.**

**Exactly. And so would you be able to tell, if I were to lie. So you will know that everything I am about to tell you is the truth. Are you ready to listen?**

Harry took a deep breath, nerving himself up for the blow. **Yes.**

**Harry James Potter, I love you. You are my son in every sense of the word except the one about blood. I know that you don’t remember me at the moment, and I don’t care.** The last words echoed slightly. Moony looked amused. **All right, I suppose I do care, to the extent that I want to find whoever did this to you and kill them in several slow and painful ways.**

He went on. **If you never get back your memories of me, I will tell you about them, and then I will help you build new memories in the**

**rest of your life. This is not a joke or a game, Harry. This is real. Do you believe me?**

Except that once, none of the words had echoed in the least. Harry gulped against the lump in his throat and nodded.

**Our family is not just a family, Harry. We have a special name for ourselves. We're called the Pack. And we have certain special things that we do that help us remember being Pack. One of them is this.**

Moony rubbed the first two fingers of his right hand down the side of his face, from just in front of his ear to the corner of his mouth, then pressed them gently against Harry's cheek. **That's called a scent-touch. It means that you belong to me. You are mine to protect and love and take care of. And I will always come to find you if we are separated. Now you do it back.**

Feeling awkward, Harry swiped his fingers across his cheek, then reached out tentatively and tapped them against Moony's. The man nodded. **Now you are Pack again, he said with certainty. And now it's all right to do what you want to.**

Harry frowned. What was the man talking about?

**Remember the Privacy Spell? They can't see us, they won't hear anything.** Moony's voice was gentle in his mind. **It's all right to cry, Harry. I know you want to, I can feel it.**

*That's unfair. No one should be able to knowthat.*

But Harry couldn't very well deny it now – not when the mere mention of the word “cry” had set him off, and he was already bawling like a baby. Moony reached over and pulled him closer, and Harry, obeying an impulse he didn't really understand, buried his face in the man's chest and sobbed, clinging to him.

**You have nothing to be jealous about,** murmured Moony to him, holding him close and rocking him. **Letha would do exactly the same for you as she's doing for Hermione – she has, actually, and I'm sure she will again.**

**Hermione?**

**Neenie. Hermione is her full name.**

**Oh.**

Moony holding him like this felt good, Harry discovered. It felt right. It felt like being home.

And all of that just made him cry harder.

Moony hummed to him as he cried, and he recognized the song after a few moments. It was “Maybe.”

*So I was wrong.*

*Someone did come for me with another necklace like mine.*

He smiled tearily. *And just like Annie, I got a family where I wasn't expecting them. They're not a maybe anymore. They're a yes.*

He closed his eyes and let himself rest against Moony's shoulder, which, he noticed as he drifted off to sleep, smelled slightly of smoke.



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# Maybe

## Chapter 11

### Chapter 11

Remus lifted the Privacy Spell and eased Harry into a more comfortable position against him. Aletha was still singing to Hermione, whose eyes were drifting closed, as she finished combing out the girl's hair. Neenie had hated to have her hair combed as a tiny girl, so Aletha had made up a hair-combing song for her to listen to while the detested activity occurred.

*I've got a little spider with 24 legs,*

*She doesn't eat flies and she doesn't lay eggs.*

*She likes to climb in hair, black, blond, and brown;*

*She makes it neat as she climbs down.*

*Climb, little spider, climb on down,*

*But don't make Neenie cry or frown,*

*Just climb into her hair and make it neat,*

*And then she will look pretty and sweet.*

Remus caught Aletha's eye and moved his hand back and forth horizontally. It was the signal for "the one you've got is asleep." Aletha nodded and put the comb (with its twenty-four tines) away in her bag.

"She napped earlier, too," said Remus, looking lovingly at the sleeping Hermione but feeling a trace of worry. "And I got a sense from Harry of very deep tiredness. Do you think it's a side effect of the Memory Charms?"

"I think it's a side effect of them feeling safe for the first time in three months." Aletha shifted her position slightly, easing the weight of Hermione's head on her leg. "Harry fell asleep in my office – I'm not certain, but I think he may not have been sleeping well. I know he was being punished for something, as by his own admission he hadn't eaten in nearly a full day. I made sure to feed him before we left."

Remus groaned, quietly so as not to rouse the boy. "Déjà vu all over again."

"Retrieving a starving, scared little boy from the clutches of the worst bunch of Muggles who have ever lived? Yes. But it was a stroke of luck for me – once he was asleep, I could bespell him to come just awake enough to walk with me and not really wake up until we were safely aboard the train. I would have had to argue with him, or lie to him, to get him to come with me otherwise, and I really didn't want to do that."

"So you just carried him off in his sleep." Remus smiled. "I like it. Very poetic."

Aletha checked her watch. "Time's moving on, it's nearly four. I'm sure they've missed him by now. But enough about us – what happened with you two?"

Remus told her, in full detail, if quietly enough not to rouse the sleepers. When he got to his revenge on Curcio, Aletha had to press her hands over her mouth to stop herself laughing aloud. "You utter git," she said once she had settled down enough to say anything. "And of course, you didn't bother to tell him that first of all, human-to-human transmission is extremely rare, and that second, for it to have even a chance of occurring, you would have to actually bite him, and do it on purpose!"

"Why should I tell him that?" Remus assumed his most innocent expression. "That would have ruined the whole point of it. As it is, I told him to see a Healer, and when he does, the Healer will tell him he's not infected after all, so there's no permanent harm done. But until then, he has to wallow in his own fear and disgust at what he believes he's become."

"Oh, one of those, is he." Aletha's face was highly annoyed. "I suppose part of it is where you grow up – and how – but people can learn, go beyond what they were taught as children. But there will always be some people who either can't or don't want to."

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I've always wondered – what were you thinking the day I told you? What went through your mind?"

Aletha nodded. "My first reaction was probably fear," she said. "That and surprise..."

"Our two main weapons are fear and surprise," interrupted Remus, "surprise and fear, and an almost fanatical devotion to the Pope, three, our three main weapons..."

Aletha reached into her bag, pulled out the comb again, and threw it at him. "If you don't mind, I am trying to answer a serious question that you asked me, and that I assumed you wanted a serious answer to!"

Remus used his wand to retrieve the comb from its place on the floor, since he couldn't bend down without disturbing Harry. "I do. But that was too good an opening to pass up." He tossed the comb back to her.

Aletha rolled her eyes. "As I was saying, I was a bit scared at first, and quite a bit surprised. I was trying to put together what I remembered from Defense Against the Dark Arts about werewolves with you, and it wasn't adding up, but at the same time it was – the way you'd always disappear around the full moon and look terrible for a few days after..."

She smiled. "And then, of course, Danger came out with 'There wolf, there castle' and that reminded me of your sense of humor, the way you helped me prepare for my Defense O.W.L., all the good things I knew about you, and I realized none of that had changed. It wasn't as if you chose to become a werewolf, and I knew perfectly well you weren't evil, not even close. You were the same person I knew before – only now I knew a little more about you."

Remus nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you, Letha. As I said, I'd always wondered a little."

"Speaking of wondering, how's Danger and Draco?"

"Asleep."

"Them too?"

"They have excuses. She used a lot of magic breaking into the Notts' estate, and she thought she was going to get a nap there, but it so happened that the bedroom she chose to nap in was being used by a certain little fox, who came running back to pack his things when he heard there was an intruder, thinking it might well be one of us..."

"Which it was..."

"Exactly. Opportunity knocked, she answered, and they left right away. She had to Apparate them part of the way into the nearest town, and they walked the rest, so she was exhausted by the time she finally got on the train. And Draco hasn't been sleeping very well – as you said about these two, he hasn't felt really safe for three months, only in his case he knows why. So the two of them are napping on the train, and I'm to wake her at about five o'clock so they don't miss their stop."

"That being the stop that will get them on the connection to us, correct?"

"Correct. And then we all ride until we get to where we're going."

Aletha nodded sanctimoniously. "Sounds like a plan."

"Glad you think so."

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Remus noticed Aletha's hand stroking Hermione's hair over and over, and found himself drawn to listen to the slow, even rhythm of Harry's breathing, and to remember other times when this same little boy had fallen asleep on his shoulder...

*I think this is what they mean when they say "infatuated." Made into a fool.*

He smiled. *If I'm a fool, then I'm at least a fool for love.*

The train rattled on.

xXxXx

The first person back into the library of the Holy Family Children's Home, as luck would have it, was a sturdy matron who was seldom rattled by anything.

Not even by finding a naked man tied up on the floor.

It surprised her, but it would have been going too far to say it rattled her.

She did what any sensible woman would do in her situation. She looked him up and down, then turned around, left the room, and found the nearest phone, from which she called the police. They arrived fairly swiftly, and took the man into custody, providing some clothes for him first. He was charged with public indecency and trespassing, since no one could remember admitting anyone of his description to the building.

The matron also gave one of the officers a description of a missing child, a girl about ten, with rather bushy brown hair, who couldn't speak. The officer promised to have it looked into.

As the police were escorting the trespasser, who hadn't said a word, out of the courtyard, he broke free from them and ran around the corner. The pursuing officers found no trace of him, although they searched for nearly half an hour.

Finally, they shrugged their shoulders and gave up. Strange things sometimes happened in London.

xXxXx

Sirius Black paced up and down the small room. He was still somewhat euphoric from his discovery, but handicapped in his glee by the fact that he had no one to share it with. He could imagine his Packmates' reactions, he could try to predict what they'd say, but he wanted them to truly be there.

so that he could tell them what he'd found and they could then respond to the fact that all their hiding had finally paid off, and that they wouldn't have to hide any more.

*At least I hope not.*

*But honestly, what more will even the idiot authorities need? Peter's here – alive – when by all the accounts, he should be dead – should have died that day, along with those twelve Muggles.*

Sirius sighed. "Poor bastards," he said, talking aloud to himself as he continued to pace. "They didn't have anything to do with the war – they were just going to work, or going out for a stroll, or to get a loaf of bread – they didn't expect to get blown away by some scared little rat trying to cover his own arse."

He stopped to stare at said rat, who was quivering in his cage, which Minerva McGonagall had thoughtfully spelled Unbreakable, so that Wormtail couldn't turn human and break out that way. "You thought you had the perfect cover," he said cheerily. "And you almost did, didn't you? If it hadn't been for one pretty girl and her dreams, you'd still be your carefree, chubby little rat self, and I'd still be rotting in Azkaban..."

He looked at Peter and thought hard about Azkaban. About the horror of being trapped in his worst memories, the parts of his life that he had always tried to forget or elide. Perhaps even worse, though, was knowing that he had better memories, that good things had happened to him, even being able to think *about* them – but they held no meaning for him. They were entries on a list, or things he had studied for a test. He had forgotten none of the events of his life, but if they held even a vestige of happiness, it was as if they had happened to someone else, and he knew only the bare facts about them...

Peter was huddled in a corner of the cage as far from Sirius as he could get, shuddering.

"That's right, Petie," said Sirius softly. "Just get used to that pose. You'll be using it a lot."

He returned to pacing and thinking. Suddenly he stopped. Most of his Packmates were inaccessible, or would be until they arrived late that night – but there was one within his reach, and one, moreover, who would be eagerly hoping for his arrival –

"Meghan," he said aloud. "I can get Meghan – I can bring her back here – she'll be dying to come home, if I remember Frank's mum right – dried-up old stick. I feel sorry for that boy. Have to remind Harry and Draco to be friendly to him..." He stopped, realizing he was babbling. "Anyway. I'll get Meghan." He made a move towards the fireplace, then stopped. "*After* I use the men's room."

It wouldn't do to wet his pants in the Floo, after all.

He turned dog and hurried out of the office, being sure to close the door behind him.

xXxXx

Unfortunately for Sirius, Peter Pettigrew was cowardly and treacherous, but neither deaf nor entirely stupid, and possessed at the moment with the genius of desperation.

And Sirius had unintentionally given away far more than he meant to.

xXxXx

Minerva McGonagall returned to her office to find an extremely disturbing sight.

The wooden cage sat open on her desk. The rat within was gone.

This could mean one of three things, Minerva told herself, trying not to panic. It was possible that Percy Weasley had retrieved his pet, not knowing what she knew.

But would such a law-abiding boy trespass in a teacher's office, even for a beloved pet?

