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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 1: Arrival

Lucius Malfoy stood alone in his study, a smile of pure pleasure gracing his lips as he looked out the windows at the long sweep of land which belonged to him, touched now by the red light of sunset. Life was a fine thing, indeed. His position in society was untouchable, thanks to his blood, his name, his wife, and his gold. Yet by night, and more and more by day, he could don his cloak and mask and enjoy his favorite sports. His lip curled as he thought of the disgusting things called Muggles – fit only to chatter among themselves and spawn more of their filthy breed.

But why should he soil such a fine evening with thoughts like this? Tomorrow would be an auspicious day – his son and heir, Draco, would celebrate his first completed year of life. The boy could already stand on his own, and was beginning to take a few steps, and to speak words, though Lucius could not say with any authority that he had ever seen or heard any of these phenomena himself. The house-elf tended the child, and reported on his doings.

Perhaps I should remedy that, Lucius thought idly. Dobby does his work well, but it might be well to have a human in charge of the nursery. One of proper blood, of course, and proper thinking. One whom I can trust to train my son and teach him well.

The peal of a bell rang out through the house. Lucius turned in surprise. A visitor, at this hour?

So it seemed. Within a few seconds, Dobby was at his side. “A lady is come, Master Lucius, and she is asking to speak with you. She is not giving a name, sir, nor a business.”

“A young lady, Dobby, or old?”

“Young, sir, very young. Almost not a lady at all, sir.”

Lucius ran over the list of Death Eaters in his mind and found very few young females on it. “Describe her.”

“She is having brown eyes, sir, and brown hair, straight and short, cut to here.” The elf indicated the level of his chin. “She is not a big lady, sir. And she is not someone Dobby knows.”

That left out almost anyone she could have been – most of the Death Eaters, indeed, most of the purebloods of Britain had been guests at Malfoy Manor once or twice. But an unexpected guest had, at the very least, the virtue of novelty. And no Muggle could have found the Manor, nor would any Mudblood dare to sully it. Or, if they did...

A different smile curved Lucius' face now. “Fetch wine, Dobby. And glasses for two.”

Any Mudblood who entered his house must fend for herself.

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She waited in the small, wood-paneled room, her eyes closed in an effort to compose herself. Her material possessions were few, all enclosed in the small bag which lay at her feet. Her non-material possessions were fewer even than these. A name, and a mission, that was all she had of herself now, beyond a few scraps of recent memory, and one unshakable conviction – that whatever had been done to her, it had been done with her full knowledge and consent, unforced in any way. She had chosen this, and she would see it through to the end.

The house-elf had reappeared with wine and glasses and assured her that his master would soon arrive. She was not worried. Part of the knowledge necessary for her mission, knowledge which perforce she owned, was a thorough understanding of Lucius Malfoy, and his wife Narcissa. The man had everything he wanted, therefore he was bored. She represented something unknown and interesting. He would not fail to appear.

And appear he did, within a few moments of her thought, bowing suavely as he entered the room. “My house is at your service, Miss...”

“Grant,” she said. “Of the Australian Grants.”

Malfoy bowed again, a shade less deeply. Australians by definition were troublemakers and malcontents, their magical counterparts no less than the Muggles. He felt free to consider her a social inferior. Good. “And what may the House of Malfoy provide for this most lovely scion of the House of Grant?”

“Employment,” she said baldly, and saw his eyebrows rise a little at such plain speaking. He now thought of her as an untaught barbarian. Even better.

“Employment?” he repeated, coming across the room to a chair near her own and reaching for the wine bottle, pouring a glass for her before he filled his own.

“I understand that you have a son. A child of about a year. I know something of nursing children, and my present circumstances make it necessary for me to earn my living. I would be content with room, board, and a small allowance for clothing and other necessities.”

A frown creased his brow, but no other sign of his thoughts appeared on his face. “Why come here?” he asked. “Why offer these services to me?”

“Because I would find great honor in properly instructing the next generation of the House of Malfoy. And because you are known, among other things, as a generous man.”

The frown was replaced by a small smile. "I notice you do not name those other things."

She matched the smile. "I await your decision."

"Room, board, and twenty Galleons a month."

"You are even more generous than rumor painted you." She sketched a bow from her chair. "I accept."

"Dobby," Malfoy called aloud, and the house-elf appeared. "This is Miss Grant. She will be Draco's nursemaid. Furnish rooms for her connected to the nursery, and show her to them when you are finished."

The elf looked worried. "Master Lucius, it is already late... Dobby will need time to prepare the rooms..."

She lifted a hand, drawing Lucius' attention as well as the elf's. "If I may?" she said delicately, knowing she had to tread very carefully here. Lucius' temper was starting to rise, and she had no wish to be in its way. "I doubt Draco will be asleep yet. If I could spend some time with him, introduce myself to him, begin to learn about him, I would be out of everyone's way while Dobby does his work."

Lucius smiled in an almost friendly manner. "Miss Grant, you will be a most valuable addition to this household. Dobby, show Miss Grant to the nursery. Good night."

"Good night, sir." She rose a moment after he did and lifted her bag to her shoulder.

He turned back in the doorway, startling her into a small jump as they came face to face. "I do not believe your other name was mentioned."

"It was not." She let her left hand tighten on a strap of her bag, where he would not see it. "It is... Pericula."

"Pericula," he repeated, musingly, then allowed his eyes to sweep over her. "It suits you."

She kept her gaze on the carpet at his feet. "You are too kind."

"Am I?" He sounded truly thoughtful. "I wonder."

And he was gone.

She released the breath she had not let him see her hold. That had been very close. The next few weeks could be risky for her. If she could just establish herself in the household, get him used to seeing her as Draco's nurse and nothing more...

But first I have to be Draco's nurse. And that involves winning over Draco.

She believed, she hoped, that would not be a difficult task. Within her bag she had certain items which would make it rather easier.

None of which, of course, she would ever have dared to show to Lucius Malfoy.

She had a suspicion that their two ideas of "properly instructing" the young boy would not match well at all.

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Draco piled a block on top of another block and watched it fall over. It wasn't very interesting, but there was nothing else to do. Food time was over. Sleeping time would come soon.

He hoped the bad and scary things that sometimes came with sleep would not come. Dobby came to him when he cried and made mouth noises at him, mouth noises that didn't seem to mean much of anything. The tall man who called himself Father made mouth noises too, but they meant even less than Dobby's.

The door opened. Draco looked around in surprise. Dobby didn't use the door, he just popped in – only Father used the door –

But the person who entered the room behind Dobby was not Father, or even Mother, a person he had seen only rarely. She was a woman like Mother, but she was different. For one thing, her hair was dark.

Draco frowned. Was hair supposed to be that dark? All the hair he had ever seen had been light-colored. After a few moments, he decided he liked it.

The new woman set her bag on the floor and smiled at him. He smiled back. He liked her smile, too.

The woman made mouth noises to Dobby, who scurried back out the door and closed it. Draco watched her take a bottle out of her bag and open it. It wasn't much like the bottles he drank from, when he still did – he was a big boy now, and almost never had a bottle anymore. This bottle didn't have a nipple on it that you could suck on. Instead, its top was open. The woman put it to her lips and drank from it.

Dobby reappeared in the room in the way Draco was used to, holding one of the covered cups he usually drank from now. Draco started to get up to take it, but Dobby was holding it out to the woman, not to him... and she was accepting it! That wasn't right! Draco shouted in outrage and clambered to his feet, determined to have what was his.

It would have helped if he'd been able to get more than three steps without falling on his face.

Or nearly on his face, as the woman dropped the cup to catch him. “Whoops,” he heard her say. “But no harm done – there, back on your feet.” She set him upright.

Draco pouted and strained for the cup, but the woman’s hands were still holding him up, and preventing him from reaching it.

“You want your drink? You can have it, but in a minute. I need to fix it up first. Dobby, can you get it for me, please?”

“Right away, Miss Grant.”

The woman lifted Draco from his feet and set him down on his bottom. He screeched indignantly as she accepted the cup from Dobby – that was *his!* – and started to get up, but she was already moving. The top was off the cup, and some of whatever was in the bottle she’d drunk from was going in it – now the top was going back on –

And she was holding it out to him. “Here you are,” she said with another smile. “All yours.”

Draco snatched the cup from her, took a drink, and stopped in surprise. The milk tasted different than usual. Not a bad different, sweet and a little spicy, but it was different. He licked around his mouth thoughtfully and decided he liked it.

It didn’t take him long to drain the cup. But once he had, he felt funny. He hadn’t been sleepy before he’d had the drink, but now he was. He sat down where he was, yawning.

The woman took her wand from inside her robes and waved it around, and a pillow appeared on the ground. She lay down where she was, placing her head on the pillow, and reached out one arm to snag Draco. He fussed a little, but only for form’s sake. He didn’t really mind. In fact, it was nice, the way she was holding him now. Cuddled up against her. It felt warm, and comfortable, and safe...

I’m glad you like it.

His eyes opened wide in surprise. The woman was talking to him, she was using something that sounded a little like mouth noises, but it wasn’t, it couldn’t be, because he *understood* this! He knew what she meant, and he had no doubt that she did mean it. She was happy because he liked being near her.

Would she understand him too, if he tried to make the mouth noises? He could only make a few, and they weren’t the way they should be...

You don’t have to make them with your mouth. Make them in your head, like this.

Deep inside him, he felt her showing him the way it should go. Eyes closed, reach for *this*, and touch *that*, and *think*...

Why?

He felt her laugh, her chest vibrating his whole body. **In case I was wondering if I’d done any permanent damage – oh, no, you’re still every inch you. Was there a different taste in your milk?**

Yes.

That was why. The words were simple, but the ideas behind them were not, the ideas that he could only vaguely grasp, but that was still more than he had ever been able to do before. The stuff in the bottle had been a potion, a magic liquid that would let them talk like this – but no, it wasn’t just the potion, it was something else...

Well, I’ll have to be careful with you, I can see! Yes, there is something else. I have magic that lets me walk in dreams. We are... not quite dreaming, but not quite awake. My magic and the potion together let us talk this way. Now, I have some things to show you. Would you like to see them?

Good things?

I think they are. Would you?

Draco considered a moment. **Yes.**

Close your eyes, then.

Without fear, Draco did so.

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Some time later, his eyes came open again, and he gave a deep sigh. His lack of fear had been totally justified – more, he now knew, deep within him, that he need never truly fear the woman who lay beside him. He might play at being afraid of her, or fear her anger if he transgressed, but he would not fear her as he did his father. For in her mind and her soul there was something he had never even heard of until today.

Love.

He had seen in her mind other children like himself, held in the arms of grownups who laughed and babbled nonsense at them, and bent to kiss them. He had never known why his father insisted that he put his lips against the man’s cheek. Now he knew.

He might have liked to see more of the children. He had known somewhere in his mind that there were other people in the world, other fathers and mothers and children, but he had never seen any before. He especially liked the look of a little girl with puffy, curly brown hair, brown like the woman's was brown, but hers was flat and straight like Draco's own...

There was something he needed to ask her, he decided, rolling over to look at her face. **Hey.**

Her eyes came open and focused on him. **Hey yourself.**

Draco, he said, hand on his chest. A moment of thought brought up an image of the house-elf. **Dobby.** Two other images, one very fuzzy indeed, the other fragmented and tainted with feelings Draco didn't want to touch right now, not so soon after feeling something as wonderful as that love. **Mother. Father.**

Yes. The woman smiled. **Clever Draco.**

He smiled back, then reached out a hand and laid it on her chest. **You?**

The woman's eyes closed for a moment, then opened again, brighter than they had been. **Peri**, she told him, then repeated it out loud. "Peri." **You try it.**

Peri, he said in mind noises.

Good. Now with your mouth.

Draco frowned. **Why?**

Because mouth noises are the way that all people talk to each other.

Not want talk to all people. Just you.

Peri's eyes closed again, and she pulled him close in what he now knew was called a hug. **Oh, Draco. I wish... but never mind. Try my name out loud.**

He licked his lips. "Pe'i," he managed.

That will do fine for now. Peri let him go, but he didn't move away. He liked being beside her. She was holding him the way he'd seen some of the other children in the pictures being held by the grownups... the grownups who loved them...

You love me?

Peri's breath seemed to catch. **Yes**, she said quietly, after a moment. **Yes, I love you.**

Draco smiled. **Good. Me too.**

Dobby reappeared in the room with a *bang*. "Miss Grant's rooms are all set up," he squeaked, and pointed toward a wall. Except – Draco sat up to look – except that there was a door in the wall now.

"Thank you, Dobby." Peri sat up. **Draco, would you like to see my rooms?**

Yes. Draco held still and let her scoop him up. With his mind touching hers, he was hearing and understanding things he normally wouldn't, and curious about them. **Why he not call you Peri?**

Because Peri is my special name. Only people I love, and people who love me, call me Peri.

I have a special name too?

Well, you can if you want to. Peri settled him on her hip. **Let's see. A special name for Draco. What about... Ray? It's right inside your name, D-ray-co, hear it?**

Draco bounced on her hip, excited. **Ray. Ray. Yes.**

So that's settled. I'm Peri, and you're Ray. Peri planted her lips on his neck and kissed him, then blew through them, startling him at first, but then making him giggle, because it made a funny noise, and it *tickled*.

He liked Peri, and he liked love, and the new name was already beginning to settle into his mind. Ray. He was Ray. He would still answer when people called him Draco, but Ray was a more important person now, because it was Ray that Peri loved, and Ray who loved Peri.

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Late that night, while Ray slept, Peri sat at the desk in her room and made a list of things she must do. On a certain night, travel through dreams to a man and a woman and convince them to be away from their house the next day. Before Halloween, obtain two drops of another man's blood and one of the woman he loves. And after Halloween... wait and watch, and do what little things she could.

"Find ways to ease suffering without ending it altogether," the recalled voice advised. "If you are found out... there are some things even wizards and witches will not stand among them. An interloper from another world might well be one."

She knew she had once walked in another world than this, worn another face, called herself by another name. But she had given it all up for love of her family, for love of those who loved her. Her brother had been freed from the false accusations laid against him, freeing him and all their family to return to their home. Her husband had been soothed, his pain at losing her eased with a peace that assured him she was all right.

And in five obscure places, five small items had vanished in puffs of smoke or hisses of molten metal, and a dark forest glade had been cleansed of its unclean inhabitant as the fragment of a wizard's soul was suddenly denied its earthly anchors. This she had done herself, with borrowed power, and been glad of it.

Moving forward through time, she had directed her husband's eyes toward her brother's young cousin, and gently smoothed away his fumbling worries that he was too old, or that something was wrong with him – for that, too, had been part of her life-price, that the bane of his existence had been taken from him. Seeing him happy, she moved forward only a little more in time, just enough to see the tangles of the four children she loved also resolved. Then she had turned her eyes away, resolved to watch no more but find other work for her hands, for what was done was done.

The work she had been offered was this. A different world than her own, but similar. Ten years she had lived earthly, and five or ten she had watched, had not yet passed here. There was room for one to step quietly, to change many things in the shadows, seeking... what? A return to her own, vanished world and life? The right folk existed, or would, but what of that? A power that had been hers was no longer, and that power had been crucial to their existence as one.

And yet there could still be a way. She closed her eyes and thought. *Give one a stronghold, a place into which he can escape. Remind another two that they have still each other, and a third to consider. Perhaps a transfer, or a relocation, for another, or even both? Yes... that would work nicely.*

She leaned down to her bag and found the bottle of potion within. Sitting on her bed, she sipped from it, feeling the familiar lethargy fill her as she swallowed. She had time to cork the bottle, set it on the nightstand, and lie down before the drowsiness overcame her.

Start their thoughts in that direction now. A change of scenery for their baby girl... then, when August comes, they will think it a sign, an omen that their home is not safe, that they must find a new place to live.

As for the others... perhaps the lady of the house would be the best to work on. The atmosphere where they live now is not healthy for her little darling. Just look how he's wasting away. She allowed herself a wry smile. The child in question was most certainly not wasting away.

For a moment, she was tempted to interfere in the prescribed order of events. Why should people have to die, innocent suffering with guilty? Why should pain and suffering fall upon people when she could prevent them?

Because that is not why I am here. I left great powers behind me. My work now is in little things. And maybe, just maybe, I can make those little things add up to big things.

Pericula launched her soul into the night, dropping an insubstantial kiss on Ray's brow as she passed. *You, my love, will be the biggest thing I do here. May you grow as well as once you did.*

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Chapter 2: Amulet

Peri sat on the floor in Ray's room and watched him build with his blocks – these were the magical type that stuck together no matter how you put them. She wondered how he'd ever come by a set of Muggle blocks in the first place.

But then, if one set of blocks is good, two must be twice as good. And two different types, three times as good.

It was the same attitude she'd seen expressed in every aspect of the Malfoys' life for the past five weeks. If money could buy it, it was here, and in its finest form. If money could not buy it, it was ignored.

Well, that's not quite true. No amount of money could have bought them a pureblood child of their own line. Not even magic has got around to making children without certain prerequisites. Like a man and a woman.

But once the child was achieved, the male child who would ensure the line continued, husband and wife need never see one another again, if they so desired, and from all Peri could tell, Lucius and Narcissa very much desired. Lucius had certainly not been backward in soliciting Peri's... company.

Thank God for small magics.

The same vial of potion that had won her Ray's trust had stood her in good stead again with Lucius. She had added it to her own glass of the wine she had coyly requested before their assignation, and at his insistence, let him sample her "flavored liqueur" as well.

And even if he'd been paranoid and checking for poison, which he wasn't because he'd seen me drink the stuff without ill effects, nothing would have registered. It's not even a sleeping potion, really... what would you call that state it puts you in? A trance, I guess, but it's a light one. Unless someone makes it deeper.

In that light trance, Lucius had escorted her to his bed, which she had decorously exited a few moments later. The memory of that first sloppy, intrusive kiss still made her want to scrub her face on her sleeve.

And I know it's not because I'm some prissy little virgin. That was just disgusting.

Fortunately, it had also been precisely the level of contact she'd needed to invade his mind, find the area of his dreams and desires, and simultaneously send him deeper into trance and start a montage of those desires playing for him, pausing only to add her face and voice in appropriate places. She had only glimpsed a moment of what he was about to go through –

Which was quite enough, thank you.

However, this gambit could be dangerous, and she knew it. If his "experience" with her was sufficiently rapturous, or even pleasant, he'd want to repeat it. Therefore, instead of slipping away and leaving him to finish out his dream on his own, she had waited by the bedside and carefully destroyed what she had created. Lucius' memories of his attempted seduction of his son's nursemaid were all fumbling, miscues, and finally a shamefaced agreement that they would be better off apart, and never speaking of this again.

Entirely necessary, since I have no idea what I'm supposed to have done with him.

The trance had also accomplished one more, very important detail. Only her entrance here had been assured by the magic that had brought her to this world. Her continued presence was up to her to manage.

So, underneath Lucius' dream, she had laid a very careful subconscious urge, or rather, two urges, slightly conflicting – the one, to have her near, and the other, to seldom if ever really notice her. As long as she did nothing so untoward that it pulled his notice regardless, her position was safe.

"Pe'i, Pe'i!" Ray clamored, pulling at her skirt.

"What is it – oh, I see." The block structure would not have been possible by Muggle standards, since it leaned rather precariously to one side and was in momentary danger of tipping over. "I think you like to build. May I come and build with you?"

Ray's smile flashed out, and he crawled briskly back to his blocks, Peri following similarly on all fours. Their mind-to-mind communication of the first day had faded when the potion had worn off, but they were starting to understand each other when they spoke aloud.

I wish we could have kept that mind-link permanently, but there's no way we could stay under that potion all the time – besides the obvious problems like being sleepy all day long, my supply is limited, and I have no idea where I'd get more. The only way we could set the link permanently is if we were related somehow..

The door of the nursery opened, startling both Ray and Peri, who got hastily to her feet. This could only be Lucius –

Except that it wasn't.

Narcissa Malfoy stepped into the room and shut the door behind her. "Hello, Draco," she said. "Miss Grant."

"Mrs. Malfoy." *Well, this isn't awkward at all. "Yes, hello, I'm your son's nurse, I have been for a little over a month, and this is the first time you've*

come to see him since I've been here... oh, and your husband tried to get me to sleep with him, but I fobbed him off with a potion and a type of magic that isn't really supposed to exist."

Ray spent a few moments studying Narcissa, then looked at Peri with an expression of concentration.

Oh, drat. He's going to start crying any minute, because he's trying to talk to me again like we did the first night, and I'm not answering him. There had been several of these episodes over the past weeks. *He just doesn't understand that we won't be able to do that again.*

Sure enough, Ray's face was starting to wrinkle, and his breathing was turning distinctly shaky. Peri quickly knelt down and picked him up. "Settle down, now," she told him, keeping her focus on him, away from Narcissa, whose eyes were still fixed on her. "That's no way to behave when your mother's come to see you. Come on, let's see your smile. Where is it?"

Ray sniffled twice and buried his face in Peri's shoulder.

"Don't trouble yourself to make him perform," said Narcissa's voice from behind her. "I haven't come to see you put him through his paces."

Peri stiffened, her arms tightening around Ray. *You despicable inbred excuse for a woman, call yourself his mother just once, I dare you...* "I beg your pardon?" she said in tones as close to ice-cold as she dared get with her titular employer – the lady of the house, after all, could turn her out as well as the master.

"No, I beg yours." The words were still formal, but the tone had changed. Narcissa sounded... human. "We were being observed until a moment ago. I wished to be certain that the observer would see only what he wanted to see."

"The observer?" Peri turned, still holding Ray, to see the other woman seated at the small table in the corner, another chair pulled out and waiting.

"My husband," Narcissa clarified. "He is not a trusting man, and often spies upon others. This house is riddled with passages, and the master bedroom contains quite a number of bowls and other implements for use in scrying spells. Some of them are permanently tuned to certain portions of the house. One is set for the nursery. He has been watching you."

Oh, Lord. I should have thought of that. "And has he seen anything he does not like?"

"On the contrary. He thinks very highly of you."

"And you... do not?" Peri hazarded. *What in the world does she want from me? If she doesn't like what I'm doing with Ray – Draco – she could have just had me sent away.* Half-consciously, she tightened her arms around the little boy again. *But she hasn't. She's here. So that means...*

Well, why don't I let her tell me?

"No. I too think well of what you are doing here..." Narcissa stopped, her eyes narrowed, as she regarded Peri's face.

I'm not surprised. I must look a sight – but if she doesn't stop blowing smoke at me, I think I might scream...

"Say it," Narcissa commanded bluntly. "Let it out and have done."

Thank you. Peri loosed the one question that had been nagging at her for a month. "You say you like what I'm doing with – Draco. Fine. That's wonderful. But if you like it so much, then why, *why* have you never done it yourself?" She looked down at the small blond head pressed against her collarbone, and laid her cheek momentarily against the top of it, closing her eyes.

"Because I do not know how."

The voice slid through the darkness and shattered the illusion of righteous anger Peri had been cherishing in her soul. In its place came bewilderment. "You don't know?" She opened her eyes to stare at Narcissa. "How can you not know?"

"The... the motion." Narcissa pantomimed it herself, pretending to hold something upright in her arms, lowering her head stiffly to rest on it. "That you did a moment ago. It came to you naturally. You knew how to perform it. How did you know?"

"I..." Memory-fragments from a lost life drifted past – children soothed to sleep, boys and girls alike, of all ages and sizes, in triumph and in tears... "I don't know how I know. I suppose I remember being held that way when I was a baby, or seeing mothers do that with their babies. It's not something I learned in school, or from a book."

Narcissa nodded. "I never saw a mother with a baby until I was old enough to be permitted limited contact with Muggle society," she said matter-of-factly. "And I doubt if my own mother ever held me in the way you hold my son."

Peri blushed a bit. "Do you want him?" she asked, knowing it would be a job getting Ray loose of her but feeling as if she ought to offer. "He'd probably go to you, he does know who you are."

"He is comfortable where he is. Leave him."

God, how does she do that – just when I thought we were getting along, she drops into lady-of-the-manor again, and sets my teeth on edge...

"I have come to offer you something." Narcissa reached into her robes for a small bag, which she set on the table between them. "You may take offense at this, but I intend none." She began to unpack the bag. Chips of different woods, a small gold locket, flasks of two potions...

And a small, silvery knife.

"You claimed blood with an Australian family named Grant," Narcissa said, looking up from the table. "You never said whether that family was magical or not."

Peri let a very small smile come to her lips. "Your husband assumes no one of 'impure' blood would dare to enter his home."

"Obviously, he is wrong."

"Obviously. I assume, since I am still here and still in charge of the nursery, that he hasn't figured this out yet."

"If I have my way, he never will." Narcissa lifted the knife. "I would create an amulet for you, containing your blood and Draco's. If you do nothing else, as long as you wear it, you will appear to magical tests as a halfblood."

Peri winced. "Well, if that's the best you can do."

"Kindly allow me to finish," said Narcissa tartly. "There is a way to make yourself appear pureblooded. If you are willing to forswear your Muggle relatives utterly, becoming a stranger to them and they to you."

"Already done. My parents think I'm dead." If they ever thought of their long-ago maybe-child at all. No Pericula had ever been born in this world. "But if I meet them somewhere..."

"You may be friendly with them as far as you wish, as long as they do not openly recognize and acknowledge you as their daughter born to them. Will you swear that while you wear the amulet, you will never allow that to happen, never let a Muggle call you blood kin?"

"I will."

"With this vow sworn on it, the amulet will cause magical tests to show you as a pureblood. If, when Draco grows older, he and you are willing, you might undergo another ritual in which the bloods of your bodies are mingled, and you become related in truth."

"Related?" Peri felt a small shiver of excitement. "Will this amulet... will we look related, if they test us?"

"They will not test you for kinship. Why should they? Draco was born to me a year ago, and you have only just come to us. But..." Narcissa smiled. "Yes, if you should be tested, the amulet will make it appear that you are related to Draco. His sister, I believe, with this type of ritual. You will forgive me if I do not wish him to take another mother."

"Of course." Something occurred to Peri. "So if we exchanged blood from our bodies, then we'd really be related, and I wouldn't have to wear the amulet to test as a pureblood."

"So long as you kept to your vow to acknowledge no Muggle as blood kin."

"But, then, couldn't anyone do this? Become a pureblood just by renouncing his Muggle relatives?"

A pale eyebrow quirked. "These spells and rituals change only the way in which your magical signature is classified, Miss Grant. If you were known to be half-blooded or Muggleborn, no proper pureblood group would dare admit you, unless you had taken rather more final steps, and even then only certain purebloods believe those are necessary."

It took Peri a few moments to work through this. "So someone like me, who can claim family ties from far away and fake up my magic, could pass as pureblood. But someone whose birth was known never could, unless they took what you call 'final steps.'" She shifted Ray's weight in her arms as the boy squirmed a little. "I don't think I like the way that sounds."

"You would not." Narcissa's eyes were veiled. "I do not care for them myself. And only those purebloods with whom my husband nightly associates believe those steps to be an acceptable method of 'purifying' one's blood. To the older families – such as the one from which I come myself – there is no way to change one's blood. It is what it is, and no amount of shedding others' blood can alter that."

Peri swallowed. *I was right, then. Final steps, yeah, I think so. Killing your own parents or grandparents – it might even extend to every Muggle relative you have... no thank you.*

She turned Ray so that he sat in her lap, facing outward. He reached onto the table and grabbed the locket, pulling at the chain. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. "Why help me?"

Narcissa met her gaze. "Because I have never seen my son so happy as he has been with you," she said. "Because I would do much for his happiness." She looked down at Ray, who had the locket chain tangled in interesting patterns around his fingers. "Because I love him. Does that surprise you?"

"No." Peri closed her eyes for a second. "No. It doesn't surprise me. I knew a woman like you once. Back where I came from."

"Australia," said Narcissa, her brows elevated just that fraction which signaled she knew she was talking nonsense.

"Precisely. Australia."

"And what's her history?"

Peri looked down at Ray, who seemed to be contemplating chewing on the locket. "A blank, my lord," she said lightly, seemingly to him.

"Did she sit like Patience on a monument?"

"Smiling at grief?" Peri shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose it grieved her to know she loved her son, and not know how to show it. But she found ways. She gave him what she could of herself. She did... something a lot like what you're doing."

"Helping a Muggleborn nursemaid hide her birth so that she could continue caring for the child?" Narcissa laughed a little. "I find it hard to believe that could happen twice."

"It didn't." Peri rescued the locket as it almost went into Ray's mouth, and drew her wand to Summon a block for him to chew on instead. "She had a problem I don't know if you have. The boy's father was abusive."

Narcissa conjured a shallow metal dish on the table, then took up the knife and began to carve small clippings of the wood into it. "Lucius has never threatened harm to me or to Draco. He wears out his proclivities in other ways."

"But if those other ways were removed..."

"That could be a troubling situation, yes. How did your former acquaintance manage her problems?"

"She sent her boy away." Peri laid her cheek against Ray's hair again. "To a cousin of hers, who had a family of his own. Then she reported her husband to the authorities – he'd been involved with some nasty gang crimes – and, shall we say, took steps to ensure she wouldn't be caught in the aftermath."

Narcissa looked up from her work. "Blade or poison?"

"Poison. You are well informed."

"It is only what I would have done." Narcissa frowned at her pile of wood shavings and began to add to it again. "What became of the boy?"

"When I last heard of him, he was happy."

"And is that not all we can say of anyone?" Narcissa murmured, setting aside one wood chip and taking up another.

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To Peri's delight, they were able to include her dream-trance potion in the mixture which created the amulet. "I had wondered how you induced that particular state in Lucius," said Narcissa. "Do you perchance have the instructions for making more of this potion?"

"I do – but I should warn you, it wasn't just the potion that did that. I have magic of my own that I use in conjunction with it."

"I see. But perhaps it can be altered, to work on its own to bring on dreams..."

"Or nightmares."

"Indeed." Gray-green eyes met brown. Understanding lurked in them both.

When the mixture of liquids was complete and a few drops enclosed in the locket, Peri swore her oath with the chain wrapped around her hand and Narcissa's wand touching it – "I do swear to let no Muggle knowingly call me blood kin while I do wear this amulet" – and the thing was done. Peri slipped it over her head, and Narcissa cast a spell to test the other woman's blood status.

"As pure as any I have seen," she said. "Wear it always. It will take no harm from a wetting, nor from a fall – the catch is charmed shut."

"I will never take it off." **Will I, my little one?**

Ray squealed in delight. **Peri! Peri! You talk to me!**

That's right. Now I want you to do something for me. Go run to your mother and hug her goodbye. She's going now.

Yes. Ray slid off Peri's lap and pattered towards Narcissa, who watched him come with surprised, hungry eyes. He almost fell once, but regained his balance at the last minute, then lost it again, but luckily pitched into Narcissa's legs rather than onto the floor. Automatically, Narcissa stooped to steady him.

"He wants you to hug him," Peri said. "Just put your arms around him, that's right, go on..."

Narcissa embraced her son awkwardly, drawing a deep breath when he put his arms around her neck. Her expression was filled with such strange and deep joy that Peri had to look away.

This isn't right, this can't be right, I shouldn't be taking him away from her...

But Narcissa unwrapped the little boy's arms and helped him turn around, and nudged him gently to start him on his way back to Peri. "I will come back soon," she said, standing up. "If I may."

"Any time," Peri said firmly. "This door is always open for you."

“Thank you.” Narcissa turned to leave.

“Wait a second,” Peri said, catching the woman in midstride. “Before you go, would you mind telling me how you knew we were being observed when you first came?”

Narcissa’s brows drew in. “To me, it sounds like a very high-pitched tone, almost too high to hear,” she said. “But it takes practice to be able to hear it regularly. I will see about finding a small item to charm for you, perhaps to change color or glow when it senses a scrying spell in use.”

“That would be very helpful. Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome. Goodbye.” Narcissa shut the door behind her.

Peri, come see what I build, Ray said happily in her mind, then turned to look at her in surprise. **What wrong?**

Nothing, Ray, nothing’s wrong. Peri knelt beside the block tower, controlling her emotions. She’d have to be more careful now that they were connected. **Oh, I like this a lot. What is it?**

A big tall manor I smash down like this. Ray shoved the tower, knocking it over and ending the blocks’ cohesion so that they scattered everywhere as normal blocks would have done. **Fun!**

Yes. Yes, fun. Carefully shielding her thoughts, Peri allowed herself a moment of worry for the life she was building for herself here, just as precariously balanced as Ray’s block creations, and just as likely to tumble down at any moment...

Nonsense. I’m not here for me. I’m here for them. The people I love. She knew their faces and their ways, she would know their names when it became necessary. She had come here for a chance to see them again, and make their lives happy. Everything else was secondary.

Including you. And don’t you forget it.

Peri? Ray’s voice intruded on her nagging thoughts. **You build too?**

Yes, of course, Ray. I build too. Peri smiled at her charge and picked up a block. **Look, let’s take it in turns. I’ll put one, and you put one...**

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“I think it might be wise to accustom him to crowds,” the nursemaid said. “Perhaps excursions to Diagon Alley, or Hogsmeade, or other gathering places of our kind. And of course, as he grows older, playdates with other children.”

“Of course.” Lucius wasn’t about to admit that he’d never in his life heard of a playdate. “I’m sure you know what’s best for him. Take anything you need from my vault, the authorization is already there.”

“You are too kind, Mr. Malfoy.” The nursemaid curtsied and vanished almost as speedily as Dobby.

She has things well under control there. Draco will not lack for a firm hand when he needs it. He is still small enough that some leniency can be allowed, and he disturbs no one with his noises and his games, so nothing need be done about that.

Hiring that Grant woman was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

With this confident assertion, Lucius returned to his parchments.

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“Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” said one young wizard to his companion, staring past said companion’s ear as they sat outside Florian Fortescue’s.

“No, you’re a monkey’s godfather. I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

“Harry is not a monkey.”

“He looked like one for a while, didn’t he?” Laughing, Remus Lupin dodged Sirius Black’s half-hearted swat. “So why will you be a monkey’s uncle?”

“For once in his slimy life, Lucius Malfoy wasn’t lying. Look over there by Quality Quidditch Supplies. Little brunette witch with a baby backpack.”

Remus looked, and looked again. “Who is that?”

“Search me, I’ve never seen her before. But look at the kid. Can’t be anything but a Malfoy, not with that hair. We all thought Lucius was talking through his hat when he said he had a son, but I guess it was on the up and up.”

“He’s probably just being careful,” said Remus absently, still looking. “There are people who wouldn’t scruple at hurting a child to get at his father.”

“Aww, come on, Moony, not on our side.”

"Yes, Padfoot, on our side. Don't be stupider than you have to be. Barty Crouch?"

Sirius grunted. "You have a point. So you going to go talk to her, or are you just going to stare until your eyeballs fall out?"

Remus turned back around quickly. "I was not staring."

Sirius sniggered. "Oh, come on. If you'd been staring any harder, your eyes would have been up against her bum."

"You're disgusting."

"I wasn't the one staring."

"That's only because you know what Letha would do to you if she caught you looking at another woman."

Sirius shrugged. "Virtue is virtue. Does it really matter why I'm being a good boy as long as I am?"

"Don't get me started on ends versus means, please."

"No problem." Sirius shook his head like his Animagus form shaking off water. "I never could get into that philosophical stuff."

"I know." *And I only hope that doesn't mean what it seems to. Damn this war, anyway, making us all suspect our best friends... but it has to be someone right in the middle of everything, and Sirius fits that awfully well...*

Of course, so do I, but I know I'm not the spy.

Remus looked over his shoulder again, deliberately ignoring Sirius' snort. The brunette witch had her head turned towards him – well, towards the little boy in the carrier on her back, but it gave him a good almost-frontal view of her, and he had to admit she was rather pretty. Not nearly as striking as Lily, nor Aletha's strong beauty, but neither was she a fragile flower. There were hints of sadness in her eyes, but she smiled and laughed anyway, reaching up a hand to caress the child.

Suddenly recalling where he was, he jerked his head around front again. "Sorry. What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything." Sirius looked him up and down. "But I think I will say something. I think I'll say something to everyone we know. Hey, everyone! Wormtail wins – or loses – the 'who'll be the last Marauder to fall' sweepstakes! Remus Lupin is finally in love!"

"Shut up," said Remus with dignity, ignoring the burning sensation on the back of his neck. "I'm going back to Headquarters if you're going to be an idiot."

"In that case, you should have gone back there years ago."

Remus disdained to reply, and carefully kept from looking over his shoulder as he rose. When Sirius had his back turned, however, Remus sneaked a quick glance. The witch was gone.

Damn it. Now I'll never see her again, and I don't even know her name. But I do know where she works...

He rubbed a sore spot on his shoulder. *Right, like that's such a help. Malfoy Manor. I don't think I'll exactly be welcome there, even if she's staff and not family. At the very least, I'd lose her her job – Lucius would never want his son's nurse friendly with a werewolf – and that's supposing she even wants to be friendly with me...*

I think it's better for everyone if this just dies right here.

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Around the corner, Peri pressed a hand to her chest, breathing hard.

No, she told herself firmly. No, no, no. You are here to do what's best for him, not what you want.

But what if those two things are the same? asked a tiny, traitorous portion of her heart.

Who those men? Ray asked from the backpack. **Why they make you cry?**

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 3: Friendship

Ray had been thinking. Something was bothering Peri. She cried at night sometimes, and was angry during the day, though never angry at him. She seemed to be angry at herself, but that was silly.

But every time she was sad or angry, one person's face came into her mind, with wanting feelings attached. He was a man, with hair a lot like Peri's, except that it had some parts like Father's or Mother's or Ray's own. He smiled happy like Peri, and that made Ray like him. And Peri wanted him. So Peri was going to have him.

He squirmed around a bit in the carrier, looking at all the people around him, then crowed in pleasure. **Down**, he demanded, bouncing to reinforce it. **Down, down, now, now.**

No manners, I see. But Peri was laughing. **There's time enough for that – all right, down it is.** She flicked open the leg of the carrier and carefully slid it off her shoulders, bending to place it on the pavement, and lifted Ray out.

As soon as his feet touched the ground, he was running. Peri's startled cry echoed in his ears. But he had to run, so she would chase him, and see the man that way...

He slowed down, looking around uncertainly. He knew where the man had been, but people were very tall from down here, and they all moved so fast – what if the man had already gone away? What if Peri went away too? What if he got lost here, in the middle of this big crowd of people, none of whom seemed to be looking down at all?

Suddenly terrified, he shrank back against a wall and began to cry. **Peri, Peri!** he wailed in his mind, and then with his mouth too: "Pe'i, Pe'i, Pe'i..."

"Good heavens, real tears," said a man's voice, and one of the sets of impersonal legs developed a chest and a face, smiling at him. "It's all right, little one. Run off, have you? I'll help you find whoever you've lost." Hands were held out coaxingly. "Come on, I don't bite."

Ray blinked in surprise, then returned the smile and walked forward willingly into the firm grasp. A comforting arm around him, and he was rising, just in time to see Peri's white face surge out of the crowd. "Draco! Oh, thank goodness – thank you, sir, I had no idea he'd run away like that – you naughty boy, I should get a leash for you, I really should..." **What in the world were you doing, young man?** she demanded as the man passed Ray over to her. **That was very naughty of you...**

Man, Ray said a bit smugly. **Hand.**

Peri looked away from him and didn't seem inclined to look back. Ray obligingly let himself be shifted onto her left hip, so that her right hand was free to grasp the man's, which was outstretched to her.

"Remus Lupin."

"Pericula Grant. Peri."

"Peri," the man repeated. "So that's what he was saying. I couldn't make it out. And he is..."

"Draco Malfoy. Say hello, Draco."

Ray waved.

"Thank you for stopping," Peri said. "I suppose I would have found him myself in another minute, but it seems criminal to let a child be frightened any longer than he has to."

"I agree, very much so. Have you been working for the Malfoys long?"

"Not terribly. I came to them in June."

"Blown in by the east wind, and only to stay until it changes?"

Peri laughed. "Something like that, but without the black hair."

"I can see that." The man looked at his watch and made a face. "Listen, I'd love to stay, but I have..." He paused, then made a different sort of face. "This is terribly presumptuous of me, I've only just met you now, but would you like to come to tea with me and my friends? They're a couple, and I always feel like a second hand with them, but we've been friends for years, so that they can also make me feel guilty about not showing up."

"I understand completely, I used to have friends just like that. I accept on two conditions. First, Ray – I mean Draco, that's my pet name for him – he won't be in the way, will he? Not that he'll make trouble or anything, he's not that type, but they don't mind children?"

"Not at all. Two of our other friends have a little boy just about his age, and Sirius and Letha are crazy about him. Sirius is actually his godfather."

Ray frowned. Some of the man's words had made Peri sad for a moment.

No, it's nothing for you to worry about, she told him gently. And his name is Remus. You can call him that.

Remus . Ray liked that. Names were good.

"And that touches on the other condition," Peri was saying to the man – to Remus – now. "You have to tell me these people's names. I refuse to go to tea with a nameless couple. And some other information, such as safe and unsafe topics of conversation, would be very welcome."

Remus laughed. "Names, I can produce. Sirius Black, starting his second year as an Auror, and Aletha Freeman, in her final year of Healer training. And my good self, doing what I can. I haven't really found anything I'm passionate for yet."

Ray jumped a little as, first, Peri's mind was filled with strange and confusing emotions, and then, just as suddenly, it was cut off from him. He stared at her. "Pe'i?" he said, aloud, tentatively.