Sirius might have removed him, to do heaven only knew what...

But no. Sirius might want revenge, but he knew probably better than any man living the horrors of Azkaban, and he would want that for his enemy, rather than the relative mercy of death or even torture.

Which left her with the third, and worst, possibility.

Somehow, Pettigrew had escaped.

The door opened behind her. Sirius, in dog form, came trotting in. "I had an idea," he said as soon as he'd retransformed. "Suppose I – what's wrong?" He had just noticed the look on her face.

Wordlessly, Minerva pointed to the cage.

Sirius' face became livid for a brief instant, before the rage was replaced with an utter calm Minerva found even more disturbing. "I know a way to find out if he's still on the grounds," he said quietly. "I'll be back in five minutes."

When he returned, he had a tattered piece of parchment in his mouth. Minerva took it from him, somewhat baffled.

"May I borrow your wand, please?" Sirius requested, changing back to human. "It needs to be activated."

Minerva handed it over and watched as Sirius touched its tip to the parchment and muttered something. Then she stared as the parchment revealed its true nature.

"We made this when we were in school," said Sirius absently, scanning the Map. "As far as we know, it never lies. If he's on the grounds, this'll find him – ah-ha!" It was an explosion of sound. "There, he's in the kitchens." He planted a finger on the Map, then moved it so Minerva could see.

The ink dot labeled "Peter Pettigrew" was indeed in the kitchens, standing beside the fireplace. As Minerva and Sirius watched, a word bubble appeared next to it. "Longbottom House," Minerva read aloud.

Then the dot was gone.

Sirius swore, jumping up. "He Flooed out – the dirty bastard Flooed out of here! But why would he go to—" He stopped, and Minerva saw him go almost completely dead-white. "Is your fireplace on the Network?" he demanded, staring at her. "Is it?"

"Yes, of course, but why—"

"Do you have Floo powder in here?"

"On the mantel. What—"

Sirius was beside the fireplace, grabbing a pinch of Floo powder.

"Tell me what's going on," Minerva demanded.

Sirius looked at her as if she were mad and said three words that brought understanding crashing down on her.

"He's after Meghan."

And then he was gone –

And he still had her wand, Minerva recalled after a rather shaken moment.

*Well, as long as he doesn't break it or use it to kill Pettigrew—*

But with a sudden chill, she realized that she wouldn't mind the second half of that sentence coming true nearly as much as she should.

*As long as the child is safe.*

Meghan had her father's charm, her mother's poise, and a sense of humor all her own, which made her almost entirely irresistible. She would be quite a heartbreaker when she got to school, Minerva knew.

*If she lives that long.*

The chill was greater this time.

xXxXx

Wormtail scurried into the greenhouse, following the scent of little girl.

He had been able, just barely, to reach and trip the latch on his cage with a paw, once he had the incentive to do so. And Sirius had provided that incentive by more or less telling him where Meghan – his daughter, Wormtail assumed – was staying. He had only ever known one Frank – Frank Longbottom.

Once out of the cage, Wormtail had run for the kitchens, since he knew the fireplace there was hooked up to the Floo Network, and that Floo powder was kept there for the convenience of the faculty. The Marauders had used it once or twice for some of their more outrageous pranks.

His plan was simple. He'd take the girl hostage and wait until Sirius came to retrieve her – it shouldn't take long – then make a deal. The child's freedom in exchange for his own.

He didn't intend to hurt her. On the contrary. He recalled how protective Sirius had been of Harry, who was only his godson – he was sure that protectiveness would be redoubled for Sirius' own daughter. So he wouldn't harm a hair on her head. He would simply take her and Apparate away, leaving a note for Sirius.

Where should he go? The old cave where the Marauders had sometimes had picnics came to mind, outside Hogsmeade – it had the advantage of being close to where he had come from, so that Sirius would have more trouble thinking to look there...

He heard children's voices and stopped, peering around a flowerpot. Yes, there she was. The image of Aletha Freeman, if his rat's eyes could be trusted. And talking animatedly with Frank and Alice Longbottom's son...

Memories of Order days threatened to overcome him, and he had to force them down. *They mean nothing to me*, he reminded himself. *I have another master now. I serve him and only him. I care nothing for those in his way. They will serve him or they will fall.*

Wormtail prepared to make his move.

xXxXx

Sirius fell out of the fireplace at Longbottom House with a thud.

*Graceful, Padfoot. Nice work.*

He looked up to find himself facing the business end of a wand.

“Change back,” snapped the witch holding the wand. “I know you’re no dog, dogs can’t use the Floo. Change back now.”

*Can this go any more wrong?*

Sirius sighed and changed.

“You!” Augusta Longbottom’s eyes narrowed. “Here to try and steal that girl, are you?”

“No, I’m here to protect her.”

“She doesn’t need protecting. Except from you. She’s perfectly all right where she is...”

Someone screamed in the greenhouse, and there was the sound of several things breaking.

“You were saying?” snapped Sirius.

“Gran!” shouted a boy’s frantic voice. “Come quick!”

“There’s a madman in your house, Mrs. Longbottom, and he’s after my daughter,” said Sirius sharply. “Are you going to help me stop him or not?”

Instead of answering, Mrs. Longbottom turned and ran for the greenhouse. Sirius pulled himself quickly to his feet and followed.

“Don’t move!” Peter’s voice arrested him as he came into the glass enclosure. “Don’t move or she dies.”

Sirius stopped in his tracks, taking in the sight. Peter had apparently smashed a few of the numerous flowerpots, since there were shards of pottery all around.

Including the one in his hand with the sharp edge pressed against Meghan’s neck.

“You wouldn’t dare.” Sirius heard his own voice as if it were someone else’s, and noted as if in a dream the growling undertones that betokened both anger and fear. Meghan’s eyes were filled with terror and pleading, and Sirius wished desperately that he could reassure her, that he could tell her it would be all right...

“One move is all it takes.” Peter sounded half-bold, half-scared out of his wits. “Put your wands down and I’ll let her go.”

Sirius glanced sideways at Mrs. Longbottom. She, too, was glaring furiously at Peter – no, she was glaring *past* him – what was she looking at?

He shifted his gaze past Wormtail for just an instant, and suddenly understood.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll put them down on three. One... two... three.”

He and Mrs. Longbottom dropped their wands.

Peter released Meghan and shoved her away from him, standing in the pose of a man about to Disapparate –

Then he was screaming and clawing at the back of his head, trying to dislodge whatever it was that was biting at his ears and his hair.

Sirius transformed and charged at Wormtail, knocking him flat – but Peter wasn’t finished yet. His hand came up and jabbed Sirius in the side with the sharp pot shard, and Sirius yelped and rolled away from Peter, who scrambled to his feet again, dislodging the Omnivorous Snapdragon that had been nipping at his head –

Then it was Peter’s turn to yelp, as Meghan stabbed him in the leg with another pot shard. He tried to kick her, but she scrambled away –

And Augusta Longbottom felled him from behind with a flowerpot to the head.

Neville, very pale, emerged from his hiding place, behind the rank of plants where he’d gotten the Snapdragon from and thrown it at Wormtail. Sirius turned human again and pulled his shirt out to check on the gash in his side. It was bleeding pretty freely, but he didn’t think it was a problem. He’d get Letha to look at it when she got back.

*“Dadfoot!”*

Besides, he had other things to think about at the moment.

Like holding his Pearl like he’d never let her go.



*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Maybe

## Chapter 12

### Chapter 12

Albus Dumbledore was enjoying himself.

It wasn't often he got to be honestly manipulative.

In most situations, of course, he didn't want to be manipulative. Even if he thought he knew what was best, and even if he turned out to be right (as was the case an overwhelming majority of the time), it was still his policy, most of the time, to give advice and guidance, then step back and let events happen unless he took part overtly. Besides being ethically correct, it was in general more entertaining.

However, in this case, he knew perfectly well what was going on. He knew that Lars Vilius and his government didn't. And he knew that Lars would never believe or accept the truth unless the evidence was in front of his face and too powerful to be ignored.

And so, he carefully manipulated Lars into a frantic search for Sirius Black, having him send his men hither and thither, keeping the Minister's thoughts firmly on the escaped criminal. Scrying turned up nothing, as Dumbledore had known it would, since he had personally reinforced the anti-scrying provisions on the school that morning. However, investigation into who had last seen Sirius... that proved a bit more fruitful.

"Would you care to explain this, Lars?" said Dumbledore politely, tapping the deposition made by the Auror on guard in the Ministry holding cells from six pm to midnight. "Why Cornelius Fudge was allowed to see Sirius Black, when all other visitors, even Black's own wife, had been denied?"

"Fudge was there?" Lars took the scroll from Dumbledore's hand and frowned. "There's no official record of any visitor at that hour."

"If you read a bit farther down, Lars, you'll see that Cornelius ordered Auror Narpin to allow him entrance, and to conceal the fact that he'd visited."

"He has no right to order anyone to do anything," snapped Amelia Bones, taking the scroll from Lars. "Especially not my people. I'll have a talk with Narpin later."

Lars paced up and down the length of the office once and ran his hands through his thinning hair. "It's so frustrating... I have a terrible feeling that I'm missing something vital, something obvious, and that as soon as I think of it, I'll know where to find him."

"Does anyone know the current whereabouts of Cornelius Fudge?" asked Dumbledore, once again redirecting Lars' attention, before the man could realize that what he was missing was the fact that Sirius Black was not only a criminal but a father, and a devoted father, and that his first act, if he had escaped on his own, would have been to seek out his children and make certain that they were well...

Of course, checking on the children would not help them find Sirius, but it would alert them to certain other occurrences that Dumbledore would prefer to remain secret for...

He checked his watch. *One and one half hours.*

Lars and Amelia's low-voiced colloquy was abruptly terminated as the door of Lars' office flew open.

"Minerva?" Dumbledore rose, surprised to see his usually cool, competent Deputy Headmistress in such a state. Her hair was in disarray, her robes likewise, and her face was flushed.

Minerva did not even acknowledge the presence of others in the room. "Albus, I must speak with you immediately. It involves our mutual friends. I believe they may be in trouble."

"Of course. Pardon me for a moment, Lars, Amelia." He left the room quickly, stepping into the outer office, which was mercifully empty, and closed the door behind him. "What is it, Minerva?"

She told him everything in a few terse sentences, moving agitatedly about the room. "I should have brought Pettigrew here immediately, but I was foolish," she finished in dismay. "I thought it could wait until after my afternoon classes – if Meghan's been hurt, or Sirius, or one of the Longbottoms, I'll never forgive myself..."

Dumbledore put a hand on her shoulder. "Calm yourself, Minerva, the situation may not be as desperate as it seems. I have an idea." He rose and opened the door to the inner office. "Lars, Minerva has reminded me of something it seems we have all been forgetting. Sirius Black's daughter. Might he not have gone to check on her, possibly to try to steal her back from her foster family?"

Lars froze for a second, then he and Amelia both hurried through the outer office and into the hallway, where Dumbledore could hear them snapping out orders to the lingering Ministry workers.

"Are you insane?" Minerva hissed at him. "Sending Aurors to the Longbottoms'? What will Sirius do?"

"Sirius, my dear Minerva, will do what he has been doing for the past nine years. Unless he is somehow incapacitated, which I highly doubt, he has the ability to hide in plain sight. It caught you yourself quite by surprise, if I remember rightly."

Minerva sighed. "As usual, you're right." She suddenly smiled ferally. "And if the Aurors should find *Pettigrew* there..."

Precisely. Ah, and that reminds me, I have a letter for Lars, which I really should give him immediately." Dumbledore produced a small scroll from his robes. "It seems to have opened accidentally in transit, so there would be no way to tell if anyone had perused it..."

"Give it here." Minerva read over the contents of the scroll once, then again, and snorted. "Rather florid, isn't it? '...fire magic so intensely powerful that almost nothing remains...' '...claims not to have seen the boy since midday...' '...respectfully submit that one or more of his former guardians may have reclaimed him, possibly by using force...' Pompous fool."

"Indeed."

"Which of them..."

"Danger."

"Ah. And the others..."

"Aletha's plan was to retrieve Harry today, and Remus, as far as I know, is still in the process of looking for Hermione. If he has been successful, then they should all have returned safely by tonight."

Minerva gave one of her rare true smiles. "I look forward to it."