"It's all right, little love," she reassured him aloud, kissing his forehead, then turned back to Remus. "Mr. Lupin, I accept your kind offer of tea with yourself and Mr. Black and Miss Freeman, if you will give me a moment to recover the item I left behind me in my hurry to retrieve my wayward babe here."

"All the moments you like, Miss Grant. Though I seem to recall that you gave me a short version of your first name when you introduced yourself..."

The wall, which had showed signs of lifting, was now thicker than ever, and Peri's cheek was redder and warmer than usual. "... don't mind if you don't."

"Not at all. Peri."

"Thank you. Remus. Will you hold Ray for me for a minute?"

Ray made a startled noise as he was bundled unceremoniously from one set of arms to another, and twisted his neck around just in time to see Peri vanish into the crowd.

"Well, hello again," said Remus, and Ray looked back around at him. "You're rather handsome, in the Malfoy way. I hope Sirius doesn't take badly to you because of your father, but I think Letha will shake him if he does. I know I'll shake him if he does. You're quite a nice young man. So he won't be prejudiced, or if he is, it'll only be for a moment – oh *hell*."

Ray jumped at Remus' sudden vehemence. "Sirius was there. He pointed you out to me. And her – Peri – can you tell me why I'm acting the way I am over her?" Remus asked thoughtfully, swaying back and forth to accommodate Ray's weight on his hip better. "I should have said my 'you're welcome' and run away. Instead, I'm asking her questions, then inviting her to tea on the basis of less than one minute's acquaintanceship, opening myself to Sirius' teasing, and James' and Peter's when they hear about this... what *am* I doing?"

Ray tilted his head to one side consideringly, making Remus laugh. "Why am I asking you? Your biggest concern is not running off from your nursemaid." His voice became distant again. "A nursemaid for the Malfoys. She won't want to stay mixed up with me. She can't afford it. I'm making a mistake, I know I'm making a mistake... well, too late now." He raised his voice to reach Peri, who had just slipped between two people, the baby carrier in her arms. "Here, set it up and I'll pop him in. It seems a shame to wear it and not use it."

Ray went into the carrier happily. He'd fixed everything.

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Ray, oh, Ray, what have you done to me?

Peri was very careful to keep that thought to herself. She'd done enough damage already with thoughts and dreams she hadn't kept under control. If she hadn't been thinking and dreaming of Remus over the past month, Ray would never have known who he was, would certainly never have remembered him from that one sighting in Diagon Alley. Everything would have been all right.

But she had been thinking of Remus sometimes –

Sometimes?

All right, if she was going to be honest with herself –

And who else do I have to be honest with?

She had been thinking about Remus for almost every free moment through the end of July and the beginning of August, and a few moments that hadn't, strictly speaking, been free. She'd been able to spare a few thoughts for other people, like Harry – most of the 31st of July had been spent thinking about him – and Sirius and Aletha (who must have got over what had happened with the Prewetts better here than she had in Peri's original universe), and the blood she still had to obtain from them –

And that is the only reason I agreed to go to tea, she reminded herself sternly. I'll be polite and charming and friendly, wait until they aren't looking, get what I want, and go. And make sure that they're nowhere near Diagon Alley when I am from now on!

But why? asked another voice. *Why should you –*

"Peri?"

She blinked. Remus was looking at her oddly. "Are you all right?"

"I'm sorry. Woolgathering. What did you say?"

We are not finished, said the second voice warningly.

Yeah, yeah, I know.

Peri was carefully friendly all the way to the Leaky Cauldron, and it was only when Remus had seen her seated in a booth and gone to the Floo to wait for Sirius and Aletha's arrival that she could find a toy for Ray in her bag and allow the second voice free rein. *All right, what is it?*

Why should you deny yourself friends? You love Ray, and he loves you, but he is a baby. You can't get by in this world just by loving one baby. You need friends your own age, with common interests. You need people to talk to, and laugh with, and love.

A woman's laugh like chiming bells cut over the noise of the teatime crowd, and a man's barking chuckle followed it. Peri flinched as if she'd been hit. The last time she had heard those laughs, they had been celebrating the birth of their second child, in a world free of war and fear, in the life she'd left behind...

And there's your point, isn't it? They were happy, without you. Happy because you'd left. Not that they didn't like having you around, but you made them happier by leaving than you could have by staying. And you'll make these people happier by staying out of things than you would by getting into them. So put on your game face and smile, and get what you need, and then do your duty by everyone and keep your nose out of things.

Her best efforts to shield were failing, Ray was starting to look at her in worry – she had to get under control, for his sake if for no one else's –

She shoved her emotions down just in time to stand up and smile, and shake the hands of the people she'd once called brother and sister.

As Remus had promised, Aletha and Sirius thought Ray was darling, and Sirius had a good laugh over the inappropriateness of the adults to which Peri was exposing the heir of the Malfoys. "What do you think old Lucius would say," he asked her, "if he knew you were letting his baby play with the white sheep of the Blacks, a Muggleborn, and a..." He stopped suddenly, looking worriedly at Remus.

"And a what?" Aletha asked, looking around from her tug-of-war with Ray.

"And an unemployed good-for-nothing like me," Remus improvised quickly.

Step one. Remove informational barriers. "Somehow I don't think that's what Sirius was going to say," Peri said. "May I exercise my meager to nonexistent Divination skills to read his mind?"

"I don't think Divination is about reading people's minds," Aletha objected.

"Fine, telepathy then – is she always this nitpicky?" Peri asked Sirius and Remus, who both nodded.

Aletha shrugged one shoulder. "I prefer 'precise' myself."

"Right. Well, whatever it is, Divination, telepathy or whatever, I don't think I can do it with Sirius, but I'm willing to try."

"Go on, then," Remus said. He seemed relaxed, but Peri could see the tension in his body. *I wish I could tell you it would be all right, Aletha won't be afraid of you and neither will I, but you'll know the one soon enough and the other doesn't matter anyway...*

She reached out a hand towards Sirius' forehead. Playing along, Sirius let his head sag back and his mouth hang open, his eyelids drooping. "I see a word," Peri intoned. "A word with eight letters... a word that asks a question, a question that many fear the answer to..."

Remus had abandoned his casual pretense and was watching her closely. Aletha was listening carefully, frowning in concentration.

"I see a man who distances himself from others because he fears he will hurt them," Peri continued, allowing her voice to shade more into a normal tone. "I see a man who closes himself off from the world because he feels that he doesn't belong. Because he feels that people could only be hurt by knowing him, and even though he cares about them, he can't show it, because they'll be better off without him around."

Sirius had come out of his "trance" and was staring at her, brow furrowed, but at the same time he was slowly nodding.

"I see a man who fears what he can be, and with good reason. But he makes the mistake so many make – he believes, he has learned to believe, that all of what he is can be defined by those few hours he cannot control, and not even his friends' voices can fully drown out the voices of the world, and of his own foolish self, telling him to keep his distance..."

Peri stopped. The sum of all the words she had spoken rushed in on her, and she let her head sag to the table.

Great Merlin.

I just described myself.

Peri ? Ray asked worriedly.

"Are you all right?" said Aletha at the same time.

"I'm fine," Peri said to both of them, sitting up and tucking away her realization for future dissection. "Just... playing the part, you know. Don't Seers always collapse after they do their Seeing?"

"I wouldn't know," said Remus, who was watching Peri intensely. "I was never fond of Divination. I don't care for crystal balls."

"I'm not surprised," Peri said. "They must remind you of... other things." She let her eyes flick upwards.

Remus and Sirius exchanged a look, frightened and desperate on one side, confused and worried on the other.

"I have a feeling I'm very close to an answer," Aletha said slowly. "And I don't know if I'll like it or not."

"How long were you planning to hide it?" Peri demanded of Remus. "She's not about to try to ward you off, I *don't* think – she's a Healer, dammit, she knows what it is, and she knows it wasn't anything you wanted!"

"How did you know?" Remus stared at her, his eyes icy blue seas without the warm brown islands she'd grown used to. "You've only seen me this once, or maybe twice – only spoken to me once – is it so obvious?"

"I doubt it, since someone far closer to you than me still hasn't figured it out after – how many years is it now you've been... friends?" Peri breathed a silent sigh of relief – she'd almost let slip that she knew about the existence of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Does this have anything to do with your recurring disappearances?" Aletha asked.

"Yes," said Peri, at the same moment that Sirius and Remus both said, "No."

Ray giggled.

Aletha leveled a Force Nine glare at the two men, looking back and forth and finally settling on Sirius. "I want the truth," she said, pinning Sirius to the back wall of the booth and watching him wriggle like the proverbial bug. "And I want it now."

Sirius tore his eyes away from Aletha's long enough to give Remus an apologetic glance. "Yes."

Remus slid under the table without even the transparent excuse of a dropped fork or napkin. Ray stared at the place where he'd been. **Where he go?**

You'll see. Peri grinned. She had learned one or two new skills while she had worked on making her first world good for her family.

Sliding under the table, she whispered three Latin words.

Everything whirled for a second. Then the world was delineated in shades of gray, showing her Remus staring at her in shock about six inches from her delicately pointed nose, which was detecting the distinct aroma of fear from him.

Oh, do settle down, man. Aletha's too grounded to shriek and run away because she finds out you're a werewolf. She may browbeat Sirius sometimes, but she also respects him, and the fact that he's known about you for so long and still regards you as a close friend will be sure to count for plenty. She knew he couldn't hear her, but it helped calm her to put it into words.

Feeling naughty, she stepped forward and licked his face, one long swipe from chin to brow with her tongue.

"Bleah." Remus shoved her away and mopped his face with his sleeve. "Wolf breath."

Peri resumed her usual form. "As if you don't have it."

"Only once a month, as you've been at pains to point out up there – did you ever stop to think, however you figured it out, that I might not want it to be public knowledge?"

Peri scoffed. "Aletha is hardly public. She's your best friend's wife, or she will be soon. What about your other friends? Do their significant others know?"

"Lily knows," Remus admitted. "Peter doesn't have a girlfriend, so it's never been a problem. But you never answered me – how did you know?"

Time to think fast. "You and Sirius are the same age, you told me so yourself. But you look at least five years older, premature graying and wrinkles and all." She cocked her head. "It's actually not unattractive, you know."

"Thanks a lot," Remus muttered.

"You're welcome. You also mentioned that you don't have a job, but talking with you convinces me that you're quite intelligent and don't lack commitment, which are the two main reasons people don't get jobs. So there had to be some other factor. And being an Animagus gives me just that little extra edge on my senses, and I smelled something semi-familiar coming off you." Not a lie, not even close, unless the 'semi' made it so. "So I put that all together and came up with a fairly simple answer." She deepened her voice. "There wolf. There castle."

"Why are you talking like that?" said Aletha, peering under the table. Remus jumped and banged his head.

"I thought you wanted me to," said Peri, kissing her fingertips and brushing them across the injured portion of Remus' head.

No, I don't want you to. Are you all right, Remus?"

"Fine," said Remus in a rather strangled voice, simultaneously rubbing his head and trying to hide his brilliantly pink face.

"Suit yourself," Peri finished, hoisting herself back onto the bench and making Ray shout happily at the sight of her. "I'm easy."

"Are you?" said Sirius.

Aletha and Remus, who had just emerged, both glared at him.

"What? It was an honest question."

"No, I'm actually rather choosy," Peri said, crawling her hand up Ray's leg like a spider. "And my first rule is, no stealing other women's men."

Sirius scowled. "I knew there had to be a drawback to this going steady thing."

Peri chuckled. "How long have you two been together?"

"Two years," said Aletha, "and don't change the subject. Remus – are you a werewolf?"

Remus flinched. "Yes."

Aletha nodded slowly, rubbing her left elbow in thought. "It makes sense," she said. "But you tell me. Should I be afraid?"

Remus straightened in his seat, surprise with a tinge of gratitude coloring his face now. "Not now. Not at any time except during transformations. And I'm... always careful."

"What should I do, if I happened to run into you, or another werewolf, while you're transformed?"

"Run," Remus said immediately. "Get out of the way, get behind walls – don't try spells, they don't work. Get up a tree, or into a house. Or if you don't have any shelter handy, create some. Conjured materials will work where Shield Spells won't, and throwing rocks works just fine, though you'd have to actually knock... me... out to do any good. It's hard to turn a werewolf from human scent."

"Hard?" Sirius snorted. "Try bloody near impossible. Prongs always had to sit on you, and I had to go scare off whoever it was..." He trailed off, noticing that everyone was staring at him. "What?"

"Secrets seem to be coming out all over the place today," said Peri, remembering in time that she wasn't supposed to know what Sirius could do. "Sounds to me like you had some way to go exploring with a werewolf buddy. How exactly did you pull that off?"

"Yes, do tell," Aletha urged, eyebrows raised.

Sirius gulped. "Um. Letha, you like me, right?"

"Yes."

"You like having me around and all?"

"Yes."

"You wouldn't want to get me arrested, would you?"

Remus closed his eyes and let his head thump against the wall of the booth. "Bad lead-in, Sirius," he said. "Very bad."

Ray wailed. **Bad nappy**, he told Peri mind-to-mind. **Very bad!**

Peri cracked a smile at the unintended repetition and scooped Ray from the carrier, motioning Remus to let her out of the booth. "Excuse me, everyone, I believe nappy attention is indicated. Don't forget to let me know what went on."

xXxXx

In the women's restroom, Peri fixed Ray's problem first, then let herself sag onto the ancient chair in the corner, little boy in her arms.

Well, I seem to have abandoned my policy of isolationism.

Didn't take much, did it? sneered an unpleasant part of her. *One handsome male and like the bitch you are, you run right to him...*

Father? Ray said uneasily.

Peri jerked upright. **No, Ray. Father's not here.**

Good.

Yes. Good.

I never realized I had a side of me that sounded like Lucius Malfoy.

But why did I do it? Why did I decide what I did?

Like Remus, said Ray. **Like Sirius and Aletha**. In his mind, he could say the complicated names without a stumble, where he might slur them aloud for years to come. **See them again?**

Peri smiled at her charge, her love, her own little one. **Yes, my love. See them again.**

And there's my answer. I may love Ray – I do love Ray – but a boy needs more than just one person to love him. He has me and Narcissa, but we're both women. A boy needs a man.

And more than that, what kind of person will I be to love him if I don't have other people to love, and to love me? I need human contact to stay human, so that I can raise Ray human. Human and happy.

So it's decided. Friendship it is.

And... something more? Brief sensory flashes, from most of which she shielded Ray carefully. The little boy wouldn't be ready for those feelings for quite a few years yet.

Why don't we be friends for now, and see what develops.

And I have something I can offer them. Not in exchange for their friendship, but perhaps for their trust...

xXxXx

"Sir – Headmaster!"

Albus Dumbledore looked over his shoulder. Remus was running down the hallway of the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Sirius and Aletha were just behind him. All three of them were grinning hugely.

"Good news?" Dumbledore asked politely.

"Yes, sir," said Remus, skidding to a halt and taking one deep breath to calm himself. "We have a possible information source in the household of Lucius Malfoy."

xXxXx

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 4: Curse

"Wait a second," said James Potter, shaking his head. "Let me get this straight. You met her in Diagon Alley and invited her to tea. Within five minutes, she'd told Aletha about your furry little problem and got Sirius to blab about us. And she works for the Malfoys. What exactly makes you think she's trustworthy?"

Remus shrugged. "Just a feeling, I suppose. But Dumbledore was supposed to meet with her sometime today, to check her out. You really think he'd let anything slip past?"

"He has," said James darkly. "We all have. You know that."

Remus sighed. "Yes. I know. But that makes having our own spy – another spy – even more important. And Peri's in a position to overhear plenty."

"Or to feed us all the false information Voldemort thinks we'll swallow," James retorted. "If I didn't know better, Moony, I'd say you like her."

Remus couldn't quite mask his guilty blush.

"Well, how about that! The fuzzy celibate finally deigns to come down off his pedestal and mingle with the mere mortals in affairs of the heart!" James peered at his friend. "Wait, this isn't the same girl Sirius said you were staring at a few weeks ago, is it?"

Remus glared at him. "Yes."

"Oh-ho-ho, and does she know that?"

"Know what?"

"That the first time you saw her, you couldn't keep your eyes off her pert little..." James wiggled the pertinent portion of his anatomy.

"Please don't do that," Remus said, averting his gaze. "It's very disturbing."

"But you don't mind it when the Malfoys' maid does it?" James dropped his teasing manner. "Moony, have you thought about the consequences of this? I mean, she lives in the same house as Lucius 'I-Never-Saw-A-Woman-I-Didn't-Want-To-Get-With' Malfoy."

Remus turned his head. "Have you thought about calling him that to his face?"

"Maybe if I ever have a death wish. But I mean it. What do you think the odds are that he hasn't already made at least a pass at her, probably more?"

"I really don't want to think about that, if you don't mind."

"Remus, I mean this." James came around to stand in front of Remus. "I'm not saying don't be interested in her – if you are, if she's interested in you, if everything works out, then damn the Bludgers and full speed ahead. But there are going to be problems. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"Thank you, James." Remus clasped his friend's shoulder. "But please bear in mind, I'm not Harry. I'm a big boy now. And I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?" James asked quietly. "Do you really?"

"Do any of us, really?"

"Point taken. Just... be careful, all right?"

"I will."

xXxXx

"So, do I pass?" Peri asked lightly.

She and Albus Dumbledore were sitting in a private parlor at the Leaky Cauldron, a mostly untouched tea between them. Ray slept in his baby carrier in a corner. Dumbledore had been asking her questions, inviting her to do the same, and finally, with her permission, using Legilimency on her.

"I am not sure." Dumbledore picked up a few crumbs of biscuit and ground them finer between his fingers. "Your mind is a very unusual one, Miss Grant. Are you aware that your memories are oddly fragmentary?"

"I am. I have some knowledge of what exactly happened to me, though."

"May I be privileged enough to receive that knowledge?"

Peri nodded, putting her thoughts in order. "I was married once," she said. "And very happily married. I had a family I loved dearly and good friends. And then, through a strange series of events, I was given the chance to make their lives immeasurably better if I would simply walk away from them. It was not a trick, not a game, but a real offer. And I took it."

"More things in heaven and on earth, Horatio?"

"Yes, that's it exactly." Ray's sense was starting to rouse. Peri shut her eyes for a moment to send him soothing, quieting feelings, and he settled back into sleep.

"You look quite young to have been married before."

"I am twenty-one. It was a short marriage."

"Really," said Dumbledore in a very bland tone that nonetheless conveyed the slightest bit of warning in it.

Damn it. "What do you want to know?"

"Your memories may be fragmented, but they have a very clear sense of time passing. More time than twenty-one years. And some of them involve people I know, but who do not look the way they do in your memories. Yet. Have you traveled through space, time, or both?"

"Both," Peri admitted. "My marriage, and my first life, were in a different world than this."

"But similar."

"Yes."

"How old are you, really?"

"This body is twenty-one, but I believe I was about thirty when I made my decision. The details are blurred. By my own wish."

"So you originally occupied another body?"

"I don't know. I have no memory of dying, or of being placed in a different body, but I know that I look different now than I originally did. I know that I am younger than I was. This could be my original body, altered for the purpose, or it could be a different one. Whichever you like."

"I see." Dumbledore poured himself a cup of tea and offered Peri one.

"Thank you." Peri accepted the cup and blew on it, then took a sip.

"And the purpose of your being here is...?"

"The people I loved in my own world also exist here. I originally intended to be a sort of nameless benefactor to them, to make them happier without ever letting them know I was here. But..." Peri looked into her tea.

"But you realized," Dumbledore finished for her, "that you are a human being and not a guardian angel."

"Yes."

"Had you ever thought that perhaps the easiest way to make happier those people whom you once loved and, I assume, still love, is simply to exist and be yourself?"

Peri smiled wryly. "Go on, rub it in. I probably deserve it."

"I do beg your pardon. Rubbing it in was never my intention." Dumbledore sipped his own tea. "May I ask if the man exists here who was your husband in your original world?"

"He does."

"And you know his identity."

"I do."

"And do not wish to share it."

"Not particularly."

"Very well. But, if you will forgive my curiosity, why the Malfoys' son?" Dumbledore looked toward the corner where that little boy slept before returning his gaze to Peri.

She met it squarely. "Because he deserves a chance. No other reason than that. I have no leanings toward Dark magic, no loyalty to Voldemort, and every intention of telling you all that I learn from listening in the Malfoy household. I trust that you will not compromise me by using information that only I could have supplied, or that if you must use it, you will give me enough warning that I can get out of harm's way in time. Are you satisfied, Headmaster?"

"Miss Grant, I am." Dumbledore extended his hand to her. "Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix."

xXxXx

Ray bounced in through the door of his rooms and shouted happily. "Mama!"

Peri smiled as Narcissa rose from her chair and dropped to one knee to embrace Ray much more naturally than she had a month ago. "Hello, Draco," she said to him. "How was your day out?"

Ray said something in reply, to which Narcissa nodded gravely, making Peri laugh a bit. "You two look perfect together," she said. "You could pose for adverts."

"No thank you," said Narcissa dryly, standing up with Ray on her hip.

"I didn't say you should, just that you could. How are things here?"

Ray squirmed. Narcissa let him slide to the ground. "Lucius is becoming excited about something he will do tomorrow," she said quietly. "I have not been told his plans, but I doubt it is anything good. Will you and Draco be here?"

"We were actually hoping to go out again," Peri said, sitting down at the table. "That's probably all the better an idea if Mr. Malfoy has something going on. If it goes badly, he'll be in a foul mood for a while, and we'd do better to be out of the way. If it goes well, he may want to celebrate, and I'd just as soon not be here."

"Understandable." Narcissa allowed herself a small smile. "I have a small entertainment of my own to pursue, so I too will be absent most of the day. By the by, have you made any plans for exposing Draco to other children his own age?"

"Not yet. Things are so unsettled right now, and I don't know who to contact, or how."

"I can help you with that. Several of Lucius' ... colleagues have children. And, of course, as long as you are not seen, what you do when you leave this house is entirely up to you."

They continued talking until a small ornamental knob on the wall suddenly began to glow with a faint golden light. Peri broke off in the middle of a sentence and stood up. Narcissa did the same. "You're sure he is not ill?" she demanded.

"Perfectly, Mrs. Malfoy. Children often sleep in the middle of the day, there's nothing to worry about."

"Very well. Keep me informed." Narcissa turned and left the room.

The knob slowly lost its glow, and Peri could allow herself to fall into her chair and laugh. Narcissa appeared again in the doorway. "You had to make it seem as if I didn't even know that children take naps?" she demanded, hands on hips.

"I'm sorry. It was all I could think of." Peri got herself under control. "I'll have a better story next time."

"See that you do." Narcissa turned and stalked away with mock-affronted dignity.

Peri sighed and sat back in her chair, listening to the sounds of Ray rummaging in his toy chest. Something was bothering her.

Lucius is going out for funsies tomorrow. No big whoop about that, though I should tell the Order. But why do I feel like it's so important...

She sat bolt upright.

Today is 16 August. That's why. My God, that means my last chance is tonight...

Her childhood and young adulthood memories remained with her, but at a distance, as if they were stories of another person's life. Still, she knew that she had loved her parents dearly, and they her, and that if she came into contact with them she might very quickly come to love them again, though she had grown used to not having them there.

It certainly happened that way with some other people I could name. She thought of the two tiny vials in her bag, each labeled with a name, which she would use on the first of September for two very specific purposes. But I can't let it happen with them. Not now, not like this.

But at the same time, I don't want them to die! And without me there, there'll be no one to take care of Neenie. She'll go to foster care, or to a home. I can't let that happen.

So tonight, I go all-out to convince a couple of Muggle dentists that tomorrow would be a nice day to take the afternoon off and go for a drive...

xXxXx

The Death Eaters who broke into number seventeen, Privet Drive, the next day, were disgusted to find the house deserted. "Nothing doing here," grumbled one of them. "What're we supposed to do now?"

"Oh, do use your head, man," said another impatiently. "This street is full of Muggles. We can find others."

"Oy, look here!" called a third from the front windows. "There's a pair of old ones getting into a car right now, down the street a bit!"

"Perfect," said the second speaker with a cool chuckle. "Shall we, my friends?"

xXxXx

Lily Potter was playing with her son when her husband Apparated into the living room. "Dada!" Harry yelled, running to his father.

"Hello, James," Lily said, standing up. "What's wrong?" she added when she got a look at his face.

"Tell you in a second. Yes, hello, Harry." James kissed his son's head. "You go on and play now. Daddy and Mummy need to talk."

Harry ran to the toy box in the corner and began tossing things onto the floor. "What's wrong?" Lily repeated, moving in for her own hug. "Is everyone all right?"

"Come... sit down with me." James drew her over to the couch. "Lily, I don't know how to tell you this. I'm so sorry. It's your parents."

"My parents?"

"They were visiting your sister. Just as they were leaving, their car was ambushed. Death Eaters. I'm sorry."

Lily distinctly felt a lump of ice lodge itself under her breastbone and grow until it filled her chest. It made every breath a struggle. "Both of them?"

James nodded.

The ice shattered. Tears came hot and fast to her eyes. Her parents were dead. Harry would never remember his grandparents now. She would never be able to ask her mother for advice on raising girls when she and James had a daughter, never again listen to her father's schemes to reconcile his own daughters. They were dead, and she was never going to see them again...

She was sobbing into James' shoulder, tears mixed with curses. "I hate them," she heard herself say. "I hate them all. May they live in pain and die in despair and see everything they ever loved destroyed in front of their eyes. Them and their whole families. Damn them all."

Ordinarily, she would have been horrified by her words, or by the fact that she meant them, but she was beyond caring.

"Why?" she begged her husband, her son, the world at large, as the tears came faster and drowned her thoughts and feelings in a sea of grief. "Why?"

But she knew no one would ever have an answer for her.

xXxXx

Lucius Malfoy sat up in his chair, looking around intently. For a moment, he had thought he was not alone.

He winced as a twinge of pain went through his right shoulder. *Odd. I am not as young as I was, but wizards seldom suffer from Muggle diseases of old age before they are at least sixty years old, and I am far from that yet...*

On a hunch, he stood up and picked up his wand, and cast a complicated spell on the mirror hanging in the corner. *Now I will be able to see if any magic affects me.*

He stared astounded at the image revealed to him. *A curse. And a skillfully laid one at that. Pain and despair and death, and not only to me...*

xXxXx

Peri, chasing Ray around the nursery, nearly ran him over as he stopped suddenly. "What's wrong, love?"

Hurts. Ray rubbed his shoulder.

"Well, we can fix that. Come here, let me kiss it better." Peri scooped him up and planted a kiss on the offending part. "And if that doesn't work, I can always tickle the pain away!"

Ray shrieked as Peri's fingers found his most ticklish spots.

xXxXx

And I thought my foes were above striking at the innocent. Lucius smirked. *Pity I don't have time to find its caster and turn it back to its source.*

But I also have no time to find another possible recipient and have it transferred. I must take other measures to deal with it...

Lucius raised his wand again, pointed it at himself, and began to speak an incantation. This was a spell of delay, one which would not try to break the curse, nor to move it, merely to keep it from taking effect for some time. He was using the most potent form of the spell, which would delay the effects of the curse for seven years.

I think my Master should be able to help me remove it by then. Or I can find the caster, or another willing victim, and remove it myself.

He sighed pleasurably as the dark green curse traces in the mirror vanished. All that was left now was his own magic and his Master's, intertwined around and through him like two snakes. *For what am I, if not my Master's creature? Serving him is greater honor than freedom could ever be.*

xXxXx

Better?" Peri asked when Ray could breathe again.

Yes. Play more now.

"What do you say?"

Pleeeeeease .

"That's more like it."

xXxXx

In a cheap lodging house, Igor Karkaroff slept, unaware of the curse which had twined itself around him and was even now working deeper into his flesh.

He would live just long enough to see it fulfilled.

xXxXx

"I was very sorry to hear about Mrs. Potter's parents," Peri said to Remus as he let her in the front door of the house on Devil's Face Road on 1 September.

"If you'd care to convey your sympathies yourself, she's here."

"No, I think I'll spare her a stranger's meaningless platitudes." *Epecially a stranger who might have caused her parents' deaths.* Mr. and Mrs. Evans had almost undoubtedly been killed by the same people who would have killed the Grangers if they'd been home.

Remus shut the door behind her. "I doubt anything you do is ever meaningless," he said. "Hello, Ray."

Remus! Ray shouted happily.

Peri winced. **Out loud, Ray love,** she reminded him. **With your mouth.**

Ray pouted. **Hard.**

I know. Why don't you try "Moony" instead?

"Mooney," said Ray very distinctly, and bounced in Peri's arms proudly.

Remus actually took a step back. "And where did that come from?" he asked in shock.

Peri set Ray on the floor. "I heard Sirius use it to you in the Leaky Cauldron," she invented quickly, "and when Ray got frustrated trying to say your name, I suggested that instead. It's easier for him, it seems. I hope you don't mind."

"No, not at all. It was just... I occasionally get the feeling that you can read my mind." Remus looked intently at her as she straightened up. "Or that you know things about me that I don't even know about myself."

"Well, if I do, I'll endeavor to tell you about them." Peri took one of Ray's hands, and Remus took the other. "Which way are we going?"

"Straight back. Alice Longbottom is here with her Neville, and Harry, of course. They're both about Ray's age, so I dare to hope they'll get along."

"They'll probably ignore each other except to fight over toys," Peri predicted. "But one never knows."

"No, one never does." Remus ran a finger along Ray's small knuckles, smiling. "One really never does."

xXxXx

Aletha rubbed her temples wearily. She'd spent too much time that day playing, but the three little boys were just too cute to ignore. They were a tangible, living reminder of the reason that Aletha and the rest of the Order were fighting this war – *so that they don't have to grow up and do it.*

And one of them was supposedly the child of the enemy. That was so strange to think about. Little Ray might look like his father, but he was all boy, running and shouting and laughing just like the other two. She and Remus and Alice had taken turns being monsters for the boys to alternately chase and be chased by, and though she'd known she had work to do for her classes the next day, she hadn't been able to leave...

"Letha?"

"In here." Aletha turned around in time to see Sirius' outline fill her doorway. "What's going on?"

"Not a hell of a lot." Sirius rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I just got off patrols."

"You must be exhausted."

"Well, not exactly. You busy?"

Aletha was about to say yes when she stopped. There was something in Sirius' voice... "I might be," she said. "Who's asking?"

"Your very tense boyfriend. Who could use a session of tension relief."

Aletha looked back at her books indecisively. *I really shouldn't...*

Oh, why not? whispered a voice at the back of her head. *The world won't end if you do poorly on one test. You deserve some fun. And Sirius does too. Go on, you know you want to.*

She stood up. "Your place or mine?"

xXxXx

Peri breathed a silent sigh of relief. *Good thing I got a bit of extra from her. I didn't know I'd need to convince her like that!*

Her three drops of blood – which had been four a moment ago – sat on the table before her, each in its own dish. A few other potions were within easy reach. Ray slept soundly in his cot nearby, tired out by his long playtime.

Now if I can just find a way to keep those boys in touch without Lucius knowing about it...

But that's for later. This is for now.

She pulled two of the dishes closer and began the first incantation.

xXxXx

Sirius found himself relaxed for the first time in far too long. They'd done this before, but it had never been quite like this – the feeling of completion, of finding one's missing other half. Of finding something that you never wanted to let go of.

So what are you waiting for? a little voice prompted. *James found what he wanted, and he didn't wait. And you can't afford to wait. You're in a war. What if one of you dies tomorrow?*

But I'm not ready, Sirius objected. *I don't have a ring or anything...*

Trust me, she won't mind. She's starting to wonder if you really care about her, or if she's just a fling before you marry a proper pureblood girl.

Sirius shuddered. *I'd rather marry a toad.*

So tell her that. And then ask.

Sirius rolled over. "Letha?"

"Hmm?" She opened her eyes to look at him.

Sirius sighed adoringly. "Merlin, you're beautiful."

"Why, thank you." Aletha let her eyes travel down his body and back up. "I regret I can't say the same for you, but you're not the most inspiring of sights when you're undressed."

"Oy! You didn't seem to mind it too much a couple minutes ago!"

Her eyes sparkled. "I'm *teasing* you, Sirius. You look fine. In fact," she moved closer to him and began to run her fingers over his chest, "I might go so far as to say that properly dressed and arrayed, you're rather handsome. And just because you're not much to *look* at without your clothes on, doesn't mean..."

Sirius caught her hand in one of his own, brought it up to his mouth, and kissed it. "Don't judge a book by its cover?"

"Something like that." Aletha continued work with her other hand.

"Well, since we're speaking of covers." Sirius stopped. "No, that's not what I mean. I mean, since we're here and all..." He stopped again, releasing Aletha's hand. "Damn it!"

"Just say it," Aletha said, now massaging his chest with both hands.

"Fine. Will you marry me?"

The hands froze in position. "*What?*"

"Will you marry me?" Sirius pushed himself a little away from her and sat up. "You know, dress robes, rings, I do..."

Aletha sat up as well, clutching the sheet to her chest and staring at him. "You want me to marry you."

"I think that's what I said. Twice. Are you having hearing problems? I know a good Healer, we could get your ears checked tomorrow..."

“Stop it.”

“Fine. Then answer me.”

Aletha barely seemed to be breathing. “This is so sudden,” she said almost to herself. “I wasn’t expecting it, at least not yet...”

“We’ve known each other ten years,” Sirius said. “Granted, we couldn’t stand each other for seven or eight of them, but I think we’ve made up for that. And I really think we make a good team. I like having you with me. I’d like to have you there more often. As often as I can manage. I...”

He felt his face heat up, but he had to convince her. This might be his only chance. “I want kids, Letha. And I want them with you. I want to be able to tell the world that you’re my wife, the mother of my children, that out of all the blokes you could have had, for some reason I don’t even understand, you picked me.” He grinned. “And as a side benefit, you’ll piss off Mother Dearest something awful.”

“Oh, so that’s why,” Aletha said dryly. “You’re going for shock value. Muggleborn, half-American, black girl – the most unsuitable candidate available – is that why?”

“No! God, no, is that what you think of me? No, Letha, I want you.” Sirius moved closer and took her hand. “If I knew you were still you, I wouldn’t care what you looked like, what your blood was, where you came from – you could be a midget who didn’t speak English from some aboriginal village in Australia, but if you were still you, I’d love you. I do love you. And I want you to stay with me forever. If that’s what you want. So will you marry me?”

Aletha looked down at their two hands, his around hers, then up into his eyes. “On one condition,” she said.

“Name it.”

“Swear that you’ll never keep secrets from me.”

Sirius frowned. “I don’t know if I can... I mean, if I get put on a case...”

“Oh, I don’t mean like that!” Aletha said impatiently. “I mean personal things. If you’re ill, if something’s wrong in your life, tell me. Don’t keep it from me.” She looked away. “When my mum was ill, they never told me. Because they didn’t want to *worry* me.” Her tone was bitter. “I don’t want love on those conditions. I’m not a hothouse flower, I don’t want to be sheltered. I want to face what you face. So I want you to swear that you won’t keep secrets from me.”

Sirius’ first instinct was to agree immediately, his second to refuse. He grabbed them as they went by and looked at both of them.

I can’t just agree to get her to marry me. I have to mean it. And I can’t just say no because love should be unconditional – people aren’t perfect. And she does have a point. Life might be better if people didn’t keep so many secrets...

And what am I going to have that I can’t tell her, anyway? It’s not like I’m the spy for old Lord Moldyshorts or anything.

“Agreed,” he said.

“Promise,” Aletha pushed.

“I promise,” Sirius said. “No secrets. Not unless they’re not mine to tell.”

Aletha lifted one elegant eyebrow, just visible in the moonlight coming through the window. “Careful with your escape clauses, there.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, actually I don’t.”

“Well, do you expect me to tell you something James begs me to keep under my hat?”

“If I don’t tell anyone, what’s the difference?”

Sirius frowned, then felt at the side of his head. “Oh, good.”

“Oh, good, what?”

“I wanted to make sure it wasn’t spinning.”

Aletha slapped him lightly on the ear. “There, now it should be.”

“Ouch,” Sirius said. “Fine, I promise. No secrets from you.”

Aletha sighed deeply, turning her head so that the moonlight caught her profile. “In that case... I accept.” She brought her other arm around and pushed him down to the pillows. “And I should warn you that I plan on being a *terribly* domineering wife.”

“As if I had any doubts.”

She silenced him in time-honored fashion, and then there was no more need for conversation. Just them, and the night, and the moon. And it was very good.

Though, if they had only known it, they were not actually alone.

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Far away, a woman slept, thinking she knew what she had done that night, when in reality she had done far more.

Ripples from a stone dropped into a pond do not stop growing, but spread.

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 5: Changes

Sirius and Aletha's wedding was held on 27 September, in one of the small rooms set aside at the Ministry of Magic for just that purpose. Albus Dumbledore presided, as he had done for the Potters' wedding. James was Sirius' best man, and Lily Aletha's matron of honor. Remus gave the bride away (prompting laughter from the small group gathered to witness the event) and Peri watched everything from inside a temporary shelter which allowed sound to pass in but not out, a necessity since it also contained three small and noisy children.

"They were actually quite well behaved," she told Alice Longbottom at the reception. "Your Neville more than the other two. I think he's just quieter naturally. Harry and Ray are both so active – I'm glad I only have to take care of one of them regularly. Two like that would wear me out."

"Yes, Neville's a very good boy that way." Alice kissed her son's head. "He hates it when people are angry with each other or unhappy. He likes his life to run smoothly."

Peri took a sip of her punch and sighed. "I only hope he has that luxury in these coming years."

"As do I," said Alice, handing Neville a small piece of bread from the buffet table.

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Aletha kept her eyes open as she spun through the Floo. Catching glimpses of the rooms beyond the passing grates was the only way she'd ever been able to stay comfortable in fireplace travel. It just felt too cramped for her taste otherwise.

Suddenly, a small jerk, and she was spinning in place, halfway between one grate and the next – she clamped down on panic, she knew what was going on, someone else was Flooing into the same fireplace at the same time, she'd been shunted into wait mode, it wouldn't last long –

Another jerk, larger this time, and she spun even faster into her own fireplace, losing her balance as the green flames died around her.

"Gotcha!"

There was something to be said for having a husband around, Aletha decided. Especially when he kept you from taking what would otherwise have been a rather painful fall, and then took advantage of your being off-balance and in his arms in a most enjoyable fashion. "I don't know why we didn't do this before," she said when she could speak again. "No more juggling schedules, no more running back and forth between places."

Sirius set her upright and brushed some ashes off her shoulder. "Maybe because I was always too scared you'd say no. How was your day?"

"All right. I spent most of it getting a pretty nasty curse off a five-year-old – nothing painful, but his head was down here, and down here was up there." Aletha pointed to the proper portions of Sirius' anatomy. "His father claimed he'd done it to himself – got hold of a wand when he shouldn't've..."

"You sound skeptical."

"It didn't look like an accident. It looked like something someone would do on purpose. The magic traces were already faded by the time he got in, and muddled up with the counterspells the family had tried, so I can't be sure. Besides, detecting intention is tricky at the best of times."

Sirius nodded. "Dumbledore can do it without much trouble, but I doubt anyone else could."

"And since I'm no Albus Dumbledore, let us pass from this subject to others. Specifically, what's for dinner?"

"Aren't I supposed to ask you that?"

"Two weeks married and you still don't know not to trust my cooking?"

"You have a point. But mine's no better."

"So I suppose we're back to the old standby."

"Take-away?"

"That's right."

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Albus Dumbledore sighed deeply, wishing that simply putting away or destroying the message he'd received a few minutes ago would make it no longer true. But even magic could not do so much.

I knew this would come. But I had hoped it would not come so soon.

He drew parchment, quill, and ink closer and began to compose two notes, very similar in content. "I will have a duty for you, old friend," he told Fawkes, who was watching him closely. "If you would be so kind. You are swifter and safer than any owl."

Fawkes bobbed his head and crooned softly.

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An owl was waiting on the kitchen windowsill when Aletha got home. She opened the window and let it in, took the letter it was carrying, and stroked its head feathers for a moment before getting it a dish of water and a few Owl Treats.

The note was from Sirius. *Delayed at work. Something to do with James and Lily. Should be home before dinnertime. Don't burn house down unless I'm there to watch.*

Aletha crumpled the note and tossed it across the room. "Just for that, I will burn the house down," she said to empty air, and set about making dinner. A simple roast of beef and jacket potatoes would be hard even for her to ruin, and anyone could rip up lettuce and chop vegetables for a salad.

She was feeling quite good about everything when she heard the noise of the Floo in the other room. "Sirius?" she called.

"Yeah."

Her husband sounded distracted, Aletha noticed, distracted and worried about something. "What's wrong?" she asked as he came into the kitchen.

"Nothing." Sirius sat down heavily at the table.

Aletha gave him a long look. "No secrets," she said. "You promised."

Sirius grimaced. "I did, didn't I."

"Yes, you did." Aletha shut the window and placed an Imperturbable Charm on it, did the same with the door, and turned down the oven – the food was mostly done anyway, it could finish a bit more slowly. "Tell me."

Sirius stared at the table. "Do you really want to know?"

"If I didn't, would I be asking?"

"Are you just asking because you want to be in on all my secrets?"

"Aren't I allowed to care about you when you come home looking depressed?"

"What if this isn't my secret to tell?"

"Who am I going to tell about it?"

"How should I know?" Sirius stopped, frowning. "Say, when did this turn into a game of 'speak in questions only'?"

Aletha laughed. "Did you want it to be one?"

Sirius smiled a bit, one-sidedly. "Well, I could use a bit of humor after today. Letha, look, this can't go any farther. We have no way of telling who the spy is, and if this gets out, there'll be hell to pay. You know James and Lily are going into hiding, because the Dork Lord's after them."

"Of course."

"And you know they're using the Fidelius Charm to hide."

"Yes."

"And they asked if I'd be Secret-Keeper."

Aletha nodded. That particular decision had cost her several sleepless nights, but she knew Sirius was the best choice. He was fiercely loyal to the Potters and unlikely to break, but also, if she looked at things coldly, far more expendable than Dumbledore, who had also volunteered for the post.

We'll probably have to go into hiding ourselves once the Charm's performed. But that's still no guarantee of safety. And it'll take us away from our work, just when we can't afford it...

"I was talking to Peter about it today. And he brought up a good point. Since I'm known to be the Secret-Keeper, once the Charm goes forward and the Death Snarfers can't find the Potters anymore, they'll be after me right away. And after you." Sirius pressed Aletha's hand hard. "God, I'd break in an instant if they threatened you, I'd tell them anything they wanted to know..."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't," said Aletha firmly. "I'd kill you myself if you did anything that stupid."

"That's good to know. But I'm not going to be able to in any case." Sirius looked around, as if someone could have sneaked in while they were talking. "Peter's going to be the Secret-Keeper, Letha. Everyone will still think it's me, but it's going to be Peter. That way, if they do come after me, that's the only thing I'll be able to tell them – that I'm not really the Secret-Keeper. It's an extra precaution – the perfect bluff – who'd ever think twice about a talentless little rat like Wormtail?"

He can't be completely talentless if he was still in school," Aletha objected. "But I do see your point. No one would expect this. And let me guess – you haven't told Remus anything about it."

Sirius winced. "I wish I could – but you know what I think."

"Yes, and you know what I think." The Blacks had already had several altercations on this topic, Sirius pointing out that Remus had known about everything that the Death Eaters had got wind of, Aletha countering that so had half the rest of the Order, Sirius bringing up Remus' lycanthropy and the general proclivities of werewolves for the darker magics, Aletha asking acerbically if he really knew his friend so poorly as all that. "Honestly, Sirius, Remus would no sooner be the spy than I would."

"Yes, I know. And that's what scares me." Sirius put his head down on the table. "Any way this turns out, I'm losing someone I care about. Someone who's been my friend. Even if it's some other member of the Order, we've all been friends for years, we've saved each other's lives. How could one of us just go and sell everyone else out like that?"

"I don't know." Aletha stroked her husband's hair. "I really don't know. I almost wish I did."

"You what?" Sirius lifted his head to look at her.

"Not like that – I don't mean I want to become a spy!" Aletha shoved his shoulder. "But I wish I knew what made the spy, whoever it is, turn his coat. Does he really think Voldemort's the better bet? Or is he just scared? And was it his own decision, or did Death Eaters get at him and turn him?" Something occurred to her. "What if they try to turn everyone they catch, and if they can't manage it, they kill them? Maybe you should look at anyone who's faced Death Eaters and got away."

Sirius snorted. "And that would only make you suspect everyone in the Order."

"No, I mean people who have done it alone. The Death Eaters might catch someone alone and say 'spy for us or you die.' If the person says, 'go to hell,' they just kill him. But if he says, 'don't kill me, I'll do what you say,' then they have their spy. See if anyone who's not known for really excellent spellwork has come out of an encounter like that unhurt."

"But if the Death Eaters had turned someone, he wouldn't want it known, because then people would be onto him, the way you said. He'd want to cover up that they'd ever been there."

"It's hard to disguise a Death Eater attack. What are you going to say, oh, sorry, Auror Moody, I cast the Dark Mark over my own house by mistake?"

"That's why they only cast it when they're leaving." Sirius stopped, looking thoughtful. "But you might be onto something there. I'll have a look through some of the old records – ask Frank to help me, he knows them inside and out – see if anyone's had suspicious encounters, time unaccounted for, that sort of thing." He smiled at her, with a small return of his old spirit. "I knew there was a reason I married you."

Aletha shook her head. "The things you learn after the vows are said," she told the refrigerator.

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Peri cradled Ray in her arms and walked up and down the room with him, singing softly. He'd been restless all day, and wasn't sleeping well tonight.

Picking up on the mood in the house. Lucius seemed highly excited about something, but neither she or Narcissa had any idea what. She'd forwarded the information to the Order, writing it in invisible ink between the lines of a commonplace letter to Alice Longbottom, with whom she maintained a regular correspondence. The Longbottoms' blood was quite pure, their only "crime" was fighting on the opposite side of the war from the Malfoys. Lucius had frowned when he'd seen the superscription on the envelope, but had not forbidden the connection.

I don't know what I would have done if he had. Found some other safe way to pass it along, I'm sure.

She peered out the window. A windy, chilly night, this All Hallows Eve. A night for terrible things to happen. And happen they would, for her mandate was not to interfere with the great events that made a world what it would be.

But what if the events interfere with themselves? What if something I've done has changed things, for better or, heaven forbid, for worse?

She walked, and held Ray close, and worried.

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Peter Pettigrew stood trembling in the center of the street. A tear rolled down his face.

Crying for your Master, or for yourself? Sirius wondered. "Reach for it, rat," he snarled.

"Lily and James, Sirius!" Peter sobbed out. "How could you?"

That's it. I'm going to kill him. Sirius closed his hand around the back end of his wand and pulled it free of its holster, aiming directly between Peter's tear-filled eyes, focusing all the hatred he'd felt when he'd seen the house destroyed, the dead bodies of his best friends, his shivering and terrified godson...

"*Sirius!*"

It was one of two voices in the world that could pull his attention away from anything. Time sped back up as he spun around. Aletha was standing behind him, not five feet away, looking at something behind him, her eyes suddenly terrified –

He lunged at her and knocked her to the ground, sheltering her with his own body just as the shockwave from the explosion reached them. “Shield,” she gasped out, and he automatically threw up a spell to deflect the debris that was starting to rain down. “What was that?”

“Don’t know.” Sirius risked a glance behind him. A cloud of smoke enveloped the place where Peter had been. People were screaming. “Either Wormtail making a bloody big mess to cover his tracks, or Wormtail committing suicide. How’d you find me?”

“A map and one of your quills. Dumbledore worked the spell for me, I just had to trigger it. How long have you been following him?”

“All night. You’ve heard?”

She nodded, and reached up to hold him, and to be held. “He was the spy?” she asked.

“Yes.” Sirius didn’t trust himself to say more. Instead he sat up, gathering his wife into his arms, and stared at the place where a man he’d once called friend had stood. The smoke was clearing now, revealing people lying silently on the pavement and the street in unnatural positions, other people screaming as they clutched wounded limbs...

“I have to help them,” Aletha said, getting up. “They’re hurt.”

“They’re Muggles.”

“So what? They’ll have to be Obliviated anyway, one more incident won’t hurt. Come help me.”

And so it was that the personnel of the Magical Catastrophes Department found Sirius Black, holding a frightened four-year-old gently in his arms while his wife healed the child’s broken leg.

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At the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, all was chaos. People were running up and down the halls, screaming and shouting, hugging each other and crying. Remus Lupin nearly splinched himself when he Apparated on top of Alastor Moody. “What’s going on?” he shouted over the noise.

“Haven’t you heard?” Moody bellowed back. “War’s over. Voldemort’s gone.”

“Gone? Since when?”

“Last night sometime.” Moody took another look at Remus. “Come over here,” he said in a more subdued bellow, taking Remus’ arm. “There’s a lot you don’t know.”

Another Apparition crack echoed through the hall. “Remus!”

“Peri!” Remus spun in time to catch the woman in his arms. “What’s going on – won’t you be missed?”

“Not today.” Peri was shaking, smiling broadly even though her eyes were bright with tears. “Not today, no, I won’t be missed today.”

“He hasn’t heard,” Moody shouted at her.

“I know, I can see.” Peri followed the two men into a small room and shut the door behind them. “Do you want to tell him or should I?”

“Well, how much do you know?” Moody countered.

“I know about the Potters. Is there something else to know?”

Remus felt his face blanch. “The Potters? Has something happened to them?”

“Haven’t heard about Black and Pettigrew, then?”

It was Peri’s turn to go white. “No, I haven’t,” she said quickly, but Remus got the distinct impression she was lying. “I haven’t heard anything about them. You tell, then.” She came over to sit beside Remus on the small sofa.

“There’s no good way to tell you this,” said Moody bluntly. “Potter and his wife are dead.”

Peri wrapped her arms around Remus. He returned the embrace and held on; she seemed to be the only stable thing in a world suddenly wrenched sideways. *James and Lily, dead? And he said something about Sirius and Peter too...*

“What about Harry?” he heard himself ask.

“The boy’s alive. But no one knows why. Dumbledore says it looks as if Voldemort tried to kill him and failed, and the spell rebounded and took him out instead.”

“Where...”

"Hagrid's got him for the time being."

Something finally penetrated Remus' mind. "Sirius," he said, a chill penetrating his shoulders and chest. "Sirius was their Secret-Keeper – what happened to him? Why did he tell?"

Moody shook his head. "See, this is where I don't quite follow. Seems that for reasons of his own, Black changed his mind about being Secret-Keeper. Thought he'd bluff it out. Make them think it was him, when all the time it was Pettigrew. Though why he wouldn't at least have told Dumbledore about it..." He shrugged. "At least he told his wife. If he hadn't, we'd probably have him in Azkaban by now."

"Peter?" Remus repeated numbly. "Peter was their Secret-Keeper?"

"And traitor," Moody said grimly. "He's the one, Lupin. The one we've been looking for this past year and more. You never knew, did you?" he asked Peri.

She shook her head. "I don't think I'd ever even met him. Which is probably good – he'd have ratted me out to Lucius before you could say wand. What happened to him?"

"No one's sure. He'd finagled Black into a set-up to make it look like Black had blown him away, and killed a bunch of Muggles in the bargain, but he didn't count on Freeman-Black showing up just in time to pull Black's attention from the shot. We've got twenty eyewitnesses ready to swear Black's wand was nowhere near Pettigrew when the street went up. Twelve confirmed deaths, though."

"Peter?" Remus asked again.

"Like I said." Moody scratched his chin. "His robes were there, with his blood on 'em, and a finger. He might've blown himself up with the spell, but he might also've changed into a rat – they did that for you, did they?" he asked Remus as a side note. Remus nodded. "Well, he might've changed and run off into the sewers. No one's sure. But they're looking for him, sending out bulletins. Human or rat, they'll find him."

Remus shook his head, and kept shaking it. "Peter," he said, incredulously. "Why... why would Peter, of all people..."

"Fear," Moody grunted. "They probably threatened his life. That or offered him power, money, prestige. You know how they work. Probably tried to corrupt a dozen. He was just the one that took."

"No." If he could just say it often enough, it would come true. "No, no, no. They're not dead, they can't be... not James, not Lily... Peri, please, it isn't true, it can't be..."

He was vaguely aware of Moody stumping out, of Peri's arms around him, of her voice whispering in his ear. He could feel her shaking against him, hear the catches in her breath as she cried. But it all seemed secondary to his own mourning for three of the best friends he'd ever had, for he counted Peter, too, as dead, since the man he thought he'd known had died by his own hand more than a year ago.

Still, he could not be entirely desolate. *I still have Peri. And Sirius and Aletha. God, I owe Sirius such an apology. I was ready to believe that he was the spy – that he would betray, that he would kill... dead, they're dead, Lily and James, Harry's an orphan now... Sirius could take him, I suppose, but what if the Death Eaters come after him...*

His thoughts ran in circles, always coming back to the pain of his friends' deaths, but thankful beyond measure for those friends who had been spared to him. Especially the one in his arms.

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Well, I've done it. For better or for worse, I changed something big.

Peri's tears were coming for different reasons than Remus'. She would miss the Potters – though she hadn't known them for long, she had quickly come to see why their deaths were so devastating to their friends – but she was also frightened. She had never meant to change such a large part of the world as Sirius' false arrest.

I have no idea what this will do... it could change everything, it could make things so much worse...

Then she had to laugh, a weak and watery laugh but a laugh nonetheless.

Welcome to humanity, girl. You've made your choices, and they've had consequences you never expected. It's how the rest of the world lives, never knowing what tomorrow will bring. You've made your bed, now lie in it. Figuratively speaking, of course.

"I need your help with something," she whispered when she could sense that Remus' first tide of grief was starting to ebb a bit.

"What is it?"

"Malfoy's bound to be arrested. He'll probably claim he was under Imperius. If they ask me to testify, what should I say?"

Remus pushed away from her a little to look her in the eye. "I don't know," he admitted. "What do you think?"

Peri swallowed hard. "I think... I think that if I displease him, he has ways of hurting me. Even from prison, he could order me killed. There are bound to be Death Eaters who get off. Whereas if I lie for him..."

He'll be in your debt." Even with his mind tangled in sorrow, Remus could understand. "And as long as you don't flaunt that, or try to extort money or favors from him, he'll be just as happy to let it lie."

"The only favor I want is a free hand in the nursery. And I intend to make sure that Ray is just the kind of son his father wants, when his father's looking."

Remus gave her a small smile. "And corrupt the poor child all the rest of the time."

"But of course." Peri looked up as the door opened.

Sirius walked in, Aletha behind him. Peri quickly released Remus and propelled him up and toward his friend. A moment later, the two men were holding each other, both babbling over the sound of each other's voices.

"Sirius, I'm so sorry, I never should have suspected—"

"No, it's my fault, I should have known you'd never—"

"—couldn't have been you, what would you get—"

"—how we never saw it was Wormtail all along—"

Peri went to Aletha and embraced her, leading her to the couch where she and Remus had just been sitting.

This is the time for mourning. The time for saying goodbye. Tomorrow will be soon enough to discuss saying hello. Tomorrow, we'll talk about Harry.

But it was Aletha who brought it up, only about an hour and a half later. "What about Harry?" she asked in a husky voice, thickened with her crying. "Where is he? Who's taking care of him?"

"Hagrid came for him last night," Sirius said. "He said Dumbledore had told him to take Harry to his aunt and uncle's. I let him use my motorbike for it, you know he can't Apparate."

"But he's yours now," said Remus. "He belongs to you."

Sirius shook his head. "So you think I should go take him?"

"I think you should at least ask about it," said Peri. "It's your duty."

Sirius took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "All right. I'll go find Dumbledore."

"We'll come with you," said Aletha, getting up.

The Headmaster, when found, proved helpful but obstinate. "I understand that your claim is perfectly legitimate," he told Sirius. "But Harry will be safest with his aunt and uncle at the moment."

"But they hate magic!" Aletha protested. "Lily used to tell me how sad she was that her sister... hated her..." She choked up for a moment, then got control of herself. "Harry needs to be with people he knows, people who love him. Not strangers who just happen to be related to him by blood."

"But it is their blood relation to him that will keep him safe. Let me explain..."

Peri kept her eyes on the floor through Dumbledore's careful account of the events of the night just past, and why they would make the house of Petunia Dursley the safest possible place for Harry Potter. When he had finished, she looked up. "So no Death Eaters will be able to get at him there?" she asked.

"Precisely. He will be as safe there as he was in his own home." Dumbledore's eyes were bleak. "Safer."

"But the Death Eaters won't be around forever," Remus said. "Most of them should be rounded up within a few months. Peri can give us some ideas of who was involved. Once things get a bit safer, could Sirius go and get Harry?"

"That might work," Aletha said. "Give us a little while to get over this, and get the house ready to bring him home." She smiled through her tears. "Do you think it would be safe to get him before the end of May?"

Dumbledore looked her up and down. "Is there a reason you ask?" he said, a ghost of the usual twinkle beginning to show in his eyes.

Aletha nodded. "Sirius, do you think you can handle one more piece of news?"

Sirius wiped his eyes. "Good or bad?"

"Good, I think. Very good."

"Day's a roller coaster already. Go ahead."

"I'm pregnant."

Peri broke into half-hysterical giggles as Sirius slid off his chair, unconscious.

Though it's not like I'm surprised, when I connived to have this happen...

It was good to know that her labors with the drops of blood had not been in vain.

Now I just wait and see if the results are anything like what happened where I came from.

A saucy little daughter would be good for Sirius. Of course, so would a handsome, troublemaking son.

But he has that already in Harry. God, I hope they can get him soon, he won't have an easy time of it there...

"Will they be allowed to visit?" Remus asked Dumbledore, watching Aletha minister to Sirius. "Go and see Harry?"

The Headmaster stroked his beard, considering. "Aletha is Muggleborn and knows how to act in a Muggle neighborhood, and Sirius will be intelligent enough to follow her directions. I see no reason why the Dursleys should deny access to Harry's legal guardian and his wife. The only problem which might arise is that they might wish to hand Harry over too soon. I suppose I shall have to go and speak to them." He rose. "Remus, can I ask you to handle the arrangements?" he asked sadly.

"For James and Lily?" Remus nodded. "I.. think I can."

"I'll help you," Peri said quietly, putting her hand on his arm. "I have the whole day free."

"How did you get that, anyway?" Remus asked her as Dumbledore left the room and Sirius sat up, groaning.

Peri mustered a small smile. "Narcissa was only too delighted to have the opportunity to take care of her own son for once. He's growing very close to her."

"Oh, I'm sorry..."

"Why? I'm not. He won't have less love for me just because he's learning to love his real mother. And your position is unimpeachable," she added naughtily. "His blood father is unlikely to find time for him at any point in the near future."

"Yes, I wanted to ask you about that." Remus led her out of the room, leaving Sirius and Aletha alone together. "With the war being over, we won't have this place to meet anymore. I can't exactly come to where you are, and you'll have a hard time getting to where I am. And meeting in public is far too risky."

Peri winced. "Yes. If we're seen..."

"It's a miracle Peter never saw us together, or found you here. And I know how Malfoy's mind works. A hint of trouble, even a sniff of scandal – and a scandal there would be if his son's nursemaid was found consorting with a werewolf – and you'll be out on your ear."

Peri bared her teeth. "I refuse to order my life around his stupid prejudices," she said heatedly.

"You're willing to lie under oath to the Ministry for him, but this you can't handle?"

"That's about him. This is about me – about *us*. I've never met any other man who makes me feel the way you do." *Strict truth.* "And I will not give you up just because my employer might think you're unsuitable. What we need is someplace to meet where he would never go, and neither would any of his toadies."

"Muggle places, maybe," said Remus after a moment of consideration. "Restaurants, shopping malls, that sort of thing. He'd never go to one of them, and no one he thinks proper would either."

"It could work." Peri thought it over. "It would work. Tell me where and when, and I'll be there. Ray and all."

"The only problem is, what if he asks you where you've been and what you've been doing?"

"I'll tell him I've been exposing Ray to a wide range of cultural diversity."

"And if he forbids you?"

"I almost think you don't want to see me anymore."

"No!"

"Then why don't we burn that bridge when we come to it, and not plan too far ahead."

Because my foreknowledge ends here. From now on, I'm just like everyone else. Trapped in the present, with no certainties about the future.

And Merlin up a tree, is it ever scary...

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 6: Camelot

“So, a baby,” said Peri thoughtfully to Remus as they sat together by an indoor fountain, Ray busily engaged in walking around and around it. “How do you think Sirius will handle being a father?”

“He’ll manage somehow. James was scared out of his skin right up until Harry was actually born...” Remus’ smile faded. “Two months,” he said, looking up at the falling water. “Two months and I still can’t get used to it. I wake up every morning and I have to readjust my mind to get it around everything that’s changed. And I keep thinking today will be the day. Today I’ll finally get used to having the war over and not seeing James or Lily anywhere. And it never happens.”

Peri laid her hand on his shoulder. “Tell me something,” she said. “You knew them so much better than I did. If they had been given the choice – if they had known that their deaths would end the war, would save Harry’s life, would make everyone so free, so happy – do you think they would have taken it?”

“In a heartbeat.” Remus’ hand found Peri’s. “I know they would have. But they didn’t. They died thinking that was it. That they’d died for nothing. That Voldemort was just going to blast through them, take Harry too, and go on and do whatever else he damn well pleased...”

“But don’t you think they know now?”

Remus was silent for a long time. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I just don’t know. I want to think so... I want to believe it...”

“Then do.”

“It’s not that easy. What if I’m wrong?”

“Who’s hurt by it if you are? Not them – I don’t think much can hurt them now. And not you. I hate seeing you so sad all the time.” She squeezed his hand gently. “I remember...” She stopped quickly before she said too much.

“What?” Remus turned to look at her. “What do you remember?”

“When some people I cared about very much died,” Peri said carefully. “I grieved, but after a while I realized that there had to be something beyond grief. That they and I hadn’t been the only people in the world, and that it was selfish to pretend that everything had ended just because they’d died...” She closed her eyes in embarrassment as she realized, five seconds too late, her mistake. “Do I have a big sign floating over my head right now that says ‘tactless’?” she asked.

From the darkness, she heard a sound she’d heard far too seldom recently. Remus was chuckling. “No. Maybe you should, but you don’t. And I understand what you’re saying. Even if you did say it rather inartistically.”

“My liege, my liege, your pardon,” Peri said, sliding to her knees, eyes still shut. “I have wronged you and our gracious kingdom by speaking – horror of horrors! – inartistically. Is it granted that I live beyond this hour?”

“It is so granted. Lift thy head, wench.”

Peri looked up. Remus had his pocketknife in his hand, blade extended. “I dub thee the Lady of Artistically,” he said, tapping her shoulders with it. “So that when you are at home, you shall be in Artistically. You may rise.”

Peri groaned. “I would, but that pun was so bad it made my knees go all wobbly. Can you give me a hand?”

“If you like. Which one?” Remus helped her back onto the seat, dodging her smack.

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Aletha was content to sit on the bench which Sirius had obligingly cleared of snow (granted, he’d done so by scooping it all up and dumping it on Harry’s head, but Harry hadn’t seemed to mind) and watch her husband and his godson play. They’d been visiting Harry at his relatives’ house for two months, and everything seemed to be going well so far.

And if all goes well, by late spring we should be able to bring him home with us...

The Dursleys had grudgingly agreed to let them visit Harry twice a week for a few hours, as long as they were discreet about their comings and goings, and never let anyone in the neighborhood know that there was anything unusual about Harry. This meant, to Sirius’ disgruntlement, that he was stuck in human form for the duration.

But a little discipline will do him good. Honestly, some days I think he’s so regimented at work that he breaks out twice as much at home...

Another woman came up the path to the little playground, leading a small person by the hand. It was difficult to tell through all the wrappings, but Aletha estimated the newcomer to be a bit older than Harry – maybe two, or two and a half – and judging by the long brown tendrils escaping from the hood, there was a little girl under there.

Sirius saw them too, breaking off his fresh attack on Harry and going to one knee. “Harry, look here,” he said. “Somebody new. Can you say hi?”

Harry shook snow off his head and waved. "Hi," he said.

The little girl waved back, but didn't say anything.

"This is Hermione," said the woman, tucking some of her daughter's hair back under the hood. "Are you new to the neighborhood? I haven't seen you around before."

"Oh, we don't live here," said Aletha. "We're just visiting Harry – we like to see him every once in a while, and his relatives don't mind."

"Are you the people they keep saying will take him in once you get settled?" the woman asked, turning intelligent brown eyes on Aletha. "They've been very adamant that he's not staying. Is there something wrong with him?"

"No," said Sirius emphatically. "There's nothing wrong with this boy – isn't that right?" he added to Harry. "Nothing wrong with you that a good roll in the snow won't cure!" He scooped the boy off his feet, deposited him on his back in the snow, and rolled him vigorously back and forth, Harry's shrieks of delight sounding throughout.

"Me too!" cried Hermione, darting forward. "Me too, me too!"

"Not shy, is she?" said Aletha, smiling. "Care to sit down?"

"Thank you. Rose Granger."

"Aletha Freeman-Black. The reprobate in the snow is Sirius Black."

"Pleased to meet you both."

Aletha chatted with Mrs. Granger – Dr. Granger, as she soon discovered, for both the woman and her husband were dentists – for quite a while, until something caught her eye. Sirius was helping the children roll balls for snowmen. Harry and Hermione were throwing themselves at the ever-enlarging balls gleefully – but weren't they moving even when no one was pushing them?

"Sirius," she hissed. "Back off a second."

Sirius frowned, but stepped back. The two children threw themselves at the ball of snow, by now as tall as either of them. It rolled a few inches and stopped. They attacked it again, and again. Each time, it rolled a little farther. Then Hermione held up her hand and loosed off a long speech in semi-incomprehensible baby talk. Harry seemed to understand it, though, since he nodded gravely every time Hermione paused.

The two children backed off and held up their hands, palms facing the huge snowball, which was directly between them and a clump of trees.

"Odd," said Dr. Granger, frowning. "What are they doing?"

"I'm not sure," Aletha fibbed. She knew what Harry was probably doing, or trying to do, but Hermione was a Muggle...

Or not. Certain childhood memories of her own nudged her consciousness. The day she'd forgotten to get a signature on a permission form for a much-desired field trip, yet, like magic, there had been her mother's handwriting on the form when she'd sheepishly produced it... the day her father wondered aloud why they hadn't had to call a piano tuner for five years, and Aletha had counted and come up with the time she had begun lessons herself...

The snowball began to move. Dr. Granger gasped. Sirius said something under his breath. Aletha tagged it mentally as deserving of a smack later. *Harry will hear enough bad language in his life, thank you very much. He doesn't need to associate it with doing magic.*

For that was what the children were doing. There could be no mistaking it. The snowball was rolling along the ground with no one pushing it – it was picking up speed – it was headed straight for the trees –

Both children jumped up and down, cheering, as snowball and trees met with tremendous force.

Dr. Granger couldn't have looked any whiter if the snow had struck her, Aletha noted. She recognized the look. Her own mother had worn it the day they'd discovered that there really was such a thing as magic.

Sirius was moving now, digging through his pocket, and his hand came out with his wand in it. He waved it first around their little circle of five, cutting them off from the rest of the world with a Privacy Spell, then stepped outside it to Disillusion it, so that Muggles wouldn't wonder what a cloud of thick gray smoke was doing hovering over their playground.

Aletha called Harry over to her. Hermione came with him. Dr. Granger snatched her daughter up and held her. "Mummy, it hurts," the girl complained, wiggling. "Too tight!"

Aletha set Harry on the bench beside her, since lap space was starting to become an issue. "There's nothing wrong with your daughter," she said. "She's simply different. We can explain, if you like, or we can get in contact with experts..."

But they'll say not to bother until the girl's Hogwarts age, her conscience whispered. They'll say, why unfit her for Muggle life? Let her live normally until then... except that with what her mother's just seen, she'll never accept the girl as normal again unless someone can prove to her that this is only a different kind of normal...

Sirius stepped back through the Privacy Spell and sized up the situation immediately. "Nothing to be scared of," he said, waving his hand through

the smoke-like substance. "It's not solid, there's nothing keeping you here. You could leave now if you like, but I hope you stay. I think we might be able to explain what's going on."

"I would appreciate that," Dr. Granger said in a somewhat strained voice. "I have just seen my daughter – what *did* she do?"

"We call it magic," said Aletha. "Accidental or wild magic, in Hermione's case – though she seems to have it pretty well tamed. As I said, it's not abnormal, she has no problem that needs to be fixed. She just has... skills. Skills that, if she wants to use them, will need to be trained."

"And what does she pay for this *training*?" Dr. Granger looked piercingly at both of them. "Her soul?"

"No!" Sirius looked vaguely appalled. "Of course not! It's a school, that's all! She'll go away to boarding school and learn to be a witch!"

Dr. Granger's arms tightened around Hermione again.

"Pay no attention to the man by the smoke," said Aletha patiently. "He's what we call a pureblood, which means his family's been marrying their own cousins for so long that his ability to walk upright and speak in simple sentences is a genetic miracle. It also means he's seen magic since he was a baby and doesn't understand that there are people who haven't. I, on the other hand, am Muggleborn – my father was a musician, my mother worked with injured wildlife. I had no idea there was any such thing as magic until I turned eleven. Magic as we understand it is not good or evil, it just *is*..."

"And it *is* cold out here," said Sirius, wrapping his arms around himself. "Please pardon my atrocious manners, but may we come back to your house and keep fumbling through the explanations in a nice warm kitchen instead of out here? It'll help with throwing us out, too. I mean, you can't very well throw us out here. We're out already. But once we're in, it's much easier..."

"Stop," said Dr. Granger, lifting a hand. "Please." The corners of her mouth were twitching upwards. "It so happens that my husband is home, and I don't fancy trying to explain this to him myself."

"No, not at all," Sirius agreed. "Much easier to have us do it. Then you can throw us out when you're done. Or have him throw us out. Or one of you throw one of us – each..." He trailed off as Aletha leaned over and scooped up a handful of snow meaningfully.

"What do you think, Harry?" she asked the boy by her side. "Should I get Padfoot?"

Harry bounced up and down, nodding hard. "Yeah, yeah, get Pa-fut!"

Aletha aimed and threw just as Sirius darted out of the Privacy Spell. A yelp from beyond the screen confirmed her aim. Harry laughed.

"Well done," said Dr. Granger, smiling slightly.

"Thank you." Aletha gathered Harry into her arms as the Privacy Spell vanished and Sirius, brushing snow out of his hair, appeared before them, along with the rest of the world. "I do try."

"Which is what convinced me not to run for my life. That and his silly prattling." Dr. Granger lifted Hermione onto her hip. "The devil is always described as proud and without a sense of humor about anything, especially himself. Your making fun of each other, and yourselves, makes me think that you're unlikely to be evil, whatever you are."

Aletha smiled. "Thank you. But I'm afraid it's a long story." She followed the other woman down the path again. "What we are, I mean. And why..."

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"Are you saying we'll lose her?" David Granger asked some hours later.

"In some ways, yes," Sirius said. "Most people who go to Hogwarts stay in the magical world. Some come back and live as Muggles, or live halfway between."

"Wouldn't that be awkward for taxes and such?" Rose inquired. They'd gone to first name terms sometime around the homemade brownies.

Aletha smiled. "You haven't seen forgery until you've seen magical forgery," she said. "The spells for that are carefully monitored, of course, and it's against our laws to defraud Muggle businesses or counterfeit Muggle money, but papers are very easy to change or invent outright. Hogwarts even has a Muggle identity, I believe – do you remember what it is, Sirius?"

"Oh, something like 'Lily of the Valley School of Fine Arts,'" Sirius said, nearly spilling his tea with an extravagant gesture. "So if she wanted to get Muggle employment, she'd have a secondary education listed. We've been doing this for a thousand years – give us a little credit for knowing how."

"But you haven't had systems like these to deal with for a thousand years," David pointed out. "Bureaucracy and red tape are still with us, but information gets around much more easily these days. It'll be harder and harder to hide."

"We'll manage," said Aletha firmly. "But what I'm thinking about is that there is still no good way to do what we've just done – explain to worried parents that their children are not ill, abnormal, or possessed. It's left until the children are Hogwarts age, and if parents are even half-looking, they'll be noticing odd things about their children well before then. Do they just write it off as their imaginations?"

"That's probably what I would have done, if you hadn't been there," said Rose. "Convinced myself I was drowsing for a moment, or that I just hadn't noticed Neenie pushing the ball with her hands." David had greeted his daughter with her nickname, and Sirius thought it was adorable. Aletha

liked it herself, but had refrained from gushing.

"But now we know," said David, looking into the living room, where Harry and Hermione were playing side by side in companionable solitude. "Our little girl is magical. So what do we do now?"

Sirius rested his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. "Wish I knew," he said. "I really wish I knew."

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"You never seem to have trouble getting time to see me," Peri said. "I thought my job was flexible, but you must have the easiest time getting days off..."

"Well, in a sense, all my days are days off," Remus said with an attempt at lightness which he was aware hadn't gone well. "I'm... between jobs at the moment."

"And just how long has this moment lasted?" Peri asked.

There are days I wish she wasn't quite so discerning. "The Order work paid. Some. And I've had an odd job here and there since then."

"But you haven't been working full-time since the war ended."

"No."

"When was the last time you had a full-time job for more than a month?"

Remus shifted uncomfortably. "Peri, I... I don't look for full-time work."

"Why not?"

"Because I know perfectly well I won't get it."

"Why not?"

"Because – oh, good Lord, you know..." He let his hand drop to his side. "I come to see you because you seem, for some reason that is beyond my comprehension, to like seeing me," he said to the far wall. "And I like seeing you, and Ray. But I could do without the Spanish Inquisition..." He closed his eyes, hearing her quick intake of breath. "I shouldn't have said that, should I."

"Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!" Peri whisper-shouted, grinning madly. Her face relaxed into gentler lines. "I'm sorry. Once again, my astounding lack of tact surfaces as my distinguishing characteristic. One of these days they're going to collar me as a medical specimen – human born entirely without tact. I'll go right between the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman."

Ray came around to them and spouted a long string of consonants, pointing at the fountain. "You want a penny to throw in?" Remus asked, rattling his pocket. Ray nodded hard. "Well, I may be a bit stretched at the moment..."

"Like butter scraped over too much bread," Peri put in.

"But I think I can do that." Remus handed Ray a penny, and lifted him up to the edge of the fountain. "Make a wish."

"He's too little, and it's your penny," said Peri. "I think you get the wish."

"I could use one." Remus watched the coin sail into the water.

May I find something, somewhere, that will allow me to keep these people near me, and make sure they're never harmed again.

And if it could keep me from starving or freezing to death, that would be nice too.

"So what did you wish for?" Peri held out her arms to take Ray.

"You know better than that. If I tell you, it won't come true."

"So make something up. Surprise me."

"All right. I wished that I could know exactly where all your quotes and quips come from."

"You mean you don't?"

"Well, most of the quotes I can trace. And the quips, I assume, come from your ever so interesting mind. But every so often you come up with something I've never heard of. I suppose it's insurance against those times."

"Just let me know if you're puzzled, and I'll explain."

"And people say telling the wish makes it not come true," Remus said to the fountain. "So when are we meeting Sirius and Letha for dinner?"

"Five-thirty. And it's almost that now. Come on, fox, we have a date."

"Fox?" Remus asked as Peri set Ray on the floor.

"Doesn't he look a bit like one?" Peri took one of the boy's hands, leaving Remus to take the other. "A snow fox, I mean, with white fur. Pointed face, very smart and cunning..."

"Foxes are tricksters in a lot of the old stories."

"Better than ever. Have I told you about his new favorite game? Cry and wake Peri up in the middle of the night, then laugh at her when she comes in the room?"

"Do you really do that?" Remus asked Ray, who nodded. "You really do? Well, that's very naughty of you. Good work."

"Men," Peri muttered. "They all think they're kings. By the way, Remus, did we ever establish which king you are?"

"No, but I think I'd like to be King Arthur."

"Looking for a name change?"

"Well, Remus never got to be a king – he was killed by his brother before his city even got started. Whereas Arthur never really died. He just floated off to Avalon. So it might be nice. But let me put it this way – not if you're going to be Guinevere."

"What, and go looking for a handsome Lancelot?" Peri laughed. "Not likely. I know the type I like, and you're it. Besides, Lancelot was a self-centered prig."

"Too true, too true. Would you be surprised to learn that Sirius can sing that one song of his from memory?"

"Sirius sings everything from memory, doesn't he? He can't read music."

Remus frowned. "No, he doesn't, but how did you know that?"

"Believe it or not, you're not the only person I talk to. Or write letters to. I didn't dare ask Narcissa to front my spying work, but personal letters are a different story. Aletha and I have been trading stupid Marauder stories."

Remus blanched. "Dear God, I'll never be able to face you again."

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No sleep, Ray said obstinately as Peri held him close, humming gently to him.

Yes sleep, said Peri. **Sleep is good. It makes you happy.**

No. No sleep.

If you sleep, when you open your eyes it will be tomorrow, and we can play some more. If you don't sleep, you have to stay here and listen to grown-ups talk boring grown-up talk. Peri embellished her mental image of the conversation with all sorts of words she knew Ray wouldn't have the faintest idea about, and deliberately damped down her own semi-automatic translation for his mind. **Yes sleep.**

Ray grumbled a little but conceded. **Yes sleep. Play tomorrow?**

Yes. Play all tomorrow.

Good. Ray's eyes drifted shut, and his body relaxed all over.

"Wish I could fall asleep like that," said Sirius, shaking his head.

"It's a side effect of innocence," Aletha said blandly.

"Never mind."

"You wouldn't be able to handle it anyway, Sirius," Remus said. "I don't think you've ever been innocent."

"Well, more innocent than I am now."

"Point taken."

"What are you going to do with him?" Aletha asked Peri.

"Slip home, make sure his nappy's dry, set an alarm to tell me if he wakes, and leave him there. Times like this I want to bless whoever invented Apparition."

"You can Apparate without waking him?" Sirius looked amazed. "How?"

"Magic," said Peri lightly.

"I knew that."

"Good, then you know as much as is good for you. Give me a hand here?"

Remus accepted the limp bundle of boy so that Peri could stand up. "Your own fault, Padfoot," he said, handing Ray back to her. "I could have told you not even to try, she'll shut you down every time..."

They were still wrangling on this subject when Peri returned several minutes later. "So how was your day?" she asked, resuming her seat.

"Well, it turns out Harry's got another magical child on his block," said Aletha.

"On the block that will very soon cease to be his," Sirius corrected. "Anyway, she's about two, cute little thing. Looks a bit like you, Peri, except her hair's wilder." He mimed the construction of Granger hair with his hands. "Her name's Hermione, but they call her Neenie..."

And she's still there. Another bright idea of mine that didn't work out. Peri sighed as Sirius and Aletha explained how they had discovered Hermione's magic and explained it to her parents.

"But there really should be someone to do that," said Aletha. "Or... I don't know. What about a place people could go to learn about the magical world?"

"A visitor's center?" suggested Remus. "With brochures?"

Everyone laughed, but Sirius was tapping his fingers on the table. "That might be something," he said when they had settled down. "Not the brochures, but that visitor's center thing. Why shouldn't there be one? There's Muggleborn students every year, and I bet at least half of them forget something when they get their sponsored trip to Diagon Alley. And they're going to be scared and disoriented, and that's not even counting their parents..."

"Muggles who marry a wizard or witch would appreciate something like that too," Remus said. "I know my mother sometimes didn't want to bother my father with little things, but she didn't have anyone else to ask. If there was a place she could have called, or firecalled..."

"And that's another thing," said Aletha, snapping her fingers. "Magical and Muggle communication. People who don't have Floo fires, or telephones, could go there and use whichever one they need."

"It could be like an offshoot of Diagon Alley," Peri said, catching the excitement around the table. "With stores, places to eat, things to do and see – and magical people could go there to learn about the Muggle world too! There could be Muggle volunteers who would answer questions – you'd need people to answer the phones – I think it could work!"

None of them so much as looked at a watch until two hours later.

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"So this place needs a name," said Sirius, tapping the pencil Aletha had lent him on the napkin he'd been doodling on. They were back by the fountain, having been politely asked to leave the restaurant after being there for an hour without ordering anything else.

"A name?" said Remus. "We don't even know if it will ever be real, if anyone will think it's a good idea, and you think it needs a name?"

"If it has a good name, it's more likely to be real," argued Sirius. "It needs a really good name. Something that talks about what it does, but also about what we want it to do. We want it to be a place where people get together. Where things get done. Where everyone's the same, and nothing goes too wrong."

"Why not order the weather too?" Peri asked. "Not too hot in summer, winter can't be too long, it can only rain at night..."

Aletha grinned and began to sing.

A law was made a distant moon ago here,

July and August cannot be too hot,

And there's a legal limit to the snowhere,

In Camelot

The winter is forbidden till December

And exits March the second on the dot

By order summer lingers through September

In Camelot...

"Wait!" Remus burst out. "Wait, I think I've got something!"

His eyes were shut. Everyone waited.

"Center," he said finally. "It'll be a Center. A Center for something. An A word."

Peri frowned. "Action?"

"Activities?" suggested Aletha.

"All," said Sirius. "Center for All to... something."

"M," said Remus. "Magic, Muggle, no. Those aren't 'to' words."

"What's the next letter?" Peri asked.

"E."

"Magically," Peri muttered. "Magically Explore!"

"Center for All to Magically Explore," Remus repeated. "Good. Now we need—"

"Lifestyles," said Aletha before he could finish.

Remus bowed to her. "Center for All to Magically Explore the Lifestyles..."

"What are we spelling?" Sirius asked.

Aletha whistled a few bars. Sirius' face cleared. "Oh."

"Exactly," said Peri, grinning. "Any ideas?"

"Lifestyles, something O," Sirius muttered. "How about Others?"

"That's perfect," said Remus. "How about this. The Center for All to Magically Explore the Lifestyles of Others Today. Also known as—"

"Camelot!" everyone chorused, and joined in the song.

Camelot, Camelot, I know it sounds a bit bizarre,

But in Camelot, Camelot, that's how conditions are...

Sirius took a line alone.

The rain may never fall till after sundown

Then it was Peri's turn.

By eight the morning fog must disappear

Remus took over.

In short, there's simply not

A more congenial spot

Everyone joined in again, laughing.

For happily-ever-aftering than here

In Camelot!

xXxXx

"So, King Arthur," said Peri lightly as she and Remus walked down the street, hand in hand. "Will you start a Round Table in your court at Camelot?"

"Indeed I will. And the knights will dance where'er they're able."

Peri laughed with him, and they did a little dance step down the street, until Remus pulled her into the shelter of a doorway. "You need to have more fun," he said. "You're beautiful when you're having fun. And you take far too much far too seriously."

"You should talk."

"Yes, I know. But I've had years of bad company to amend my fault." Remus' face turned grave. "Very bad company, in some cases."