"As do I," said Dumbledore. "As do I."

xXxXx

The fire in the fireplace in the Hogwarts kitchens flared green. Sirius stumbled out, unbalanced because of the weight of Meghan, who was clinging to him. She had positively refused to Floo either before or behind him, insisting on going at the same time.

*Not too surprising, really. She hasn't seen me for three months, she doesn't want to take any chances.*

He sat down heavily on the hearth as soon as Meghan let go of him, hand pressed to his side. The stab wound was not as deep or as serious as he had first thought it was, but it was still dribbling blood and probably needed to be washed out – soot got everywhere when you Flooed.

"Can I have some warm water and clean cloths, please?" he heard Meghan ask one of the house-elves.

Sirius managed a smile. "Going to take care of me, Pearl?"

Meghan crossed her arms in a gesture Sirius found highly familiar. "Well, someone has to."

Sirius chuckled, ignoring the fresh ache the motion set up in his side. *She gets more like her mother every day.*

Two house-elves came running up, one with a bowl of water, the other with a pile of cloths. Meghan accepted both, thanking the house-elves and making them blush, which involved turning a deeper shade of puce than usual. "Now don't move," she said sternly, pulling his shirt up. "This may sting a little."

It did. But Meghan's touch was gentle, and Sirius had other things to think about.

Augusta Longbottom had been deeply skeptical of his story, but she was willing to hear him out. She recalled enough of the stories Frank had told her from the days of the war to know that he wasn't making all of it up. Still, Sirius rather thought it had been Meghan's obvious ecstasy at seeing him again, instead of his somewhat halting explanation, that had convinced her he wasn't going to try to kill her.

*And then the Aurors showed up.*

The first flash of green fire in the kitchen fireplace had sent him almost automatically into dog form, but he had still thought it was all over when he realized why they had come. All Mrs. Longbottom had to do was tell them he was right there...

*But she didn't.*

Instead, she had directed them to the unconscious Wormtail, telling them that she had seen him transform from rat to human and attack Meghan, and that she, Neville, and Meghan had taken care of him themselves.

*Basically, she told the truth, leaving me out of the equation. I was just the big black dog the little girl was holding onto.*

So now Wormtail was in Ministry custody, and the Aurors knew he was an illegal rat Animagus, so they were probably watching him closely – if they knew their business, they'd have anti-transformation wards on his cell –

*And it's only a matter of time before he's identified, and then...*

Then the celebration could begin.

"All done," announced Meghan. "Stick this on, Dadfoot."

Sirius looked down to find his daughter indicating the bandage she was holding to his side. He pulled Minerva's wand from his robes and applied a Temporary Sticking Charm, and Meghan took her hand away.

*Have to return this to her at some point. Going to need my own back, come to think of it. Maybe Dumbledore can do something about that.*

*Or maybe I'll just get it back when the Ministry morons finally have to admit I'm innocent.*

"Want to see our new Den, Pearl?"

Meghan nodded eagerly. "Is it here in Hogwarts?"

"Yes. Just down the hall a little ways."

xXxXx

Serpina was filing her nails when she heard a small voice say, "Excuse me?"

She looked down to see a little girl standing with one hand on the back of the huge black dog she already knew. "You must be Meghan," she said, setting aside her nail file.

The girl smiled a bit shyly. "Yes, ma'am."

"Not ma'am. Serpina, or just 'Pina if you like."

"'Pina. That's pretty. Is it safe for my Dadfoot to come out?"

"Yes, it's safe, no one's anywhere nearby."

The dog transformed into the rather good-looking man she'd been introduced to that morning. "Anyone else home yet, 'Pina?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid not. But they did say they wouldn't be back until after six, and it's not even five yet..."

"I know. I just wanted to be sure."

"I understand. Password, please?"

"Chocolate chip," said Meghan importantly, and Serpina allowed her portrait to swing open, giving the two access to their rooms.

*I do hope the rest of them arrive safely... and soon...*

xXxXx

"Food first or den time?" Sirius asked Meghan.

"Den time," Meghan decided.

Sirius Summoned some of the covers from his and Aletha's bed, and Meghan pulled the cushions off the sofa. Together, they built a den for two and crawled in.

The first thing Meghan did, rather disconcertingly, was burst into tears.

*Emotional overload, Sirius diagnosed, holding her close. Too much tension for far, far too long, and then a terrible scare this afternoon – being held hostage is frightening for adults, what is it going to do to her, she's only seven...*

"Going on eight," Meghan mumbled into his chest, and Sirius realized he'd spoken the last part of his thought aloud.

"I stand corrected, Pearl. You are indeed going on eight."

To himself, Sirius smiled. *She can't be too traumatized if she can argue about her age.*

He held her tightly and let her cry herself out and fall asleep against him.

*It has definitely been too long. I'd almost forgotten what this feels like.*

He felt a surge of anger. *Damn whoever came up with this whole "let's split up the Pack" game.*

The anger, though, instead of smoldering in him as it had for the last few months, burnt itself out quickly. *It's over now. Or close to over. We're fighting our way back to each other. Meghan was the last piece, and I have her now. The others are on their way. They should be here in time for dinner. And no one can find us here.*

His own eyes were closing, and he let them. *There's no reason I shouldn't. We're safe now.*

*As safe as we ever can be.*

xXxXx

Danger came awake with a start.

**Now that's timing,** said Remus in her mind. **How did you know I was just about to call you?**

**Wormtail!**

**Where?**

**Not here. At the Longbottoms'. With Meghan. He tried to hurt her, but the boy stopped him – and Sirius jumped on him –**

**Sirius?**

**And then Meghan stabbed his leg and the old witch took him out with the flowerpot – and he's been arrested!**

**What are you talking about?**

**A dream, Remus, it was one of my dreams, but not a prophecy – a seeing! It just happened, it really happened, right now, or just a minute ago – Sirius has Meghan back, and Wormtail's been arrested!**

**But what was he even doing at the Longbottoms'?**

**Trying to kidnap Meghan, I think. That's what it looked like. But that doesn't matter now – they got him, they got him, and they know he's an Animagus, they're watching him so he can't transform – we're going to be free! All of us! Really and truly free!**

Remus shot her an image of himself doing one of the Marauders' victory dances. Danger added herself to the dance, then, feeling naughty, started subtracting clothes from the images, until Remus canceled the whole picture. **Not in front of the cubs,** he admonished.

**We're not.**

**I'm still linked with Harry.**

**So unlink and let's think dirty for a little while...**

**No, you need to be awake. Your stop's coming up.**

**Aww .**

Remus loaded his tone with innuendo. **I'll make it up to you tonight.**

Danger made her own decidedly flirty. **I can't wait.**

The connection closed. Simultaneously, Draco stirred against her shoulder. "We there yet?" he mumbled sleepily.

"Almost, little one. We need to be awake now. Come on, wake up."

Grey eyes came open slowly, refocusing on place and time. "What do we do now?"

"We change here and take that train for two stops, and then we change again and look for our friends – they should be on that second train."

Draco smiled. "And then we go home?"

"And then we go home."

The train started slowing down as the station name was broadcast through the cars. Danger arched her back, stretching.

*Not much longer now.* She held onto that thought as onto a prayer. *Not much longer now.*

xXxXx

He huddled in a dark corner of the pub. No one was paying attention to him. His gold was as good as anyone else's, and no one seemed to care that he wrote notes to get service rather than saying what he wanted.

The gold was his, taken from his stash at his home. Likewise the parchment, quill, and ink, and the bowl filled with silvery potion. The clothes were also his own, once he'd taken a long shower to wash the defilement from his body. The wand was stolen from an unsuspecting witch on the street – she likely hadn't missed it yet. People weren't nearly as careful as they needed to be.

A fact he was counting on to help him in his present quest.

*I am the master of scrying spells. It was I who learned what Cornelius Fudge had been unable to learn for these six years – who it was that humiliated him so terribly and forced him to resign – scrying back through time, in idle curiosity, I discovered that none other than Sirius Black was responsible for that.*

*And I took that information to Fudge, and used it to gain his trust. He thinks I serve him.*

The man snorted and took another gulp of his drink. *Fool. I serve only one master.*

*But if, as it so happens, I can aid my master by helping Fudge in his little power play and revenge scheme, and have some fun of my own along the way...*

He snarled silently. *Or at least that was the way it was supposed to work.*

*But I will have my revenge.*

He touched the wand to the surface of the liquid in the bowl and began the process of scrying, thinking the words savagely when he couldn't say them.

*I will find them. And I will show them the true meaning of a blaze of glory.*

xXxXx

"Petunia?" Vernon Dursley walked into the kitchen, where his wife was starting dinner. "Shouldn't the boy be doing that? He is being punished, after all."

Petunia chopped an onion in half and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "He can't."

"Why not?"

"He's not here."

"Not here?"

"I've told him and told him, if he's not ready to go when Dudley is, I'll leave him behind. We waited a full five minutes and he didn't come. So I left."

Vernon nodded decisively. "Good. Make him walk. Teach him a lesson. How far is it?"

"About six or seven miles, I suppose. I don't keep close track."

"So he ought to be here in about an hour." Vernon smirked. "And we're not waiting dinner for him, either. He gets whatever's here when he decides to show his face."

xXxXx

Harry roused, blinking sleepily. He seemed to have gone to sleep sitting up, leaning on someone's shoulder, with his glasses on...

He stiffened as he remembered. He'd been kidnapped.

But his kidnapper said she loved him.

**And she means it, too,** said a quiet voice in his mind. Harry jumped before remembering about the magical necklaces that let people talk in their minds...

"I'm sorry, that was probably spying," said Moony, lifting his necklace off Harry's neck. "But you were thinking fairly loud. And she does mean it. And so do all of us." He smiled a little sadly. "Or we will, when you meet us again and we get a chance to say it to you. You'll be meeting Danger fairly soon now, she's my wife, and Hermione's older sister, and she'll have your brother Draco with her. And then, when we get to where we're going, you'll meet Padfoot, your godfather, and his little girl Meghan, who's something like your little sister."

"Is Neenie like my sister too?"

"Yes. The four of us, the adults, have been taking care of you and her since before your second birthdays. Meghan was born about two months before you turned three, and then Draco came to live with us just before you were four – on his fourth birthday, as a matter of fact."

"Why?"

Moony chuckled. "Now that's really a long story. Would you be willing to wait a few minutes? We're about to connect with Danger and Draco, and I'd rather see that done before I get into history."

Harry nodded. "I'll wait."

The train came to a halt. Miss Letha, who had been leaning against the corner of the seat with her eyes shut, opened them and yawned. "Neenie, wake up," she said on the tail end of the yawn. "Danger's coming."

The girl had been lying with her head pillowed on Miss Letha's lap. Now she sat upright quickly, eyes fixed expectantly on the door. "Not yet, Kitten," said Moony, smiling at her. "They're on their way across the platform. Boarding... now."

"They know what we look like?" asked Miss Letha a touch anxiously.

"Yes, I gave Danger the images hours ago."

Harry realized he was missing something here, but he didn't want to be rude by asking. The door of the compartment slid open at this point anyway, and his attention was fixed on the people who entered. One was a boy about his own age, who went straight to Miss Letha and hugged her tightly, and the other was a woman who practically ran to Neenie and snatched her up into a fierce embrace. Then she turned to Harry and did the same.

Over her shoulder, Harry saw the boy hug Neenie and whisper something to her that made her giggle, then approach Moony, stop, and get down on one knee. Moony placed his hand on the boy's head, then motioned him to stand up and hugged him before doing the scent-touch thing that he had done earlier with Harry. Harry might have felt jealous again, except that the woman – Danger – pulled away from him at that moment to look him in the eye.

"I'm so glad to have you back, Greeneyes," she said, smiling at him. Her fingers swept down her cheek, then touched his, and Harry found his hand reciprocating without conscious direction from his brain, and his face stretching in a smile to answer hers.

He felt curiously shy, but at the same time, wonderful.

Maybe he did belong with these people after all.

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# Maybe

## Chapter 13

### Chapter 13

Neenie looked hard at the red-haired Draco. "You look like Ron," she said.

Draco grimaced. "I know. Can I please get the glamour off now?" he asked Danger.

Danger shook her head. "Sorry, little fox. You're too noticeable. Come to think, the six of us together are fairly noticeable. We should probably split up."

Neenie made a faint noise of protest, and Harry felt slightly ill for no reason he could fathom. Some part of him, hitherto either ignored or simply unknown, was insisting that they had to stay together, that they were only safe when they were together...

"I think we should be all right until we get to our station," said Moony. "It's only thirty minutes from here. This compartment is anti-scryed, I assume, Letha?"

Miss Letha nodded. "First thing I did."

"All right. We'll stay together for now. Then we'll debark in... two groups, let's say. Danger, you and I with Draco, and Letha, you take the other two – Neenie, we'll have to glamour you a bit darker so you look right. Letha, you know how to get where we're going?"

"In my sleep."

"Excellent. You go straight there and go on through, and we'll go a bit more roundabout and come in later."

Danger frowned. "I don't know. Shouldn't the two groups be able to communicate?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"You, Letha, and Harry go roundabout, and I'll take Neenie and Draco straight there. If either group gets into trouble, we can yell for help, and no glamour changes are needed."

"Do you even know where this place is?"

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Then I do." *Obviously*, her tone implied.

Moony nodded slowly. "I think I like it. Letha?"

"It sounds good to me."

"All right, we have a plan."

"And now back to our regularly scheduled program," said Danger with a chuckle. "You. Sister. Come. Sit." She patted the seat beside her, and Neenie sat quickly down and nestled against her.

Draco pulled a folded sheet of parchment from his bag. "Moony, can I ask you something?"

"You can, there's no one stopping you."

Draco sighed exaggeratedly. "*May* I ask you something."

"Yes."

"How do the chord progressions work in this piece?" He opened the parchment and handed it to Moony. "All I can see for this part is minor two to major six and that can't be right."

Moony studied the parchment, frowning. Then his face cleared. "I see what you're saying – but no, that's not a major six..."

"Don't try to understand it," advised Miss Letha's voice from behind Harry. He jumped slightly and turned to face her. "Those two can talk music theory all night. Me, I don't understand it that well. I just play it." She moved over slightly, the invitation clear, and Harry sat down beside her. "And Remus said he'd tell you Draco's story after we were all here, and here we are, and he's off on a tangent. I love him like a brother, but honestly. He has a mind like a steel sieve some days."

The comment surprised a laugh from Harry.

"Do you want to hear Draco's story?"



Harry sneaked another look at the other boy, who was asking Moony something incomprehensible and tapping at his parchment. "Yes."

When the story was over, Harry surreptitiously rubbed his head, making sure it wasn't spinning. He didn't know much about his parents, but he hoped they hadn't been like that. Well, not so much Draco's mother – she'd done the right thing, after all, letting the Pack go home to their hiding place instead of letting them get arrested, and giving them Draco to take with them, to bring him up like another one of their children, their cubs – but his father...

Harry felt a chill down his back just thinking about it. He knew what it was like to live with people who hated you, but he could at least rationalize that the Dursleys had been stuck with him, so there was no real reason for them to like him. But what if it had been his own father who had hurt him for fun, or locked him in a cupboard...

He didn't realize he was shivering until a coat descended around his shoulders, and an arm encircled him. Without thinking, he leaned into the side thus provided, and half-heard Miss Letha say something that sounded a bit like a sneeze. Then, suddenly, she had something in her hand –

"In case you need this," she said, handing him his lion.

Harry accepted the toy, feeling rather silly. What would the other two think of him, needing to hug a stuffed animal like a baby?

"I bet you anything the others have theirs too," murmured Miss Letha as if to herself. "In those bags they're carrying."

"Too?" asked Harry very quietly, so as not to disturb Moony and Draco, who were still talking about numbers, but had now moved on to words that sounded vaguely Greek as well.

"All four of you have lions. We bought them for you and Hermione as second birthday gifts, Meghan got hers when she was born, and we gave one to Draco as a welcome-to-the-Pack present. And even before this happened, you still slept with it in your bed. Every single night."

Words came to Harry, and he pushed them away. They were stupid, they were babyish, he didn't really need to know...

But he wanted to. And there was no indication that these people would snap at him as the Dursleys so often did, telling him to keep his mouth shut, to do what he was told, to not ask questions...

"Will you tell me about me?"

Miss Letha smiled. "Of course I will. What do you want to know?"

"Anything. Everything. My parents."

"I think I can handle the last one better than the first two. Your parents. What do you know about them?"

"My aunt and uncle told me they died in a car crash. That my father was probably drunk and that he and my mother were both shiftless, worthless freaks who deserved what they got." Harry was mildly surprised by the anger in his voice.

Miss Letha shifted. "I see." Her voice was very crisp. "Anything else?"

"My scar." Harry traced the thin line on his forehead with a finger. "They said I got it in the crash." He twisted slightly to look up at her. "Is any of that true?"

"No." Miss Letha ran her own finger across Harry's scar, turning the gesture into a caress which continued down Harry's cheek and lingered there. "No, Harry, none of that is true. Your parents were not worthless, nor were they freaks. They were magical. As are you, as am I, as are all of us here."

She looked at Neenie and Danger, who were gazing into one another's eyes, the glint of gold around both their necks betokening a silent conversation via chain, and Moony and Draco, who were still discussing something to do with numbers and modes on the parchment. "Your aunt and uncle seem to think that different automatically equals bad. I would guess that they strive to seem perfectly normal in every way. Am I right?"

"Yes," said Harry quietly. "They always yelled if I talked about anything unusual." He smiled a little. "They yelled if I talked about almost anything."

Miss Letha smiled back. "You won't have to worry about that with us. We all like to talk at once, so you'll have to speak right up if you want to be heard. Now, as for how you got that scar, and how your parents died..." She sighed. "Another long story. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes."

"All right. Around the time I entered school, rumors started circulating about an evil wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort..."

xXxXx

The watcher was frustrated. He'd been working at his spell for an hour, and it was producing no more results than it had in the beginning. He'd tried it on other objects, other people, and gotten exactly what he was looking for – clear and crisp picture, perfectly audible sound – but try as he might on these particular people, all he could get was blankness.

*One more time. I will try it one more time.*

*If I am unsuccessful, I will seek help. As humiliating as that will inevitably be.*

*One more time.*

He cast the spell, holding the name of the people he sought in his mind –

And the surface of the potion flared to life, displaying a scene.

**YES!**

He quickly knelt on his chair to peer into the depths of the bowl.

The creature had changed his appearance. Perhaps that was why the scry had been confused?

Never mind, though. He had found the freak at last.

And not only him.

The man stared as a woman emerged from the train to stand beside the thing – a woman he'd seen in his scry before. She was the one whose flat the creature and his wife had stayed at in Surrey...

And then a boy got off the train and joined them, and the answer exploded in his mind.

He wanted to scream, but that release was denied him. He had to settle for viciously twisting a piece of parchment.

*Black's wife. She was there. She was in Surrey, near the Potter boy, and I never knew it.*

*And those fools at the Ministry must not have maintained the 24-hour surveillance I insisted on for him – because there he is, with the last people in the world he should be with, and in a place that is most certainly not Surrey –*

*But where is it?*

Quickly, he expanded the area of the scry, searching for something, anything, to tell him where they were, and almost missed the second party departing the train. Almost, but not quite.

*Ah-HA. There she is. My little precious.* He leered at the image of the girl in his bowl. *You will be mine eventually, pretty child. One way or another.*

For one as interested in the girl as he was, the older sister's disguise was easy to see through, and the other boy could be only Draco Malfoy, who must have been stolen mere hours, or minutes, after he himself had left the Notts' estate –

Another memory flew into his mind, of the blond boy making a petulant face.

*"Just because our names are the same doesn't mean we lived together."*

He snarled silently. *The boy should think his last name is Malfoy – I set that condition myself.*

*But, quite obviously, he does not.*

*The Memory Charm must have been lifted somehow. Probably by the Tonks woman.*

He wasted a pleasant moment thinking of ways he could hurt the meddling bitch who had dared to undo his careful work, but soon brought himself back to the task at hand. *Finding out where they are...*

He tuned the scry slightly better, and was rewarded with the ultimate goal of most scryers – sound. Sound from a scry was usually exceptionally hard to achieve, except over very short distances, but as he had noted before, he was the master of scrying spells.

He listened intently. The creature was speaking.

*"Good luck, you three. Don't linger at the Green Dragon – Floo straight to the kitchens. We'll be right behind you..."*

The watcher canceled the spell and began to pack his things away, glee suffusing him. He knew of only one pub called the Green Dragon. And he knew where it was.

He would be nearby, waiting for them.

*My name will be remembered with honor.*

That was his ultimate goal now.

After all, who would want to live, inhuman and degraded?

xXxXx

Remus walked slowly through the back streets of the town, his arm around Aletha's waist, Harry walking sometimes in front of them, sometimes

behind, never far.

*Just a family out for a nice walk before dinner. That's all.*

They talked as they walked, of little things, not terribly important. Things like what Harry would like for dinner, and if he had any homework tonight (he looked confused for an instant, then said he had some math problems to finish), and whether Remus had finished his latest project at work. The project, like Harry's homework, was totally fictitious, but it would have looked rather odd for a family to be walking in total silence...

The pendants went hot against his chest.

In the same instant, Danger screamed in his mind.

Rather than waste time asking questions, Remus sent an overriding command to her mind, demanding it show him what it saw and heard without disrupting her, and it did so.

What he saw made him swear violently.

"What in heaven's name—" Aletha began.

"Do you know the pub well enough to Apparate there?" Remus demanded of her.

"Yes, I think so."

"Do it. Take Harry. I have to help the others, they've been attacked."

He Disapparated before Aletha could ask him anything.

The wizard he had stopped at the orphanage was standing ten feet from Danger, a stream of sickly green light pouring from the wand he was holding. Danger was countering it with a steady stream of fire from her outstretched left hand, her wand in her other hand providing a shield for herself and the cubs, who were huddled behind her, clinging to one another.

**We're pinned down, she sent. He seems to be supercharged somehow – if any of us try to move, he steps it up until I can barely keep it off us – and I don't want that stuff touching us. So at the moment, we're stalemated.**

**Not for long.** Remus moved to get himself into spell-firing position –

**Don't!**

**Why not?**

**He's got some kind of permanent shielding on him. I tried disarming him already – I was lucky not to lose my own wand. I don't know where he's getting all this power from...**

**Are you all right where you are?**

**For the moment, yes. But this is going to wear me down fairly soon...**

**Let me think for a second, then.** Remus stared at the light shooting from the wizard's wand, which, now that he looked, was echoed more faintly all around the man's body... he knew something about this type of magic, he had studied it, if only briefly...

His mind froze for an instant in dismay as the answer came to him. **Good God.**

**What?**

**He doesn't expect, or want, to survive this. He's suicidal. This power is coming directly from his life – he's almost literally sold his soul for this, as soon as he accomplishes his goal he'll die.**

**What goal? Pinning me down here?**

**No, that can't be it – I think he's playing with you, waiting for something, but I don't know what...**

He felt Danger's shock as something reverberated through her.

**What was that?**

**Can you take over blocking here?**

**Why? What's wrong?**

**I'm about to go down for the count – it seems this little exercise is draining me more than I knew...**

The fire streaming from her faltered, flickered, then went out as she fell to her knees, then crumpled to the ground. Remus hastily shot a shield spell around the cubs and followed that up with a blast of fire, intending to burn the wizard's wand out of his hand –

It was deflected back at him. He absorbed it without thinking much about it, except to set that aside as a possible method of attack. His best plan seemed to be to continue Danger's strategy – a constant, steady stream of fire, which the other wizard seemed to be unable to break through –

*But is that because he honestly can't, or because he doesn't want to?*

Suddenly he noticed that the point where magic and fire met was closer to him than it had been. He increased the intensity of the fire, and the magic backed away a bit –

Before beginning to creep back towards him.

*This is bad. I don't know how long I can keep this up...*

He increased the intensity again, and the magic increased in response – more from each of them, more and more –

Remus cried out as the magic penetrated his defenses and struck him. It *hurt* – it felt as if some huge and willful child were trying to twist him into some other shape than his own –

He was on his knees on the ground, panting with pain, but still holding the fiery shield. He risked one glance over his shoulder – Danger lay immobile, Hermione and Draco's faces showed terror but no pain. So far, he was the only one who had been affected.