Peri shook her head. "You couldn't have known," she said. "No one could have." *Except me, and I wasn't supposed to tell...* "And he's dead now, isn't he? Dead and no more trouble to anyone." Exhaustive searching had shown no trace of Peter Pettigrew, and he had been labeled, tentatively,

as a suicide.

"So they think." Remus sighed deeply. "I just can't help feeling there's something hanging. Something that should have happened, but hasn't."

"Yes, Camelot," Peri said firmly, opening Remus' arms and inserting herself into them. "That's obviously meant to happen, from the way we're all crazy about it."

"No, I mean something bad. Something like... I don't know, like someone else dying..."

"Stop," Peri said, pressing a hand against his mouth. "Please, Remus, don't talk like that. Fate doesn't need any more tempting around here."

Please, she willed him as his lips met hers. Don't ruin it. I did more than I ever meant to, we might even all get a happy ending out of this... don't destroy it all now..

xXxXx

In every creation lies the seed of its own destruction.

Some merely sprout sooner than others.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 7: Fiasco

"To the grand opening of Camelot, tomorrow," Remus toasted, lifting his glass.

"To Harry's homecoming, next week," Aletha added, tapping hers against his.

"To our daughter, next month," said Sirius, sliding his non-glass-holding arm around Aletha's shoulders.

"To all our fondest dreams," said Peri, clinking her glass with her friends'. "May they come true, sooner or later, and sooner rather than later."

"Hear, hear," said Sirius.

Three flutes of champagne and one of sparkling cider were sipped from.

"So, will you be there?" Remus asked Peri. "At the opening?"

"Wouldn't miss it, Mr. Librarian."

"Librarian," Remus repeated, smiling broadly. "I still can't believe that."

"Believe it. The job is yours, likewise the pay and the prestige, neither of which is much."

"But still more than I've ever had before."

"I'm happy for you." Peri stroked a finger down Remus' hand where it held his glass. "Save me a good seat, will you?"

"Just one, or is Ray coming?"

"He's still little enough to sit on my lap. Or yours."

"It'd better be yours. I have to help with the ribbon-cutting."

"He'd love to help you with it..."

"Are you out of your mind? With everyone who'll be there, and watching? Why not just go tell Lucius firsthand that you're exposing his son to Muggle culture?"

"Hold up! I never said he should. I just said he'd love to. I know he shouldn't, he can't, so there's no need to yell at me. Unless you think it's fun."

Remus gave a stiff nod and put on a stern tone. "Yes, of course I think it's fun. I love it."

Peri laughed.

"I want to keep yelling at you all my life," Remus went on, his voice softening. "I want to be the only man entitled to yell at you, or whistle at you, or anything else. I want..."

Peri shrank back in her seat. "Maybe we shouldn't go there," she said. *It's happening again... why does the one thing in the world I want the most have to be the one thing I can't have?*

"Why not?" Remus leaned forward. "Peri, you know how I feel about you. You must know. And I don't think I'm imagining that you feel the same way about me."

Peri considered lying for a moment, but discarded it. *He deserves the truth.* "You're not. Imagining it, I mean. I do care about you. I do... like you a lot."

"You don't have to be afraid to say it." Remus let his eyes wander across to Sirius, who had his hand on Aletha's belly and a look of joyous wonder on his face. "Look what saying it did for them. I'll start if you want. I..."

"Don't. Please." The words hurt coming out, like biting on a sore spot in her mouth, but she couldn't let him say it, couldn't let it begin. *If you start, I won't be able to stop myself.*

"Peri, why not?"

She met his eyes, and what she had to say was almost lost in what she wanted to say. She forced her feelings back. "I'm not free, Remus. I have an obligation. Something I promised I'd do. And I can't do it and be with you."

"What is it?"

"It's Ray."

Remus frowned. "But now that I have work, you wouldn't need to..."

Peri shook her head. "You don't understand. It's not the money. It's him. I... I know what he could be. What he can be, if he has the chance. But he won't get the chance if he doesn't have someone to help him. Narcissa's doing her best, but she can't do it alone. Not and keep up appearances, and she has to do that, or else Lucius will get suspicious and find out what's going on, and then he'll take charge of Ray himself, and..." She had to turn away to fight down tears. "It isn't you. Please believe me, it isn't you. If I didn't have Ray to think about, I would have said yes a month ago."

A month ago and a world away... no. No more of that.

Remus' voice was flat. "I understand."

"No. You don't. I wish you could, but you can't. But no, I don't wish that either. I don't want you to be where I am." Peri knew she wasn't making sense, but she couldn't bring herself to care. "I hope you don't ever have to choose between two people you love, and know you'll hurt everyone no matter what you choose."

"Don't worry, I won't." His voice had picked up a hint of venom. "Thanks to you, I can't choose at all. Excuse me, I need to get home and rest up for the ceremony." Peri winced as she heard his chair scrape against the floor. "Good night, Sirius, Letha. I hope I'll see you tomorrow."

"Of course," said Aletha, sounding confused. "But you're not leaving already, are you?"

"That is generally what it means when a person gets up and says good night," Remus said lightly. "I'm sorry to abandon you, but I really can't stay."

"Not even to feel your goddaughter kick?" Sirius cajoled. "Come on, you know you want to."

"Thank you, no. I'd rather not do anything else that could be misinterpreted."

Peri clenched her teeth against misery as Remus' footsteps receded into the distance. Looking up, she met brown eyes and gray, both equally surprised.

"What on earth did we miss?" Aletha asked.

Peri forced a tiny smile. "Nothing much," she said. "I just had to... remind Remus about a few things. Excuse me, please? I should get back, it's getting late..."

"You're still coming to the ceremony tomorrow, aren't you?" Sirius said, standing up as she did.

"Yes, I'm still coming."

"With Ray?" Aletha asked.

"With Ray." Peri hugged her friend carefully, and laid a hand on Aletha's belly. "Now you be good tonight, little one," she said in mock-scolding tones. "Let your mummy and daddy love each other for a while, because your daddy will be very busy tomorrow making sure everybody is safe at the big ceremony, and your mummy won't get to see him much."

The baby girl kicked at Peri's hand. "I think that's baby for, *Yeah, right,*" Aletha said, chuckling. "If she needs to be the center of attention this much now, I hate to think of what she'll be like when she's born."

"Comes by it honestly, I'd say," said Peri, flicking her eyes towards Sirius.

Sirius folded his arms. "I resemble that remark."

"You most certainly do," Aletha said, threading her hand through one of his elbows. "Let's go home, love. Good night, Peri, we'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night." Peri watched them go, then made her way back to the ladies' room, from where she Apparated back to Malfoy Manor. Ray was already asleep, and Narcissa seemed to sense that something wasn't right, merely nodding to Peri before slipping out of the nursery.

Peri went into her own room, shut the door, and flicked Silencing Charms on walls, floor, and ceiling. Standing in the center of the room, she transformed, and howled grief and pain and the irreconcilable impossibility of two loves, each greater than the other.

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Remus sank onto his couch, feeling the beginnings of a headache in his temples. *Why does she have to be so damned noble and self-sacrificing?*

Because if she wasn't, she wouldn't be Peri, the back of his mind said. *And you wouldn't love her nearly so much.*

Love her. He almost wished he didn't... but no, he couldn't unwish something that had brought so much light and joy into his life. Even if it was, at the moment, producing nothing but pain.

And let's be fair, she is still bringing in information that couldn't come from anywhere else. Like that tip about the Longbottoms. Thank God they were warned about that in time. I just wish they'd been able to catch the Death Eaters, rather than running them off...

Still, most of the Death Eaters were rounded up now, and the ones who weren't had to act respectable. Like Malfoy. Why did Peri stay at that

godforsaken place, anyway?

You know why. Because of Ray. You've seen what she's talking about, the promise he shows, how sweet he is. You care about him yourself. And he's bonded to Peri now. It wouldn't be right to take her away from him, not before he's ready.

Remus sat up straighter. *Wait a minute. Wait just a minute. That might be the answer. When he's ready. Most children stop having nannies when they're six or seven, eight at the most. It's a long time to wait, but I'm used to waiting for things, and it's better than not having her at all...*

He almost snatched up a quill to write to her immediately, but his good sense restrained him. *You can't write to her directly, Lucius will see the letter and want to know what she's doing in contact with you, and there's everything you're working to save gone out the window without a broom. You'll see her tomorrow. Wait until then. Wait until the ceremony's over. And then apologize, and tell her this.*

And then what? She'll fall into my arms?

Well, maybe if you're lucky. Remus recognized this part of his mind – it was the one that sounded most like Sirius.

And what if I'm not lucky?

She'll slap your face, call you a selfish berk, and walk away.

Remus shrugged. *I'd rather be slapped by her than kiss almost any other woman I know.*

What other women do you know? That aren't taken, I mean?

Remus laughed. "All right, I have just reached critical mass of arguing with myself," he said aloud. "Chocolate is indicated. And then bed."

After all, he did have a big day tomorrow.

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"It's a shame to see Remus and Peri fighting," said Aletha, snuggling down into Sirius' arms. "I wonder if there's anything we can do."

"Not tonight," Sirius said firmly, freeing one hand to cup Aletha's chin and turn it towards him. "Tonight is for us. You're not going to be pregnant much longer..."

"I thought you'd be happy about that."

"Well, yes, I'm happy for you. And it will make certain things easier. But you are so sexy this way."

Aletha shook her head. "You keep saying that," she said. "And I just can't see it. Sirius, I'm puffy all over, I can't see my own shoes, I can't eat anything with salt in it or I swell up like a water bomb..."

"Mmmm."

"Get your mouth off there and answer me. What is so attractive about this?"

"Well, there's always the fact that I got you this way." Sirius grinned. "That you let me get you this way."

"As if I knew it was happening. Go on."

Sirius shrugged. "I dunno. I just think you're beautiful whatever way you are, and you plus one is more than twice as beautiful as before." He kissed his hand and patted her belly. "I can't wait to meet you all on your own, little one," he said to it, then looked back up at Aletha. "We need to think about names. Girl names."

"Nothing celestial, I take it."

"No, Merlin, no. And nothing long and complicated, either. I love Andy, but how she could tag her daughter with Nymphadora I'll never know."

"So you want something simple."

"Mm-hmm. And if you don't mind, I think I want her middle name to be..."

"Lily?"

Sirius nodded.

Aletha smiled, and blinked back tears. "I was going to suggest it if you didn't. But why not her first name?"

"It's too soon. I don't want to be crying every time I talk to her. Maybe if we have a boy next, he can be James."

"That sounds nice. So something Lily. Something short and uncomplicated."

"Yeah." Sirius snickered. "Short and uncomplicated. Unlike her mum."

Aletha bent her head and bit him on the shoulder.

"Ow! That was supposed to be a compliment!"

"And that was supposed to be a love bite." Aletha smirked. "You big sissy."

"It still hurt." Sirius pouted. "Kiss it better?"

Aletha laughed and obliged.

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Minister of Magic Millicent Bagnold sat comfortably in her chair on the dais and watched the crowd find seats.

An old Muggle shopping center. It's perfect. Lovely open space here in the middle, two floors of shopfronts, plumbing and lights already in place... the normal Muggle-Repelling Spells had had to be altered slightly, so as not to send away the friends and families this place was for, but the alterations were simple enough, and everything had been finished by the beginning of this month.

She chuckled to herself as she thought of the way she'd come here. She'd been ready to retire from her position at the end of an exhausting war, but before she could get around to filing all the paperwork, a first year Auror had worked his way through her secretaries to an appointment with her, and spread out a proposal she couldn't ignore. It would be a perfect cap to her time as Minister.

Another chuckle, at her own vanity. *I can see the Chocolate Frog Card now. "Millicent Bagnold, former Minister of Magic. Noted for her strong leadership of wizarding Britain during the war with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Madam Bagnold also sponsored the founding of the Center for All to Magically Explore the Lifestyles of Others Today, or Camelot, Britain's first Muggle-to-magical assistance center."*

One of her aides caught her eye from the back of the space and waved. She nodded back and stood up, drawing her wand and casting a *Sonorus* on herself.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, Muggle and magical," her voice rang out, quieting the crowd. "It is my great pleasure to be here, and to welcome you to the Grand Opening of this Center. Here, wizards and Muggles can meet in harmony, can learn about our differing lives, and perhaps, discover that we are not so different after all."

The crowd applauded.

"We both use money to buy food and clothing and other necessities of life," Bagnold continued, waving her hand at the shops to her left. "We both communicate with distant friends and loved ones." The post office and bank of Floo fireplaces in front of her. "And we both read books to learn more about our world." The library to her right. "Now, with the opening of this Center, we can learn more about the money and stores, the communications, the books of our neighbors, and we can hope that this learning will end some of the unnecessary fear in our lives."

Still speaking, Bagnold let her mind wander – she'd rehearsed this speech a hundred times, she could have given it in her sleep. Black was standing off to one side, his eyes searching the audience, resting every so often on his wife. She was sitting in the front row of the audience, and by the looks of her, she and Black hadn't wasted any time. Black's friend Lupin sat beside her, listening intently.

Maybe it's favoritism, giving Lupin the library job like this, but Black pledged a quarter of the building costs if we'd do it, and Lupin passed all the tests. Odd, though, his insisting on two extra days off a month, just the way Black said he would. Lupin was willing to take them without pay, though, and Black held out for paid leave...

Shattering glass broke into her thoughts, and her speech. She whirled, hearing gasps and screams from the audience.

Half a dozen masked and robed figures had just broken through the glass doors at her back. More were behind them.

She swore under her breath. *We should have known this would bring in Death Eaters... but this might be a good chance to round some of them up...*

She was already off the dais, her wand up and throwing a shield around the audience, joining several of the Aurors. "Don't panic!" she shouted, the *Sonorus* still in effect on her voice. "Adult wizards and witches, wands out, please! Muggles and children stay down!"

If we can just keep it from turning into a slaughter...

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"You get down!" Remus shouted at Aletha over the noise the crowd was still making. "Cast from down there if you have to, but don't you dare run anywhere!"

"As if I could."

"I know you. You'd try. Don't." Remus scanned the audience for Peri. *She has to be here... she wouldn't have stayed away just because of me, would she? Come on, Peri, we need you, every wand helps...*

But wait, she has Ray to take care of. She can't cast with him in her arms.

And – oh, God, if Malfoy's one of them –

He spun around again, suddenly certain that Peri was here, that Malfoy was as well, that any second he was going to see his son and his son's nurse, snatch the one and curse the other into oblivion –

Not if I have anything to do with it.

There – a flash of brown and silver-blond together, just a glimpse, but he knew them. He plunged into the crowd, still massed together in panic inside the spell-shield. "Anyone here who can Apparate but not cast?" he shouted.

Two or three hands went up, tentatively.

"Can you Side-Along?"

Hesitant nods.

"Then start getting people out!" Remus pushed through one or two more rows and was suddenly face to face with Peri, who blanched. "Get him home," he told her. "Malfoy's got to be here, you can't let him see you."

Ray's face, which had been bright with welcome for Remus, suddenly shut down, and he burrowed against Peri. She was watching Remus with an expression he couldn't make out.

I have to say something, and it has to be the right thing... "I want what's best for you," Remus said quickly, hearing the sound of spellfire beginning behind him. "And if that's just to be your friend, I'll take it. You know where to find me. I hope to see you soon. Now hurry."

"Thank you," Peri said quietly, and spun in place, disappearing with a loud snap.

Remus hurried back to the front line, hearing other cracks and pops as he went. *I hope the Aurors and MLE personnel can hold off the Death Eaters long enough for all the Muggles to get away safely.*

And that this isn't a precursor of things to come...

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The Aurors had pulled the dais apart with their wands and were using it for cover, keeping the Death Eaters from circling and sending the magically unstoppable Killing Curses into the crowd behind them. Sirius hoped there wasn't another crew ready to come in behind them.

No, there can't be. We've got most of them, locked up or dead or claiming innocence. This is probably all that's left of the "free" ones, and a lot of the "innocent" ones too...

"Hello, Sirius," a poisonously sweet voice called. "Still protecting worms in human shape, I see."

Sirius growled under his breath. "Still following your dead Master, I see, Bellatrix," he called back.

Bellatrix's spell blasted through Sirius' wooden shield, just to the left of his head. "The Dark Lord can never die!"

"Funny, I thought that's what you called it when somebody's body got blown out of existence." Sirius' return spell forced Bella to dive for cover of her own. *This place is never going to look the same... and after all the work we did on it. And I can't afford any more gold of my own for renovations. Wonder if Narcissa'd make another anonymous donation?*

He jerked back as a spell nearly took the tip off his nose. *Why don't I try surviving today, and then think about what comes next?*

His awareness of the battle after that came in flashes. He was leaning out perilously far from cover to drop a running Death Eater – he was Summoning someone from MLE who'd been caught that way – Remus was beside him now, and the noise from the crowd was almost gone – the Death Eaters were starting to back up –

Are we winning? We are! We're winning! Sirius and Remus shared a grin for a second, then leaned out around either side of their cover and fired off Stunners at the same moment. The Death Eaters shielded, but part of Sirius' spell got through anyway, making one of them stumble and nearly fall.

"They're tiring!" shouted a gravelly voice. Sirius snorted. *Trust Moody to be here, even though he wasn't assigned.* "Keep it up, people, drop them where they stand!"

Alice Longbottom popped up, shot a spell at the Death Eaters, and spun her wand quickly towards Sirius, a tiny silver badger flying from it. It waved its front paws at him, meaning she had orders or a message.

"Good here?" Sirius asked Remus.

"I'm fine." Remus shot two spells in quick succession and was rewarded with a yelp from the other side.

"I'll be back, then." Sirius crossed the distance between himself and Alice at a crouching run.

"A few of us are going around back to flank them," Alice said in his ear. "Are you up for it?"

"Yes ma'am."

"That's what I thought."

Three Aurors and four MLEs congregated in a sheltered area. "We're headed for the parking lot," Alice said. "It's shielded, so no worries about Muggles seeing you. Get in, get cover, and don't shoot until I give the word. Ready?"

"Ready," six voices chorused.

"Then... go!"

Sirius spun around, forcing himself through the darkness to the outdoor parking area, which had spaces for cars and sheltered racks for brooms – he wanted to arrive behind the broomracks, they made perfect cover –

He was there. His body dropped to the gravel automatically, and he peered cautiously out. The other six seemed to have arrived in good order, though he couldn't see much of them, since he was the farthest up.

"Glory hound," Alice mouthed at him from her place behind a red car. "Wait for the rest of us."

Sirius' instincts shrieked for him to get into the fight, to run, to strike, but he knew he couldn't possibly take all the Death Eaters alone.

But it would be fun to try.

He pulled himself up sharply. *Fun if I didn't have people to take care of. Fun if I didn't have Letha, and Harry, and Meghan Lily.* They'd finally decided on the name after nearly two hours of discussion the night before. *I will be smart. I will wait. I will –*

"They're behind us!" a Death Eater shouted.

Oh no. Sirius knew without looking that most of the group had been caught out of cover – unless the Death Eaters got a much better target within the next half second, people were going to die –

He was out from behind the racks, charging the Death Eaters, dodging left and right, jumping and ducking – *Merlin, they're lousy shots, nothing's hitting me* – he was almost to them now, he'd dropped two already, though he didn't see Bellatrix anywhere –

A weight fell on him from above, and an arm wrapped around his throat, cutting off his air. "Go!" her voice shrieked, and the world blurred into lines of color and sound.

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"Don't worry, we'll find 'em," said Moody grimly. "Portkeys're dead easy to trace. Else they'd be using them every time."

Aletha nodded mechanically. Meghan kicked her, but for once Aletha felt no urge to smile. *Oh, baby, if you only knew what kind of trouble your daddy's in now... if I only knew...*

"I'm sure they'll find him," Remus said, his hand over hers. "I just wish I knew what the Death Eaters were thinking, attacking this place in broad daylight."

"They were thinking they could close it down," said Minister of Magic Bagnold, overhearing. "That by attacking the opening festivities, they would send a message that Camelot would never be safe. But I refuse to bow to terrorism. The Center remains open, as scheduled." She pitched her last two sentences to carry. "If, of course, we can keep anyone employed here after that little fiasco," she added under her breath.

"You'd be hard put to find a disaster that could drive me away, Minister," said Remus. "I'm here to stay."

Bagnold looked closely at him. "Yes, but are you willing to take a pay cut for a few months, to help rebuild?"

"Yes. I'm used to surviving on very little, and the better Camelot looks, the better my chances of getting pay raises later on."

Bagnold chuckled. "I like you, Lupin. How much are you willing to give?"

"Let me think." Remus muttered to himself for a few moments. "Shall we say ten percent, for four months?"

Bagnold jotted it down on a scroll she was carrying.

"Shouldn't someone else be doing that, Minister?" Aletha asked, finding a moment's solace from worry in little things.

"Maybe. But if I do for myself, there's less chance of a slip-up. It'll go through clerks enough when it gets to the office, and I've nothing better to do just now. Though we could use your skills, Healer, if you think you're able." Bagnold was not commanding, merely asking.

Work will help. Aletha rose to her feet, accepting only minimal help from Remus. "I can work."

She was wrapping a four-year-old's sprained ankle when the commotion broke out in the main concourse. "What on earth?" the boy's mother said, shifting the restless baby girl in her arms and peering out the front of the small café they were sitting in.

"They've caught one!" shouted a boy who looked exactly the same as Aletha's current patient. "One of the Death Eaters!"

"It's a woman," said an older boy, who looked vaguely familiar to Aletha. "She has something in her hand. It's all bloody."

"Cool!" the youngest of the boys yelled. "Lemme see, lemme see!"

Aletha hid a smile and turned back to her work. *He's not too much older than Harry. Maybe we should get them together sometime, when we bring him home...*

"Letha," said Remus' voice from behind her. "You need to see this."

Startled, Aletha turned. She'd only heard this tone from Remus once before – on 1 November of the previous year. And his face was studiously even, but fear and sorrow showed in his eyes.

Whatever it is, it's bad.

He crossed the café and helped her up, and led her out into the concourse, where a woman sat in the middle of a cage of wood and magic, laughing softly to herself. Aletha's eyes narrowed. *Bellatrix, what have you done?*

"Sit," Remus said, and pushed her gently down onto a chair he'd conjured. "Letha, I'm sorry about this, but I can't identify it clearly enough to be sure it is what she says it is." He picked up a small box sitting on a nearby table and handed it to her.

Aletha closed her eyes for a moment before she opened it. *Professional. I am a professional. I will be professional. I will not let emotion in.*

Yet.

The lid came off the box. Resting within was a man's finger. It had been severed cleanly at the joint, probably with a spell. It was the ring finger, Aletha estimated, the ring finger of the left hand.

Of course, it helps that there's still a wedding ring around it.

And that was where her professionalism cracked. For she knew this wedding ring, knew it as well as she knew her own, and for the same reason.

She looked up and met Remus' eyes, and nodded once.

Remus' face half-crumpled. He kept it straight with an obvious effort. "She said it was her trophy," he told her. "She claims... she says she killed him."

Aletha nodded again, slowly, staring at the finger. It would be so easy to give up, so easy to stop caring, with him gone.

But I can't give up now. There's Meghan to raise, and my life to keep living. Sirius would have wanted that.

Strange how easy it is to put him in the past tense.

She reached into the box and separated ring from finger. "I'll keep this," she said, cradling the ring in the palm of her hand. "Can you get Moody for me? I need to ask him something."

Remus looked at her oddly, but hurried away. Aletha set the box aside. "I think you'd approve," she whispered to the ring. "I'm not breaking down or falling apart. I know how you hated that."

She knew she would pay, over the next hours and days, for these few moments of calm. But she also knew the laws by which Sirius had lived. Fire was fought with fire, prank answered prank. Bellatrix had taken a life. Aletha intended to take something in return.

Not her life, though. I won't kill her. It's illegal, for one thing, and it's against my oaths, for another. But I know what I can do, and what I will. And it will cause her no pain – now – nor will it impede her survival. In Azkaban.

Moody limped over to her. "Sorry to hear it," he said. "He was a fine man. What is it you want?"

Aletha looked up at him, tucking Sirius' ring into her pocket. "Five minutes alone with her," she said. "And no mention of it, ever again." She lifted her hand as he tried to interrupt. "On my oath as a Healer, no death, no pain, and no illegal spells."

Hardly any spells at all, in fact.

Moody looked from her to Bellatrix and back. "All right," he growled finally. "But this gets out, I had nothing to do with it."

"It won't get out unless you let it out." Aletha rose and turned away from Bellatrix, mentally practicing the incantation and wand movement she'd need. *Dele nuntia sine dormio*, she chanted. *Dele nuntia sine dormio.*

It was Remus who led her to the small, empty room where Bellatrix sat in the corner, tied up, her dark eyes furious. Aletha shut the door and locked it, then said her four words out loud, with a chopping motion towards Bellatrix's neck and a swirl around her head.

Bellatrix's eyes went wide, her mouth slack, and all her muscles relaxed. Aletha smiled slightly and untied the ropes with a silent flick. After a moment to let Bellatrix savor total helplessness, no part of her body responding to her, Aletha cast her final spell. "*Trado caput.*"

Bellatrix blinked rapidly and licked her lips. "What – what is this?" she whispered, her eyes darting around the room. "I thought your kind didn't torture."

"I won't hurt you." Aletha put her wand away. "You can't feel pain right now. You're under a total nerve-block. We use them when we have to do major healing spells, so the patient doesn't fight."

Bellatrix laughed under her breath. "I don't think you're about to do any healing spell on me."

"No, I'll be healing you." Aletha stepped closer. "The question you should be asking me is, healing you from what?" She let Bellatrix see her smile, and had the satisfaction of watching the Death Eater flinch. *As it should be.*

"Healing me from what?" Bellatrix asked weakly.

Aletha closed her hands around Bellatrix's right forearm. "You're about to find out," she said, and twisted.

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 8: Pity

A conspiracy of silence reigned in the Ministry of Magic on the subject of Bellatrix Lestrange. The Aurors who took her to the holding cells and those who escorted her to her private trial were silent, as was the jury who decided her fate and the officials who recorded it. Dementors, of course, were always silent.

What a pity, the Aurors sighed to one another, that the Lestrange woman should have shattered both her arms so thoroughly with that fall. And how awful that they had healed in such unnatural positions. She might be able to feed herself, to keep herself marginally clean, but she would never again be able to produce the precise, definite movements necessary to use a wand.

What a pity.

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Neenie was squirming to get down from her mother's arms almost as soon as they'd entered Camelot. "I wanna see Letha," she demanded. "Harry come too."

"See Letha!" shouted Harry Potter, bouncing in Hermione's father's arms. "See Meghan!"

"Now, just you two wait," Rose Granger said, sharing a smile with David at the children's impatience. "We have to make sure Aletha's not too busy right now. Why don't you go see Moony instead? You can see Letha and Meghan in a minute."

"Yes," said Harry as David set him on the floor. "Come, Neenie! See Moony!"

Hermione caught Harry's hand in hers, and the two raced across the open floor, headed unerringly for the largest door on the other side, the one with the gold letters over it which read *Potter Memorial Library*.

"They never go anywhere slowly, do they?" said David, chuckling. "Ah, to have that sort of energy again."

"We wouldn't know what to do with it." Rose tucked her hand into her husband's arm. "And they obviously do."

They strolled slowly around the edge of the atrium, window-shopping as they went, until they reached the unassuming door. *Black Memorial Health Clinic*, the sign read. *Magical and Muggle ailments*.

A bell jingled as Rose pushed the door open, and a young woman looked up from her paperwork. "Urgent or non-urgent?" she asked briskly.

"Non," David said. "We're just friends of the Healer, hoping to see her if she's available..."

"I think she's with the baby now, but I can check if you'd like."

"Yes, please do," Rose said.

The young witch rose and went behind the partition, returning in only a few seconds. "She'll be right out," she said with a smile before returning to her work.

True to the word, Aletha herself stepped around the partition a moment or two later, baby Meghan in her arms. "I thought I heard your voices," she said, shifting Meghan to one arm so that she could shake David's hand and return Rose's hug. "How are you?"

"We're fine—what about you?" Rose looked the younger woman over worriedly. "How are you taking things?"

"As they come. I'll be in the building, Cassie," Aletha told her secretary. "Send a message for me if anyone comes in."

"Of course, Healer Black."

"We haven't seen you lately," David said as they stepped out into the quiet bustle of Camelot. "Your letters are wonderful, but we'd hoped you'd come for a visit occasionally."

"Maybe a bit later." Aletha sighed, relinquishing Meghan to Rose. "I loved visiting your house, but it was always with Sirius that I was there. I hope you understand, it isn't you...I'll gladly visit with you, here, or at my new place—you may not have known I'd moved, owling is convenient that way, since you don't have to know exactly where to send the letter. But just now, most things that remind me of Sirius hurt."

"I can understand that," Rose said, stroking Meghan's cheek. "Such a little beauty you have here."

"Yes, she's one of the few things that doesn't hurt to see." Aletha smiled slightly. "Or rather, she does in some ways, but the joys overcome the sorrows. Remus as well, and his friend Peri. We've seen each other through sorrows before, so it seems only natural to come closer together now with this."

"You mentioned in one of your letters...forgive me if this is painful, but I have to ask." David pulled out a chair for Aletha to sit down. "You think there's a chance Sirius might not be dead?"

There's always a chance. We never saw his body, or talked to anyone reliable who saw him die. Loss of a finger doesn't make him automatically dead." Aletha accepted Meghan back from Rose. "Part of me wishes that I did know he was dead," she said softly. "Then it would be over. I could grieve and go on. But another part of me insists he might still be alive, and it's wrong even to think of moving on when he could need my help."

David frowned. "But if you don't know where he is, or anything about it..."

"Don't worry, I'm not about to run off on a crusade," said Aletha. "For one thing, it's only the craziest part of me that thinks that way. Though if I got any evidence pointing towards his survival, I can't say what I'd do. As long as things continue as they have, I'll stay where I am." She looked down at the baby girl in her arms. "I have responsibilities, after all."

"Yes, and we were terribly sorry to hear about Harry," said Rose. "There's nothing you can do? No appeal?"

"Well, I suppose I could steal him, but they would know it was me." Aletha's lips quirked. "I do have some legal claim to him, since I married his godfather, but it's dubious at best. Besides, now that Sirius is gone, his mother's making it difficult for me to draw from his family vault. She claims I'm not his legal wife, since we weren't married magically, and I just don't want to deal with the hassle. Meghan and I can live comfortably on my salary as a Healer, but Harry would be stretching things."

"You sound like a woman trying to convince herself," Rose said softly.

"I am." Aletha rocked Meghan gently, as the tiny face began to wrinkle in preparation for a fuss. "But honestly, Rose, what else can I do? I want Harry, but I don't know if I can handle everything that comes with him. I'm barely managing as it is—any appearance I may project of having myself together is just that, an appearance. If I have to pick up one more thing, I think I may break down and cry."

"Then you've made the right decision," said David. "Harry is safe enough where he is. His relatives aren't the friendliest of people, but your suggestion was a stroke of genius. Petunia Dursley doesn't dare do anything to him with Hermione there in the house as well, and she doesn't charge nearly as much as the place where we used to send Neenie."

"You do know I was only joking when I said that."

"Yes, we know, but it's worked surprisingly well," David said. "Hermione loves to be around Harry, and this is something we can do for you, to make up for all you did for us."

Aletha laughed. "Well, as long as you're not worried about her being bullied by the Dursleys' great lump of a son..."

"She's learning to handle herself," Rose said smugly. "The last time he pulled her hair, she bit him."

"And Petunia still let her come back? I am impressed."

"That was out on the playground, when Petunia wasn't looking. I settled it myself, with a judicious sweet or two."

"A dentist, handing out sweets. Will wonders never cease."

"Sugar-free, of course," David said sanctimoniously. "No cavities, no plaque, no taste."

"Thanks, I think I'll pass." Aletha began to undo a discreet flap on her blouse as Meghan's face puckered again. "So what else is new in your life?"

"Well, we have a new dog," Rose said. "A stray, but a sweet creature. A mixed breed, I think. He certainly doesn't fit any breed I've ever heard of."

"He's brown, mid-sized, fairly short fur," David picked up. "He simply showed up at our back door one night, and Neenie insisted we let him in. By the time we'd finished feeding him and cleaning him up, she'd already named him Jump."

"Jump?" Aletha chuckled. "Not Jumper, just Jump?"

Rose chuckled as well. "I asked her the same thing. She got quite indignant and said, 'Mummy, he's not something to *wear!*'"

"Well, then, here's to Jump." Aletha rearranged Meghan and her blouse, and the little girl's burgeoning wail cut off before it got properly started. "May he not fulfill his name too often for anyone's comfort."

xXxXx

It was a quiet time in the library, quiet enough that the librarian could afford to take a few minutes and sit with two children, one on each side of him, reading aloud to them from a favorite book of his. The little girl followed his finger with her eyes as he ran it under each line of text, and the little boy listened raptly, gazing from book to reader every so often.

If I could only spend all my time doing this. Or something like it. If I could only have them for my own...

Remus chuckled inwardly at his silliness. *Why not wish for Sirius back as well, and for him and Aletha and Meghan to come along? And Ray and Peri, of course? Maybe even Lily and James, alive again. If you're wishing, might as well wish big.*

Enough of this. Remus counted his blessings and came up with a goodly number. He had the job here at Camelot, a job he enjoyed, and a job that paid real money, so that he didn't have to worry about where his next meal was coming from, or how to repair the leak in the roof or the broken leg on the couch. He missed Sirius terribly, but he had Aletha still, and Meghan.

The day she was born was the strangest mixture of wonderful and terrible I've ever felt. It was a miracle to hold her and watch her open her eyes, but Sirius should have been there.

He wasn't sure what he thought about Aletha's half-belief that Sirius might still be alive. *It would be wonderful if he came back somehow, but realistically, if he is alive, the Death Eaters still have him. Otherwise, he'd have been back here with us long ago. Is it really right to hope for that?*

But is it right to hope he's dead?

"Moony, read more!" Neenie demanded, pulling at his sleeve. "More now!"

"Peri come?" Harry asked. "And Ray?"

"Maybe," Remus said, turning the page. "If they can. Here, why don't you two look at the picture for a minute?"

Ray and Peri are the best, least complicated things in my life right now. He smiled as he watched Harry and Hermione seriously discussing the illustration. *Not that that's saying much.*

Peri had agreed gladly to Remus' idea about waiting when he had broached it a few days after the battle at Camelot. "I'm flattered and grateful in equal measure," she'd told him shyly. "I won't try to dissuade you, exactly, but I will tell you that in my own opinion, I'm not worth that long a wait..."

"Then your own opinion, my very dear, is a load of dung," Remus had said bluntly. "I love you, Pericula Grant, and as long as I know you love me back, I will wait as long as you need me to."

"In that case, I will tell you the truth, which is that I do love you back." Peri had blushed rosy red, but her voice was steady. "And that I am humbly grateful to have found you, since I can't think of any other man—well, except one—who would have done this."

Remus laughed. "Now I have to ask. Who's the one?"

"Someone I used to know, a long time ago," Peri said quietly, her eyes far away. "No one you'll ever meet, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He's in a better place now." Peri blinked rapidly, then turned to him, her smile going past the lower settings and lighting on high. "And I am with you, which qualifies this as also a better place. So, will you show me around your lovely library, Librarian Lupin?"

Remus returned to the present as Neenie set the book carefully on his lap. "Done," she announced. "Read more now."

"Please," Harry added quickly.

"Because Harry was polite, I will read more," Remus said. "Thank you, Harry."

He found his place and started reading. One wisp of thought drifted through his mind before he was engrossed once more in the story.

As long as no one finds out who shouldn't, what we're doing now could last us quite a while...

xXxXx

Harry Potter caught the tree limb in both his hands and planted his feet on the trunk, pulling himself up into his usual place and settling there comfortably. "They still haven't learned to hide properly," he commented to Hermione, two branches higher.

"All the better for us," Hermione said. "Stay, Jump," she called down to the foot of the tree.

Jump the dog scratched his ear with his hind leg, then settled into place, his tail brushing back and forth idly along the ground. He knew the routine as well as Harry or Hermione.

"Where are they?" Harry asked, leaning back against the tree trunk.

Hermione peered out through the leaves. "Usual places," she said. "Behind bushes and such. Waiting for us to come down."

"Why?" Harry shook his head in bewilderment. "We're eight years old now—you're rising nine—and we're not stupid. *We know* they're there. And they know we know, or they should. We never come down until they leave, or until a grownup comes looking for us. Why do they still bother?"

"Because, Harry, you left out one important detail," Hermione said calmly, fishing the ever-present book out of her pocket. "You said we weren't stupid, and we're not. But they are."

"Good point." Harry sighed. "Well, at least your mum and dad know where to look when we don't come home."

Home. Harry's mind flitted over the different meanings that word could have. His tiny bedroom at number four, Privet Drive...the quiet, comfortable house at number seventeen...the cozy flat in London where Letha lived with Meghan...the smart semidetached nearby that he just remembered Moony moving into when Harry had been four...and, of course, the rooms and hallways of Camelot.

Camelot, he hummed. *Camelot,*

I know it sounds a bit bizarre...

Hermione began to sing.

But in Camelot, Camelot,

That's how conditions are...

The rain must never fall till after sundown, a boy's voice sang from the bottom of the tree, startling them both. Harry peered down, grinned, and picked up the next line.

By eight the morning fog must disappear

Hermione tucked her book away again and began to clamber down, singing as she came.

In short, there's simply not

Harry joined in.

A more congenial spot

The new voice made it a trio.

For happily-ever-aftering than here

In Camelot!

Harry dropped to the ground and shook Ray's hand. "Good to see you," he said. "Does your dad know you're here?"

"Does he ever?" Ray hugged Hermione. "Oh, no, now I'm dirty," he said in mock horror, shrinking back. "I need to go get disinfected from all the muddy bloody germs."

"Harry, help!" Hermione fell back against the tree, her hand on her heart. "I've been attacked by his purebloodness! It's killing me! Quick, get it away, get it away!"

Jump began to live up to his name, frisking around them and making more noise than both Ray and Hermione put together. "She should have named you Bark," Harry said, grabbing the dog's collar. "Sit, Jump. Sit."

Jump sat, but his whole back end wiggled as he watched a woman walking across the grass. "Oh, all right," Harry said, letting Jump go.

Peri fended off Jump's frenetic greeting and scratched around his ears, reducing him (as usual) to adoring bliss. "So who's for a trip to Camelot?" she asked, hugging Hermione with her free arm and waving at Harry. "I've already checked with your parents, Neenie, it's all right with them. And I don't think Harry's relatives will mind."

"I don't think they'll notice," Harry said. "Maybe if I didn't come back tonight, but not until then. Not unless somebody tells them."

"And nobody will," Ray said, rubbing Jump's chest until the dog's leg thumped against the ground. "Peri chased off your cousin and his gang."

"A quick Muggle-repelling spell around this area, and they were gone," Peri said, bowing slightly. "Thank you, thank you very much."

"So how are we getting there?" Hermione asked. "The Knight Bus?"

"No, we're going to drive," said Peri. "I do drive, believe it or not. And Remus said I could use his car when he wasn't, and he Floos to work. So Ray and I Flooed to his place and drove here."

"Do we have to go right away?" Harry asked.

Peri frowned, thinking. "Well, we're not on any particular timetable, except that we all need to be home in time to eat dinner. But that's a flexible concept for Ray and me, and I expect your parents will wait for you two, Hermione."

Hermione nodded. "Mum's doing a roast," she said. "It can wait a while after it's done."

"So no, we don't have to go right away," Peri finished. "Why do you ask?"

Harry grinned. "Because there's something I want to do. TAG!" He slapped Ray on the shoulder and took off running.

The game lasted a good ten minutes, complete with all the screeching and shouting that games of tag usually involved, until Ray fell over Jump while running away from Peri and was slow to rise. "I'm all right," he said breathlessly, waving everyone off. "I just...my ankle hurts a little, that's all. Not like a sprain or anything, I think I just twisted it. And I must have bumped my shoulder when I went down."

"Time for a nice cooldown walk," Peri stated. "Straight to the car. And then..."

"To Camelot!" the three children chorused.

"Can Jump come?" Hermione asked, stroking her dog's head.

"Well, all right." Peri drew her wand and conjured a lead. "Keep hold of him, though. I'm not in a mood to pay for damages if he decides something looks tasty."

The dog licked his chops innocently. "Yes, you," Peri said sternly to him. "I happen to know for a fact you eat anything and everything. Including flies, if you can catch them."

"Eww!" Ray laughed. "He eats flies?"

"Snaps 'em out of the air," Harry said, demonstrating with his hands.

The fivesome started towards the car, and if Ray was limping slightly, well, he'd played hard and fallen hard, it was no surprise that he was hurting a little.

xXxXx

Lucius Malfoy rose from his chair and stopped, surprised, at the sudden twinge of pain in his hip.

Odd. I have felt something like this before...a long time ago...

Memory provided the appropriate time and place, and the action he had taken at that point. He had meant to ask the Dark Lord for help, but the Dark Lord had fallen so soon after that, he had never had the chance...

Lucius swore under his breath.

My seven years are up.

And unless he could find the person who had cast the curse, or some blood relative of theirs, and turn it back onto them, he and his family would die, slowly and in great pain.

Which appeals to me no more than it did seven years ago.

He hurried towards his bedroom, disregarding further stabs of pain. He would find out who had cast the curse—the signs could not be entirely gone, not when the curse itself was manifesting with such vigor—and he would turn it back so skillfully that there would be no removing it.