*Good. Keep it that way for as long as I can...*

But he didn't know how long that would be. He was running low on magic, he could feel it, and although he might be able to beat the other at his own game, if he were to tap his own life for extra power, such an exercise would almost certainly kill him as well. But he didn't see any other way to get enough power to beat this menace –

The magic broke his defenses again. This time, instead of merely dropping him to his knees, it threw him backwards several feet, knocking him into something hard and half-stunning him. Barely able to breathe, unable to move, he watched the magic cease, watched the wizard approach his cubs with a horrible, mocking smile –

Watched the wizard stagger back as a large rock struck his forehead –

Watched Aletha dive in front of the cubs and put up her strongest shield, blocking the magic for the moment –

His breath was coming back, his muscles were beginning to respond to him. *She can't last long. She won't be able to hold it much longer. Good for Hermione, throwing that rock –*

**Full link!** It was Danger's voice, sounding very far away, as if she were shouting across a great distance. **Link everyone with the pendants! That's the only way to beat him – all of us together!**

**Everyone? Are you sure?**

**I'm sure.**

**What about Sirius, and Meghan? They're not here –**

**Want to bet?**

"Come on, Moony, up you get," said Sirius' voice from beside him, and then Sirius was pulling him to his feet, Meghan peering fearfully around his legs.

**How the hell –**

**They were asleep and dreaming. I invaded their dream and told them to get here. You can yell at me later.**

**If we survive this, I don't think I'll be yelling.**

"Stay close behind us, Pearl," Sirius was saying. "Remus, you all right?"

"I will be in a second. Let's get over there, Letha's about to go down – Sirius, can you take over shielding? No, wait, you don't have a wand –"

"Yes, I do." Sirius produced one from within his robes. "Borrowed," he explained. "Tell you later. Let's go."

Behind the cover of Sirius' shield spell, they made their way into the stream of bilious green light. Sirius threw his shield around Aletha's once Remus and Meghan were safely within, and Aletha thankfully dropped her own. Remus looked at her face, drawn and exhausted even without her disguise, and felt a sting of guilt at asking her for more.

*But if we don't all do this, none of us are going to make it out alive –*

*Wait. We're all needed. All.*

*There's one missing.*

“Letha – where’s Harry?”

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# Maybe

## Chapter 14

### Chapter 14

"He... I..." Aletha caught her breath and took an instant to compose herself. "I left him at the pub and came back. Why?"

Remus felt his hope collapsing.

*She did the right thing – and it's backfiring on us. There's no time to go and get him, and we won't be strong enough without him –*

Something flew through the air and struck him in the chest without hurting him.

A stuffed lion.

Remus looked up, mentally figuring the toy's flight path. *It came from... over... there.*

Harry stared back at him from the entrance to an alley.

Remus created a corridor of fire blocking the hostile magic and waved the boy through it, praying he would come, and to his astonishment and relief, Harry came.

"How did you find us?" Remus demanded as Harry dropped to hands and knees beside him, safely inside Sirius' shield.

"I followed that man from the pub. He's my godfather, isn't he?"

"Yes." Remus set that aside to ask about later. "Harry, I need you to put my chain on again. We all need to be linked in order to beat this magic. It's going to take a lot out of you – out of all of us – but it's the only way we can win. Will you do that?"

Harry nodded instantly.

Remus handed Harry a loop of chain and began lengthening it more to fit everyone. *Thank heaven he agreed so fast – he has no real reason to trust us, much less to risk his life for us –*

**Don't I?** Harry's green eyes were challenging behind his glasses. **You love me. You told me that. And love's worth taking a risk for.**

Remus grinned, handing the chain to Aletha and Hermione. **Now that sounds like the Harry I know.**

Draco ducked under the chain, as did Meghan – Aletha slid a loop around Danger's neck, then threw the final length around Sirius', just as his shield spell began to flicker –

**Everyone open to me,** Remus sent, and felt the minds coming open, some more hesitant than others. He could sense preexisting cross-linkages of power, which looked to his "inner eye" like bands of color connecting people – Sirius and Aletha had a power bond already, one which appeared sky blue to him. He and Danger had a blue one between them as well, but their own was stronger, with a darker color to it – *because it's been used more.*

Blood also seemed to demarcate linkages, with Danger and Hermione having a dark red bond, and one running from Meghan to each of her parents. Draco had one to Sirius and one to Meghan as well, but these weren't quite as bright or clear as the others. Finally, there were golden bonds, which connected every member of the Pack to every other – they looked weak, but Remus was willing to bet they'd be stronger than they seemed when activated.

**Does everyone see this?** he asked, displaying his image in the shared area of their minds.

Various affirmatives answered him.

**All right. On my mark, concentrate on sending power out. We need it to circulate. Think about each other, and concentrate on staying together. That's what's going to save us now.**

**Heads up,** said Sirius, with the mental equivalent of panting. **I'm about to lose it – it's going down – now.**

The shield flickered and died. Simultaneously, Remus felt the magical bonds activate, and suddenly there was power available to him, power he hadn't even dreamed of. He threw up his own shield, wandlessly, and the green light slid off it harmlessly. Their attacker – Curcio, he had the man's name now, from Hermione and Draco's minds, Christopher Curcio – looked furious and redoubled his attack, but Remus simply increased the power to the shield correspondingly.

**So far so good.** Sirius was sitting up now, catching his breath from the work he'd done shielding. **But no one ever won a fight on defense. We're going to have to take it to him.**

Remus sighed. **If I knew what he was doing and how to beat it, that would be good –**

**Turn the shield around,** advised Danger, opening her eyes suddenly. **Trap him in a shield, with his own magic in there.**

**And then whatever he's trying to do to us will happen to him.** Aletha bared her teeth. **I like it.**

**All right. Here goes.**

Remus began reshaping the shield. It was set as an egg-shape around the Pack – he began to stretch the boundaries of the egg, as a preliminary to turning it inside out –

And stalled halfway there.

**It's not enough. Something's wrong.**

Some of the bonds still hung lifeless and unenergized – one of the life-sparks Remus could feel in the overall Pack-bond wasn't yet in the circuit, wasn't yet part of the giving and receiving of power – someone was still holding back –

Curcio seemed to sense his hesitation and stepped up the power of the attack yet again. Remus wasn't sure how long even this stronger shield was going to hold... if they were ever going to defeat him, it had to be now...

But they couldn't. Not with the power they had at the moment.

Something had to change.

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For all his brave words, Harry was scared.

He didn't understand what was going on. It felt like a thunderstorm was forming around him, and wanted him to be swept away in it, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to be or not. He could sense the thoughts of the adults, and of the other children – the cubs? – and they were completely open, committed to whatever it was the Pack was trying to do – they trusted the Pack itself that much.

But Harry was still partly closed off. He couldn't make up his mind to trust that much yet. His doubts kept nagging at him, slamming the doors of his mind every time he thought of opening them and letting his thoughts and his power – his magic, he supposed – flow freely along the faint golden bonds he could see, running from him to the rest of the Pack.

He didn't really know these people, the doubts niggled. The necklaces could have been rigged to let Moony lie to him. The little things he'd been noticing – the way everything about them felt familiar, the way they seemed to know him better than he knew himself, the way they always knew just what he wanted – they could all be tricks, games someone was playing with him –

*No.*

He clenched his fists.

*No. I don't believe that.*

The same part of him that had told him to trust Miss – no, to trust *Letha* – that had prompted him to cry in Moony's arms, that had given him the impulse to return Danger's scent-touch, that had impelled him to follow the man who had dashed out of the fireplace with a little girl in his arms and caused a mass panic in the pub – that part of him looked at the man standing before the Pack, the man whose face was lit with fiendish glee –

And knew him.

*The Pack's not playing a game with me.*

*You are!*

The man before him had told him lies and used magic, bad magic, to make him believe them.

But if bad magic had made him believe lies, then good magic could help him remember the truth.

And there was good magic all around him.

He slammed open the doors of his mind, not to give power out, but to let it in – the storm rushed into his mind, powerful beyond his imagining –

It was all he could do not to scream. It felt as if he had been trapped in a small, dark room for a long time, and suddenly the door of that room had opened, the walls had collapsed, and he was free – he'd been getting glimpses of the outside world all day from the stories and assurances of the Pack, but this was the real thing. These memories were his own.

Pictures, sounds, emotions rushed past him madly – he only caught a few – looking up in confusion at Padfoot, wondering why his godfather was crying, asking him not to – peering at the tiny bundle in Letha's arms and being amazed when the baby yawned and opened her eyes – staring down Draco over the kitchen table, with Danger setting a timer for them to compete by – standing face to face with Hermione, moving a bit awkwardly in time with the music, with Moony's voice directing them, calling out what to do next –

But there was no more time to waste. The shield, weakened by the loss of the magic he'd used, was about to collapse.



*Time to do my share.*

Harry stopped holding back and threw himself into the link fully, as he had not dared to do until this moment, as he only now dared because he knew – really and truly knew – who these people were.

They were his family. His Pack. And he had shared his entire life with them.

Compared to his life, his mind and his magic were really no big deal.

The golden bonds flared to full life.

xXxXx

Remus felt the drain as Harry pulled energy from the link – he wanted to scream at the boy, ask him what he thought he was doing, but he was too busy trying to hold the shield in place –

And then the burst of fresh power hit him, and everything snapped into place, as if he'd been working on tuning his violin and just now managed to get that one pesky string into perfect tune with the others. The Pack resonated, like notes within a chord, each strengthening and supporting the others.

*We've got it. Time to use it.*

Remus opened the back of their shield and, with one swift motion, turned it inside out, reflecting all the magic Curcio was directing at them back at him, sealing him in with it.

Curcio's face turned first astounded, then frightened, before the level of magic within the shield became so high that the light blinded Remus and he had to look away. He could feel it, though – the magic was being reflected off the inner surface of the shield, ricocheting around, striking other bolts of magic and recombining in unexpected ways – something was going to happen, something none of them had any control over –

He felt the shield twisting in a way his mind couldn't quite comprehend – it was as if it were being dragged out of the world entirely – and it was going to take Curcio with it –

*Good riddance.*

But just before the shield twisted so far that it vanished entirely, Curcio made one final effort – and breached the shield in one place.

The small area was dark again with the disappearance of the other wizard and his magic – there was nothing to prevent Remus from seeing, as if in slow motion, the last bolt of green light streaking towards them.

Aimed directly at Hermione.

He tried to get between it and her, but his magic was gone, expended on the shield – and his body was still recovering from being thrown against a building, it wouldn't respond to him –

Danger had no such restriction.

Remus saw his wife leap upwards, directly into the path of the magic, taking it full on her chest –

It struck her almost softly, outlining her whole body in green and seeming to hold her in place. For one timeless moment, she hung in midair, suspended –

Then she writhed, as if in agony, but Remus felt no pain from her – in fact, he felt nothing from her, had felt nothing from the moment the magic had struck – it must have rendered her unconscious on impact –

Suddenly he realized what he was seeing. Danger's body was being twisted by the magic – twisted in the same way Curcio and the shield had been – as if she were about to be physically removed from the world –

**NO!**

He still couldn't move, couldn't muster the energy to do anything about it –

But it seemed someone else could.

He felt some of the Pack-bonds flare to life again – but these bonds didn't involve him, and he couldn't quite tell whom they did involve – only that it was Pack-magic, and strong –

Red light, bright crimson red, wreathed Danger suddenly, and where it touched her, the deathly green pulled away – azure blue light joined the red, striking at the evil magic, driving it back – another green became apparent around her now, but this was a vibrant and living green, as far from the sickly shade of Curcio's magic as could be imagined –

Hermione was standing up, the same magics covering her that now coated Danger. She lifted her hand and reached towards her sister, their dark red blood bond becoming more and more apparent. The bilious green tried to attack her as well, but the three bright magics shielded her.

Their hands touched.

There was a blinding flash of white light.

Then the sound of two bodies hitting the ground.

**Ow** , said a little voice in Remus' mind.

He began to laugh, and almost couldn't stop.

They were all alive.

He could sense them all, every one – tired, shaken, frightened, but *alive* .

One by one, the others joined in, until everyone was laughing. It was a natural reaction, Remus told himself – relief from almost unbearable tension had to be expressed somehow, and this seemed like a fine way to do it.