Suffer your own penalty, he thought viciously towards the yet-unknown caster. Discover just how Light you really were, when it came down to cases...you scorn us for striking at children, and yet you struck at mine...

That was what truly galvanized him, what spurred him to action.

Draco must not die of this. My line must continue.

And continue it shall.

This I swear.

whydoyouneedtoknow
FanficAuthors.net

Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 9: Discovery

"I'm going to get a snack," Hermione announced as they walked through the front doors of Camelot.

"Are you," said Peri blandly.

Hermione refrained from taking the third step towards the ice cream shop. "I mean, may I get a snack, please?"

"Yes, you may, but a small one."

"May I too?" Harry asked.

"Can you?" Peri's tone was serious.

Harry smirked. "I picked Dudley's pocket."

"You never," Ray said.

Harry nodded. "He took about five kids' money, and I took it all back when he wasn't looking and returned it. They clubbed up and gave me 30p each to say thank you. I tried to tell them I didn't need it, but they wouldn't leave me alone."

"Is that why he was chasing us today?" Hermione demanded, taking Jump's lead from Peri. "You could have told me!"

"Hermione, he always chases us anyway. Why does it matter if it's for something different today?"

"Do you want anything?" Peri asked Ray as Harry and Hermione headed off, still bickering.

"No, I'm not hungry."

"Are you sure?" Peri looked at Ray closely. "You're not feeling ill, are you?"

"Just a little."

"Come here." Peri laid a wrist on Ray's forehead. "No temperature," she said critically, "but you're sweating a bit. Do you want to sit down?"

"Only if I can have a big soft chair."

"A big soft chair. I wonder where we'd find something like that in Camelot." Peri pursed her lips and pretended to look around. "I know. The library!"

Ray was already halfway there.

"I hate it when he runs away before I get to the punchline," Peri grumbled as she started after him.

xXxXx

"Knock, knock."

Remus smiled to himself but didn't look up. "Who's there?"

"Banana."

"Banana who? Knock, knock. Who's there? Banana. Banana who? Knock, knock. Who's there? Orange. Orange who?" Remus lifted his head and grinned at the boy standing on the other side of the desk. "Orange you glad I didn't say banana?"

Ray pouted. "No fair, you knew that one."

"I taught you that one."

"Did not."

"Did so." Remus came around the desk to hug Ray. "How have you been?"

"I'm OK." Ray rose onto his toes. "Look how big I'm getting."

"Down, boy," Remus said, laying a hand on Ray's pale head and pressing. "You're tall enough without stretching it."

Ray grumbled under his breath, but came down anyway. "Am I big enough yet?" he asked.

It was the same question he'd been asking ever since he'd realized the nature of the relationship between Remus and Peri. Remus had a sudden flash of a pale-blond child no taller than his waist tugging at his robes, asking gravely if he was big enough for Peri to go away yet.

"Maybe soon now," he answered, using the same words he had that first time and all the times since then.

Ray snorted. "Do you ever mean that?"

"Actually, this time I do." Remus watched the boy meander over to the large armchairs strategically placed between the bookshelves. "You're getting old enough to take care of yourself."

"Really?" Ray dropped into a chair. "Does that mean I can go away from home?"

Remus sat down on the edge of his desk. "Not until you're eleven."

"Drat."

Remus chuckled. "You knew that. You're just looking for loopholes."

"Of course I am." Ray tilted his head to one side, attempting to look cute, then winced.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I fell while we were playing tag and it still hurts a little."

"You fell and hurt your neck?"

Ray shrugged, closing his eyes. "It hurts a little all over. I think I just jarred myself."

Unobtrusively, Remus reached behind him. His fingers found the well-worn button on the desktop that activated the in-house messaging system—one part telephone, one part Floo—to the clinic. The flare of green light in the corner of his eye told him the system was active. "When were you playing tag, Ray?" he asked a little louder than usual.

"A little while ago, when Peri and I went to see Harry and Hermione."

"And how hard did you fall?"

"You worry too much, Moony."

"You noticed," Remus said dryly. "I'd like an answer."

"I lost my breath, I got shaken up, I twisted my ankle. It's not that bad."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that," said Aletha from the door.

Ray's eyes shot open. "Huh?"

Aletha turned ninety degrees, presenting her profile to Ray. "Good afternoon, Healer Black, how are you?" she said in a piping falsetto, higher than her own voice or Ray's, then turned back to her original position and spoke in her own voice. "I'm feeling just fine, Ray, thank you for asking, but I understand you're not feeling your best."

Ray stuck out his tongue.

Aletha's wand was in her hand faster than Remus' eye could follow.

"Hllllf!" Ray protested, as best as he could with a tongue which refused to bend.

"Letha, what are you doing to that poor boy?" Peri asked from behind her friend.

"Teaching him a few manners, which you appear to have neglected," Aletha retorted. "What *have* you been doing with him all these years?"

"You know perfectly well." Peri slipped past Aletha to enter the room. "Ray, were you rude to Healer Black?"

Ray shook his head, glaring at Aletha.

"Apologize anyway."

"Thahee."

Aletha removed the charm. "I was only trying to help," she said with a faint smile. "Enabling him to hold his tongue."

Ray grimaced, swallowing. "Thanks, Healer Black," he said sarcastically. "Now I hurt all over *and* I have a nasty taste in my mouth."

Peri leveled a look at him. "Draco," she said warningly.

Ray flinched. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"It's all right," Aletha said, crossing the room and setting her bag on the table in the center of the four armchairs. "Now, do you just ache, or is it

some other kind of pain?"

xXxXx

Harry flopped down on one of the benches outside the ice cream shop. "No," he said to Jump, who was eyeing the two cones hopefully. "Mine."

The dog sighed and rested his head on his paws.

"Poor Jump," said Hermione. "He doesn't get any ice cream. Maybe I should have got it in a cup instead, so he could lick it out."

Harry took care of burgeoning drips and swallowed. "That's all right," he said. "He can lick my face when I'm done."

"Yuck!" Hermione shuddered. "Harry, he's got germs!"

"You let him lick your face all the time."

"I do not!"

"You do so. You let him lick you just last night."

"On the cheek. That's not all over."

"Why do you think I'm going to let him lick my face all over?"

"Why would you have ice cream on your cheek?"

Harry smeared the tip of the ice cream across one side of his face. "That's why," he said, handing Hermione his cone and leaning down. "Jump! Here, boy!"

Jump sat up and washed Harry's face enthusiastically. Harry pushed the dog away after a few swipes of the long pink tongue and dried his face on his sleeve.

"You're disgusting," Hermione said in the general direction of boy and dog.

"You noticed," said Ray, loping up beside them. "What's good today?"

"I got raspberry chocolate chip," said Hermione. "Harry has banana nut."

"Nuts to nuts, eh?"

"You have to feel better," Harry grumbled, taking a swipe at Ray. The blond boy dodged back out of range, laughing. "You never make stupid jokes when you're not feeling good."

"So my jokes are better when I'm sick?" Ray darted for the ice cream counter before Harry could answer.

"Yes, he's better," said Hermione, licking delicately around a chocolate chip. "Healer Black must have found out what was wrong with him."

Jump cocked his head inquiringly.

"No more for you until I'm done," Harry said to the dog, biting off a walnut piece. "I don't think so, Hermione. What's really wrong with him is just that he's him." He grinned. "I don't think Healer Black can cure that. She's good, but she's not that good."

Jump tugged on his leash and whimpered.

"Oh, we never took him out before we left," Hermione said worriedly. "He probably has to use the grass. Do you think they'd mind if we took him out back?"

"We can ask Peri to clean up if he makes a mess," Harry said. "Let's wait for Ray, then we can all go together."

xXxXx

"Where's Meghan?" Peri asked Aletha as the adults crossed the concourse.

"She should be here soon. Another girl in her dance class takes the bus home with her mother, and Meghan comes this far with them."

"Mum!" cried a little girl's voice.

"Speak of the angel," Aletha laughed, turning to face her daughter. "Look who's here, sweetheart."

"Hi, Peri!" Meghan hugged her mother, then wiggled free to embrace Peri as well. "Is Ray with you?"

"When is he not? He's out back with Harry and Hermione."

Meghan clapped her hands. "Moony, do you want to see me dance?" she asked, turning to Remus. "We finished learning the dance today. Can I

show you?"

"Go ahead," Remus said.

Meghan needed no further encouragement, spinning into a dizzying series of twirls and leaps. When she finished, balancing on one foot with the other extended behind her and her arms held out for balance, all three adults applauded sincerely, as did a few shoppers who'd stopped to watch. Meghan beamed and curtsied to her audience.

"Do you think my daddy would have liked to see me dance?" she asked Remus as the four started towards the clinic.

"I'm sure he would." Remus smiled down at her, the pain of Sirius' loss lessened by time. He still missed his friend, and always would, but he had grown used to being the only man in his own life.

Not that I wouldn't change it in an instant if it meant he could come back.

Meghan skipped around the three sedately walking adults, chanting phrases from the songs she heard at dance class. Remus watched her with a pang. "You'd have loved her, Sirius," he said under his breath. "I only wish you could have had the chance."

xXxXx

Out on the grass, three ice creams had been devoured, and running was now the order of the day. The children shouted and chased one another, aware but indifferent to the eyes which watched them.

Watching was all that he could do now, all he had been able to do for a long time. He protected them from the little, mundane troubles of their lives, but what good would he be against something worse? How could he save them from the danger which lay ahead of them?

Harry's peril went without saying—Voldemort was gone, but not dead, and many of his followers were still at large. Hermione's was part of the same, since any friend of The Boy Who Lived took a risk, and a Muggleborn girl more than most. Ray was safer in that sense, but in more danger in other ways.

He's only eight. A sharp eight, but still eight. If Peri quits her job, will he be able to make it to eleven without giving himself away to his father? And what about after he goes to school? Won't his Sorting tip Lucius off that something's not quite right?

He growled low in his throat. *If I could just have one minute, just one...just long enough to tell them what I know, and what I've figured out, and what I've seen...*

Bellatrix's mocking voice echoed through his mind. *"To change your form is death. To give any sign of recognition that would tell another who you are is death. To communicate with another in any way that a beast would not is death. A beast you chose to become, so a beast now be, for the rest of your unnatural life!"*

David and Rose had once discussed what Aletha had done to Bellatrix in hushed whispers, after Hermione was safely in bed. It had given him a great deal of satisfaction.

Hermione herself ran over to him now, laughing, as the boys plunged into the small forest which grew on Camelot property. "Jump is a funny dog, yes he is," she half-sang, scratching his belly. "Jump is a silly dog, yes he is..."

He rolled onto his back, whining with pleasure. The Grangers had been his choice of household because he knew the Dursleys would never accept any dog, let alone a stray, and he'd wanted to be as near to Harry as possible, to keep an eye on the boy.

Besides, Rose is a good cook.

And as much as he'd wanted to go to Aletha, he'd known it was a bad idea. Sooner or later, he wouldn't have been able to control himself. He'd have tried something, some way to tell her who he was, and then he would have died.

But wouldn't that be better than this? Cleaner? It would be over, then. I wouldn't have to play Bella's stinking game anymore. As it is, I haven't seen my wife in years, and I've never seen my daughter.

But he wasn't ready to die, not yet. He hadn't been hurt enough for that. Maybe he'd never seen Meghan, but he knew she existed, and that she was happy. He saw Harry every day, and he'd come to love Hermione as well, and Ray and Peri when he saw them. He'd even seen Remus a few times over the years...

A pair of startled yells and a crashing noise from the trees catapulted him to his feet. His head barely missed Hermione's as he dashed for the tiny forest.

Please just don't let them be in trouble that a dog can't handle, he prayed as he ran. Don't let it be something that requires magic.

It might be selfish of him, but he still wanted to live.

xXxXx

Peri was laughing at one of Remus' more outrageous jokes when her amulet seemed to twitch slightly. She shivered.

"Cold?" Aletha asked.

"Not really. I just feel odd. Maybe I should go check on the children."

"Can I come?" Meghan asked. "I want to meet the dog."

"That's fine with me." Peri took the little girl's hand and turned to start for the door by which Harry, Hermione, Ray, and Jump had left.

Her chest contracted painfully, and she lost the rhythm of her breathing. Lucius Malfoy stood just inside the door, looking around Camelot distastefully. One cheek was scratched and bleeding, and in his arms he carried an unconscious Ray.

Peri was sure the roaring in her ears was the sound of her world falling apart.

Not again. Not like this. No, please, no...

Malfoy crossed to her, cold anger sharing his face with another emotion Peri couldn't name, but which looked strangely like satisfaction. "What excellent care you have taken of my son, Miss Grant," he said icily. "What fine companions you have given him, to fit him for his future life. How long exactly has this been going on?"

"Longer than you can possibly imagine," Peri said, moving a little forward and to one side, shielding Meghan with her body. "What's happened to him?"

"He was climbing in a tree with another boy." Malfoy looked down at his son, who had a bruise spreading across one side of his face. "A dark-haired child with glasses. It was his weight that broke the branch, but both of them paid for it."

"Harry," Aletha breathed.

"Is that who he is? I did wonder." Malfoy nodded negligently over his shoulder. "He's still out there, probably with the little girl crying over him by now, if she's finished wailing for her dog."

"What did you do to Jump?" Peri demanded.

"The mongrel attacked me," Malfoy said, satisfaction definitely uppermost on his face now. "I defended myself. If it isn't dead already, it will be soon."

"You're horrible!" Meghan screamed, pulling away from Peri and darting around her to confront Malfoy. "I hate you!"

Malfoy's smile grew slightly as he looked down at the girl. "You sound very like your father," he said lazily. "Did you know that?"

"Meghan, no!" Remus snapped as Meghan drew back her foot. The girl bared her teeth at him, then dashed for the door Malfoy had come in by. Aletha hesitated one anguished moment, then followed her daughter, pausing only to shoot Malfoy a look which should have felled him on the spot.

"You, Miss Grant, are dismissed," Malfoy said to Peri, shifting Ray in his arms. "There will be no reference—in fact, I may see to it that you never work again." He glanced over at Remus. "Perhaps you can find an...*unofficial* line of work."

"You've said what you came to say, and you have what you want," Remus said, stepping up beside Peri. "Leave her alone and take your son home."

Malfoy tutted. "Now, now, I thought this was a place of harmony, of understanding, a place where anyone could be welcome."

"Only if they come in the same spirit with which the place was founded," Remus said, meeting Malfoy's gaze evenly. "Get out."

Malfoy lifted his chin and turned away, starting for the Floo fireplaces.

"Don't," Remus hissed at Peri, catching her shoulders as she started to follow. "Not here, not now. You'll find some way, this isn't the end, but don't do anything now."

Peri struggled for a second, then gave up the fight and sagged against him. "No," she moaned, still weakly trying to push him away. "No, I can't let him win, I have to go after him..."

She breathed in deeply, and Remus' familiar scent soaked deep into her and began to erode her barricades. It would be so easy to give in, to let him hold her, to go home with him tonight and forget everything that had happened between this and the last time Remus Lupin had held her in his arms...

"I can't." She pulled away. "I can't do this."

"What can't you do?"

"I can't let you do this to me. You don't mean to, but..." Peri shut her eyes, then opened them again. "I'm not here for me," she said, hoping Remus could hear how much this hurt her to say. "That's not the reason I came. If I was here for myself, I'd stay with you. But I'm here for someone else, and he's in trouble. I have to help him."

"Peri, nothing is going to happen to Ray tonight," Remus said with careful calm. "Not even Lucius Malfoy would hurt a little boy who fell out of a tree earlier today, especially not his own son. He may well punish Ray, but I think he'll wait to do it."

Peri shivered. "That's only because you don't know him like I do," she said. "He'll see this as treason, Remus, as a betrayal. He'll know that I haven't been teaching Ray all the things he wanted me to—that I've been teaching him completely differently—and he'll want to start 'fixing' it right away, this instant, now." Her every instinct impelled her to get up, to run, it was only her humanity that kept her in her seat. "If I don't go to him tonight, right now, I'll be too late. I might be too late already."

She met Remus' eyes. The love in them nearly drove her to her knees. "We've waited this long," she said softly. "Please, just one more night. Then I'll come to you, and I'll never leave you again. I promise."

"You're sure."

It was a statement, not a question, but Peri answered anyway. "I'm sure."

Remus nodded once, then got to his feet. "Come home soon," he said. "I'll be waiting."

Peri kissed her fingertips and brushed them against his cheek, then sprinted towards the fireplaces.

I'm coming, Ray. Hold on. I'll be there soon...

xXxXx

Hermione had caught up with Jump in the woods just in time to see a tall man who looked a lot like Ray use a wand to blast Jump away from him and across the clearing. Her next few memories were hazy, but involved a lot of screaming, charging at the man, and pain in the places where she'd collided with the ground when he'd thrown her aside.

She'd managed to get up once the man had left, to check Jump and Harry and see that they were both breathing, and to start to run for help, but before she'd gone more than a few feet, she heard footsteps running her way. "Here!" she screamed. "In here!"

Meghan was the first one to reach her, but Healer Black wasn't far behind. She went first to Harry, checking him over with her wand. Meghan glanced at the boy cursorily before running to Jump, who lay where Malfoy's wand blast had left him. Falling to her knees, she stared at him in horror. "He's dying," she said in a voice filled with shock.

Hermione caught at the nearest tree to hold herself up. She couldn't remember a day without Jump, the way she couldn't remember one without Harry. What would her life be without her dog?

"And he's...he's..." Meghan's silvery eyes widened, and Hermione blinked. It might be a trick of the tears she could feel coming, but her friend seemed to be *glowing* somehow...

"No!" Meghan shrieked. "I won't let him!" She thrust her hands into Jump's fur, and a blinding flash of blue light shook the clearing.

Healer Black was on her feet, running to her daughter's side. Her wand was in her hand, and she was already rattling off incantations, but she stopped in mid-word. "Dear God," she breathed, staring at something only she could see. "It can't be..."

"What?" Hermione demanded, suddenly furious. "Tell me!"

"Go and get Moony and Peri, Hermione," Healer Black said like a woman in a trance, moving around to Jump's other side and kneeling across from Meghan. "Have them take care of Harry. He's only been knocked out, he should wake up on his own. I have something I need to do."

She pressed her own hands down on top of Meghan's, and a second, brighter, flash of blue filled the air. When it cleared, mother and daughter knelt motionless on either side of the brown-furred dog, their eyes closed and their faces frozen into identical expressions of determination.

Hermione backed away a few steps, then turned and ran.

Moony would know what to do.

xXxXx

So this is how it ends. Sixteen years as a slave to tradition, six or seven being more or less happy, then six more as a dog, and now this.

Sirius was rather proud of that summation of his life. It was short, poetic, and accurate, which was more than could be said for many biographies.

He flicked a pebble idly into the water by which he sat. Clear and salt-smelling, it lapped around his legs with each wave and seeped up his robes, making him shiver a little. He'd tried getting up once or twice, but dizziness had overcome him before he'd even got to his knees.

I guess I'm supposed to stay here.

The tide was coming in, he knew. The waves weren't leaving him on dry ground when they rolled out anymore, and the last few high ones had wetted his chest. Before too long, he'd be sitting waist-deep in water. Then chest-deep, then shoulder, and then...

He shrugged. When he'd seen Malfoy bending over Harry that way, dog instinct had taken him. Anything threatening a young one of his pack had to be destroyed, even if there was a chance that he might not survive himself.

But that was truly a brilliant move, Sirius. You not only got yourself killed, but you didn't do anything to Malfoy. You never even marked him. Now he's got Harry, and he knows what Peri's been doing all these years, so he's got Ray as well, and if he wants Hermione he'll take her too...

Sirius shut his eyes hard to try to fight those images. He knew what Lucius Malfoy was capable of. He'd lived through enough of it, those weeks before the Death Eaters had tired of him and thrown him out to live or die as a dog.

But there's nothing I can do about it now. It's over.

He shivered as a chill wind blew across him.

I wish I could have seen my daughter, just once. Little Meghan Lily. Looks like her mum, but has her dad's eyes...

"Are you hurt," said a treble voice, "or are you just stupid?"

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 10: Awakening

From Vivens cum Pericula , Chapter 9:

“Are you hurt,” asked a treble voice, “or are you just stupid?”

xXxXx

Sirius’ head jerked up. He hadn’t imagined it. Standing beside him, ankle-deep in seawater, was a tiny girl, maybe six years old. Her skin was the color of brown sugar, her eyes were a silver-gray, and her arms were folded across her chest in a gesture Sirius found hauntingly familiar.

“Well?” the girl said impatiently. “Which one is it?”

“Why does it have to be one or the other?” Sirius asked.

The girl smiled. “I suppose you’re right. It could be both.”

Not quite what I meant. But Sirius didn’t care. He’d just had an impossible wish fulfilled, and he wasn’t about to let silly misunderstandings get in his way. There was only one person in the world this little girl could be.

“Would you stay with me for a minute?” he asked. “Before the water gets too deep?”

“Why don’t we move farther up?” The girl waved her hand, indicating the rocky beach behind them. “Then I can stay longer.”

“I’m not feeling very well. I tried to get up before, but I fell.”

“Then I’ll help you.” Two tiny hands wrapped around Sirius’ arm, and the girl began to tug at him.

She has a name, you know. You can say it.

Despite his earlier certainty, though, Sirius didn’t want to commit himself. What if he was just imagining this? What if she wasn’t who she looked like at all?

There’s a very easy way to find out. And you might want to consider helping her haul your heavy self over these rocks.

One of these days, Sirius decided, he was going to find out who his inner voice sounded like and tell that person exactly what he thought of them. But he couldn’t help admitting the voice had a point.

He pushed with his feet, the girl pulled on his arm, and very slowly they made progress. Finally, Sirius couldn’t stand the quiet anymore. “What’s your name?” he asked, hitching himself a little higher on the rocks.

“Meghan. Meghan Black.”

And what were you so worried about? the voice asked smugly.

“Shut up,” Sirius muttered.

“Sorry?” Meghan said.

“Not you. Just...thinking.”

“Mum says that’s a bad habit,” said Meghan, letting go of Sirius’ arm to press one hand against her chest. “You’re heavy. I think I need to stop for a minute.”

“Stop as long as you want.” Impulsively, Sirius opened his arms. He remembered what it felt like to hold Harry and Hermione as toddlers, what it felt like to have their older versions climb on him in Jump’s form, but he’d never held a child this size in his human arms, and certainly not his own daughter.

Meghan sat down on his lap and laid her head on his chest. Sirius closed his eyes in silent bliss, feeling her body warming his and lifting the chill the seawater had laid on him.

She’s real. She’s real, and she’s all mine. For as long as we have.

“You said your mum says thinking is a bad habit,” he said, more to stave off the tears he could feel coming than anything else. “Why does she say that?”

“She’s joking. She says it’s something my dad used to say. She says he was very good at not getting into that bad habit.” Meghan turned her face up to look at him. “I never knew my dad, you know. He died before I was born, or maybe he didn’t. Nobody ever really knew. It was a war, and bad things happen in wars.”

"You are so right," Sirius said softly, unconsciously tightening his grip on Meghan. "Bad things do happen in wars."

"Mum tried to help the people who got hurt by the war," Meghan went on. "She became a Healer. Now she works at the clinic at Camelot. It's named after my dad, did you know that? She asked if it could be, because she never wanted to forget him. But how could she, when she's got me?" She yawned. "I'm very sleepy. Do you mind if I take a nap?"

"You're sleepy? That's funny, I'm wide awake..." And not nearly as tired as he had been, Sirius realized.

He pushed experimentally with his heels.

And skidded a few inches farther up the slope.

Heartened, he tried lifting himself on hands and feet, crab-wise. The extra weight on his legs nearly felled him, but he managed to scuttle nearly a foot before he dropped again, spent.

He looked around and groaned silently. *It's not enough. We're not above the tide mark.*

But they had more time now. The waves were just beginning to come up this high, they hadn't touched him since he'd moved...

And what does that do? Lets you die more slowly. Both of you, this time.

Meghan was asleep in his arms. Sirius laid a hand on her cheek. It was noticeably cooler than it had been.

That's because you stole her energy to get this far, his inner voice carped. And for what? Isn't it enough to get yourself killed by inches, without dragging her into it with you?

"Shut up," Sirius said aloud, angrily. "Look down there—that's where I was." The beach where he had started was awash now, the waves higher than his head would have been. "I'd already have died if she hadn't come here."

And you'll still die with her here, the voice said triumphantly. Only now she'll die as well...it's no more than you deserve...

"Shut UP!" Sirius shouted. "I'm not going to let her die!"

"Nobody's going to die," said a woman's voice, and footsteps sounded on the rocks behind him. "Though you do have yourself in a bad position here."

Sirius whipped his head around to look up at the speaker. "You think so?" he said casually. "I thought this was a little picnic myself."

"Well, it could be. All it needs is a blanket, a meal, a little champagne..."

Sirius grinned up at her. "Are you offering?"

"Maybe." Aletha knelt beside him and embraced both him and Meghan at the same time. "Sirius Black, you are the world's biggest fool," she whispered in his ear. "If it turns out that all this time you've been where I found you today, I'm going to be very vexed with you."

"It wasn't my fault. I swear."

"That's what you always say."

But her arms were warm and gentle around him, and her lips were soft against his cheek. Sirius felt tears coming to his eyes again; this time, he didn't try to hold them off with anything.

"I love you," he murmured to both women.

"I know," Aletha answered in the same tones. "And so does Meghan. She always has." Pulling away, she looked around. "Now then, let's get you two above the tideline, and then we can do some serious talking." She winced at her own words. "And no pun was intended, you horrid man."

"Of course not, but I'll make one anyway."

xXxXx

A gray wolf crept through the corridors of Malfoy Manor, her nose twitching. Something wasn't right about the trail she was following. Lucius' smell was there as usual, though it held overtones of pain she wasn't used to from him, but Ray's scent seemed off. She was only getting tiny hints of him, though, since his father had been carrying him, and he'd fallen and been hurt, so that could account for it.

I need to think. I need to think about what I'm going to do.

She slipped aside into a shadowed alcove and sat down, letting her form blur back into humanity.

I'm not welcome here anymore, and I don't think I can change that. But I might be able to Obliviate Lucius into forgetting what he saw of Ray. If he thinks I was at Camelot alone...maybe that I sneak off there to meet Remus, that would make him happy...

I can talk to Narcissa and get her to support me. She can say that she wanted to spend more time with Ray, so she didn't question where I was

going, and that gets both of them off the hook...as long as Ray has enough sense not to mention anyone he knows from Camelot in front of his father, and I think he will...

She sighed. I'll miss my boy, but he'll be all right. Narcissa will take good care of him, now that she knows how. And he'll be off to Hogwarts in just a few years, and then he'll be safe ten months out of the year...

A nagging voice in the back of her mind seemed to say that she was forgetting something, or ignoring it, but she dismissed that. If she was forgetting anything, there was no use trying to run after it. It would come back to her when she wasn't looking for it, not when she was.

And right now, I have a man to stalk.

She slid back into wolf form and left the alcove, her paws making no noise on the carpeted floor. She would find her ally first and make her preparations, then track down her opponent and strike without warning, without mercy.

And then, I keep my promise.

Then I go to my mate, and never leave him again.

xXxXx

Remus bent and lifted Harry into his arms, frowning.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"Nothing," Remus said absently. It wasn't quite true, but he couldn't put his finger on what was wrong. Something to do with Harry, and not the way he was limp and unresponsive—according to Hermione, Aletha had said there was nothing to worry about, but Hermione had also passed along that Aletha had only looked at the boy for a few seconds before her attention had been drawn to the dog...

Yes, and what is going on over there?

Remus looked over his shoulder at the tableau. Aletha's face had changed from its first look of resolute fierceness into a softer expression he seldom saw on her anymore. He couldn't see Meghan's face from where he was, but he had a feeling her look was similarly different. And Jump, far from dying as Malfoy had claimed, seemed almost to be larger, though that could be a trick of the flickering blue light around the three...

"Meghan's smiling," Hermione announced, darting around to look at her friend, then lifting her head to look at Remus. "What is it, Moony? What are they doing? Is it magic?"

"I think it must be, Hermione, but it isn't anything I've ever heard of before." Remus shifted the weight in his arms. The subtle wrongness struck him again, but he shrugged it off. Harry would be fine.

"Do you think Jump will be all right?"

"I think they're probably trying to help him. I don't know if he'll be all right." Remus shifted the boy in his arms again, and came to a decision. "Hermione, can you get my wand out of my pocket? Here, on my right...thank you. Now I need it." He accepted it in his right hand and concentrated on a small bare patch of ground.

Hermione watched intently as a camp bed appeared where Remus was pointing his wand. "That looks like one of Letha's beds from the clinic," she said.

"It is. I brought it out here." Remus lowered the boy onto the bed. "It would cause a lot of commotion to take him inside, and I'm not up to that. I don't want to leave Letha alone out here, either, but I can't move the three of them together, and they probably shouldn't be separated. So we'll stay out here for a while, how about that?"

He conjured two of the large chairs from the library, one on each side of the camp bed, for himself and Hermione. The girl perched in hers, rocking back and forth anxiously as she stared at Aletha and Meghan.

xXxXx

Peri crept closer to the door through which Narcissa's scent led. Odd...the wafts of air from the door were bringing her Lucius' scent as well, but none of Ray's. Instead, she was catching another very familiar scent which shouldn't be here at all...

"Lucius, what does this mean?" Narcissa said sharply. "What is *he* doing here?"

"Do not meddle in things you do not understand, Narcissa," Lucius snapped back.

"Then allow me to understand it better."

"Have you not noticed a certain lassitude today? A few aches and pains, a general fatigue? I see by your face that you have. Had you not wondered what this was?"

"I had thought that perhaps I was ill," Narcissa said. "But from the way you are talking, it has its origin elsewhere."

Lucius laughed. "Elsewhere. You could say that. A curse, Narcissa. We have fallen under a curse. It was laid originally on me, but it reaches out

to all my family, which apparently includes you as well as our son.”

“Apparently. I still fail to see why...”

“The curse is fatal,” Lucius interrupted. “I was able to hold it off for some years, but now it can no longer be delayed. It will take a few months to have its full effect, since it was designed to inflict a painful and lingering death. And the only way to remove from us is to turn it back to its caster. Unfortunately, she died herself a few months after casting it. But since she worded it to have effect on me and my family, I have the power to turn it back not only onto her, but onto any member of *her* family...”

Peri lost control of her form in the shock of understanding.

xXxXx

Remus wasn't sure when he first noticed the sound. He'd been watching the lax face of the boy on the bed, trying to let his mind work its way to the source of the wrongness, when a faint, musical noise began to distract him.

Hermione was humming.

It was a song his mother had once sung to him, a long time ago. His mind fit words to her notes, words about fine things and castles being no better than the place you loved best.

It's a sweet old song, but why sing it now?

He followed her line of sight, and understood.

She's hoping to bring them back. As if they're lost, and she can sing them home.

Maybe she can.

Quietly, he added his voice to hers, though he was singing to someone else as well.

You promised, he reminded Peri silently. You promised to come home.

I'm going to hold you to that.

But for now, these three needed to be brought back.

xXxXx

Sirius thought he would never get tired of sitting like this. Aletha snuggled next to him, their arms around each other's shoulders. Meghan nestled in his lap, sleeping soundly, one hand clinging loosely to the collar of Sirius' robes.

It was chilly, the rocks were hard and pointed, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Even the feeling that his eyes were closing wasn't too hard to take...after all, who wouldn't like to sleep with the two people he loved best next to him?

“We have to go,” Aletha said hoarsely, rousing herself. “We can't stay here.”

“Why not?”

“We're not...this isn't a real place. I don't know how to explain.” Aletha looked around them, at the windswept beach where the waves now beat against the rocks, the sullen gray sky above, the endless sea stretching away to the horizon. “We're in your mind, Sirius. You were dying. That's what the tide meant, coming in that way. We stopped it, Meghan and I, but now we have to get out. We can't stay here.”

Sirius sighed and braced his shoulder to let Aletha push on it. Once she was up, he handed Meghan to her, then accepted her hand to pull himself upright as well. It was hard work.

“Now where?” he asked, looking around.

“I don't know,” Aletha admitted. “I wasn't paying attention on the way here. Inland would be my best guess, but it is only a guess...”

A faint sound of music caught Sirius' ear. “What's that?” he asked.

“What's wh...” Aletha turned her head. “It's coming from that way,” she said, pointing inland and slightly to the left. “It's someone singing, or humming. Two people. A man and...a girl, I think. The voice isn't developed enough for a woman.”

“A man and a girl,” Sirius repeated thoughtfully, then changed forms to listen better. A moment was enough. “Hermione,” he said surely, changing back. “That's Hermione singing.”

“Which would mean the other voice is Remus.” Aletha smiled. “That's our direction.”

Supporting each other and the half-awake Meghan, the Blacks began to follow their friends' voices.

“Will we be awake when we get there?” Sirius said as they walked. “There's something I think Moony needs to know about.”

Aletha stumbled but caught herself before she fell. "I don't think so," she said. "We're barely awake as it is. I don't think we'll be able to do anything when we get there."

Sirius swore under his breath, mindful of the girl beside him. "It's important," he said. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"I might be able to get you awake for just a second, but I don't know how coherent you'll be." Aletha smirked. "Probably about as coherent as you ever are."

"Knew that was coming. Would you? Could you? He really needs to know this."

"Am I allowed to know it?"

"The more, the merrier. Or the sorrier, in this case. You're not going to like it."

Aletha's vocabulary of curses had expanded over the years, Sirius discovered.

xXxXx

The light around Aletha and Meghan blinked out. Hermione's song broke off in a gasp as Jump began to grow. His fur darkened and lengthened, his head changed shape, until he could have been...no, he *was*...

"Padfoot," Remus breathed incredulously.

Hermione pressed herself back in her chair.

The dog's form blurred, and a black-haired man lay there, weakly trying to lift his head. "Moony," he croaked.

Remus was across the clearing in a second. "I'm here," he said, leaning over Sirius—and *howdid he end up as the Grangers' dog, exactly?* "I'm here, it's all right."

"No." Sirius grabbed Remus' wrist. "Not...Harry..."

"Harry's all right too. He just fell, he'll wake up on his own. Aletha said so herself."

"She didn't...look." Sirius drew a painful breath, fighting to keep his eyes open. "Look at him...he's not..."

His lids fell shut again. Remus caught his own breath, until he saw his friend's chest still rising and falling in the rhythm of life.

"What was he saying?" Hermione asked tremulously from behind Remus. "Something about Harry?"

Remus nodded dumbly. Most of his mind was still taken up with a great shout of joy.

Sirius is alive.

xXxXx

"So what do you propose?" Narcissa asked crisply. "To save our family at the expense of this innocent boy? The wizarding world would never stand for it, Lucius—and neither will I."

"You would rather die, then? Slowly, in pain, and watching our son die before us?"

"I would rather see if another way existed to remove the curse, or to mitigate its effects. You will not harm this child while I stand here."

"Easily solved," Lucius sneered. "*Stupefy!*"

"*Protego!*"

The sound of a ricocheted spell, and Lucius' startled curse.

"I am not a child in school, Lucius," Narcissa spat. "Any spell you can cast, I can block."

"Indeed," Lucius said coolly. "You are right, Narcissa. You can block any spell I cast..."

Green light flared within the room, and something heavy fell to the floor.

Peri stifled a scream in her sleeve.

"Any spell," finished Lucius, "but that one."

xXxXx

Gently, Remus lifted Aletha from where she'd slumped and laid her beside her husband, then placed Meghan on her father's other side.

Sirius is alive.

So many people would have to be told. Harry, when he woke up...Peri and Ray, when they got back...even Narcissa might be pleased to know about it...

But Harry first. He deserves to know he'll never have to go back to his relatives again.

Remus lost himself for a moment in the thought of Harry's face when he learned the news.

How will he like Sirius, I wonder?

Remus laughed aloud. *Harry picks pockets and taunts his cousin for entertainment...they'll get along just fine.*

And Sirius knows Harry already. He's been with him all these years, and we never even knew..

"What did he mean?" Hermione asked. "Mr... Black?" She looked curiously at Sirius. "Was that really him all the time, in Jump?"

"It looks like it." Remus stood up. "And I don't know what he meant. I suppose I should find out. If there's something wrong with Harry that Aletha didn't know about, he might need treatment right away..."

xXxXx

"Draco," called a voice. "Draco."

He moved restlessly, wondering who was calling him. Usually, he hated that name, but from one person in the world, he'd accept it. This sounded like that person, but how had she come here?

"Draco, my son," she called again.

"Mother?" Ray turned. Narcissa stood behind him, dressed in white, her face not quite the same as the one he knew. He frowned at her for a minute, then identified the difference—she looked younger, with fewer lines around her eyes and mouth. "Mother, what's happened?"

"I can't tell you that yet, Draco. You will find out when you wake up. But you must wake up. You must deliver a message."

"A message? What is it?"

"You will know it when you arrive where you are going."

"Why can't you deliver it?"

A sad smile touched her face. "I cannot explain that to you, Draco. All I can tell you is that you must wake up immediately. It is very important. I must go." She turned to walk away.

"But I want to know..." Ray moved forward and stretched out his hand, meaning to catch her sleeve.

His hand passed through it as if it were made of smoke.

"You cannot touch me now," she said without turning around. "I must go on, or I will be left here, and that was never my destiny. You must awaken, my son. The fate of people you care about rests in your hands."

Ray stepped back, shaking his head. "I don't understand..."

"I know. But I cannot explain it to you." His mother's figure had almost faded away. "Wake up, Draco," her voice echoed back quietly. "Wake up."

She was gone.

Ray looked around the place where he was, then shook his head again. "It's probably the only way I'm going to get any answers," he said.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated on waking up, on what it felt like. A little stiff, a little sore, but ready to get up and get at the new day...

His limbs all suddenly felt heavy, and his mouth tasted terrible. He tried to call out and ended up moaning as pain stabbed across his head.

"Moony!" cried a girl's voice, making his head throb again. "He's waking up!"

"Mother," Ray mumbled, trying to get his eyes open. Something was resting on his face, pressing against the sides of his nose just where it joined his face. He ought to remember what that was, but he couldn't think of it.

"Mother?" said Moony's voice, sounding worried. "She's not here. Were you...expecting her to be?"

"Saw her," Ray managed to get out. "She said...message..."

Moony inhaled in what sounded like surprise. "Your mother gave you a message?" he repeated.

"Yeah." Ray raised a hand to his face to take off whatever was on there. "What's this?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I left them on you." The light pressure was removed. "You can have them back as soon as you need them."

“What are they?” Ray repeated, dropping his hand back by his side.

“They’re your glasses, Harry,” said Hermione, sounding worried. “You need them to see. You got them in October, remember?”

“I’m not Harry. I’m Ray.”

There was a long silence.

“This,” said Moony finally, “is not good.”

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 11: Battle

Peri's heart pounded so hard she was sure Lucius could hear it on the other side of the door. *What am I going to do, what am I going to do, she's dead, Narcissa's dead, he killed her, what am I going to do...*

She lifted her hands and watched them shake with morbid fascination. She wouldn't be able to cast a spell farther than two feet for hours. Stunning Lucius, or putting him under the Body-Bind, were out of the equation altogether.

But I have to get his attention off Harry long enough to get Harry out. How can I...?

Left hand against her chest to calm herself, she cast a spell on the door behind which she crouched, turning a small section of it transparent.

Harry, still unconscious, lay on a couch in the middle of the room. Lucius was working over a cauldron beside him, carefully measuring spoonfuls of different-colored powders into it. Peri pinched the bridge of her nose and swallowed. *Now would be a very bad time to sneeze.*

The room was badly lit, but a crumpled form on the floor near the other side could only be Narcissa. Peri bit her lip, forcing tears back. *She wouldn't thank me for crying now and getting caught. I have to help Harry, get him away from here...*

A breath of hope whispered through her mind. *Narcissa dead... Lucius a kidnapper... someone will need to take care of Ray...*

Peri set that thought in the back of her mind to give herself strength through what she would have to do now.

A diversion would be the best idea. Make Lucius attend to something happening elsewhere in the room, then wake Harry and get him out.

On second thought, maybe now wouldn't be such a bad time to sneeze...

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"Achllp!"

Lucius' head jerked up. *Someone nearby...*

"Oh, shite," whispered a voice, and hasty footsteps receded from the door Narcissa had entered by.

She was not alone. Another came with her. A wiser other, but still a witness—someone who could speak out—

Lucius drew his wand and hurried to the door, not bothering with stealth. Speed would serve him best now.

Three bodies may be disposed of as easily as two.

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Peri released her breath. *That went a lot better than I thought it would.*

Sirius had taught her the spell to throw her voice (and various other sounds) back while the war was still going on. She'd played games with it all through Ray's childhood, calling to him from different places in the room until he could figure out where she was truly hiding.

Enough time to reminisce later. Lucius won't take long to realize he's been fooled.

She stood up and opened the door. The potion smelled worse inside the room than out, but she pinched her nose shut again. *No noise. Nothing to tell Lucius I'm here. Just in, get the boy, and out again.*

Wand in her hand, she dropped to her knees beside Harry's couch. "*Ennervate*," she whispered.

Harry stirred, then went limp again, his lips moving in a half-mumble.

Peri hissed under her breath and tried again, throwing more power behind her spell. "*Ennervate!*"

Too late she recalled that people woken up abruptly sometimes shouted.

Harry's yell echoed through the halls.

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In differing parts of the house, two men jerked in surprise at the sound. One needed a moment to work out where it had come from. The other was under no such handicap.

Both, though, were determined to get there as quickly as possible.

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Peri cursed once, fervently, then wasted no more time. "Harry, get up," she hissed, pulling the boy off the couch. "Come on, we have to get out of here!"

Harry stood up, wobbled, then regained his balance, staring about him with unfocused eyes. "Where are we? Where's Ray? What happened?"

Peri dragged him towards the door she'd entered by. "There's no time, I'll tell you later, come on, we have to run—"

Lucius slammed through the opposite door, wand out.

Peri spun, shoving Harry behind her and through the door. "*Globopillo!*" she shouted, and a translucent shell of magic shot from her wand to surround her, deflecting Lucius' first spell harmlessly into the ceiling—Harry's footsteps pounded out a rhythm down the hall, he was getting away, he'd be safe now—

"*Expelliarmus!*"

The spell tore through her block, weakened by her lack of attention. Peri tried to dodge, but the Disarmer caught her wand arm, knocking her back against the wall and tearing her wand from her hand. She hit the floor, winded, thoughts chasing one another through her mind.

Need air, can't breathe...

Have to protect...

No wand...

Lucius pointed his wand at the wall. "Let the defenses become active," he intoned. "The intruder is to be captured only. Do not harm him."

Peri managed to suck in a breath, and her mind shook partly out of its shock. *He's making it so the house will keep Harry in, so he can't get away—I have to stop him, Harry has to get out of here—*

"I say this, who have the right to say it," Lucius continued inexorably. "This is my home, thus I have the right. So I speak, so I intend—"

He never finished his sentence. Peri had caught her breath, changed forms, and hurled herself at him, impacting square in the middle of his back.

Wolf and man went down together.

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Harry's feet obeyed him only sluggishly, and he could barely see without his glasses on. His mind was reeling. *Strange house, Peri looking scared, Ray's father—last thing I remember was falling out of that tree—that branch shouldn't have broken—*

He staggered around a corner and slammed into something—no, *someone*—who clutched at him. Yelling in panic, he shoved at the arms holding him, trying to fight back, get away, get free—

"Harry! *Harry!*"

The voice, the familiar voice, finally penetrated his fear, and he slumped against Moony in relief. "Thought you were Malfoy," he panted. "Thought he'd doubled around—"

"Where is he? Where's Peri?"

"That way." Harry pointed over his shoulder. "Told me to run. Pushed me out." Now that he was no longer running, his head and various other parts of his body were registering complaints. "Where are we? What happened?"

"This is Ray's house," Moony said, his arms tightening around Harry. "And it's a long story. Is Peri all right?"

"They were fighting." Harry eased his weight off one ankle, which was protesting its further use. "I don't know what happened."

Moony muttered a few words Harry was fairly sure he shouldn't be hearing, then shifted his grip, holding Harry's arm firmly. "We're going to Apparate," he said. "Hold your breath, and be ready to feel squashed."

Harry drew a deep breath just in time.

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Remus pushed aside all his fear for Peri—*She's a grown witch. She can handle herself—* focusing instead on the clearing in the woods behind Camelot, on Hermione's anxious face and Ray's worried one, on the reunited Black family sleeping nearby—

Maybe I should have warned Harry about that—

Too late. They were there.

"Harry!" Hermione darted forward to hug the boy. "You're all right!"

Harry grunted, then winced. "Side—Hermione, too tight—"

"Sorry, I'm so sorry." Hermione loosened her hug.

"What was happening?" Ray asked from where he was sitting in Remus' vacated chair. "What *is* happening?"

"No time for that now," said Remus. He considered telling the children to get help from Camelot, then changed his mind. The staff were nice enough people, but unlikely to be able to deal with a situation which involved a kidnapping, an identity switch, and a dead man returning to life. Instead, he aimed his wand at the bed he'd brought outside. "*Portus*," he said firmly. The bed glowed blue and trembled for an instant.

Hermione gaped at him. "But you're not allowed!" she whispered. "It's not legal—not without a permit—"

"I'll deal with that later." Remus cast a careful levitation charm on Sirius and Aletha, lifting both of them, and Meghan between them, into the air. "Get on the bottom of the bed, you three."

Hermione helped Harry over, then went to get Ray, as Remus landed his friends on the bed. The unfinished Portkey spell nudged at him, pushing for him to release it. *Not yet*, he told it. *Wait until I'm ready*.

"Thanks," Harry said as Ray handed over his glasses. He hooked them on and looked at Remus. "Where are we going?"

"Just inside. Call the Ministry and tell them what's happening, and where." Remus lifted his wand and completed the spell.

"But—" Hermione was just beginning as the bed vanished.

Remus quickly sent the chairs back to the library as well, then spun in place, concentrating on Malfoy Manor, the hallway where he'd collided with Harry.

Getting him out to safety took one minute. Maybe. Nothing can have happened in one minute.

But his heart insisted otherwise, and the pressure of Apparition seemed to last much longer than it should.

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Lucius coughed painfully, then massaged his throat, hissing under his breath as his hand came away bloody. *A closer call than I knew*

"So let it be done," he croaked. His voice was damaged, a shadow of its former self, but the spell recognized it, and a two-toned chime rang through the room, signifying that the spell was active.

With this spell in place, my home is a haven for my own people and a prison for others. No one who does not bear Malfoy blood can enter or leave my property now, by any means magical or Muggle.

He turned to regard the long-furred wolf lying insensible on the floor. *So Miss Grant is an Animagus. I wonder what other skills or tricks she has been hiding from me all these years?*

The wolf-woman's first attack had knocked his wand from his hand, forcing him to fight back physically, struggling to keep her jaws from his throat, a struggle he'd nearly lost more than once, as the blood running down his chest could testify. Her teeth had broken his skin, her weight had battered and bruised him, but he had finally been able to throw her from him long enough to regain his wand, and the fight had been over in that moment.

A strange fight. She seemed reluctant to close with me—she could have killed me at almost any time, and yet she held back. Why, I wonder?

He pointed his wand at her and thought an incantation carefully, sparing his voice. *Better to see what she is hiding all at once.*

The wolf twitched and shuddered, then twisted back into the familiar shape of his son's governess, sprawled on the floor. Within her clothes, something glowed brightly. Lucius crossed to her, bent down, and retrieved a small, golden locket on a chain.

What can this be?

He tapped the chain with his wand, then pulled it free of her neck, the clasp hanging loosely.

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Ray gasped as a cold shiver ran through his body.

"What is it?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"I don't know." Ray wrapped his arms around his chest. "This is a really strange day."

"No kidding," said Harry, who had been staring at the people on the bed ever since the rush of the Portkey had stopped and Hermione had babbled out who they were. "I might never have to go back to the Dursleys' again, and I don't think Peri's going back to your place after she and Moony get back here..."

"What? Why not?"

Harry snorted. "Her dueling with your dad was a pretty good sign."

"Aren't we supposed to be calling the Ministry?" Hermione said. "Telling them what's going on?"

"Wait, slow down," Ray said, raising a hand. "Let's us figure out what's going on first."

Hermione nodded and sat down, pulling one knee to her chest and hugging it.

Ray twisted a bit of his robes between his fingers. "Father took you to the manor, Harry, only you looked like me and I looked like you, so everyone thought he was taking me home. Then what?"

"Then I woke up with Peri telling me we had to run," Harry said. "I tried, but it was hard because I was still sleepy and I couldn't see where I was going. Your dad came running in and threw a spell at us, but Peri blocked it and shoved me out the door." He scowled. "And I ran away."

"What else were you supposed to do?" Hermione demanded. "You're not even in school yet—you don't even have a wand! We need to call Magical Law Enforcement, now, before something worse happens!"

"It won't do any good." Ray had both his knees against his chest, his chin resting on them. "Not if Father's invoked his security spells. He has layers of them, all around the house, meant to stop people who don't belong there from getting in..." He trailed off, lost in thought. "There's only one person who could get into that house right now," he said finally, looking up. "If the spells are active."

"Who?" Hermione asked.

"Me."

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As he unraveled the layers of spells in and around the amulet Miss Grant had worn, Lucius realized that his removal of Narcissa had been not only expedient but justified.

A conspiracy in my own house, under my very nose. For all these years, I have had not one child, but two. And one of those Muggle-born, for all her claims to the contrary. I should have investigated further when she arrived so conveniently...

He was beginning to suspect some magic in that arrival, as well as in his immediate and unquestioning acceptance of it.

And if my memories and my actions at that time were false or somehow changed, I wonder what other memories involving this particular woman are also different than they appear?

He would have to test it.

But should I test before I go to retrieve the Potter boy, or after?

Truly, Lucius decided, it made no difference. As there was no way the child could have left the house in the scant minute that battling with the wolf had delayed the activation of the security spells, he was still here, and the house itself would make efforts to corral him. He would be easy enough to find, when he was needed.

Besides, I think I deserve some pleasure, after all I have been through today.

His lips curled into a smile as he levitated the unconscious woman off the ground and onto the couch.

And perhaps the boy will think to come to her aid. He is a hero, after all.

He tethered her wrists loosely to the arm of the couch above her head and her ankles to the one below. Her outer robes disappeared with a quick swish from his wand, and his smile grew. Finally, he laid his wand's tip against her chest. "*Ennervate*," he said delicately. "Wake up, my dangerous little blossom."

Her eyes opened, and her face tensed, first into confusion as she saw him, then into fear as she tried to move and found herself restrained. "What—how—"

"Long ago, we met late one night, you and I," Lucius reminded her, letting his fingers trail down her face, enjoying the way she flinched from his touch. "It was...unsatisfactory, as I recall. Perhaps it is time to try again."

The terror in her eyes quickened his breath and heated his blood.

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Remus swore as the sixth doorknob in a row refused to turn under his hand. "Who keeps all their doors locked in the middle of the afternoon?" he muttered, unlocking the door with a tap of his wand.

This room, like the others, was musty-smelling and devoid of people.

If I weren't sure I was awake, I'd think I was having a nightmare. Lost in a strange house full of locked doors and empty rooms, searching for the woman I love, having no idea where she is or how to find her, only knowing she's here and she's in trouble—

A woman's scream shattered his thoughts.

Peri!

Remus was bolting in the direction the screams had come from before the second one followed the first. He slammed into a locked door as the third one sounded.

The hell with this. A Reductor Curse blasted it to splinters, and he was running again.

A fourth scream broke at its peak and fell away into silence.

No. No, no, no! Remus bit back a scream of his own and held his breath, listening. Any sound at all now would tell him which way to go—there couldn't be anyone else in the house, or at least not anyone who would interfere, which meant any sounds would be made by the people he was looking for...

"Not so much fun anymore, my darling?" slurred a man's voice, thick with emotion—

Or with something else. Remus tightened his grip on his wand and moved farther down the hall, tracking the voice. *There, that door, I think it's that door—*

"Perhaps we can find a way to...liven you up." A chilling laugh, and the sound of a slap.

Remus didn't even have time to think a spell. Raw magic shot from his wand, and the door exploded inwards under the force of it.

Peri lay on a couch in the center of the room, her arms stretched above her head. Her robes were torn and disarranged, and her eyes were neither open nor closed. She breathed shallowly from a slackly hanging mouth.

Remus' world disappeared for an instant, and a sea of red swam before his eyes.

He was going to kill someone for this.

"Seize the intruder!" shouted Malfoy hoarsely, rising from where he'd been crouched. "Destroy him!"

Remus fired a Stunner at Malfoy, who deflected it, but was forced to take a step back. *Who is he talking to?*

Then the floor split apart under his feet.

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Hermione held tightly to Harry and Ray as they spun together through the Floo fire.

This needs to work. This needs to work. This needs to work.

I just hope Ray's right about the way his father's spells are set up!

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Remus dived to one side and shot another spell at Malfoy just before he landed, turning his landing into a roll to avoid Malfoy's return salvo.

I have to get out of here—but if I know him, he'll have that prevented too—

One of the walls rumbled warningly, and Remus stumbled back out of its way as it began to fall, only to have a chair and table charge at him.

Is he insane? If he brings the walls down, the whole house could fall on us!

But he knew magic could prevent that, and would.

And it probably knows the difference between him and me. It could easily kill me and leave him alone.

He shot an *Incendio* at Malfoy's feet and blew another charging table into debris over his shoulder.

No, I don't think so. If I'm dying, he's dying with me. Especially after what he just did...

He leapt across the gulf separating him from Peri and shot a spell at Malfoy in transit. Malfoy blocked it, but staggered as he did so. *He's weakening. If I can just stay alive for another minute, just long enough to take him down with me...*

"Destroy him!" Malfoy shouted as Remus landed beside his love. "Destroy them both! *Now!*"

The floor shook under Remus' feet, and he fell to his knees, clinging to Peri's couch to stay even that upright. Dust billowed up around them. Any second, the boards would buckle and crush them, or the ceiling would fall, or some other death would strike them—

Together. Whatever comes, we're together.

He found her hand and grasped it.

The boards groaned and shivered.

“NO!” shrieked a high-pitched voice.

A figure hurtled at Remus from out of the dust. Automatically, he reached out to catch it, and it slammed against him, rocking him back into the couch. Arms wrapped around his neck and clung desperately.

The noise in the room stopped.

“Do as I command!” Malfoy shrieked from the other side of the dust cloud. “Destroy these invaders!”

The small section of floor where Remus knelt rippled in frustration, but made no other response.

Remus edged himself around so that he could use his wand to cut the ropes holding Peri to the couch. “I think we may be stalemated, Malfoy,” he called back, pausing in his work to ruffle pale hair and return the tentative smile momentarily lifted to him. “Perhaps we should talk.”

“Talk, half-breed?” Malfoy sneered. “Give me one reason why I should talk with such as you.”

Remus cut the last of Peri’s bonds and flicked his wand to settle the dust. “Because I have something here that you don’t want to hurt,” he said as Malfoy came into view.

Malfoy goggled for one instant, then regained his self-control. “Nicely done, Lupin,” he said, starting to move around the outside of the room. “Obviously, you’ve fully subverted my son. But simply because the security spells will not harm him does not stop me from—”

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Remus tracked Malfoy’s wand towards the door and out of sight. “Was that who I think that was?” he asked Ray, who grinned and nodded.

Malfoy swore bitterly and extensively. “—just like your mother, Potter!” he finished at a hoarse half-scream.

“Thank you,” answered Harry’s voice, and Harry himself appeared around the corner, taking three running steps and launching himself towards Remus’ oasis of floor. He almost didn’t make it, landing precariously on the edge and windmilling his arms to stay upright. Remus shot out a hand and caught the front of Harry’s robes, pulling him in.

“Thanks,” Harry panted, dropping to the floor beside Remus. “Ray, here.” He handed the other boy a wand. Ray took it gingerly between finger and thumb, then grimaced and held it properly, pointing it towards his father with the arm he wasn’t still using to hold onto Remus.

Remus lifted Peri’s arms down from where they’d been held. “Well done,” he said to Harry. “You must have been paying attention through all those impromptu magic lessons Letha always gives you.”

“*Letha* always gives us?” Ray said cockily.

Remus tweaked a strand of blond hair. “Quiet, you. Where did you get the wand, Harry?”

Harry held the wand where Remus could see it, and Remus sighed. “Just don’t break it,” he said. “It’s the only one Sirius ever had, and he’s rather fond of it.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t.” Harry turned back around, pointing his wand the same way Ray was.

Remus gently disengaged Ray’s arm from his neck and pulled himself upright, turning as Harry had to face Malfoy. “Stalemate,” he said again. “You can’t have your house attack us, because your son is here. And you can’t attack us yourself, because we have your wand.”

“But if any of you try to leave here without him, my spells will kill you,” Malfoy picked up the thought, smiling cruelly. “And he cannot protect all of you if you are moving—or he can, but not forever. Sooner or later one of you will move out of his sphere of influence, and you will die. As for wandwork, I can simply leave this room, and you will be unable to harm me in that way. And I have other defenses in my home besides my wand and the spells you have already seen.”

“Isn’t there a word for that?” Harry asked Remus. “Thinking everyone’s out to get you?”

“Paranoid,” Remus supplied. “Though that usually means thinking it without any reasonable basis, and I’d say there’s some reasonable basis here.”

Harry nodded. “We’ll give you one last chance,” he called to Malfoy. “Let us go home, and we won’t say anything about this.”

Malfoy laughed. “Let you go home? I doubt it, Potter. Not when you are the key to my living beyond this year. Or my son’s life beyond that same term.”

“I’m sorry?” Remus said, taking a step forward. This was important, he knew it—

“That’s too bad,” Harry said loudly.

“*Stupefy!*” cried a new voice, and red light outlined Malfoy for an instant. He looked stunned as he fell.

How appropriate.

“Go Hermione!” Ray shouted as Harry whistled through his fingers.

Clutching Aletha’s wand and shaking, but managing to smile nonetheless, Hermione waved at them from the other side of the chasm. “Are you all right?” she called.

“Most of us,” Remus answered, stealing a look at Peri, who lay as though nothing had happened. She still breathed, her pulse beat, but something was very wrong with her.

Figure it out later. For right now, we need to get home.

“There are no more invaders,” Ray said to the ceiling. “You can settle down now.”

A nearby wall grumbled, but the rubble began to pick itself up and fit itself back into place. The floor rippled once more, then reappeared smooth and whole, and Hermione flew across it and into Harry and Ray’s approving hugs. “You were terrific!” Harry told her, pounding her on the back.

“And you didn’t think you could do it,” Ray teased. “You were better than either of us.”

Hermione shook her head. “Was not. All I had to do was hide and wait for Harry’s signal, then sneak out and do one spell.”

“But if you hadn’t done it right, we all would have died,” Remus said, bending down to hug the girl. “Very well done, Hermione.”

“Thank you.” Hermione leaned up to put her mouth near Remus’ ear. “There’s a woman on the floor over there,” she whispered, pointing towards a far corner of the room. “She looks like she could be Ray’s mum. I think she fought with Malfoy and he knocked her out so she wouldn’t make trouble.”

“Say, where’s Mum?” Ray was looking around. “She ought to have heard this, or noticed it by now, unless she went out, and I thought she was going to stay in today, she wasn’t feeling well...”

Remus crossed the floor to the corner Hermione had indicated, his heart suddenly pounding harder than it had even in the battle. *Narcissa—I haven’t met her myself, but from Peri’s stories about her, she would have fought against this harder than just a Stunner would have stopped...*

I don’t want her to be dead. I don’t. But if she is—

The vague shape in the corner resolved into a woman’s body. Remus knelt beside her and took her wrist in his hand, then dropped it without bothering to feel for a pulse. No living flesh felt that cold, or moved that limply.

Narcissa Malfoy is dead. And Lucius will not be seeing daylight again for a very long time.

Remus looked over his shoulder at the three jubilant children and allowed himself to imagine a future. Sirius, Aletha, Meghan, and Harry, all together in one house. Hermione and her parents in another. And in a third, not too far away from either...

I only ever thought I’d have a wife when this was all over. What am I going to do with a son?

It was a thoroughly rhetorical question, of course.

So give it a rhetorical answer. What are you going to do with a son?

Remus smiled, watching Ray recreating his father’s astounded look for Hermione. *I think I’ll provide for him, teach him, guide him—oh, yes, and love him. Can’t forget that.*

But somewhere in the back of his mind, a pessimistic voice was insisting it couldn’t possibly be this easy. Not for Remus Lupin. There would be a catch somewhere. There was always a catch.

“Catch away,” Remus said under his breath. “I’m ready for anything.”

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 12: Sorrow

Ray curled a little tighter in the chair in the waiting room at St. Mungo's, laying his head on his knees. Sounds washed over him in meaningless waves.

My mother is dead.

Moony had told him quietly while Harry found something for them all to eat and Hermione firecalled the Ministry. The words hadn't meant anything at first, not until Moony took his hand and led him to a dark corner of the room to see for himself. His mother lay silent and still, one hand around her wand, her face set in determined disbelief.

"I thought dead people had their eyes open," he'd said, babyishly trying to deny what he could see was true.

"I closed them," Moony had said softly.

That had been the one thing that made it all too much. He'd tried to push away the truth, let himself think everything would be normal again after this. But now he knew it wouldn't. Peri lying so still, his father attacking Moony, none of that had penetrated his mind like this did. His mother was dead, and she would never come back.

He remembered very little of the next hour or two. Only crying—*crying like a baby*—against Moony's shoulder, then being lifted up and held close through the Floo, set down gently here and asked if he could wait. He could.

Harry and Hermione were sitting nearby, talking in urgent whispers. Every now and then, one of them would glance over at him. He would have minded if he'd had anything left to mind with, but all his resources were taken up with trying to process impossible facts.

Peri's hurt, and it must be bad. I can't touch her like I always could.

My father hurt her. He did something awful to her, so awful Moony can't even explain it, but it makes him angrier than I thought Moony could get.

And Mother's dead.

The pillars of his life were crumbling as the walls of his home had a few hours ago, and these couldn't be put back into place with just a word. One of them could never be replaced at all. Another hovered in a void, still visible but tantalizingly out of reach.

And lurking back of it all was the question that had burst into his mind when he'd first seen his father standing below the tree where he'd been climbing with Harry.

What happens to me now?

He knew he couldn't go home. There was no one there to take care of him, except Dobby, and though Dobby could do all the things Ray needed done, nobody was going to let him live on his own with just a house-elf to watch him. Besides, he'd keep thinking he saw Mum around a corner, or heard Peri's voice in the next room.

I know where I want to go, but they're not going to let me...

He had an aunt on his mother's side, his Aunt Andromeda, though he'd never met her. She was a Healer, which meant she might even be in the building right now. He'd probably go home with her for a while, until somebody decided where he ought to live from now on.

Maybe I could go live with Hermione and her parents. We'd all be near each other that way, and I have enough money so I wouldn't be a burden on them. I might even go to school with Hermione and Harry until it's time for us all to go to Hogwarts. And we could still go to Camelot, to see Moony and Letha and Meghan, and Padfoot, now that he's alive.

He clung to this idea as both safe and possible, building pictures of the games they'd play and the fun they'd have, ignoring the cynical voice in his mind that said the Ministry of Magic would never let a magical child go to a Muggle home—

"Draco?"

Pop went the vision. Ray felt a tear of disappointment escape from his closed eyelids, and quickly wiped it away before opening his eyes to face the unknown speaker. She was an older witch, wearing the robes of a Ministry worker, sitting across from him in another chair. Beside her sat a Healer with long brown hair and a resemblance to his own mother, smiling tentatively at him.

"Aunt Andromeda?" he said uncertainly.

"That's my name," the Healer said, reaching out her hand to take his. "And you're Draco."

He nodded. Movement near the fireplace caught his eye, and he turned to see Moony with his arm around Harry, watching the flames where Hermione had just vanished.

"Your friends are all right; the young lady's parents have been called, and they're coming to Camelot to pick her up with her friend," said the Ministry witch, drawing Ray's attention back to her. "I'm Casewitch Felicity Davidson, by the way, of Wizarding Family Services. I'm going to help you, or do

my very best.” She shook Ray’s hand. “Quite a tangle you’re in, young man. May I guess you’re wondering where you’re going to sleep tonight?”

“Mm-hmm.” Ray focused on the casewitch, trying not to look back at the fireplace. Moony would go with Harry and Hermione, to make sure they got where they were going safely—that was the best thing to do, and Moony always knew the best thing to do—

“Usually, you’d go with your aunt,” Casewitch Davidson said. “But if I understand correctly, you two haven’t met before.”

“Family troubles,” Aunt Andromeda said sadly. “I married, as my family thought, below me. I wish I had tried harder to be reconciled with them, but my own foolish pride—” She broke off, shaking her head. “Never mind, that’s not important now. What’s important is getting you, Draco, somewhere that you want to be, with someone who can take care of you.”

Ray looked at the floor. “I understand,” he said in a mumble. “You don’t want me,”

“No!” Aunt Andromeda’s hands caught his shoulders and shook him slightly, forcing him to look up at her. “Merlin’s robes, no! I’ll gladly take you home with me, if you want to come. But you don’t know me, and you might not want to spend tonight with people you’ve never met before. And as it happens, someone else has already asked if you could go with him.”

Ray’s breath caught in his chest. *With him? With who? But they wouldn’t—they won’t—*

Hurried footsteps beside him, and Moony pulled up a chair and sat down. “Sorry to be late,” he said to the casewitch, catching his breath. “I had to explain a few things to the staff at Camelot, and make arrangements for my other friends to be taken care of. All right, Ray?”

Slowly, Ray nodded. “All right,” he said in a voice that didn’t sound like his own.

Aunt Andromeda let him go, nodding to Moony. “Mr. Lupin has asked that you be allowed to go home with him for the time being,” she said. “He’s explained that he knows you well from your visits to Camelot, and that if you’d like to go with him, he’ll be glad to have you. What do you think?”

Ray didn’t have to think, or even speak. Without a word, he ran across the intervening space into Moony’s opened arms and held on as desperately as he had a few hours before. Then he had hoped to save Moony and Peri; now he was the one in need of saving, and he knew beyond words or telling that he had found the only person who could do it.

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Remus held Ray close against him, feeling the boy’s shuddering breaths. “We’re going home,” he murmured. “We’ll be all right there.”

Casewitch Davidson smiled in satisfaction. “I have no doubt you will be,” she said, standing up. “I’ll come by to check tomorrow morning, if that’s convenient for you?”

“Perfectly, thank you.” Remus nodded to her and watched her out of sight before turning back to Andromeda. “Thank you, Andy,” he said fervently. “I don’t know what I’d have done if you’d said no.”

“Why should I say no?” Andromeda moved down two chairs, placing herself beside Remus and Ray, then began to run her wand up and down beside Ray’s back. “He’s under a great deal of stress right now, frightened and grieving and confused—the best thing for him is to be with an adult he knows and trusts, and that’s obviously you. I could take care of him, I’m capable of doing it, but coming to a strange house and getting to know a stranger would be one more upheaval in his life, and he doesn’t need that.” She frowned. “Odd. I haven’t seen quite that pattern before...”

“Does it need to be taken care of right away?” Remus asked, letting his eyes roam towards the fireplace.

“No, it doesn’t.” Andromeda ended her spell and put her wand away. “Take him home, Remus. Take care of him. I’ll check back tomorrow or the day after, or someone will, and you know how to get hold of me if something unexpected happens.”

“Of course.” Remus clasped her hand briefly, then stood up, cradling Ray against him. The boy shifted and turned his head, sighing against Remus’ neck.

Despite everything that had gone wrong that day, despite his deep worry for Peri and his hatred towards her attacker and the grief he felt on Ray’s part for Narcissa, Remus couldn’t help a small rush of joy. Part of a dream he’d never consciously allowed himself to acknowledge was fulfilled in this moment.

He was taking his boy home with him.

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Ray dozed, sorrow and pain pushed to one side. They would still be there when he woke up, and he’d have plenty of time to think about them. As long as Moony held him, he was all right.

The motion of the Floo half-woke him, but he opened only one eye to regard his new surroundings. He’d seen Moony’s home often, the mix of shabby old and comfortable new furniture, the dusty kitchen, the books on every available surface. He’d never been upstairs, though, and Moony was carrying him up the stairs now, up into a dark, cool hallway.

“Ray?” Moony’s voice vibrated through his chest, traveling directly through bones and flesh into Ray’s ears from the inside. “Are you awake?”

“Mmm.” Ray lifted his head to look around more fully, blinking away the blurriness of the eye he’d been lying on. “Where are we?”

Home." Moony lowered him to the ground, supporting him with one hand under his arm. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah." Ray took a tentative step and found he hadn't been lying. "Where?"

"Just in here." Moony leaned through the nearest doorway and turned on a light. "This is your room."

My room? I have a room?

Ray peered through the door, and eagerness overcame tiredness and worry. A small room, but large enough to hold the usual bedroom furniture, plus a full bookshelf and a chair the right size for lying in, or for two people to sit side by side, one perhaps a little on the other's lap.

He looked back at Moony, who was watching him anxiously. "It's great," he said, and found a smile somewhere at Moony's look of relief. "But why is it here?"

"Because I'm sentimental sometimes," Moony said, coming into the room and sitting down in the chair. Ray joined him, climbing into his lap the way he still loved to do but couldn't do at Camelot anymore. "Because I've cared about you since we first met, and I would sometimes imagine that your family had lost their money, or their home, and you needed a place to stay." His arms closed around Ray. "I never wanted this for you. But I'm glad it was ready, and I was ready, when you had need."

Ray shivered, and the bad thoughts came rushing back over him, not as strong as before—he could still think and see and hear—but very much present. "Will Peri be all right?" he asked. "When will she come home?"

"I don't know." Moony swallowed before he spoke again. "She was hurt badly, Ray, in more ways than one. The Healers said she doesn't seem to be *there* anymore. She's alive, and with care her body will heal. But they don't know when she'll wake up, or what she'll be like when she does."

"Or if she will at all?" Ray asked timidly.

Moony sighed. "Yes. Or if she will at all."

You're not supposed to say that, Ray scolded silently. You're supposed to tell me not to be silly, that of course she'll wake up, that she'll be just fine, that I'm making a fuss over nothing...

Maybe he ought to be grateful that Moony thought enough of him not to lie, but a large part of him would have preferred it the other way.

And what if Peri never does wake up? What if she dies like Mother did?

Moony will take care of you no matter what, said his sensible side. And you're borrowing trouble. Get some rest. Things always look better in the morning.

Ray closed his eyes over more tears and let the indisputable safety of Moony's arms lull him into sleep.

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Remus felt Ray's breathing go from the quick, shuddering breaths of a boy trying to keep from crying and not succeeding very well to the slow, deep, regular ones which meant fears and worries dropping away at the door into dreamland.

Good. Excellent. Sleep's the best thing for him just now.

He could have moved Ray to the bed, covered him, and left, but he had spent too long wishing for this, longing for it from a distance, to want to let it go just yet.

Besides, even if I didn't care for him at all, he's my only link to Peri.

The Healers had been honest with him, more honest than he might have wanted, but it was better to know the truth, as painful as truth might be. Lucius had seemingly taken out all his rage and frustration at the thwarting of his plans, whatever those might be, on Peri. Her arms and chest were badly bruised, one of her ribs cracked, and her body had bled inside, though the Healers had stopped that before it threatened her life. It was too early to know about anything else.

And they have only the vaguest idea why she won't wake up.

"I've seen this in people who've survived tragedies," one older Healer had said. "They sometimes withdraw into themselves, stop eating, stop responding. This is a higher degree than any other case I've witnessed, but the young lady may have had her reasons."

Remus closed his eyes, turning his head so that any tears falling wouldn't wake Ray. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I could have stopped it. If I'd thought, if I'd stayed, if I hadn't been in such a hurry..."

If I hadn't acted to save Harry. If I hadn't been willing to finish what you sacrificed yourself to start.

He had no doubt that was why she'd left herself in harm's way, to delay Lucius, to keep him more interested in her than in whatever he'd been planning for Harry.

It worked much too well. Harry's safe, and even has a family to go home to when this is all over. But you—

He freed a hand to press against his closed eyelids, trying to wipe away the vision of Peri lying still and white in a hospital bed, only the rise and fall of her chest showing that she lived.

Damn you, Pericula Grant. If it weren't for you, I could be happy right now. Sirius is alive, Harry's leaving his relatives forever, Ray is here with me...

Why do I have to love you?

No answer came to his ears.

But then, he hadn't expected one.

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Hmm. Sheets and a pillow

Either Hermione's playing house with me again, or the last thing I remember wasn't a dream after all.

Sirius cracked one eye open.

I see colors. This is a good sign.

After a moment of work, he got one hand out from under the covers.

And it is a hand. Not a paw. Another good sign.

Rolling over took a little more work, but it was worth it.

Goal, Snitch, and match.

Meghan lay in the bed next to his, and Aletha in the bed beyond that, both of them still fast asleep.

Doesn't matter for just looking at them. Sirius snuggled down in the sheets and spent several minutes familiarizing himself with every eyelash on Meghan's cheeks, then moving on to categorizing the lines on Aletha's face that hadn't been there when he'd seen her last.

I'll need to know them all, if I plan on carving replicas into Bellatrix.

On second thoughts, though, his beautiful wife had punished Bellatrix thoroughly enough.

Bella won't ever be able to do magic again, which means if the Dork Lord ever does come back, she'll be useless to him. Might as well leave her alone. But there are plenty of other Death Eaters running around...like, say, Malfoy...

Of course, he rather hoped Malfoy wasn't running around anymore at this point.

The last time I saw him, he had my godson. If that hasn't changed by now, I'm going to raise the biggest ruckus ever raised.

The thought of Harry in Malfoy's clutches got him up and moving. The room swirled around him a little when he sat up, but he hung onto the bedclothes until it stopped, then pulled himself to his feet. *I have to find out what's going on, what happened to Harry, what day it is—Merlin, I don't even know that, I could have been asleep a few hours or a week—*

A glance at the sunlight through the window told him it was afternoon, but not much more than that.

I'm going to tear this place apart—

He shivered, and looked down at himself.

After I get some clothes on.

Or at least a longer gown. Why do they make them so damned short?

Noise suddenly erupted in the hall, making him jump.

"But we want to see him!"

"Please, just for a minute!"

"Don't shout!" reproved an Official Voice. "Quiet in the halls, please!"

Sirius grinned and edged backwards until he felt the bedframe against his legs, listening all the while.

"We'll be quiet if you just let us in. We don't want to stay long, and we'll be very good the whole time—"

"We're terribly sorry for disturbing things, but we've been very worried, and we just want to see for ourselves—"

For a moment, Sirius considered greeting his visitors as Padfoot, but decided against it. *Too much work. Besides, they're used to that.* Instead he lay down, pulling the sheets up around himself, and peered out of one slitted eye.

Harry and Hermione entered the room like a whirlwind, with a flustered Healer just behind them. "Five minutes," she said appealingly. "Ten at the most."

Two heads nodded solemnly, and the Healer hurried out.

Harry rose on his tiptoes and imitated the Healer's voice. "Five minutes!" he falsettoed. "Ten at the most!"

Hermione giggled, then did her own imitation of the Healer in the hallway—"Don't shout, quiet in the halls, please!"—which made Harry snicker. Sirius held his breath lest he give himself away by laughing.

"What do you think he'll be like?" Hermione asked when they had both recovered.

"I don't know." Harry moved closer to Sirius' bed and looked down at him. "I hope he's nice."

"I'm sure he will be," said Hermione, joining Harry. "Jump was always such a nice dog." She frowned. "But what are we supposed to call him?"

"Padfoot, I guess." Harry shrugged. "Or maybe Mr. Black."

Sirius groaned before he could stop himself. Both children leapt backwards as though he'd shouted a spell at them.

Damn.

"Um, oops?"

Hermione giggled again, high-pitched and nervous. "I guess he's awake," she said to Harry.

"I guess he is." Sirius sat up. "Who are we talking about?"

"Muchu Kuchu, the king of the Monkey People," said Harry with a straight face.

Sirius scratched under one arm and grunted, sending Hermione into fresh giggles. "What do you want us to call you, please?" she said when she was done.

"Padfoot will do just fine. Mr. Black was my father, and you didn't want to know him. He wasn't a nice bloke."

"That's what the stories say," said Harry. "Did you really shave your head one year?"

Sirius nodded. "I thought I was cool," he said mournfully. "Don't ever do that. It makes girls laugh at you."

Harry looked at Hermione, then peered over Sirius to see Meghan, still asleep in her bed. "The girls always laugh at me anyway," he said. "I don't see what difference it would make."

Sirius chuckled. "You're right, they do. At least from what I've seen."

Hermione seemed to have overcome her initial diffidence, and was now right beside Sirius' bed. "Padfoot?" she said tentatively.

"Yes?"

"Can you really—I mean, would you—can I see what you really look like when you're a dog?"

Sirius drew his legs under him, knelt up, and transformed, landing on his front paws as Padfoot rather hard. *Whoof. Almost forgot what that felt like.*

"You're big," Hermione said in surprise. Her hand found its usual spot between his ears. "And your fur is rough. But I like it."

Harry darted in on the other side and mock-tackled him, hugging him ferociously and growling. Sirius growled back and swiped out a paw, knocking Harry off balance, then pulling him onto the bed.

You wanna play rough? I'll show you how Marauders play rough!

Hermione leaped on top of the tangle and thumped him with her heels. "Giddyup, Padfoot!"

Sirius sat down, depositing Hermione unceremoniously on his pillow, then wagged his tail, smacking her repeatedly in the face with it. Unfortunately, while he was busy with that, Harry had crawled out from under him, and he was attacked afresh from above.

Maybe I'm getting too old for this...

With the protesting creak of rusty iron, the bed collapsed under them.

I'm definitely getting too old for this.

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Remus lay on his front lawn on a blanket, Ray cuddled against his side, asleep. They'd had a picnic lunch, then watched clouds for a while before Ray had drifted off.

He's been sleeping a lot these last few days. But it's only been four days since it all happened...maybe this is just his way of coping with it.

More worrisome were the little aches and pains still bothering Ray. Though the boy seldom complained, Remus could read between the lines to see what was behind an hour on the couch, an afternoon spent chatting instead of romping, a restless and disturbed night.

And Peri still hasn't woken up. They'd been to visit her once or twice, but she remained the same as she had been before, silent and unresponsive. The Healers had begun feeding her by magical means. They claimed she was getting stronger physically, but Remus found he couldn't bear to look at her still face for too long.

Ray had kicked up a fuss the first time they'd visited, claiming one of the Healers must have stolen the locket Peri always wore, until Remus pointed out that it was far more likely Lucius had removed it. Inquiries at the DMLE had turned it up, scuffed and broken, its magic gone. Ray had claimed it anyway, and wore it now himself, as though hoping some of the connection it had forged between him and Peri still remained.

No use hurrying Peri, though. There never has been. She'll do things in her own good time, or she won't do them at all...

Of course, that's the possibility that has me worried.

He shook his head, smiling at himself. *Borrowing trouble again, Moony. She'll wake up, you'll kiss her better, and she'll come home to you and Ray. And then you'll all live happily ever after...*

The sound of a car pulling up drew Remus out of his dreams of a home filled with laughter. He sat up, then stood, as Sirius and Meghan burst out of the passenger door of Aletha's small sedan. "Free at last!" Sirius shouted across the street. "They just let us out today!"

Remus grinned and waved, but pointed downwards at the sleeping boy by his side and made shushing motions. Sirius nodded and tiptoed exaggeratedly across the street, Meghan copying his every move. Once across, she broke away and raced up the lawn towards Remus, pulling to a halt at the last possible second and holding out her arms for her usual hug.

"Harry gets to come home with us tomorrow," she said when she let go. "If the court says yes."

"Why wouldn't they?" Sirius scoffed, dropping down on an unoccupied corner of blanket. "I am who I say I am, he is who he says he is, I'm legally entitled to him, and I want him. What more is there to it?"

"You'd be surprised," Aletha said tartly, arriving behind them. "Hello, Remus. How have things been here?"

Remus smiled, looking down at Ray. "Idyllic. It won't last, but I'm treasuring it while it does."

Aletha closed her eyes for a moment. "You may be more right than you know," she said. "Can we come inside? There are a few things we need to tell you."

Remus frowned. "What's the matter?"

"It's complicated," Sirius said, his smile gone. "Probably best to give it to you in order."

"All right." Remus lifted Ray into his arms and started for the house. The boy stirred but didn't wake. Behind him came Sirius, Aletha, and Meghan with the blanket.

What is going on here?

Inside the house, Remus laid Ray on the couch, then joined the Blacks in the kitchen. Meghan accepted a small bag from her mother and scampered into the other room. "She'll play quietly," Aletha assured Remus as he sat down.

"Malfoy talked," Sirius said without preamble. "I found out when I stopped by the Auror Office to see what was going on there. It was all over the place. He told them everything, all about what he was going to do with Harry, what he did do to Peri, and why..." He shook his head. "He is one sick SOB."

"I knew that." Remus bit the words off short. "Get to the point, please."

"The point is, Malfoy was cursed. It happened near the very end of the war, and he thinks—I don't know how right he is—he thinks that Lily cursed him."

"Lily Potter?"

Aletha half-smiled. "Did you know another Lily?" she asked pointedly.

"No, but..." Remus stared at the familiar, scarred surface of the tabletop. "It seems so unlike her."

"He says the curse hit him the day after he participated in a particular Muggle killing. An older couple, in Surrey. Sound familiar?"

Remus' eyes widened. "Lily's parents."

Sirius nodded grimly. "Anyway, Malfoy put a delayer spell on the curse, to hold it off for seven years. He meant to get Voldie-farts to help him with it, but Halloween happened pretty soon afterwards, and he never got the chance. So he forgot about it until last week, when the delay spell ran out..."

"And he realized he was still under a curse," Remus finished. "But what does Harry have to do with it?"

"It was a blood curse," Aletha said hoarsely. "Directed at Malfoy and anyone of his blood. That sort of curse can only be removed from its victims if it's turned back to its caster, or someone of the caster's blood. The closer the relation, the better."

Remus swore under his breath. "So that's why he wanted Harry," he said aloud. "It makes sense, now."

"More sense than you're going to want it to." Sirius glanced towards the doorway of the room where Ray slept. "Narcissa and Peri ruined Malfoy's game before he had time to do anything to Harry. The curse is still there, still potent. Malfoy's dying by inches."

"Is this bad?"

"Some of the Healers ran tests on Narcissa's body," Aletha said. "They found signs of the same sorts of effects on her. The curse was beginning to affect her as well when she died."

"When Malfoy killed her," Remus corrected absently, then stopped. "But she wasn't any blood to him—well, somewhere very far back, but that can't be why it affected her—"

"It's not," Sirius said. "It hit her because she bore Malfoy's child. Hell of a clever curse, this one—backtracking through bloodlines..."