**I hate to be a party pooper**, came Aletha's mind-voice, **but it's not safe for some of us to be out here. Are enough of us ambulatory to get us all to the pub, and can we make it through the Floo?**

**I can walk**, said Sirius. **If you give me a minute, I can carry somebody.**

**I'm all right**, sent Draco.

**Me too**. Meghan.

**Hermione? Danger?**

**Er, I'm going to need a ride**, said Danger a bit woozily. **And I think Neenie will too.**

**Harry?**

**I'm fine.**

Something about the way Harry said that made Remus a bit suspicious, but he let it pass. **Let's go, then.**

Slowly, the Pack got to its collective feet. Sirius lifted Danger into his arms, and Aletha picked up Hermione and handed her to Remus. He was grateful, since he wasn't sure he could have bent over without passing out. Draco and Harry were supporting each other, and Meghan was holding onto Aletha for dear life.

Remus reclaimed his chain and tucked it away under his shirt. "Let's go home," he said. "All of us."

xXxXx

Remus stood in the shadows near the Green Dragon, supporting a now awake but still dizzy Hermione.

He wanted to swear.

*So close. We were so close.*

Apparently someone, after witnessing Sirius' mad dash through the pub, had thought to go to the Ministry. The building was filled with Aurors, and they were getting ready to move out through the surrounding streets, they would find the Pack any minute – Sirius was back in dog form, but they would still find the rest of them, and probably recognize them and put them back under arrest –

But at this point in Remus' thoughts, he noticed a familiar figure exiting the pub, and a plan sprang fully-formed into his mind. "Meghan," he called quietly.

The girl was beside him in an instant. Remus knelt down and whispered into her ear, and she nodded eagerly and dashed away.

"What are you doing with my daughter?" asked Aletha warily.

"Just watch."

Meghan ran into the lit area in front of the pub. An Auror shouted at her to halt, and she did, looking very young and frightened and getting everyone's attention. Including the man Remus had most hoped would notice her.

Professor Dumbledore waved the Aurors off and was at Meghan's side in a moment, leaning down to hear what she had to tell him. He nodded to her and stood up again. "Gentlemen, this little girl has information I believe you should all hear," he said loudly. "If you will join me inside."

The three Aurors outside the pub filed in, with Dumbledore and Meghan behind them. A few moments later, the windows of the pub shone with silver light. Then Meghan was standing in the doorway, beckoning the Pack to come.

Remus lifted Hermione into his arms again and led the way.

There was no time to waste; the spell Dumbledore had used would last for only a moment or two. "I will, of course, be blaming this on you," he said to Sirius as Aletha opened the bag of Floo powder from Remus' pocket. "You were obviously hiding near here and took this opportunity, when we were all assembled, to knock us down, snatch Meghan before she could reveal your whereabouts, and escape."

"Have they identified Pettigrew yet?" Sirius wanted to know as the fire flared green for Draco.

"No, but that is my next order of business. They have placed anti-transfiguration wards around his cell, though, so you need not worry about his escaping in that way. And I took the opportunity, while I was at the Ministry, to retrieve something of yours." Dumbledore produced a wand from within his robes and handed it to Sirius, who accepted it gratefully. "Now you may return Minerva's to her."

"With thanks – it saved my life at least twice." All the cubs were gone now, Danger was just stepping into the fire, supported by Aletha.

One of the Aurors groaned.

"On your way," Dumbledore urged with a smile, returning to the place where he had been standing and performing quite a creditable stage fall for such an old man, Remus thought.

Sirius was gone, whipped away by green flames. Remus stood alone by the fire, waiting until it returned to a normal color, then added his own pinch of Floo powder and stepped in.

"Hogwarts kitchens," he said quietly – in case any of the Aurors were awake enough to hear him, there was no reason to make it easier for them than it had to be.

A few moments later, Sirius caught him as he staggered out of the fireplace. They supported each other, through the kitchen door, down the hall, Sirius winking at Serpina, who winked back from her open portrait, and into their Den, Remus pulling the portrait shut behind him.

Danger was sitting on the floor with her back against the sofa. As the two men came in, she pointed her wand at them and said something inaudible, but Remus felt the tingle of a Cleaning Charm wash over him, and then a moment later the soft breeze of a glamour.

*That's right, I had a spell on. I'd almost forgotten.*

The rest of the Pack, minus the once again brown-haired Hermione, who was sitting on the sofa watching, were busily setting up their den. Remus watched Aletha, now bereft of her disguise, Summon a double mattress from one of the adult bedrooms; chuckled as it nearly knocked over Harry and Draco, both unbeglamoured, who were dragging in one of the twin mattresses from the cubs' rooms (of which there were two, one for boys and one for girls, but connected by a door); and looked down as he felt a tap on his foot.

"Shoes off," said Meghan in her bossiest tone.

"Yes, miss," said Remus contritely, allowing her to untie his shoes and lifting first one foot, then the other, letting her pull them off for him. She moved over to Sirius, who did the same for her, then giggled and ran away towards her bedroom with the shoes, no doubt intending to tie the laces together in curious and complicated knots.

*I knew it was a mistake to raise them as pranksters.*

**And what choice did you have?**

**Good point. "Children learn what they live," after all.**

**Exactly.**

xXxXx

Sirius sat down on the mattresses and watched Harry, who was now helping Draco drag the last of the twin mattresses in from the cubs' rooms.

*We're going to have to deal with him somehow. He won't know what's going on, he won't understand any of this – he doesn't even know who we are –*

Remus caught his eye and nodded as the boys dropped the last mattress into place and Meghan came running back from the cubs' rooms and claimed Aletha's lap.

"Be welcome, all, to this den-night," said Sirius, getting everyone's attention. "We are Pack now. Pack together." He put quite a bit of emphasis on the last word.

"Pack forever," responded everyone else.

Including Harry.

Sirius stared at him, barely hearing Danger's words, inviting stories to be told.

*Did he just...*

Harry noticed the stare and crawled across the mattresses to Sirius' side. "Did I do something wrong?" he asked, sitting up.

No – but...” Sirius tried to figure out how to put it. “Harry, do you know who I am?”

Harry grinned. “Yes. You’re my ugly godfather who likes to make my silverware sing to me on my birthday.”

Sirius felt his smile stretch his face incredibly out of shape as he knocked Harry to the mattresses and hugged him ruthlessly. He had, in fact, done exactly that to Harry on his tenth birthday.

*And he remembers it.*

*He remembers!*

They wrestled for a little while, in the sheer joy of being together once again. The entire Pack seemed to be doing the same, Sirius noticed out of the corner of his eye, although the other six were switching off occasionally – *but I don’t want to. Harry’s mine right now.*

“I am not ugly,” he said a moment later, with as much dignity, and breath, as he could muster with Harry sitting on his chest.

“That’s what you say.”

“Oh, hush, you.” Sirius twisted his body and dumped Harry onto the mattresses, moving swiftly to pin the boy down before he could get away. “This little git,” he said loudly, getting everyone’s attention, “knows where he belongs.”

There was a wave of exclamations of surprise and delight.

“Harry, when did this happen?” asked Aletha, her face alight with joy.

Harry wriggled out from under Sirius’ grasp and sat up. “I used the magic,” he said. “When we were all linked up, I used some of the magic to take the Memory Charm off. And then I remembered.” He looked around the room, and Sirius was somehow unsurprised to see the glint of tears in the green eyes. “I remembered everything.”

“Everything?” asked Draco.

Harry gave one large snuffle, then turned to his brother. “Yes. Everything. Including those four Sickles you owe me.”

“Damn.”

“So we’re all back,” said Danger in satisfaction, leaning against Remus. “We’re all Pack again.”

“Pack together,” said Harry, grinning.

“Pack forever,” everyone else chorused again, and the den-night was started in earnest.

After the romping was over, everyone settled down for story-telling. The cubs told their tales, one by one reliving the fear and the sorrow of being parted from their Pack without their consent or in some cases their knowledge, allowing it to be soothed and nullified by the joy and safety of the Den and their Pack around them now.

They broke for dinner after the last story, which was Harry’s. One of the house-elves who brought them the food was Dobby, who was overjoyed to see them all back, and presented Remus with a note in Dumbledore’s handwriting when he was finished hugging the cubs. Remus broke the seal and read the note aloud.

“Pettigrew has been identified. Amelia Bones is beginning to come to the proper conclusions. Lars Villias remains unconvinced. *Numerus stultorum infinitus est.* I would be interested to know why you looked as if you had been through a battle when we met earlier this afternoon, but that is your decision. You may reply via Dobby if you wish.”

“I think we’ve got quite a bit to tell him,” said Danger blandly.

“I think you’re right, love. But I also think it can wait until after dinner.” Remus set the note aside. “Thank you, Dobby. We’ll call you when we have our answer ready.”

“Of course, sir.” The clothed house-elf vanished with a sharp snap.

Sirius sat back in his chair, putting his fork down, an idea occurring to him. “You know,” he said speculatively, “just because we can come out of hiding when I’m cleared, doesn’t necessarily mean we should. The reporters are going to be all over us, we’ll be the greatest thing since self-stirring cauldrons. Would it be so bad if we stayed here for a while and kept our heads down?”

“Recovery time,” said Aletha, nodding. “Time to be ourselves, with just ourselves, and no one else to bother us. I think we could all use it.” Her eyes darted towards the cubs.

Remus and Danger nodded as well.

“We’re not going back to the Den?” Harry looked a bit disappointed.

“We will, eventually, Greeneyes,” said Sirius, squeezing Harry’s shoulder. “Just not right away.”

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# Maybe

## Chapter 15

### Chapter 15

Remus couldn't sleep.

The rest of the Pack was out like the proverbial light – the cubs had begun falling asleep almost as soon as dinner was over, and the other adults hadn't taken long to follow them. There was extreme snuggling going on: Meghan was practically invisible between Sirius and Aletha, Harry was curled into a ball against his godfather's legs, Draco was pressed up against Danger's back with one of his ankles lying across one of Aletha's, and Hermione was cuddled against her sister's chest with Danger's arms around her, thumb in mouth. Remus had been lying next to the sisters before he had realized that sleep wasn't going to come.

Now he was slumped in one of the armchairs, looking at his Pack and having a strange mental conversation with himself which might be the product of it being three in the morning, but might also be valid in some ways...

*It's my fault*, said one part of his mind gloomily.

*What is?* asked another part.

*Everything.*

*Including the rise of Voldemort?*

Yes.

*How?*

*All right, not everything. But this.*

*So it's somehow your fault that the Pack was found?*

*No, but –*

*And it's somehow your fault that a bunch of sadistic Healers spent three months poking at you and watching you without even asking your permission first?*

Remus winced. No matter what he told Danger, that wound hadn't yet healed, and he wondered a little if it ever would.

He had personally come to terms with what he was long ago, and living with the Pack, who all knew and understood – hell, they'd taken his problem and turned it into a lifestyle! – he sometimes forgot how other people, so-called "normal" people, reacted to lycanthropy.

One of those "normal" people being named Christopher Curcio.

*I should have realized from the way he acted. I should have known. I should have been more careful. I should have figured out he wouldn't go to a Healer – he'd count himself lost and try for revenge instead –*

*Speaking of which, I shouldn't have been after revenge at all! What's wrong with me? Revenge is for the Dark side, it's personal satisfaction – I went too far, and I put us all in danger because of it –*

But Hermione's face rose up before him again, as she had looked when he had seen her on the bookshelf – bewildered, frightened, furious, all at the same time – she who was always so calm and logical, reduced to the most basic of emotions –

*Accidental magic is the product of emotion. And that was very powerful accidental magic she did – every single window in that building was shattered, and that room was a shambles – but the girl who actually triggered the attack – she got away with one bump on the head from a book.*

The thought cycled back into his litany. *Even Hermione, Obliviated and out of control, didn't hurt anyone. But you – Remus Lupin, supposedly the calm and cool-headed alpha male, the leader of the Pack – you made a man believe he was a werewolf, and because he believed that, he killed himself.*

*How exactly are you planning on living with that?*

He answered himself honestly, with a weary sigh, the same way he had the last seven times the question had come up in his mind.

*I don't know.*

Something caught his ear. He looked back at the Pack. The easy rhythm of their breathing was being interrupted. Someone was disturbed – having a bad dream, perhaps, or waking for some other reason –

With no more warning than that, Danger screamed.

The Pack came awake in a flurry of blankets and confusion. Remus, trying to get up quickly, tripped over a discarded pillow and fell hard, winding himself, and it was Sirius who got to Danger first and shook her hard.

Her eyes snapped open, and she stared at him. "You're alive?" she whispered.

Sirius looked at her oddly, then nodded. "Yeah, I'm alive."

Danger threw her arms around him and held on tightly. "Letha?" she asked in a frightened whimper as Remus caught his breath and managed to sit up.

"I'm here," said Aletha, coming up behind Sirius, so that Danger could look over his shoulder into her friend's face. She stroked Danger's cheek soothingly. "I'm just fine. We're all fine. That must have been a nasty dream."

Danger nodded, then buried her face in Sirius' shoulder. Sirius looked over at Remus with an expression on his face that said many things – *You do know I didn't ask for this* was one, along with *I have no idea why she's doing this* and just plain *Help!*

Remus made his way over to the two of them and reached out to touch Danger, feeling a static-like spark jump between them as he made contact. **What was it?** he asked silently.

**Oh God** – Danger released Sirius and turned to Remus, staring intently into his face. **You have me. And you have Sirius and Letha, and the cubs. You're not alone. Right?**

**Yes, of course, you know that. What on earth happened?**

Danger relaxed with an all-over shudder and buried her face in his chest without answering. Sirius and Aletha had turned to calming the cubs, who were a bit shaken by their sudden awakening, but willing to accept that everything was all right, if not to go back to sleep immediately.

**Whatever it is, everyone's going to want to hear about it,** Remus told Danger, noticing that the cubs were all watching the two of them.

**No, they're not.**

**Why not?**

**God in heaven, Remus, you have no idea what I saw – what I had to watch –**

**No, I don't. Not unless you tell me.**

Danger looked up at him. **The cubs shouldn't hear this now,** she said pleadingly. **Please, not them. I'll tell you, and Letha and Sirius. But not the cubs. Not tonight.**

**They won't like it.**

**I don't care. We can charm them asleep if we have to, but they can't hear this tonight.**

**You're sure.**

**Dead sure.**

**All right.**

"Everything's all right now," Danger said aloud. "I just had a really awful dream."

"What was it about?" asked Harry.

"I can't tell you that tonight."

All four cubs looked bewildered. "Why not?" asked Hermione.

Danger smiled slightly. "I can't tell you that either. Please trust me on this one, cubs – I will tell you, as soon as I can. But not tonight."

"Tomorrow?" said Draco.

"No promises, fox. But yes, maybe tomorrow."

The cubs traded looks. "All right," said Harry, with a "don't-think-we'll-let-you-forget" expression on his face.

"Everyone back to sleep, now," said Remus, "or else."

"Or else what?" asked Meghan.

"Or else we'll make you," said Sirius, waving his hands mysteriously. "Hocus pocus, meepy beepy, you are getting very sleepy..."

The cubs all laughed and settled back in, choosing new positions in regards to one another. The adults found places of their own, leaning back

against pieces of furniture to rest their backs, and watched as their cubs drifted back to sleep.

*I've missed this. I've missed this a lot.*

Hermione's were the last set of eyes to close. As soon as all four cubs were limp in the way that was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to counterfeit, the adults moved closer to one another, Danger still in the circle of Remus' arms.

She held out her chain. "So we don't wake them by accident," she explained quietly. Sirius and Aletha accepted it and slid it on, and Remus did so as well, just for consistency's sake.

**I know what Curcio was trying to do to us, Danger began without preamble. The magic he was hitting us with, you remember I got exposed to it, but it was stopped? It took partial effect on me – it did what it was supposed to, but only in my dreams – so I know what it was for. He wasn't trying to kill us – or at least, not exactly. He was trying to... erase us.**

**Erase us?** Aletha looked as bewildered as Remus felt.

**Have you ever heard of the idea of parallel or alternate universes? Worlds like ours, but with small differences between them?**

**Yes, but what's that got to do with Curcio?** Sirius asked.

**He was trying to force us into one of those alternate universes. If he had succeeded, we – She shuddered. We would have been trapped in a world with no place for us – because we were already there. Or – not us, but people like us. People who could have been us. Am I making any sense?**

**I think so,** said Remus. **You're saying that there might be, in that alternate universe, another Remus Lupin, another Gertrude Granger, and that we would have no place there, no identity.**

**Yes – and no. You have the right idea, but you don't understand all of what would have happened to us.**

**So tell us,** Sirius urged.

**The world has its own ways of dealing with things like that. Duplications of people. The ones who don't belong are – damn it, I can't think of the word...**

She spread the concept in front of them, and Remus swallowed as the implications became clear to him. Within a few moments of their arrival in the other world, their physical bodies would have vanished, self-destructing in a hostile environment, and their minds and souls depleted, becoming only a part of those of their counterparts in that world –

**Assimilated,** offered Aletha quietly.

**Yes. Thank you. We would have been assimilated into our counterparts. Or – for those of us with no living counterpart – we would just have died. And that would have been cleaner.**

**Who doesn't have a living counterpart?** asked Sirius in surprise.

Danger smiled humorlessly. **Me, for one.**

**You?**

**Apparently, in the world he was trying to force us into, I was never born.**

**Oh.**

**Letha for another.**

**Me? But –**

**You were born. But in that world, you've already died.**

Aletha's hand tightened around Sirius'. **Tell me how,** she said very quietly.

**You were found dead in a meadow outside Hogsmeade on the morning of 2 June, 1983 . You had apparently been out flying and fallen from your broom.**

Aletha's eyes narrowed. **Key word being – "apparently"?**

**Yes. How did you know?**

**No matter what world I'm in, I don't just fall off my broom.** Aletha looked at Sirius, who was very pale. **Congratulations, lover-boy,** she said with a slight smile. **You saved my life.**

Sirius shook his head, looking around at the other three in confusion. **I don't understand.**



Aletha's smile took on a bitter tinge. **It was suicide, Sirius. That world's Letha followed up on what I told you once – that I couldn't live without you.**

**But – where was I?** Sirius asked in bewilderment. An instant later, his face registered annoyance and understanding. **Of course. No Danger – so you would never have found out about me and Peter, Moony – so I was still...**

**Yes.** Danger's mind was open; everyone could see her, in memory, crouching in the tiny, dark cell in Azkaban, trying to comfort that world's Sirius, who was huddled in a corner as Padfoot, before realizing that she was caught in a dream and to him, she wasn't real...

**And of course, without me, Meghan was never born.** Sirius looked over at the cubs, as if needing confirmation that his daughter still existed. **I think I agree with you, Danger. I don't like the sound of this other world at all.**

**I suppose I have to ask,** Remus said wearily. **What about me?**

**You... went on with life. You never found Harry or met Neenie. You never saw Letha again. You got a series of odd jobs, enough to keep yourself alive, and you survived.**

**Wonderful.** Remus was mildly surprised at the heaviness of the sarcasm on the word. **What about the cubs?**

**Harry – what you'd expect. He stayed with the Dursleys. They weren't quite as bad as our world's lot, but bad enough.** Snatches of scenes flashed through Danger's mind – Vernon and Petunia shouting at Harry, Dudley pursuing him, days filled with drudgery and nights with loneliness –

But through it all, Harry's spirit shone through. Remus could still see the boy he knew and loved – the Dursleys, for all their trying, had apparently never managed to break Harry.

**That's my boy,** said Sirius proudly. **Strong, determined, not afraid of anything.**

Remus agreed, but suddenly recalled something. **You said I never met Neenie. Did she still exist?**

**Yes – and I wasn't entirely truthful. You did meet her. You just never – well, look.** And images of a normal Muggle girl's life flooded the conjoined minds. Hermione had indeed been born to her parents, grown up normal, received her Hogwarts letter on her eleventh birthday, met Harry and Ron Weasley aboard the Hogwarts Express as her fellow first years –

**But she's not supposed to be in their year,** objected Aletha. **She's officially too young, it's only because we have special permission that she's going to stay with them –**

**Not in that world. Apparently, not having me meant my parents had her a year earlier.**

The images went on, pausing in Hermione and Harry's third year. **There,** said Danger. **That's when you met them.**

Remus stared at the mental image of himself, a few years older than he currently was and far more careworn, a Professor at Hogwarts –

**Good for you,** said Sirius approvingly. **You'd make a good Professor.**

**So in that world, I only ever knew them as their teacher?** Remus looked over at the cubs in question, just barely visible under their pile of blankets and siblings, and had to force himself to stay where he was, not to go to them immediately and hold them close, reconfirming that they were his...

Then something occurred to him. Something awful.

**Draco,** he said quietly.

Aletha looked as if she couldn't decide whether to be sad or angry. Sirius had no such trouble; his face was filled with anger. **He never got away, did he?**

**No. He never did. He grew up a Malfoy, he was sorted into Slytherin, and he and Harry are bitter rivals. In that world, Lucius is still free as a bird, Narcissa is still alive, and Draco keeps challenging Harry and his friends and coming off worst, and he can't understand why.**

Aletha sighed. **Maybe because he ought not to be challenging them at all – because he ought to be one of them?**

**Maybe,** Danger said with an answering sigh, then frowned. **Oh, wait – I lied. Lucius isn't free. Not at the point where I stopped watching.**

**What point was that?** Sirius asked. **I think I like that point.**

**No, you don't.** Danger shivered. **Trust me. You don't.**

**Why not?**

**Because you're...**

**Dead?**

**How did you know?**

**I think my first clue was when you woke up and greeted me with “You’re alive?”** Sirius looked vaguely amused. **So. How did I bite the big one?**

Danger told them the whole story, starting with Sirius’ unassisted Azkaban escape and finishing with the episode involving the archway and veil. **And that’s when I just couldn’t take it any more,** she finished. **Half my Pack dead or never born, the other half lost, hurt, broken –**

Remus closed his arms around her. **It’s not true,** he reminded her firmly as Sirius and Aletha closed in behind her, putting hands on her shoulders, rubbing her back. **It was only a dream. It didn’t happen.**

**I know.**

But Danger cried anyway.

The three other adults held her close and let her cry, reminding her by the mere fact of their presence that the dream hadn’t come true, would never come true, that they would never have to deal with so much pain and sorrow in their own lives.

After what felt like a long time, Danger looked up. **I’m better now,** she said in a small voice. **Thank you.**

“Any time,” said Sirius, taking her chain off himself. “It’s what we’re here for.” He scent-touched her and went to lie down beside the cubs.

“Sleep better,” said Aletha, following her husband’s lead. “And if you two want some alone time, feel free to move us and reclaim one of the mattresses.”

Remus raised an eyebrow at her. “We’ll keep that under consideration,” he said dryly. **Are you interested in that?**

**Not really.** Danger sighed deeply. **But I do have something I want to show you. I think I’ve figured out where that magic came from, the magic that saved me.**

**Do tell.**

**Are you ready for some memory-traveling? It’s the easiest way.**

Remus lay down where he was, Danger following his every movement. **Ready when you are.**

Abruptly they were standing back in the tiny area, the Pack frozen in time before them. The Danger of memory was arched backwards, her body outlined in pale green.

“I’ve just been hit,” said Danger, waving at herself. “Now watch.”

The scene animated at about half of real speed. Remus watched the deathly green writhing around Danger, trying to push her out of their world and into the other world she had glimpsed, and felt no pity for Christopher Curcio, whatever had happened to him.

“Look.” Danger froze the scene. “Do you see?”

The bright crimson magic had just begun to wrap around her, protecting her. Remus looked – and saw.

“Harry,” he breathed. “Yes, of course – Harry had just gotten his memories back, he knew who you were, he would have wanted desperately to save you – and I didn’t draw as heavily on the cubs in making the shield, I didn’t want to deplete them too far, so they would still have had enough magic to do this...”

Danger nodded. The scene reanimated. “And you see who the blue comes from.”

“Yes, the blue from Meghan – and green from Draco – I do see. So they stopped it from pushing you any farther out with their combined magic, then they expanded it to cover Hermione, who could pull you back into this world because of the blood bond...”

“Exactly.” Danger smiled. “We have some amazing cubs.”

“So we do.”

They were back in their Den, holding one another.

**So – the cubs saved you from never existing,** Remus said, trying to make a joke. **Isn’t that usually the other way around?**

He realized instantly that he’d blundered again, as Danger tensed against him.