"Agreed," said Remus with a shrug. "Forgive me for sounding callous, Sirius, but Narcissa's dead. Is it important how she would have died if she hadn't already died?"

"Yes." Aletha had her eyes closed. "It is." She opened them and met Remus' gaze, her own laden with pain. "Malfoy admitted to using spells to increase his own fertility, and Peri's, before he did what he did. It worked. She's pregnant. And even if the child dies, the line has been established."

Several phrases collided within Remus' mind.

"Malfoy's child...blood curse...anyone of his blood..."

His lungs stopped working.

"Backtracking through bloodlines...the line has been established..."

"No," he breathed with the last of his air. "Please, no."

Their silence was answer enough.

"How long?" he whispered.

"We don't know," Aletha answered, the sorrow in her tone quietly respectful of his. "A month, maybe two. No longer."

A month. Maybe two.

Remus felt his dreams fade into the distance, the happy laughter in them now bitter and mocking.

I knew there'd be a catch somewhere. But not like this.

Not like this.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 13: Hope

Meghan looked up from her toy and cocked her head to one side. Moony was crying in the kitchen. That had to mean something was very wrong.

But there were a lot of things very wrong. Ray sick, and Peri asleep and not waking up, and the new baby starting to grow inside her—it wasn't that new babies were wrong, Mum had explained, nor even that this baby was wrong, but that Peri hadn't said it was all right for the baby to get made. Meghan didn't quite understand, but she knew Mum did, and Dad, so she accepted for the time being what she couldn't grasp.

But maybe I can help Ray. She set down her linked blocks and scooted over to Ray, still asleep on the couch. *If I could make Ray better, maybe I'd know how to help Peri too. Peri has more wrong with her than Ray does, but if I can take away one of the wrongs, maybe Mum or another Healer will be able to help with the other one.*

She put her hand on Ray's and concentrated on looking. *Let me see what's wrong, she willed. Let me see if there's a way I can fix it.*

Lines of ugly red light began to show under Ray's skin. Large ones spread through his arms and legs, small ones threaded across his fingers and face, until all his skin was cross-hatched with them. Meghan caught her breath—she'd seen something like this before, in one of Mum's books—

Whatever's wrong with Ray, it's in his blood, running around inside him, hurting him more and more. Can I stop it from doing that?

She reached, but pulled back with a yelp as the wrongness snatched at her too. *No! You can't hurt me! Mum and Dad need me to take care of them!*

A little shiver ran down her spine, and she let go of Ray's hand reluctantly, watching the lights under his skin fade. *So I can't stop whatever's hurting Ray. Not without letting it hurt me too. And I don't want to get hurt.*

She could taste the wrongness still, in her mouth. It was a sad sort of wrongness, and it reminded her of somebody she knew.

But I don't know anybody who would hurt Ray. He's our friend.

She slid that to the back of her mind and scooted closer to the kitchen door, listening carefully.

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"There's nothing anyone can do?" Remus asked for the fourth time, or the tenth, or the thirty-second—he'd lost count, and it didn't matter, because the answer would never change. "What about you and Meghan? You healed Sirius, didn't you?"

"The curse on him was different than this," Aletha said patiently. "It was normal magic, laid on thickly, but still normal magic. This isn't. It's wild, like accidental magic, but it's very strong, and it's tied closely to the Malfoy blood. Meghan and I might be able to draw the curse out of the bloodline, but we'd have to put it into another one—"

"And don't even think about it," Sirius said before Remus could do more than open his mouth. "Peri'd never forgive us, or you, if you did something *that* noble and stupid."

"And what else is there for me to do?" Remus asked bitterly. "Sit by and watch them both die? There has to be *something* I can do, damn it!"

Sirius looked away. "Sometimes there isn't," he said quietly. "Sometimes, no matter how hard you fight, there are things in life you can't change. Things you just have to live with, and try to work around." He twisted his wedding ring, reinstated on its proper finger two days ago. "I won't lie to you, Moony. It hurts, not to be able to fix things and make things all better. Sometimes it hurts a lot. Usually that's because it's your fault it happened, or because you think it is." He looked back at Remus with a half-smile. "This isn't your fault, by the way. None of it is. But I know you. You'll try and convince yourself it is, because blaming yourself and beating yourself up hurts less than facing the facts."

Remus laid his head on the table, pressing a hand against his eyes. *This isn't fair. He shouldn't be allowed to know me this well.*

"I know the feeling too," Aletha added softly. "And sometimes there just isn't any way to make it better. But there are other times when things get better all of a sudden, after you'd almost stopped hoping." Her hand found Remus' and pressed it gently before moving on to hold Sirius'. "Hope hurts, Remus. But without it, there's no way through this, or at least no way that will leave you as yourself when it's over."

"When it's over." Remus let his hand tighten into a fist. "When they're dead, you mean. When I've hoped until there's no more reason to hope, and let their deaths kill me."

"Do I count as no more reason to hope?" Sirius said in a mock-offended tone. "What about Meghan and Harry and Hermione? They care about you, I'll have you know. And I suppose Letha does too," he added quickly as his wife cleared her throat. "Ow!"

"You deserved it." Aletha's hand pressed gently against Remus' face, turning it so that he could see her. "Remus, please don't give up hope yet. We haven't had a chance to study this curse fully. There's always a chance we'll find something, a way to delay it if not to take it off entirely."

"Delay it? What for?" Remus shoved her hand away roughly. "Let them die even more slowly, prolong the pain?"

"To give us more time to find a true cure," Aletha said firmly. "But even if we fail entirely, if there is no cure at all, there's one thing that only you can

do.

“What?” Remus asked ungraciously.

Aletha lowered her eyes for a moment. “It isn’t easy,” she said. “It will hurt you, tear at you, no matter what we find.”

Remus growled under his breath. “Tell me what it is.”

Aletha looked up. “Ray. He’s old enough to be told the truth, in my opinion; old enough to ask is old enough to know. You’ll make the final decision, of course, but whether or not he knows, he will need someone there with him, someone to lean on and call for when it hurts too much.”

Remus bit down hard on his lip. Could he still bear to hold Ray in his arms if they both knew how it would end?

“And don’t give me that look, either,” Sirius said grumpily.

“What look?” Remus gripped the edge of the table, hoping it would help him keep as firm a grip on his temper.

“The look that says *Lucky Sirius, he doesn’t have to deal with this*. Maybe I don’t have someone dying on me, but I have to explain to Harry and Meghan—yes, and Hermione too—what’s happening to Ray, and to Peri, and they’re going to ask me, ‘When are they going to get better?’” Sirius imitated Hermione’s voice. “You know they will, that’s how kids think. ‘When will they be able to play with me again?’ ‘When will they be able to do everything they used to?’ How do you think I’m going to tell them that it might never happen?”

Remus tried to say something, but Sirius ran over top of him. “When I’ve just seemingly come back from death, they’re not going to understand that being dead lasts forever. I get to try to explain that to them, and deal with whatever comes of it. And you know Harry—he’s just enough like his dad that he might well try something brave and stupid, especially when he realizes it was Lily’s spell that did this, and that Malfoy could have turned the curse onto him and saved Ray.”

“And himself,” Aletha interjected dryly, “which I think was his main concern.”

“No, I wouldn’t say that,” said Sirius, diverted. “He seems to care about his son.”

“About his son as in Ray, the boy we care about, or about his son in the sense of his bloodline continuing?” Remus said dully.

“Probably the second one,” Sirius admitted. “But Harry’s still going to pick up on it, and want to know why he can’t save Ray and Peri, and I get to convince him that he can’t—”

“And since we will all be suffering quite enough over the next few months, I think this session of ‘I’m a bigger martyr than you are’ is over for the moment,” said Aletha quellingly. “Nothing is set in stone, Remus,” she added more gently. “We could find out something new at any time. There might be a way to turn the curse from them that we never thought of.” She sighed. “I just wish we knew more about it. How it was worded, what exactly it said. If we knew that, we might be able to find a way to take it off them.”

xXxXx

From the other room, Meghan listened carefully, her fingers pressed against her mouth.

Mum wants to know what words the curse used. She can’t know because Harry’s mum made the curse, and Harry’s mum died.

But Meghan had seen what dying looked like. A cold, rocky beach, with waves washing in...

If the water means dying, maybe people who are all the way dead are out in the water somewhere. She shivered. Mum would never tell her scary stories, but some of the other girls she took her dancing lessons with weren’t so careful. *I don’t really want to see a dead person.*

If somebody didn’t do something, though, Ray would be a dead person soon, and so would Peri, and Peri’s baby. Meghan shivered harder at the thought of her friends stranded on that lonely shore, watching the water come in, wondering how long they could last before a wave broke over their heads and dragged them away...

I have to do something.

No, we have to do something. Harry and Hermione intruded themselves upon the mission as a matter of course, and Ray as a matter of necessity—it was his life, after all.

Meghan settled down next to the couch for some deep thinking.

xXxXx

When the Blacks had gone home, Remus sat down at the end of the couch and watched Ray sleep. *Damn it, Peri, why couldn’t you be here? You’d know how to explain this to him—how to make him understand—*

“It’s one of the lies we have to tell our children,” Peri murmured in his memory. Remus closed his eyes to see her sitting beside him at the library in Camelot, the children curled up together with Hermione reading to them. *“That we can protect them from anything. They have to realize sooner or later that it’s not true, but when they’re very young, if they don’t believe it, they’ll never learn to trust anyone, because they aren’t ready for the realization that no one is perfect.”*

Remus opened his eyes again to look at Ray. *Ready or not, little one, here it comes...*

He slid off the couch to sit on the floor beside his boy. *I can do this much for you. I can be there with you every step of the way. I won't let you suffer any more than you have to.*

Drawing a deep breath, he shook Ray gently awake.

xXxXx

Ray squirmed, cataloguing all his body's sensations. *Is this what "very sick" feels like? I hurt all over, but I can still do things. I still want to do things. I thought sick people didn't care.*

"Will I have to go into hospital?" he asked Moony.

"Probably not, at least not for a while. As long as you can take care of yourself, or I can take care of you, you'll stay here." Moony tried to smile. "There's even a chance Peri could come out of hospital."

"She's woken up?" Ray realized a split second too late this was impossible—Moony would have told him that long before the trifling fact that Ray himself was very sick—and wanted to kick himself for the look that spread over Moony's face. "I'm sorry," he said, looking away.

"Don't be." Moony's voice was rough, and he leaned down to hug Ray tightly. "Don't be sorry for anything you do—not that I'm going to let you get away with being a brat," he added, with a faint version of his usual chuckle. "No, Peri hasn't woken up, but the Healers think that being in a familiar place might make her more likely to wake. So she'll be coming here, at least until—" His face shut down, and he turned away.

"At least until what?" Ray was suddenly worried. "What's wrong with her? Is there something new?"

"Yes." Moony coughed over the word, and had to clear his throat before he could go on. "Yes, there's something new. Sirius and Aletha were just here, with Meghan, to tell me about it." His shoulders shook once, and he reached out to take Ray's hand. "She's under a curse, Ray. Even if she wakes up, she'll be ill the same way you're ill, and she probably isn't going to get better from it. Unless the Healers can find a way to get rid of the curse..."

Ray felt a cold knot of ice form in his stomach. "She's going to die, isn't she?"

Moony's face gave him all the answer he needed.

"No!" he half-shouted. "I don't want her to die!"

"Nor do I," Moony whispered back.

And they were holding each other and crying, crying like Ray hadn't been sure Moony could cry. Moony wasn't supposed to cry.

But then, Peri wasn't supposed to die, either.

xXxXx

Late that night, Ray lay in his bed and watched the shadows on the ceiling flicker and change shape.

Peri's under a curse. A curse that kills people. But who would put Peri under a curse?

Maybe my father did it. Maybe that was the way he hurt her that was so terrible that Moony couldn't tell me about it. But Moony acted like he only learned about that today, and there was something else that was terrible that my father did to Peri before...

He shifted uneasily as his shoulder twinged.

Moony said Peri would be ill like I'm ill if she woke up. I don't want her to hurt like this, but I do want her to wake up. I want her to be here with me. He fingered the locket on his chest. *She promised she'd always be with me...*

If Peri will always be with me, does that mean I'll always be with Peri?

The way the thought looped made him smile, until it curved back to touch his earlier thoughts.

I'll always be with Peri, so wherever she goes, I have to go.

Moony said she'd be ill like I'm ill if she woke up.

Her being asleep isn't part of the curse.

The curse kills people.

A sudden, terrible fear filled him, and he jumped out of bed.

Or tried to jump. Halfway through, his left leg stabbed with pain, and he doubled up over it, yelling. Too late, he realized this had tipped him over the edge of the bed.

The resultant slam shook the floorboards and left Ray winded. His thoughts, as scattered as his breath, flitted around his head as he fought for air. *A curse...like Peri...she's going to die...*

"Ray!" Moony appeared in his doorway, lit wand in one hand. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Ray coughed. "It hurt," he wheezed, pointing at his leg. "I tried to get up..."

"Don't talk too much," Moony said soothingly, dropping down beside him and helping him to sit up. "Just relax. Breathe deep."

Ray drew one great, sobbing breath, then another. His chest loosened. Leaning into Moony, he closed his eyes, and for one second the world was the way it ought to be.

Then he looked up at Moony and asked his question.

"Am I going to die?"

xXxXx

Remus' first impulse was to lie.

He's too young to understand it. He'll be terrified by it. Don't tell him.

And behind it all, the sneaking hope, *If he doesn't know it's supposed to happen, maybe it won't happen...*

"Why do you think so?" he asked, playing for time.

"You said Peri would be ill like I'm ill if she woke up. But if her being asleep were part of the curse, then she wouldn't ever wake up, or not until someone found a way out of the curse. So the curse has to be something else." Ray pushed away from him and met his gaze. "Please, Moony. I want to know."

Not quite a man yet, but well on your way. Remus felt a rush of pride, accompanied and overshadowed by the grief of a loss assured. "I will tell you," he said quietly. "Yes. Unless Letha and the other Healers find some way to counter the curse..." *Stay strong for him. Don't let him see you break down. "...you will die."*

Ray closed his eyes and swallowed once, then opened them again. "What is it like?" he asked. "Dying?"

"We don't know." Remus waved Ray closer, and Ray came willingly, pressing himself against Remus' side as though he held to life itself. "Some people say it's like passing through a door, or walking through an archway. Some talk about bright light, or clouds, or beautiful meadows and forests. Many people believe that you meet the people you loved."

"And I don't have to go alone," Ray murmured. "Peri will go with me."

Remus winced at this unintentional stab. "Yes," he answered. "Peri will go with you. You know nothing can go too wrong if she's there."

Ray nodded, and they sat together in silence for a long time or a short one. Finally Ray spoke again. "It would be nice if we could all go together." He shifted in his place. "Or if we could all stay."

"I would prefer that, myself," Remus said lightly, pushing his own pain aside to be dealt with later. "But going together might be a good idea as well."

The only trouble is, I doubt that suicide is a particularly good ticket into whatever realms Peri and Ray are bound for. And I'd hate to ruin my chance. You only die once, after all.

A small smile sneaked onto his face. He let it stay there.

Whatever tomorrow brings, tonight we have each other. Let's be thankful for that.

xXxXx

"My *mum* did this?" Harry stared at Padfoot, appalled. "Why would she do something like this?"

"She was angry," Padfoot said, spreading his hands wide. "Both her parents had just been killed. She wanted to hurt the people who'd killed them. There was no way she could have known she'd be hurting Ray, or Peri."

"But Ray and Peri didn't do anything to her!"

"No, but it looks like her curse was made to hit back the way she'd been hit." Padfoot didn't seem to like what he was saying, but plunged on gamely. "She'd lost her family, so her curse would hit back by hurting this other person's family. I'm sure the curse itself is on Lucius Malfoy..."

"But Ray and Peri get hurt for it." Harry shoved back his chair. "I hate my mum."

"Hey, that's no way to talk—"

Harry tuned out the rest of this, listening instead to his angrily pounding feet as he stamped out of the room. "That's stupid," he muttered to himself.

"That's stupid, stupid, stupid."

"What's stupid?" asked Hermione, coming around the corner.

Harry summarized the truth for her in a few words.

Hermione gasped. "She never."

Harry scowled. "I hate her," he said. "I wish she was still alive. I'd kick her." In Lily Potter's absence, he kicked the wall.

"I wish she was still alive too," Hermione said fervently. "Then she could take the curse off."

"Take it off?" Harry stopped mid-kick. "Hermione, do you think we could find a way to take it off?"

"Us?" Hermione frowned. "We're just kids."

"We were just kids when we fought Ray's father, but we still won."

"But that was sneaking and using wands. This is complicated magic." Hermione shook her head. "I don't think we can."

"Chicken."

"I am not chicken."

"Are so. You're giving up before we even start."

"I am not! I'm just saying I don't think we can do something like this!"

"That's the same as giving up!" Harry shouted.

"It is not!" Hermione shouted back.

"Enough, both of you!"

Harry and Hermione both jumped and faced Letha, who had her arms folded across her chest. "I have no idea what you're arguing about, but stop it. This is hard enough on everyone without you two making it worse. Upstairs, and either play politely or sit and sulk in opposite corners. I really don't care which. Go."

Casting angry glances at each other, Harry and Hermione climbed the stairs. Meghan opened her door and peered out as they reached the top. "Were you talking about the curse?" she whispered.

"Yes," said Harry just as Hermione said, "No."

Meghan crossed her arms, looking very like her mother.

"Yes," Hermione admitted. "But Meghan, you don't really think—"

Meghan put her finger to her lips and beckoned them into her room.

"I can't read all these big words," she said, pointing to a book that lay open on her bed. "But you can, Hermione. Tell me what this means." She tapped the paragraph she meant with one small finger.

Hermione began to read aloud, hesitantly. "The gaining of knowledge from the dead is a very risky proposition and should not be attempted without proper training—there, you see?" she interrupted herself, looking up. "It's saying what I was saying—we can't do..." She stopped and looked back at the page. "Gaining of knowledge from the dead?" she repeated shrilly. "Meghan, what are you thinking of?"

"Harry's mum is the only person who knows enough about the curse to take it off," Meghan said firmly. "And she's dead. If we want to learn enough about the curse to save Ray and Peri, we have to ask her."

"You're crazy," Harry said.

Meghan punched him in the shoulder. "Keep reading, Hermione," she said. "I think I understand the next part, but I want to make sure."

Hermione looked back down at the book, found her place, and continued. "...without proper training, though the physical requirements are fairly basic. That means the things you need to do it are simple," she translated before going on. "One essential is a blood relative of the one to whom you wish to speak—Harry, that's you! You're her son, that's closer blood than anyone but brothers and sisters!"

Harry nodded. "Go on," he said breathlessly, starting to let himself hope. Maybe Meghan's crazy idea wasn't so crazy after all...

Hermione hurried ahead. "Another indispensable person is the Healer, who keeps the souls from parting company permanently with the bodies to which they are attached—"

"I'll be a Healer when I grow up," Meghan interrupted. "And Mum already is one. She could keep us from—from—"

From dying while we try to talk to a dead person?" Harry suggested.

"Yeah, that." Meghan noticed Hermione's glare and stopped talking.

"—a third requirement is one possessed of the unusual ability to change one's sleep-borne visions at will, the skill sometimes called dreamsculpting..." Hermione trailed off, frowning. "But can't everyone change their dreams?" she asked. "Can't you?"

Meghan and Harry shook their heads. "I dream all sorts of strange things," Harry said. "They just happen. I can't do anything about them. Sometimes I wish I could, when I have nightmares. Why?"

"Because I can." Hermione was starting to look hopeful. "I can change my dreams any time I want. I always could, even when I was just a little baby. Sometimes I'd even see you there, Harry, or Ray and Peri. I can dreamsculpt, I know I can."

"That's three," Meghan said excitedly. "Harry for the blood, me for the Healing, and you for the dream-stuff, Hermione. Is there anything else?"

Hermione returned her gaze to the book. "...but the final person required is the most important of all," she read aloud, "for without him the entire plan shall fail. To enter into the mists of death, your party must be accompanied by one who already walks on death's road, for only he can see the way and lead you hence."

"Does that mean we have to take along someone who's dying?" Meghan asked in a small voice.

"I think so." Harry grinned. "And we don't know *anyone* like that at all."

Hermione laid the book carefully on the bed. "It's like it was written for us," she said quietly. "With Ray, we're exactly the people we need."

"Except for one problem," Harry said, his good mood suddenly sinking like lead.

"What?" asked the girls together.

"The grown-ups."

Silence fell as they considered this indisputable obstacle.

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 14: Preparation

Remus shut the door behind him, dropping a hand to the small amulet he wore on his belt. He'd left its partner with Ray and instructed it to activate if the boy woke or made any unusual noise. *He'd probably be angry if he knew I was keeping tabs on him, but I want to be able to get to him quickly if he falls again like he did last night. Or if the news I had to give him sinks in badly and scares him...*

Drawing a deep breath, he set Ray aside. *I've done all I can for him right now. I need a minute to deal with something else. Some one else.*

That someone lay before him in the dark bedroom, her breathing quiet and regular. Remus crossed the room to the blinds and pulled them open, squinting against the sudden brightness until his vision cleared. *I only wish it were so easy, but she's not likely to wake up just for a little light.*

Reluctantly, he turned to look. Peri was exactly the way he remembered her from hospital. Arms by her sides, face still and composed, she could have been a statue except for the slow rise and fall of her chest. Remus placed a hand against her cheek, savoring the cool, smooth skin under his fingers.

"Not like this," he whispered, kneeling beside her bed. "I never wanted to bring you home like this." A smile rose unbidden to his lips. "We're in the wrong room, even. We should be down the hall." His mid-year bonus had been unexpectedly large last year, and in a mood of crazy extravagance, he had bought himself a double bed. "I wanted to surprise you. To show you I was ready for you, when you were ready for me."

He'd imagined a quiet ceremony, private and small; they needed no grand displays to ensure the world of their love. A celebration with their friends, to share the joy, and then the homecoming. They would find every desire fulfilled in one another, and hold each other fast against the world, and never let go again...

He reached for her hand and took it, rubbing it between his own hands to warm it. "You'll be leaving again soon," he said conversationally, trying to think of it in Ray's terms. "I'll miss you when you're gone. There isn't any way you'd consider letting me see you one last time before you go, is there? Not just you, but *you*. If that made any sense."

His chest felt tight, and he knew he was close to losing his battle with grief. "You can't do this," he said under his breath, struggling to keep the words from coming out as a wail. "You can't do this to me, Peri—you can't just sleep your life away, without ever saying goodbye—"

He laid one of his hands on her chest, then slid it down to her belly. "Is this why?" he asked her. "Are you afraid of this? It doesn't make any difference to me—I know, I'm not the one who has to deal with it, but you know I'll be there with you every step of the way. Besides..." A shudder went through him. "...you won't ever have to give birth..."

He laid his head on her arm, shaking all over. "Don't leave me," he begged her. "Don't leave me all alone. Even if it's just for a little while, a few days, a few weeks—" He broke off, his voice half-choked.

"I can't do this alone," he said quietly when he could breathe again. "I know Sirius and Aletha will be with me, and we'll still have Harry and the girls, but I need you. We always wanted to be together, and I still want that. For as long as we can."

Because if you were here with me, then I wouldn't have to believe it for a little while longer. For a day, or two days, or three, we could pretend that everything would be all right. That we were just an ordinary family, a man and a woman who'd made a life together, and who had nothing but joy to look forward to, watching their two beautiful children grow up.

We would all know it was a lie. But just for a day, we could pretend it was true.

Just for a day, we could be happy.

xXxXx

Harry ran up to Moony's door, too impatient to wait for the adults. Hermione and Meghan were only a few steps behind, though Meghan was scowling at the restrictions placed on her by her shorter legs.

"All right," Padfoot said resignedly. He drew his wand and unlocked the door. "Stay quiet, someone's probably sleeping."

Harry darted inside, then back out. "Don't you mean Ray's probably sleeping?"

"Ray or Peri," Letha said quietly, coming up the front walk unhurriedly. "She's here now."

"Why?" Hermione asked curiously. "Is she awake?"

"No," Padfoot said, "but Moony wanted her here if it was possible. He's very worried about her."

Harry snorted and ran back inside. *He should be worried about her. And about Ray. They're going to die—and all because of my mum.*

That still bothered him, deep down inside. How could his mum, who by all accounts had been a good person, have done such a terrible thing? Padfoot claimed she didn't know it was terrible, but why had she done that kind of magic if she didn't know what it would do? Letha and Moony had drilled it into him from the first day they let him hold a wand to never, ever, ever do a spell unless he was sure of what he wanted it to do.

Maybe I'll get a chance to ask her. If they say we can do this.

That was the other problem on his mind, getting the grown-ups to agree with their idea. They hadn't told Padfoot and Letha what they were thinking yet—Hermione had said, and Harry and Meghan agreed, that it would sound better if they only had to say it once. It sounded worse and worse every time Harry said it inside his own head, so he could understand Hermione's point.

But we're here now. Moony will come downstairs, and we'll all sit down, and we'll tell him what we think we can do.

His heart was thumping faster than it ever did when he climbed trees or ran away from Dudley and his gang. *What if they say no? What if they think we're crazy? What if they won't let us?*

"He's probably upstairs with Peri," Padfoot said quietly, sitting down at the kitchen table. "Do you want to go up, Letha, or should I?"

"I'll do it," said Hermione, starting for the stairs.

"Fair enough," said Letha, sitting down beside Padfoot. "Harry, sit, or at least don't do laps around the kitchen."

Harry made a face at Letha, but sat down. Meghan clambered onto his lap without asking. "Stay," she commanded him.

"Bossy."

Meghan nodded, grinning widely.

xXxXx

Hermione stepped carefully from stair to stair, trying to make sure they wouldn't creak, and thought as she climbed. She had never been quite sure what she felt for Moony and Peri.

I love them a lot more than I think you should love grown-ups who are just friends and not your parents, or aunts and uncles. But then, I love Mrs. Letha like that too. So I guess they're like aunts and uncles to me, since I don't have any of my own.

She daydreamed occasionally about something happening to her parents—something not too bad, because she loved them very much, but something that would make them not able to take care of her anymore—and her needing another place to live, and going to live with Moony, or Moony and Peri if her daydream took place after Peri left Ray. This sometimes felt like ill-wishing her own family, but when she'd hesitantly told her mother about it, Mum had said not to worry.

"Every child wants to know what would happen to them if something happened to their family," she'd said, kissing Hermione. "You're very lucky, Neenie love, because you have people who would love you and take good care of you if it was needed. Don't feel bad about thinking or wondering."

I wish—I wish—

She was at the top of the stairs, and light came from a room down the hall. Step by careful step, she inched towards it, until she was up against the door, peering in through the crack between the hinges.

Peri lay on the bed, silent and still, with Moony kneeling beside her. His forehead was pressed to the back of one of her hands. Hermione's imagination painted a long gown onto Peri, armor and a sword onto Moony, and she drew a breath of wonder before she could stop herself.

Moony lifted his head, looking around for the source of the sound. "Who's there?" he said hoarsely. "Ray, is that you?"

"No, it's me," Hermione said, pushing the door open. "I'm sorry I was spying. I shouldn't have been."

"It's all right." Moony beckoned her closer, and she came. "When did you get here?"

"Just now. Everyone else is downstairs." Hermione slipped herself between Moony and the bed and put an arm around his neck, looking at Peri. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I don't want this to happen."

"No one does, Kitten." Moony held her close, and she felt his chest shake a little. "None of us."

"That's why we came," Hermione murmured. "We found something out...it's hard to explain, though, so we wanted to make sure we only had to do it once."

"Should I be worried?" Moony asked lightly.

"Maybe."

"All right, now I *am* worried." Moony set her on the floor and stood up, stretching his legs and making a face. "Cramps," he explained. "Let's go downstairs and hear what you found out."

He looked back at Peri. "I'll be back soon," he said quietly. "If you wake up, just call."

Hermione closed her eyes hard and hurried out of the room.

xXxXx

“You want to *WHAT?*” Sirius exploded.

“Just a second,” Aletha said, holding up her hand before her husband could go any farther. “Don’t let’s yell at them yet.”

“I still need another minute to process this,” Remus said, shaking his head. “You want to attempt to speak to Harry’s mother?”

“It has the advantage of being logical,” Aletha pointed out. “Lily set the curse, so Lily would know the curse. It might be the only way we could find out its exact wording.”

“But there’s one enormous drawback to that,” Sirius said, pounding the table lightly to emphasize his words. “Lily. Is. Dead.”

“We know,” said Harry. “But we’re perfect to go and talk to her. Look.” He nodded to Hermione, who slid the book across to Sirius. “I have her blood, Meghan and Letha can Heal us, Neenie can dreamsculpt, and Ray is going to die soon. That’s what we need.”

“Sounds like a set-up,” Sirius said suspiciously, perusing the passage Hermione had pointed out. “Where’d you get this book?”

“No, it’s for real,” Remus said, his voice sounding stronger. “I’ve studied that combination. There are other ways to contact the dead—a blood sacrifice at certain locations, séances if they’re properly done—but this is simple, doesn’t involve too much esoteric equipment, and not terribly dangerous.”

“Not terribly dangerous?” Sirius slammed the book shut. “They want to *die* ! Or go closer than any rational person should!”

“We don’t want Ray and Peri to die,” Hermione said pleadingly. “This is a way we could help.”

“And you’d have to help us,” said Meghan earnestly. “We’d be very careful and always come back as soon as you called and not do anything we shouldn’t.”

Sirius spluttered. Aletha ignored him for a moment, looking instead at Remus.

He isn’t sure if he should let himself hope yet or not. But this could mean everything—it could be exactly what we need—

Or it could be a disaster waiting to happen.

But if we do nothing, Ray and Peri will die.

“Define ‘not terribly dangerous,’” she said to Remus.

Sirius groaned. “Letha, not you too!”

The children sat up straighter, listening for all they were worth.

“If we are observant, there should be no way for the children to die while doing this,” Remus said slowly, pulling the book away from Sirius and flipping it open to the table of contents. “The dreamsculpter—Neenie, that’s you?”

Hermione nodded.

“All right. Hermione, then, will set a landscape that will define our boundaries of life and death. Sirius, you described a beach with waves coming in. The beach was life, the water death. Right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Using that metaphor,” Remus continued over Sirius, “we, the adults, would wait on the beach. The children would go into the water. We’d have ropes on them for safety, and some way to monitor how they were doing. If they seemed to be getting into trouble, we could pull them back. They would also come back by themselves when they needed air. As long as we’re watching them closely, there should be no way that they can get themselves into enough trouble to die.”

“There should have been no way that a curse from Lily could be killing Malfoy’s nursemaid,” Sirius countered. “Are you honestly willing to stake all their lives on a ‘should be’? Or are you just that desperate to get—”

“Stop that sentence right there, Sirius Black.” Aletha was on her feet and around the table before she was consciously aware of deciding to move. “If you’re afraid of this, then say so. It doesn’t require your participation.”

“It does require Harry’s,” Sirius shot back. “There’s no way you’ll be able to get to Lily without him. And I’m his godfather, and I say he doesn’t do this.”

“Hey!” Harry shot to his feet. “That’s not fair!”

“I’m not interested in fair,” Sirius told him. “I’m interested in you living until Hogwarts age.”

Harry clenched his fists. “Can I live with the Dursleys again?” he asked.

Aletha stifled a laugh at the look on Sirius’ face. “If that’s what you want to do,” she said. “We’ll see about it first thing tomorrow morning.”

"Good." Harry glared at Sirius, who was staring at him in astonishment. "They won't stop me. They didn't care what I did. I'll stay with them until I'm all grown up if you won't let me do this. Because if Ray dies, or Peri does, and I could have helped them and I didn't, that's wrong. And I'll go and live with the Dursleys again if that's the only way I can help them."

Sirius closed his mouth. "Is it just me, or is anyone else hearing Lily in this?" he said weakly.

Harry growled.

"I know you're angry with her right now, Harry, but Sirius has a point," Remus said, waving Harry back into his seat. "This was what your mother was really like. Fierce when someone challenged her about something she thought was right."

"And willing to do things that she might not like," Aletha added, sitting down on the edge of the table. "Even things that might put her in harm's way. Which drove your father up the wall, but in his saner moments, he had to admit he admired her for it. And so did we all." She gave Sirius a significant look.

Sirius slumped in his chair. "Give me a break," he said. "You always used to be telling me to grow up. Now that I think I've finally done it, you're yelling at me for it?"

"Growing up isn't just following the rules you used to ignore," Remus said, closing the book. "It's knowing when to follow them and when to ignore them. And I think we have a situation here where ignoring is called for."

"Seconded," Aletha said.

"Do we get to vote?" Hermione asked.

"No," said Remus.

"Damn."

Everyone looked at Sirius.

He closed his eyes, then opened them. "You're all mad," he said. "I just wanted to get that on record. All right. Yes. Let's try it."

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Ray ran, pressing a hand to his side to stop the pain, wincing as new pains erupted in his knees and hips with every step, but he couldn't slow down. The monster was right behind him, and it would catch him if he slowed or stopped.

It'll catch me anyway. The thoughts came in short bursts. *It'll catch me, and eat me, and I'll die.*

Peri lay a short distance away, blood seeping from her throat onto the ground. Moony stood watching, his face dull, his hands empty.

No one's going to help me—no one can help me—

Something heavy landed on his feet, and he tripped and fell—

And came awake, gasping for breath, safe in his own bed at Moony's house, with Meghan perched at the bottom of the bed, looking at him curiously. "You have a bad dream?" she asked.

"Sort of." Ray forced himself to breathe slowly and evenly, squeezing two handfuls of the covers in time with his breaths. "Sort of."

"I have good news." Meghan was grinning. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes, please."

"There might be a way to get you better," Meghan said, bouncing off the bed and rocking on her feet. "You and Peri both. We don't know yet, but we think we know how to find out. And we need your help for it."

"Meghan, don't tease."

"I'm not teasing!" Meghan stamped her foot. "We really can! We just have to talk to Harry's mum!"

"Harry's mum is dead."

"I know. That's why we need you."

Ray put his head in his hands. "Start over," he said. "And use little words."

"We found out a way to talk to dead people," Meghan said, enunciating carefully as she might to a child even younger than herself. "It needs somebody who's sick and might die themselves, like you, and a Healer like Mum and me, and somebody who can change dreams, like Neenie—"

"Wouldn't mind being able to do that," Ray murmured.

"—and somebody who's the same blood as the dead person you want to talk to, like Harry. And a grown-up wizard, or two wizards, who're good at

magic and can watch you to make sure you'll be okay. Like my Dad and Moony." Meghan beamed. "So we can go talk to Harry's mum and find out what the curse was she put on your father, and then Mum will know how to take it off, and then you and Peri will get well and everything will be all right again!"

Ray put his hand against Peri's locket, lying cool on his chest. His heart was starting to speed up again.

I could get well. Peri could get well and marry Moony. We'd all be together. I'd go to Hogwarts after all, and grow up and be whatever I wanted to be. And Peri'd have the baby, and I'd have a little sister, or a brother—

We'd be a family. A real family.

"When can we do it?" he asked, looking up.

"Soon. Very soon." Meghan bounced some more. "Dad and Mum are getting ready for it right now. And Moony is helping Hermione think about it, and Harry's waiting for us because he wants to talk to us about what we have to do."

"Where?"

"He's right outside. Harry!"

Harry pushed the door open and came in, a large book in one arm. "Did she make sense?" he asked. "She didn't, when I first heard about it."

"Did so!"

"She made sense," Ray said, folding his legs under him on the bed. "How are we doing it exactly, though?"

"It works through dreams. Neenie can change dreams, so she'll get us to where we need to go. Then you and I have to work together." Harry set the book on the bed and flipped through the pages. "Two-twenty-eight, two-twenty-eight...here it is. Have a look."

Ray leaned over the book next to Harry. Meghan slipped under them and knelt down, frowning at some of the longer words. Her hand was warm where it rested on Ray's.

I'm going to have a real family. And no curse is going to stop me.

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"Can I just use the beach and the water?" Hermione asked, nestled comfortably against Moony on the couch in the living room. "I know what that should look like. Meghan likes to tell the story a lot. And it will make sure we don't stay too long, because we'll have to come up to breathe."

Moony nodded. "It will make it easy to keep track of you as well," he said. "You'll wear harnesses with ropes, and we'll hold the ropes. You won't have long each time, though, and you'll probably get tired quickly. Cold, too, if the water's as chilly as Sirius says it is."

"We'll move fast," Hermione said, closing her eyes the better to imagine that lonely, rocky beach. "We'll need to." Moony's arms were strong around her, holding her safe. "We'll probably find her our first time down, then go back to actually talk to her the second time..."

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"So there's a part of me that's different because I'm..." Ray didn't want to say the word, but there wasn't any way around it. "...dying?"

"That's what the book says," Meghan said. "And Harry has to touch that part of you and think about a person who had that feeling and was his blood, and we'll know which way to go to find his mum."

"You nervous?" Harry asked.

"Yeah." Ray shifted on the bed. "What if it doesn't work? What if we get stuck there and can't get back?"

"We won't." Harry flattened his hand on the page, then popped it off. "Neenie can wake us up just like that if we start to feel like we're stuck."

"But if she's stuck too, she might not be strong enough. Then what?"

"Then the grown-ups pull us in."

"But what if they get tired too?"

"What if monkeys fly in the window and sing you 'Happy Birthday'?" Harry countered. "Do you want to get better or don't you?"

"Not if it means one of you has to die!"

"Stop it!" Meghan screeched, slamming the book shut and just missing Harry's hand. "Nobody's going to die, because—because—"

"Because you said so?" Ray suggested.

"Yes! Because I said so!"

“Well, that makes me feel much better.” Ray grinned at her. “Now I know we’re going to be all right.”

“That’s right,” Harry said in the same tone. “Nobody is allowed to die when Meghan says they won’t.”

Meghan nodded fiercely. “Dad didn’t,” she said. “I saved him, with Mum. And I’m going to save you too, and Peri. I am.”

“I believe you,” Ray said.

And just for a moment, he did.

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 15: Risk

Sirius levitated Peri's bed down the hall and into Remus' master bedroom, where Remus and Ray lay on the double bed, the boy's face against the man's chest. Aletha sat in a chair to one side with Meghan on her lap, the two of them talking quietly together. Hermione, cross-legged in a corner, had her eyes shut and was moving her hands as though sculpting a landscape from clay. Harry paced along the bottom of the bed, the only available bit of floor.

Remus let go of Ray and carefully climbed over him to help Sirius maneuver Peri onto the double bed. Ray watched them, worry most prevalent in his eyes, though sorrow, anger, and fear were all jockeying for second place.

Poor kid. No eight-year-old should be thinking about the stuff Ray's been through these last couple days. But if this works, maybe he'll be back to normal. Maybe we can put this all behind us and just have our lives again.

He stepped back to let Remus arrange Peri tenderly on the bed. *"Back to normal" might not be the best way to put it. We won't ever be the same as we were.*

But maybe we'll be better.

He could hope, anyway.

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Remus took Peri's hand in his and held it for a moment. "I'll see you soon," he said quietly. "I hope."

"Moony?" said Ray behind him, making him turn. The boy was looking uncertainly around the room, and his body language and scent indicated he'd prefer there be fewer people present at the moment.

We can do something about that. Remus fumbled out his wand, let it rest in his hand for a moment to calm himself, then cast a Privacy Spell around them. "Yes?"

Ray looked back at him with sudden naked fear in his eyes. "I don't want to die."

Remus pulled him close and held him, feeling desperation in the way Ray's arms clutched at him. "I know you don't," he said. "That's why we're doing this. Because none of us want you to die."

"But we're going closer to it. To dying." Ray glanced around Remus' shoulder at Peri. "What if I end up like Peri? What if it doesn't work, and I can't ever wake up again?"

Remus lifted Ray and set him down between himself and Peri, buying a little time to think about his answer. "I wish I could tell you that wouldn't happen," he said finally. "I wish I could tell you I know this will work, and it will make everything all right again. But I hate it when people lie to me, even if they're trying to make me feel better."

Ray nodded slowly. "It won't work, then," he said, closing his eyes. "It won't help."

"No—I did *not* say that, and kindly do not put words in my mouth." Remus shook his boy gently between his hands. "What I said was, or would have been, that we don't know if it will work or not. It might help you, it might not help you. We don't know, and we can't know until we try it."

"I'm scared."

"So am I." Remus let one hand slide past Ray's back to take Peri's cool one. "I just got you. I don't want to lose you so soon. But that's why I'm willing to do this. To take this chance. Because I want to keep you here with me, Ray, you and Peri both."

"And the baby?"

"And the baby." Remus smiled. "What do you want? A sister or a brother?"

"I don't know. Brother, maybe. Then we'd outnumber the girls."

"True, very true. Though with Sirius on your side, numbers don't matter so much anymore. And it might be good to have a secret agent."

"Secret agent?" Ray was relaxing as the innocuous conversation continued. "You mean like a girl who did boy things, but would still sometimes go play with the girls, and then come back and tell the boys about the girl things?"

"Yes, just like that." Remus recalled his school days and hid a smile. "I knew a girl like that once. She liked being with the boys the best, but she could be just as frilly and pretty as any girl when she wanted to be."

"Letha," Ray said surely.

Remus sighed dramatically. "I can't hide anything from you, can I?"

Ray shook his head. "I think I'm ready now," he said, sitting up with a wince. Remus supported him. "Thanks, Moony."

"Anytime, Ray." Remus squeezed the boy in one arm once more, then removed the Privacy Spell. "All ready on this end," he said.