**What is it?**

She looked up at him, her eyes bleak. **Remus, I existed in the other world. I was just... never born.** The words tumbled from her now, as if they

had to be said before she lost her nerve. **I was a surprise, they were very young and not married yet, and in that world my mother didn't think she could handle a child and finish school at the same time, and she was worried about what everyone would think, and I can understand that, I don't blame her, it was her choice –**

**You don't blame her?** Remus interrupted. What Danger was driving at had suddenly hit him, and it made him absolutely furious. **You don't blame her for depriving me – that world's me – of my wife, for keeping Sirius in Azkaban for all those years, for driving Letha to suicide, condemning Harry to the Dursleys, Draco to be a Malfoy – you don't blame her?**

**She couldn't have known –**

**Exactly, and that's why she should have been more careful –**

Remus stopped, suddenly hearing the words slightly differently.

*I should have known... I should have been more careful...*

**But none of us really know the consequences of our actions, he said slowly. Do we?**

**No, I suppose we don't.**

**And there's no use getting angry about what happened in another world – another universe.** Remus bent his head to kiss the top of Danger's. **I'm just grateful it didn't happen in this one.**

Danger laughed weakly. **Do I sound really pathetic if I say "Me too"?**

**Not really. And besides, there's no one here to hear you except me.**

**Me too.**

**That was pathetic.**

Danger reached for a pillow and smacked him with it.

Some time later, after a few things that hadn't required moving into another room but had made Remus glad that no one else was awake, he held the peacefully sleeping Danger in his arms and thought.

*There's no use getting angry about what happened in another universe, and there's no use getting upset about what's over. I made a mistake, and a man died. He was a nasty git who wanted to destroy us all, so I don't feel as guilty as I probably should, but he's still dead because of me.*

*But there's no way to turn back time and stop it from happening. It happened, it's over, and I have to live with that.*

*So... I'll think my actions through a little better from now on, and try to make sure it doesn't happen again.*

*That's the best I can do.*

And with that, his tumultuous thoughts began to settle down, and he discovered that he was really quite tired after all.

His last thought before he slept was a memory, of a day long ago, the day the cubs had made friends with the Weasley children, and something he'd said to Sirius.

*"All things considered, this really may be the best of all possible worlds..."*

## Maybe Epilogue

### Epilogue

April:

Cornelius Fudge paced up and down in his cheap lodging, his mind working furiously.

"It must be false," he said for the thousandth time. "He must have Confused Pettigrew into believing the story, or put him under Imperius, or something of the sort – this can't, it simply can't be true."

"Agreed," said his right-hand woman from her seat at the table. "But we must be patient, Minister. We must wait for Black to make a mistake again. Then we can strike once more."

"Yes – yes – you're right, Dolores. Of course, you're right."

Fudge wondered again where Curcio was. The man had gone out on that round of the children and never come back. Possibly he'd run afoul of Black or one of the others while he was doing it. In which case the poor man was lying dead in a ditch somewhere.

Perhaps – his mind snapped to work. Perhaps that could be put to use. He started pacing again, his mind already working on possible headlines.

*"Ministry Casewizard Missing – Sirius Black Connected with Case."*

*"Casewizard to Sirius Black's Wards Missing – Aurors Suspect Foul Play."*

Yes, that should do the trick nicely. He chuckled.

Sirius Black would never know what hit him.

xXxXx

May:

***CORNELIUS FUDGE ARRESTED***

***Charged with collusion in Black children scandal***

*Ex-Minister of Magic declares his innocence*

xXxXx

June:

***FUDGE TRIAL BEGINS TOMORROW***

***Sirius Black expected to take the stand***

*This would be Black's first public appearance since his acquittal in April*

xXxXx

July:

***BLACK SENDS WRITTEN DEPOSITION TO FUDGE TRIAL***

***States "The facts speak for themselves"***

*Aurors examining document say it's genuine*

xXxXx

August:

**Ex-Minister gave OK for Memory Charms on minors**

*Sentence expected to be at least five years*

xXxXx

September:

Theodore Nott set his owl down on his trunk and walked slowly down the platform, keeping his eyes fixed on the person he'd been looking for.

"You owe me," he said when he got close enough.

Draco Black turned around, looking confused. "I'm sorry?"

"You owe me. I saw you with the woman that day, when you left. And I didn't tell anyone. So you owe me."

"Yeah, well, I saw a few books in your dad's library that I think the Ministry might like to hear about. So how about you keep your mouth shut, and so will I."

Theodore nodded. "Fine with me."

They shook hands briefly and parted.

xXxXx

Neville Longbottom followed his grandmother through King's Cross Station. He knew he should really be excited about leaving for Hogwarts, but all he could muster up was scared.

He passed through the magical barrier and patted at his pocket, hoping Trevor was still there. His new pet showed an alarming tendency to try to escape – nine getaways in the past week alone.

His hand touched only empty space. "Gran, I've lost my toad again," he said, his heart sinking.

"Oh, Neville," his gran sighed. "I suppose we'll have to look for him, then."

Neville got down on his hands and knees and began peering under luggage trolleys. But his mind kept going off on tangents.

*I bet Meghan would like Trevor. I bet he'd like her too. He might not try to run away from her.*

He recalled the last time he had seen the girl. He had gone upstairs to retrieve her toy, since that was all she said she really needed to take with her, and since she obviously didn't want to leave her father. When he had come back with it, she had hugged him and kissed him on the cheek, and whispered in his ear.

*She said "I'll see you again soon."*

But that had been months ago – in March – and this was the first of September –

"Excuse me," said a voice behind Neville. He jumped, banged his head on the trolley, and yelped.

"Sorry," said the owner of the voice, actually sounding contrite. "Is this your toad?"

Neville got himself straightened out, turned around, and stood up to find himself facing a pale-blond boy about his own age, with both hands firmly clamped around –

"Trevor!" Neville took the toad back from the boy and slid him carefully into a pocket. "Thanks a lot – Gran, here he is!" he called down the platform. He turned back to the boy and held out his hand. "I'm Neville. Neville Longbottom. I owe you one."

"No, we're even," the boy said, shaking his hand. "I already owed you for what you did for my little sister. Draco Black, nice to meet you."

"Little sister?" Neville was a bit confused. Meghan was dark-skinned, and this boy couldn't possibly be any fairer –

Then the implications of the boy's first name hit him. Simultaneously, he recalled what Meghan had told him about her family.

"You – used to be Draco Malfoy, didn't you?"

The boy grimaced slightly. "Yeah. A long time ago."

"OK, thanks – I just wanted to know."

Draco smiled. "Now you know. Hey, do you want to sit with us? There's some room left in our compartment."

Neville couldn't believe his luck. "Sure!"

Together, they started getting Neville's trunk aboard the train.

xXxXx

Ron Weasley walked onto Platform Nine and Three-Quarters and sighed.

*I never thought I'd be doing this alone.*

All his imaginations of Hogwarts, from the age of eight onwards, had included his three best friends – Harry, Drake, and Hermione Black. He had imagined talking with them, eating with them, playing Quidditch with them (not Neenie so much, but Harry and Drake were as mad about it as he was), even studying with them (this was where Neenie would be useful, walking encyclopedia that she was).

But Christmas had changed all that.

Over Christmas, the entire Black family, all eight of them, had vanished.

He had learned later, in dribs and drabs, who they had really been. It was a bit of a shock to find out that his best friends had been lying to him the entire time he knew them. Especially about something like being Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy.

*But I hope, wherever they are, they're all right.*

The thought slipped out before Ron could stop it. He wanted to keep being mad at them – they'd lied to him, they'd made him feel like a fool – but he couldn't keep it up any more.

*They had to lie. If they hadn't lied, they would have been taken away from their family.*

*And they weren't trying to hurt me. They were just trying to stay safe.*

Ron stared towards the front of the train, not really seeing it. *I guess – if it had been me – I would have lied too.*

*I wish I could see them. Just to say hi.*

“Ron!”

Ron jumped about a foot. Fred was standing right behind him. “Come on, ickle Ronniekins, getting left behind is not a good way to start your first year of school. We've saved you a space in with us. Lee Jordan's got a giant tarantula!”

“Great,” Ron mumbled. *You know I hate spiders, you bloody git...*

He endured his mother's embraces and parting admonitions, hugged Ginny good-bye almost without noticing, and sat as far as he could from the large box on Lee Jordan's lap once he got into the compartment.

*If this is how my entire time at Hogwarts is going to go, maybe I should just get a job washing dishes at the Leaky Cauldron or something...*

The train rounded the corner.

“Give us a look, Lee, go on,” George said, leaning forward to see better.

Lee was just about to lift the lid of the box when the door of the compartment slid open.

“Excuse me,” said the black-haired boy standing in the doorway. “Is Ron Weasley in here?”

Ron stood up hastily. “I'm Ron Weasley,” he said, looking at the boy as hard as he could without staring. There was something very familiar about him...

The other held out his hand. “I'm Harry Potter. Nice to meet you.”

Now Ron did stare. As did everyone else in the compartment.

“You're Harry Potter?” blurted George.

“Can we see your scar?” said Fred on top of him.

Harry ignored them both. He was still holding his hand out to Ron.

Still staring, Ron took two steps toward him and shook it.

Harry smiled. “Want to come and sit with us?” he asked.

“Us?”

“Me and Drake and Neenie, and another boy named Neville. He's our year, I think you'll like him. Want to come?”

Ron stood dumbfounded for one second, then blurted “Yes!” before Harry could change his mind.

The rest of the compartment looked like Ron felt as Harry ushered him out into the hallway and shut the door firmly.

“Ron, I want to apologize,” said Harry as soon as they were alone in the hall. “We lied to you for three years – I’m really sorry – I wish we could have told you, but you probably wouldn’t have believed us, and you might have told your dad or mum, even without meaning to – and then we went and disappeared on you for nine months...”

“It’s all right,” said Ron, realizing as he said it that it was. “Where’ve you been?”

“Hogwarts, actually. We’ll be living up in the Tower with the other Gryffindors now – if we get sorted into Gryffindor...” Harry rapped his knuckles twice on the wood trim in the corridor. “But our parents have quarters down near the kitchens. They might be going home to Devon now, they haven’t decided – or maybe some of them will stay and some will go – Meghan’s going to stay, though, she’s dead set on it. She’s been hanging around the hospital wing all the time we’ve been there, I don’t know how Madam Pomfrey puts up with her, but she does...”

Ron just listened. A part of him that had been empty for nine months was starting to fill up again. But he had to ask...

“Harry,” he said as they crossed between cars.

“Yeah?”

“Do you – still want to be friends with me?”

Harry looked at him oddly.

“I mean, you’re famous,” explained Ron quickly. “And I’m not. I’m nobody. So if you don’t want to be friends any more, then that’s fine, really, it is...”

Harry groaned. “Why do you think I went and shook your hand in front of your brothers and hauled you off to sit with me? Of course I still want to be friends with you, you idiot!”

Ron grinned. “Then – that’s all right, then.”

“Yes. That’s all right.”

They had arrived at the compartment door. Harry pulled it open, and Neenie jumped to her feet, shot into the corridor, and flung her arms around Ron’s neck. “Ron! I’m so glad to see you!”

Ron blushed and looked at Harry. *Help?*

Harry was too busy laughing. So, as Ron looked into the compartment, where Drake – Draco, he remembered from the papers – and a boy he didn’t know, though the round face looked vaguely familiar...

“Glad to see you too, Neenie,” he said, trying to peel her off him.

She came off of her own accord and stood on tiptoe to glower into his face. “*Don’t* call me that. It’s *Hermione*.” She stalked back into the compartment, sat down with a decided thump, picked up the book sitting beside her place, and hid her face behind it.

Ron walked into the compartment, feeling a sense of the world righting itself as Draco stood up to shake his hand and introduce Neville Longbottom.

“I met a boy named Neville once,” recalled Ron, shaking Neville’s hand. “In Diagon Alley, when I was about five.”

Neville’s eyes widened. “I met a boy named Ron in Diagon Alley when I was five.”

“Outside the Apothecary–” they said at the same moment.

Everyone laughed.

“Seems like some things are just meant to be,” said Draco with satisfaction, sitting back in his seat. “Bertie Bott’s, anyone?”

**The End**