"So are we," said Aletha as Meghan hurried over to climb onto the bed.

"Me too," said Hermione, starting to get up. Sirius bent down and scooped her into his arms, making her squeak a little, and deposited her on the bed. "Padfoot!" she scolded, smacking his arm. "Don't do that!"

"Sorry," Sirius said, grinning. "Just enjoying being able to pick things up again." He looked at his hands with an expression half-wistful, half-ludicrously happy.

"And what you choose to pick up is other women?" Aletha asked in a mock-dangerous tone, making Hermione and Meghan giggle and Harry and Ray snort behind their hands. "Really, now, Sirius, I knew you didn't have much judgment, but this..."

"Let's not go there, please," Sirius said, starting around the bottom of the double bed. "Let's go here instead." He sat down on the bed Peri had been lying in and held out his hands to Aletha.

"If you insist." Aletha tucked up her robes and climbed nimbly across the bottom corner of the bigger bed. Harry slid up behind her, tucking himself into a ball at Ray's feet. Hermione had wiggled between Ray and Peri, and Meghan had found some space near Remus' knees.

"Who wants to start us off?" Sirius said, scooting around so that he lay on his side looking up at Remus over Aletha's head. "You, me, who?"

"I can do it," Aletha volunteered. "It's my area."

"True enough," said Remus. "Whenever you're ready, then. Hermione?"

"I'm ready." Hermione's eyes were closed, her hands grasping Ray's. Harry had a hand on Ray's bare leg, as did Meghan. Their other hands were clasped together, and Meghan's ankles were tangled around one of Hermione's legs.

Aletha drew her wand and waved it in the air three times, murmuring a song-like incantation. A fine mist showered from the tip and drifted down around everyone.

Here we go. Remus took a deep breath and felt sleep begin to take hold. *Hold on a little longer, love,* he thought towards Peri, turning so that her face would be the last thing he saw. *Just a little longer. We're going looking for the answer. As soon as we have it, we'll use it.*

Just a little longer.

Darkness.

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Hermione clung to the image she'd built from Meghan's stories and her own imaginings. Cool gray light, a chill salt-smelling wind, pebbles sliding underfoot, the slap of the waves as they rose and fell...

Darkness covered her, but only for a moment. Then she was standing on the beach, still holding Ray's hands. "You can look now," she said. "We're here."

Ray opened his eyes and looked around. "Cool," he said, shivering. "Where's everyone else?"

"Coming." A strong burst of heat beside them, and Harry appeared, hand in hand with Meghan. "Hold on, I might need to help the grown-ups a little..." She touched Meghan's shoulder and shut her eyes. *I need her parents,* she told her magic. *Bring them here.*

A rush of red, a hint of blue, and Padfoot and Letha stood behind them, Letha looking a bit shaken, Padfoot less than happy. "Where's Moony?" he asked.

"I'm getting to him." Hermione let go of Meghan's shoulder and reached into herself, into the small and wistful part of her that guiltily longed to live as a wizard's daughter, but not just any wizard...

A tiny pop and another flush of warmth over the group marked Moony's arrival. "Am I the last?" he asked.

"We weren't exactly expecting Peri to come, so yes," Letha said. "I assume this is our staging area."

"For lack of a better," said Padfoot. "Where do we get the equipment?"

"Ask the dreamsculpter," Harry said promptly. "Neenie?"

Hermione closed her eyes again to hide the fact that she was rolling them. "What do you want?" she asked.

"Harnesses for all four of you, and enough rope to get you where you're going," Padfoot began.

"We can bespell you to stay warmer in the water longer," Letha added, "so don't bother with that. I wish we dared to give you Bubble-Head Charms, but with where we are, I don't want to risk that they wouldn't work. You'll just have to hold your breaths."

"I can do a little with that," Meghan said. "I think. If we're coming up for air anyway. But I can't do too much. I'd get tired like I did when Mum and I healed Dad."

"And you're not to get overtired under that water, understand?" Padfoot said sternly. "If you feel too tired at all, at any time, any of you, you come back right away. Clear?"

"Clear," chorused Harry, Ray, and Meghan. Hermione nodded, then concentrated on what Padfoot had wanted. *Harnesses and ropes, to keep us safe, to bring us back...*

A series of pops, and Hermione opened her eyes. Harry was already picking up one of the harnesses, looking it over, and Letha was holding one out for Meghan to slide into. "These look good, Neenie," said Padfoot, feeling the material of the one Harry was holding. "Strong and supple. They'll move with you, not hold you back."

"Thanks." Hermione picked up the one that had appeared by her feet and slipped her arms into it. Remus helped Ray fasten his up the front, then came over to do the same for Hermione.

"Good luck," he said in her ear, hugging her briefly after she was safely fastened in.

Hermione hugged back. "Thanks."

Meghan slid out from between her parents and came to stand next to Hermione. The rope leading from the back of her harness lay in coils on the beach, but Padfoot had its other end wrapped around his arm, and Harry's in his hand. Remus held Ray's rope, and Letha picked up Hermione's own rope. "Any time you're ready," she said.

Ray and Harry looked at each other, then clasped hands. Hermione put hers on top of theirs, and Meghan added hers last of all. "Feel magic," she muttered. "Everyone feel magic like I do—Hermione, make them feel magic like I do—"

A trickle like water flowed through Hermione's hands, and suddenly the world was far more complicated. Colors, scents, feelings cascaded in on her, she was going to lose control of the dream in a moment if she couldn't get them into an order she could understand—

"Let me help you," Meghan said quickly. "Here. Feel."

Violet silk on the salt-smelling wind, cool and soft and strong...

"That's me. That's what I feel like. Now Harry."

A sun-warmed boulder covered with smooth lumps, a scent of spice rising from its surface...

"And Ray."

Pine needles, prickly-soft and Christmas-spicy-smelling, but something wasn't right. Some of the needles were brown and crumbly and starting to fall away...

"There," Hermione said. "That's where it is. What we need. Harry, do you see it?"

"Not yet." Harry shook his head. "What do you feel like, Neenie? I can follow you to the place if I know what you are."

"I don't know—"

"I do," Ray said. "This is Hermione, Harry."

The creamy fur of a kitten with the tiny sharp points of its claws, or the smooth crispness of new parchment coupled with the sharp corners and edges of the scroll...

"Got it." Harry nodded once. "Lead me in, Hermione."

Hermione swallowed and reached out to the wrongness within Ray once more. "Here," she said, laying a magical 'hand' on the place. "Do you feel it?"

"Yes." Harry was beginning to sweat. Ray's clothes were already damp. Meghan had changed one hand from the top of the stack to the bottom, to touch Ray directly. "I can feel it. Now I need to put some of me into it..."

A bit of the rock crumbled and fell into the brown pine needles.

Harry shuddered all over. "Feels weird," he said. "Now we just have to follow it out in the water."

"Let us see it," Hermione commanded loudly. "Show us where we have to go."

A red beam of light sprang up from the four sets of hands clasped in the center of the circle and lanced out over the ocean, disappearing a few hundred meters from shore.

"I guess that's where we're going, then," Harry said. He looked back at the adults. "We're going."

"Come back soon," Padfoot said. "Stay safe."

"Do your best," Letha added. "And try to find out what we need to know."

Moony smiled at them, but he looked as though he might cry if they stayed too much longer.

"Let's go," Hermione said, starting towards the water. "Come on, hurry, we may not have a lot of time..."

Ray hissed as he put a foot into the surf. "It's cold."

"Of course it's cold," Harry said resignedly. "What would be the point if it were warm?" He waded forward a few paces, then dived out flat and submerged himself, coming up spluttering. "God, it is—just get it over with—"

Hermione launched herself forward and shrieked, the sound coming out as bubbles, as the freezing cold of the water constricted her chest. *I forgot about that—it feels terrible—and Ray's already hurting—*

Meghan was beside Ray already, though, Hermione saw as she surfaced, and his face seemed to say that he wouldn't welcome pity. "I'm all right," he said, slicking his pale hair back. "Let's go."

Hermione floundered forward a few paces, kicked off the bottom, and began to paddle, following the red light that still shone above her head. Harry swam to one side of her, Ray and Meghan to the other.

This has to work. It has to work. I won't let it not work.

The words pounded in her head, in time with her swimming stroke and her harsh breathing.

Because if it doesn't work, people are going to die.

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Harry dog-paddled beside Hermione, peeking over at Ray and Meghan every so often. *If they wear out, we might have to tow them back to shore... would we make it? The water's colder than I thought it would be...*

But Ray seemed to be bearing up better than Harry had expected. A little color had come back to his cheeks, and his eyes were determined. "Almost there," he called, splashing an arm free of the water to point. "See it?"

"Yeah." Harry kicked harder, remembering to keep his feet below the surface, and was the first one to the place where the red light disappeared under the water, though Hermione wasn't far behind, and Ray and Meghan paddled up only a few seconds later. "So now we dive."

"Now we dive," Hermione agreed. "Deep breaths, everyone. In and out, in and out, in and out, in and down."

Harry sucked in a big breath and blew it out, listening to the others do the same. *Wait a second, go number two, keep going Hermione, Meghan's got it, let it out, come on Ray, there. Number three, in it comes, fill it up and let it out—and—*

Holding his breath, Harry turned and dived under the surface, Ray beside him, Hermione and Meghan an instant behind.

The red light wavered downward, and the four of them swam along it, following where it led.

Weird, Harry thought in the portion of his brain not concerned with keeping his mouth shut and his limbs moving. *There's people—or not quite people, but ghosts—they're all around—*

Of course, said a supercilious voice that could almost have been Hermione's. *Remember what this water is supposed to be?*

Shut up. Harry paddled a little harder. There—ahead—was that a flash of red hair? A pale face? Eyes widening in surprise or worry or shock, eyes the color of Harry's own?

Ray clapped his hands twice, Meghan squeezed Harry's ankle, and Hermione shot past him, hand outstretched. A bright light appeared in it, shining on a face Harry had only ever seen in photographs.

They'd found the person they were after. Hair drifting around her, Lily Potter stared at the four interlopers into her silent world in shock.

Meghan's squeeze became more urgent. Harry tore his eyes away from his mother to look back at her. She was pointing up, and her face was starting to look strained. Harry nodded, then turned back to his mum. "We'll come back," he said, though the words emerged as bubbles. "Don't go..."

Lily's eyes narrowed, but she didn't comment as Harry shot off towards the surface, towing Meghan. Ray and Hermione followed under their own power.

Ray spit out a mouthful of water when he broke the surface. "We did it!" he said excitedly. "We found her!"

"I don't know if I can do that again," Meghan said wearily, floating on her back. "It was hard. My ears hurt."

"Blow out a little air as you go down," Hermione advised. "The pressure changes. You ought to be all right just once more."

No, I can't, you go on..."

"I don't think we can," Harry said, peering back towards the shore and the three figures huddled together there, looking out towards them. The clouds overhead looked darker than before, and the wind was starting to pick up. "I think it's all or none of us. Come on, Meghan, please. We have to try."

Ray paddled over to Meghan and put an arm around her. "It's not so bad down there," he said. "Swim with me. I'll try to show you some of the pretty things I saw."

"All right."

Harry exchanged an alarmed glance with Hermione. Ray seeing pretty things under the water that meant death didn't sound good to him.

But we don't have a choice. If this wasn't all for nothing, we have to go down there again. And the grown-ups have us hooked. He ran a hand across the rope that linked him to the shore, finding comfort in it. They'll pull us out if anything goes wrong.

Once more can't hurt.

"Deep breaths," he said, starting the routine himself. "Down in three—two—one—"

They dove.

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Meghan kicked her feet hard, gliding beside Ray, looking where he pointed. She was starting to see the pretty things he'd mentioned—formations of gleaming rainbow-colored bubbles, tendrils of seaweed that made funny shapes, the ghostly shapes of people winding around one another. Strange how the people were starting to look more and more solid, and Harry and Hermione less and less...

Ray stopped, and Meghan almost bumped into him. Mrs. Potter, Harry's mum, hovered in front of them, looking like Peri if someone had just dropped an entire ice cream cone on a book. "What are you doing here?" she demanded. "This is dangerous—look at them, they're fading—" She pointed to Ray and Meghan. "Get out of here, now, before you're all lost!"

"We need to know," Harry said loudly, his words emerging over the bubbling of his lost air. "About the curse."

"You put it on the people who killed your parents," Hermione added. "But it went wrong."

"I know." Mrs. Potter shook her head. "I've been so sorry for it, I never should have done it—but this isn't the time. I can't tell you what you need to know."

"But you have to!" Meghan blurted. "You're the only one who knows!"

"Not true." Mrs. Potter looked towards Ray. "Come here," she said.

"Why?" Ray asked warily.

"Because you have something I need. Come here, quickly."

Ray kicked himself forward and floated upright in front of her.

"Take out your locket."

He pulled it free, and Mrs. Potter pressed her finger to it. It glowed golden for an instant; then a beam of light shot from it, pointing back the way they'd come. "Follow that," she said. "Now go, quickly—a storm is coming—"

Meghan's eyes moved past Mrs. Potter, and she screamed, air streaming from her mouth. A mass of black water hurtled towards them, moving faster than they ever could—it would catch up to them and drag them down, snap their lifelines, strand them here forever—Harry was turning back towards shore, Hermione as well, but there was no way they could go fast enough—

A man and another woman appeared from behind Mrs. Potter—the man looked like a grown-up Harry, the woman a little like Ray—and took places one on each side of her. Together, they turned to face the black water and held up their hands. "Go!" Mrs. Potter shouted over her shoulder. "Hurry!"

Harry yanked on the rope that tethered him to shore.

"Mum?" Ray whispered, stretching out a hand.

Meghan caught at it and pulled it back. "Don't," she said with the last of her air. "Don't—touch—"

Everything around her rushed away into black.

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Ray opened his eyes and immediately shut them again. His gut and back ached, his throat was tight, and his feet were freezing. The rest of him was only warm because he was wrapped in someone's robes, the same someone who he'd seen in one swift glance holding Hermione as she coughed up the last of the water she'd swallowed.

"I don't want to do that again," he croaked.

"Don't think we have to," Harry answered in much the same tone. "Different way to go now."

"Yeah. I know." Ray got one eye open and looked down at his chest. The locket still glowed, though the light from it was no longer quite so bright. "Different way, different person."

"So you did see Lily?" Letha asked. "It did work?"

"It worked," Hermione said hoarsely. "We saw her, and Harry's dad, and—Ray, was that your mum?"

"Yeah." Ray shifted positions, trying to get his feet tucked inside the robes as well. "They stopped the storm from hitting us."

"Good thing," Padfoot said. "We barely got you back in time as it was. Let's all rest a minute, and then we can go looking for whoever else we're supposed to talk to."

Pebbles shifted beside Ray's head, and Moony appeared in his field of view. "Better?" he asked.

"Some." Ray decided to try to sit up. "Help me?"

Moony's hands closed around his arms and lifted. "There," he said. "Do you by any chance know who we're going to see?" His tone was studiously casual, as though the answer didn't matter to him at all.

Ray snickered under his breath. Moony couldn't fool him. "Yeah," he said. "I think I do."

"Who is it?" Meghan asked. Ray located her after a moment of looking, wrapped in Padfoot's robes and curled up on his lap. "Who knows how to take the curse off?"

Ray smiled and ran his finger across the locket. "The other person under it," he said. "We get to go find Peri."

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 16: Decision

She sang to herself as she tended the small garden. She'd never cared for grubbing in the dirt before, but here there was world enough and time. The soil smelled sweet and crumbled well between her fingers, and she thought of her mother, who had loved to watch things grow, who would bring her daughters outdoors with her and teach them the names of the plants and the birds.

Strange how it all comes together in the end. Her two lives, her two faces, had in this place blended into one, so that the woman who now watered the thorny bush growing under the fence had hair neither as straight as Pericula Grant nor as curly as Gertrude Granger, a face neither as old as Danger's nor as young as Peri's. Her eyes were her own, warm and shapely and brown, with no tint of any other color.

The song which came to her lips was from both worlds as well, though it belonged more to the first world she had known, from times she had not lived. The boy she had loved, and taken again as her own, would sing it, or had sung it, to the lady of his heart, a shared joke about the fickleness neither of them had ever shown.

"O father, go and dig my grave," she sang, smoothing the dirt again over the bush's roots.

"Go dig it soft and narrow;

"Sweet William died for me today,

"I'll die for him tomorrow."

Only that wasn't right. In the story she half-recalled, the lady had died first, and the gentleman after...shaking her head, she moved to the next verse.

"They buried her in the old churchyard,

"Sweet William's grave was nigh her;

"And from his heart grew a red, red rose,

"And from her heart a briar."

For his faithfulness in love, and her fickle and thorny nature. That sounds right.

"They grew upon the old church wall,

"Till they could grow no higher;

"And there they twined in a true love's knot,

"The red rose round the briar."

She sighed, straightening up slowly. "So what they couldn't have in life, they had in death," she said, brushing off her hands. "That makes sense, I suppose."

A glance upward showed that the strange beam of golden light still touched the top of her cottage, as it had for nearly an hour. She'd wondered, when it first appeared, if this meant she should follow the light towards something else, but had felt no pull, no urge to move to a different place.

It was just as well. She liked this place. It was safe and peaceful. No pain or worry could touch her here. She barely even recalled what she had been fleeing when she found this place, or what she had left behind in her flight.

Because you choose not to, whispered a nagging voice in the back of her mind. *Because you hide from those thoughts.*

She dusted her hands again, more briskly, sending the voice flying with the last of the dirt. "Time to start supper," she said, and turned towards the cottage.

The golden light was moving.

She stood very still and held her breath as it slid down the wall and across the ground, jerking rhythmically along its way rather than the smooth glide she would have expected. Closer and closer it came to her—perhaps it was meant for her to follow after all?

But how can I follow it to myself?

The light centered itself on her chest and glowed extra bright for a moment, then faded out.

Around the clump of trees that marked the edge of her place came a boy. No one she had ever known, in either life, but heartbreakingly familiar for all that—brown hair, soft and smooth, a long and expressive face, and cobalt blue eyes with only one match anywhere in the world—

Remus' child, if that were possible. Remus' child and mine.

The eyes focused on her and lit up with a joy she'd known for more than seven years. "Peri!"

"Ray?" The question was more than half a statement; she could never mistake that voice, or that smile. "Ray!"

She was already holding him before the impossibility of it struck her. "Ray, what are you doing here?" She pulled away from him to look him over. "And what have you done to yourself?"

"What do you mean?" Ray asked. "I didn't do anything to myself."

Peri reached into her pocket and found what she needed—it hadn't been there before, but she didn't let a little detail like that bother her. "Have a look," she said, handing Ray the small mirror.

Ray looked, and didn't seem inclined to stop looking. "When did that happen?" His hand went up to his face, feeling its new contours tentatively. "I didn't even notice—no one else said anything—"

"No one else?" Peri said, feeling a sudden stab of alarm. "Ray, who else is here?"

"Everyone, of course. We came to find out how to take off the curse—"

"What curse?"

"You don't know?" Ray jerked his head up to stare at her. "But you're supposed to know how to take it off—Harry's mum sent us to find you—"

"Harry's mother is dead, how could she possibly have sent you anywhere—"

"She set the curse, we thought she was the only one who could help us, but she said to go to you—"

"Hold on," Peri said, raising her hands. "First things first. Who do you mean when you say 'everyone'?"

"Well, everyone. Me and Harry and Hermione and Meghan, and Letha and Padfoot—"

"Padfoot? *Sirius?*"

"Yes, he's all right. He was never actually dead. He was Jump, Hermione's Jump. None of us believed it either to begin with." Ray grinned. "He's just as much fun as you always said."

"I'll take your word for it." Peri put her hands to her head. "So Sirius is alive, and he and Aletha are chaperoning you four on some crazy adventure to—what, exactly? What is this curse you were talking about?"

Ray's face shut down. "It's bad." He moved closer to Peri, giving her the sidewise look that was their public code for 'Please hug me and make it look like an accident'. Peri obliged. "It's on my father, actually, but it was set to hurt his family too, so it's on me. And you."

"Me?" Peri laughed. "Ray, I was many things to your father, but I don't think family was one of them."

"But the curse thinks you are. Because of the baby."

"The baby?" Peri blinked a few times. "What baby?"

"You didn't know?" Ray stared at her blankly. "But I thought—"

"There's no innate magic to it, Ray," Peri said. "Muggle women usually don't know until at least a month along, and it can't have been that much already, can it?"

Ray shook his head. "Just a couple days."

"Let me sit down, please," Peri said, looking around for the bench—there it was, back by the house. She took the few steps to it and sat. "So there's a curse on you through your father, and it's also on me because, apparently, I'm carrying his child?"

"I'm sorry," Ray said, kicking at a clump of dirt. "I didn't know you didn't know."

"It's all right." Peri shut her eyes and rested her head against the side of the house. *Put that away for the moment*, she told her mind. *You knew it already anyway*. "So what does this curse do?"

A gust of air and a jiggle on the bench was Ray sitting down next to her. "It hurts," he said, resting his face against her shoulder. "It hurts all over, sometimes worse, sometimes better, but it always hurts. And it doesn't get any better." His voice was hushed, the way it sometimes was when he told her about his nightmares. "Moony said, unless they could find some way to take it off...it wouldn't get better."

"It wouldn't get better, meaning?" Peri opened her eyes to look down at the small brown head against her side where a blond one had so often lain. "Meaning it would stay bad, or meaning it would keep getting worse?"

Ray squirmed closer to her. "Second one."

"And did Moony tell you what that might mean in the end?" Peri wasn't sure what answer she was hoping for.

He said...he said we were going to die.”

Peri winced. *That wasn't it.*

“But he said dying might not be so bad,” Ray went on, his voice getting dreamy. “Like walking through a door, and being in a beautiful place, and seeing people you love again.” He looked up at her. “Am I dead, Peri?”

“No.” Peri flicked Ray’s nose, making him yelp and cover it with a hand. “Not nearly. And you are not going to be, either. Not on my watch. Now, where is the rest of this ‘everyone’ you were talking about? We can start figuring out what to do as soon as they get here.”

“Oops,” Ray said guiltily, jumping up. “I think I left them behind. Mrs. Potter made my locket glow and shoot a beam of light to where you were—”

“You mean my locket,” Peri corrected, noticing the necklace for the first time. “Or, if we’re being perfectly precise, your mother’s locket. It was hers first.”

“It was?”

“Yes, but that’s not important now. You had the guide to find me here, didn’t you?”

Ray nodded, looking shamefaced.

“And you just ran on ahead and left everyone else behind.” Peri stood up and shook a finger at Ray. “Naughty, naughty, very naughty. Go on back and find them—” Voices from down the road caught her ear. “Or don’t. I think they’re coming now.”

“Here!” Ray shouted. “Here we are!”

“Finally!” Hermione called, coming into view. “We’ve been looking forever!”

“I never knew forever meant five minutes,” said Ray sulkily. “I just wanted to get here.”

“And leave everyone else behind,” Hermione retorted before running to Peri. “I’m so glad to see you, Peri. We’ve been worried for you.”

“So I’ve been hearing. How are you, little love?”

“I’m fine. Everyone is fine. Except Ray. And you. Did Ray tell you?”

“He did, and I’m starting to have an idea what I can do.” All her powers were strong in this in-between world, even ones she hadn’t used for a long time. “Let’s wait for the rest of your merry band, and then we’ll see what we shall see.”

Harry rounded the trees. “Found her!” he yelled over his shoulder. “Here she is!”

“Yes, here I am,” Peri said. “You’re all so very happy to see me—hello to you too,” she added, laughing as Meghan darted around the corner and assaulted her with a full-on hug. “I’m happy to see you too, but really, it hasn’t been nearly long enough for you to be *this* happy...”

“You weren’t ever like you are now before,” Meghan said seriously, pulling back enough to look up into Peri’s face.

“Say that again, please?”

“You’re sick now, and you’re not waking up. You were never that way before. We were worried.”

“Well, thank you,” Peri said, accepting Harry’s brief one-armed hello hug, “but I’m just fine, as you can see, and I think you have far more exciting news of your own. A little fox told me that *someone* has a daddy again, and someone *else* has his godfather back...”

Harry and Meghan both grinned, and Harry turned back towards the trees to throw his arms wide. “Here he is—the one, the only—Padfoot!”

Peri hurried forward, Meghan still attached to her waist, to embrace the grinning Sirius. “You were Jump?” she asked, rumpling his hair. “All this time, you’ve been right there?”

“I’m not proud of it.” Sirius grimaced. “At least someone got Bella after what she did. And Lucius now. I’m just sorry it hit you and Ray in the backlash.”

“Well, I think I might be able to help Ray.” Peri let go of Sirius to hug Aletha, who had come up behind them. “Let’s go inside and we’ll get started.”

“Wait,” Aletha said, pulling away to look over her shoulder. “We’re not all here yet.”

“Not all here?” Peri frowned. “Ray didn’t mention anyone else...”

Her mind caught up with her mouth just in time for her eyes to confirm it, as Remus came around the bend in the path and saw her.

Oh God. The pain in his face was unmistakable, the desire likewise. Peri took a step forward under the spell of that desire before turning aside. “Hello, Remus,” she said quietly.

“Hello, Peri.” His voice was quiet and a touch breathy, as though he’d been running. “May we come in?”

Of course. Everyone, please, come inside." Peri turned to lead the way, her mind racing. *I can give them what they need, then send them away and get on with what I'm here for... they won't want to stay too long, it's too dangerous, especially for Ray if he's not well...*

The knowledge she'd put off rushed back on her, making her bite her lip. *I'm going to have a baby. Lucius Malfoy's baby.*

Her hand went to her belly, resting there lightly. *How would that change things? Between me and Ray, between me and Remus, between me and myself, even? Could I look at myself in the mirror and know I was going to give birth to a Malfoy child?*

But then, after what happened to the me in this world, could I look at myself if I wasn't?

She pushed the thoughts away again. *Help Ray first. Be philosophical later.*

"So let me hear this story from the beginning," she said when everyone was seated around her small kitchen table. "Who even thought of talking to Lily? How did you know you could?"

Harry and Hermione both spoke up, talking in turn, Meghan chiming in to add to their account. Sirius and Aletha told their part when the story got to them. Remus remained silent, leaning against the counter rather than taking a seat with the rest of the group.

He wants to talk to me. Peri could feel his eyes boring into her shoulder. *He wants to know what's going on. Oh, love, don't ask, don't ask—it will only hurt us both...*

"So, we're here," Sirius finished. "What exactly do you know about this curse that we don't—and if you knew about it, why didn't you ever tell anyone?"

"I didn't know about it. But I can help you find out what was said." Peri got up and walked over to the back door, placed her hand on the glass of the window there, and drew it firmly across. *Show me James and Lily Potter, the day Lily's parents were killed, she willed. Let me see and hear them. Let me hear what she said.*

The window blurred for a moment, then cleared to show the Potters sitting together on their couch, James holding Lily's hands. "Lily, I don't know how to tell you this. I'm so sorry. It's your parents."

"My parents?"

"They were visiting your sister. Just as they were leaving, their car was ambushed. Death Eaters. I'm sorry."

Peri frowned. *Visiting her sister—Petunia—if this is exactly seven years ago, then that would put them—*

"Both of them?" Lily asked, her voice starting to shake.

James nodded.

Lily's composure shattered, and she fell crying into James' arms.

Peri's breath was coming short. *It's August. The middle of August. Seven years ago, the middle of August, on Privet Drive, what was supposed to happen?*

"I hate them," Lily sobbed out in the picture. "I hate them all. May they live in pain and die in despair and see everything they ever loved destroyed in front of their faces. Them and their whole families. Damn them all."

Peri closed her eyes. *I stopped the attack on my family, but I never bothered to think what else might happen.*

I deserve this.

"Enough," she told the window under her breath as Lily continued to cry. "You can stop now."

The sound from there cut off, but someone in the room was still sniffing. Peri thought it might even be her. Surreptitiously, she looked over at the table.

No, it's Neenie. My mistake.

"Peri, is it just me, or is your hair different than it was?" Sirius asked, looking closely at her.

"A little bit. I think this is a place where desires are fulfilled," Peri invented quickly. "Just have a look at Ray."

Everyone looked. Ray, never loathe to show off, propped his chin in his hands. "Cheeeeese," he said, putting on a huge, phony smile.

"And you've always wanted curly hair?" Aletha said, looking back at Peri.

Peri shrugged. "It's pretty."

"Why didn't I notice that?" Harry was asking Ray.

"Because you need stronger glasses?" Ray ducked the smack Harry aimed at him.

"Because it doesn't matter," Meghan said. "Ray is Ray, no matter what he looks like."

"And we're wasting time," Remus said quietly, but in a tone that drew all eyes to him. "We know now what the curse was. We should start thinking about ways to reverse it."

"But can we?" Hermione said doubtfully. "Ray's father must have killed one of Harry's mum's parents, and that means the curse belongs on him."

"But it doesn't belong on Ray, or on Peri," Sirius said. "I think the key is that last phrase. 'Them and their whole families.' If we could make Ray and Peri not part of Malfoy's family anymore..."

"Then the curse wouldn't have any hold on them," Aletha finished. "It would all revert to Malfoy, where it belongs. Sirius, I think you've got something there!"

Sirius smiled lopsidedly. "All part of the service, ma'am."

"But Ray is Malfoy's family," Harry said. "Sorry, Ray, but it's true. You're his son."

"It's not like I wanted to be," said Ray, making a fist. "You can't choose your family—"

"Yes, you can," Hermione interrupted. "Or maybe not the one you start out with, but the one you make for yourself."

"I can't exactly get married, Hermione."

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Hermione put her hands in her hair and tugged gently. "All right, yes, you were born the son of Lucius Malfoy. And Padfoot was born the son of his parents too. But then, when he got older and they didn't like what he thought, they said he wasn't their son anymore. They sent him away."

"Disownment," Sirius said, sounding struck. "I never thought of that—you really think it would work?"

"It might," Aletha said. "Depending on how physical the curse is, if we can get Malfoy to disown Ray, to cast him off completely, that might break the bond. And the same with Peri and the baby. He has to have meant to do that deliberately..." She trailed off. "How much do you know about that?" she asked Peri.

"Obviously not enough." Peri moved in to take a seat at the table.

"Outside," Sirius said to the children. "Go on, shoo. Play, but don't go far."

"And no listening at the door," Remus added, sitting across from Peri. She was grateful, as she didn't know how she'd be able to keep from taking his hand if they were closer. "We will know."

"You're no fun," Ray said, making a face.

"Yes, I know, it's how I make my living. Out." Remus pointed firmly at the door.

The children vacated the premises, Ray waving once to Peri before he shut the door behind them.

"There is no good way to say this," Aletha said, facing Peri. "I can dance around it for a while and then tell you, or I can just tell you."

"Just tell me, please."

"Malfoy did what he did to you deliberately. He meant to impregnate you. I have no idea why—whether he knew it would make you part of the curse, or whether he was simply trying to hurt you—"

Peri tensed, knowing what was coming. *I didn't want this—this is why I ran—this is why I'm here in the first place—*

"Second one," she choked out, losing the words as the moment engulfed her again.

Malfoy ran his slimy fingers across her bare skin and laughed as she shuddered away. "Will your so-faithful lover want you now? Now that you carry my child in you? More likely he'll throw you out like the bitch you are, and you and your mongrel will starve." He affected a society tone. "If you thank me nicely for the favor I've shown you today, I might be willing to pay you a little something. Enough to keep yourself alive, and the brat if you so choose." His hands slid up her body to the back of her head and untied the gag he'd conjured earlier. "What do you say?"

She spat at him. He wiped it away and smeared it across her face, his breath beginning to come faster, his idiot grin returning. "Ah, you'd like some more. I understand you, you can't fool me—playing hard to get, I know your type—"

She couldn't keep from screaming as the nightmare started over, worse than before.

"Peri!" Someone was shaking her, shaking her and holding her—or were they just holding her, and the shaking was her own doing? She couldn't tell. "Peri, breathe. Just keep breathing. In, out. In, out. That's right. Good. Good."

"No," she whispered, her eyes still shut tight. "Bad."

"What's bad?"

"Me. I am."

"No." A firmer negative she'd never heard. "You are good."

"I'm a coward. I ran."

"You stayed. You put yourself between Harry and Lucius Malfoy. That's not cowardly."

"But then I ran away." Easiest to get it all out now, to make it clear, so that he would know everything. "I've always run when things got hard. I'm still running now."

"I don't understand."

"I know." Peri—*no, it's time to tell myself the truth, now that I know it*— Danger opened her eyes. Remus held her in his arms, so familiar, so safe, but she had forfeited her right to that safety long ago. "If you'll let me, I'll try to explain."

"I'll listen."

"I don't belong in this world." She held up a hand to still his protest. "That's not a value judgment. It's a statement of fact. In the world where you live, I don't exist. I was never even born."

Remus quirked an eyebrow. "Then what, or whom, have I been...friends with for the last seven-odd years?"

Danger licked her lips. "I was placed in this world at the age of twenty-one," she said. "I came here because of a bargain I made in the world where I was born. That bargain helped my family, my friends, tremendously. I was able to save them from a war, along with everyone else in that world. At the price of only one life."

"Your own."

"My own." Danger tried to recall what it had felt like to die, or to be reborn, but nothing came to her. "I left their lives, and those lives were changed for the better."

"As far as you could see," Remus said carefully. "You have no idea how things would have fallen out if you had stayed."

"We would have had to fight a war!" Danger snapped. "People would have died! Innocent people, who had never done anything wrong!"

"And what have you done so wrong, that makes you an appropriate sacrifice?" The sarcasm was gentle, but no less cutting for that. "Why are you punishing yourself?"

"I'm not. I helped people. It doesn't matter what happens to me."

"I don't believe that." Remus' voice cracked in the middle of the long word, and he stopped and cleared his throat before going on. "It matters a great deal what happens to you. It matters to me."

"You don't understand." Danger pressed herself against his arms, and was obscurely disappointed when they opened immediately. She scooted backwards across the kitchen floor until she had her back to the wall.

Remus wrapped his arms around his knees instead. "Then let me."

"I was married. In the world I came from. I walked out on my marriage. My happy, wonderful, everything-I-ever-could-have-hoped-for marriage." Danger slapped herself lightly on the forehead. "And now I sound like I'm playing for sympathy, and I'm not. I don't even know what I'm trying to say anymore."

"May I make an observation, then?"

"Observe away."

Remus moved a little closer to her, just close enough that they could hold hands if they both wanted to. "There are some things men will walk through fire for," he said. "Some things that might make even living through a war bearable. And one of them, though I doubt you'll ever get any other man to admit it, is love. Men don't say it as much, but they need it as much as any woman." He laid his hand on the floor between them, palm up. "There have been times when the people I loved have been my only reason to get up in the morning. And you rank very high on that list."

"I shouldn't."

"Let me be the judge of that, please?"

"You don't *understand!*" Danger screamed, closing her eyes to hide her soul from the hope and love in his.

"You keep saying that," said Remus in a tone that suggested he was very close to either laughter or tears, "but you don't do anything about it..."

"The world I left," Danger began, shaking. *No, I can't. But I have to.* "The world I left was this world. Except for me. I was born there. Here I wasn't. But everything else was the same. *Everything.* My friends, my family—" Her voice broke. She forced it to work for two more words. "My husband."

The silence in the room was absolute. Danger breathed it in and let it fill her, and then let herself fill it. "I loved Remus Lupin more than I loved my own life. And I proved that. I had a choice to make. I could return to my family and become a burden on them, or I could leave them forever and give them all lives from a fairy tale. Happily ever after. I chose to leave.

"But as a very wise man once told me, I'm a human being, not a guardian angel. I couldn't watch them be happy without me. It hurt too much. So I came here, to this world. And I tried to make things better. But they just went wrong a different way. I hoped to stop Sirius from suffering, but I made his life worse. Harry had to stay with the Dursleys, where in my world he got away from them. And what I've done for Ray..."

She laughed shortly. "Maybe, if making Lucius disown him works, that will be the one unblemished good thing in my life. But it would serve me right if it didn't work. Because I'm the reason he's cursed. I saved my own parents, or the people who would have been my parents if things had gone differently, and instead Lily's parents died. Lily cursed the people who killed her parents, and their families, and now here we are. Poetic justice."

Remus let his breath out slowly. "So this is what you've been carrying around in your head all these years," he said. "I'll admit I'd wondered, but this...this is beyond anything I'd imagined."

"You understand, then." Danger lowered her head until her forehead rested on her arms. "You understand why I can't come back. I'll help get the curse off Ray, he shouldn't suffer for what I did—I can link you to a dream of Malfoy's, you can do it there, it ought to be just as binding as in real life—but I have to pay the price for what I did."

"For what you did? Trying to save your parents?" Remus didn't bother with gentle sarcasm this time. "Or is it not being perfect you're trying to atone for? Peri, you're *human*. We make mistakes. What makes love so amazing is that we're willing to forgive them."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't be." Danger hunched her shoulders. "Or haven't you figured it out yet? I ran out on one Remus Lupin. What makes you think I won't do the same to you?"

She heard Remus moving into place behind her. "Did you give him this choice?" he asked softly. "Did you ask him what he'd rather you do? Or did you decide alone?"

"He wasn't there. I had to decide it myself."

"I understand." She heard Remus shift in his place. "May I touch your shoulder?"

"Yes." Danger drew a hungry breath as Remus' scent washed over her, and another as his soft touch sent ripples down her back.

"Earlier," he said quietly, beginning to massage her shoulder. "When you were taken over by your memory. We—we heard it."

Danger hissed, tensing.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No—it's just..."

"I'll never bring it up again," Remus said. "But I had to tell you something. Malfoy has me completely backwards." He chuckled briefly. "He's probably judging me by himself. So let me set the record straight. What happened to you is in no way your fault. I love you, and nothing anyone else can do will change that. And if you will allow me, I would love to be a father to your child."

His other hand began work on her other shoulder. "I know you won't run out on me, because I won't let you. Unless you truly want to go, unless you think that your life would be better without me in it, I want you beside me. I have spent seven years hoping you would someday enter my house and make it not mine, but ours."

His hands paused in the middle of her back. "It's not fair that one mistake should have the power to define so much of who we are. But that's the way it is sometimes. I made a mistake when I was a very little boy. You made one when you were a woman grown. I won't try to compare them, to play 'who hurts more' with you. That would be stupid. But I will ask one favor of you."

"What?" Danger asked warily.

"Think about everything I've said considering only what you want. Not what you think you deserve, or what you ought to have. Think about what you want, and then give me an answer."

"Answer to what question?"

"This question." A few rustles as of cloth, and then silence.

Danger turned to see Remus sitting back on his knees. "Pericula Grant," he said quietly, "will you marry me?"

My name is Gertrude. And I can't.

She opened her mouth, was about to say it, to cut him out of her life forever—

No.

It was a voice she hadn't heard in her mind for a long time.

Your name was Gertrude. But you left that behind. Just like you left behind the mistakes you made as Gertrude. You always hated that name anyway, remember? Granted, Pericula's not much better—a small chuckle—but it's yours to have and to hate. And Pericula hasn't made any horrible mistakes, and certainly not any that would deserve a painful death.

Besides, what about Remus? What about Ray? And what about that baby inside you? Why should they be punished for whatever you feel you've done wrong?

Let it go, Danger. Enough. Move on.

Brown eyes narrowed. *I believe I'm being messed with.*

You needed it. Now give that man the answer he deserves and go have a decent life.

Peri laughed aloud. "All right," she said.

"All right what?" Remus said cautiously.

"All right." She wasn't surprised somehow to find laughter turning to tears. "Yes. I'll marry you."

Remus stared at her, and her laughter overtook her tears again. "You—you weren't expecting me to say yes, were you?" she giggled, wiping her eyes. "Truth, now..."

"I did think you might need a little more convincing than that," Remus said, stretching out a tentative hand.

"Not anymore." Peri latched onto his hand and pulled herself into his arms. "Not ever again."

I know where I belong. I know where we all belong.

Now to make sure we can keep what we've won...

whydoyouneedtoknow
FanficAuthors.net

Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 17: Attempt

Ray looked at himself in the mirror and sighed. “Goodbye, hair,” he said. “Goodbye, eyes. Goodbye, face.”

“What, are you going to be headless now?” Harry asked behind him.

“No, I’m just going to be my usual self again.” Ray concentrated. *Pale everything. Pale skin, pale hair, pale eyes. Like a ghost.*

His skin and hair went translucent. Harry stared. Ray rolled his eyes. *Not like that. Normal. Like I was last week. Like I thought I’d always be.*

The face he’d always known was his reappeared. For a moment, Ray had the strange sensation that he was looking at a portrait now instead of a mirror, that in a moment the person in the portrait would leave, or hold up a true mirror, and he’d see again the face he’d seen a few moments before, the one with hair like Peri’s and eyes like Moony’s...

Now you’re being silly.

“I’m ready,” he said, turning around.

“So are we, I think,” said Padfoot, sliding on the backpack Peri had found for him. “Everyone?”

Letha finished her drink and set the glass by the sink. “Lead the way, Peri,” she said. “We’re following you.”

“More frightening words I don’t think I could come up with.” Peri stepped out the front door. “Come on, then, let’s not be late for our date with the nasty Death Eater.”

xXxXx

Aletha left Sirius at the back of the group to make sure the children all kept up and slipped up to walk beside Peri for a minute. Remus, catching her mood, dropped back a few paces to walk with Harry and Ray.

“Are you all right?” Aletha asked quietly. “Seeing Malfoy again, so soon?”

“He can’t hurt me,” said Peri. “Not here. I have control.” She offered a shaky smile. “Besides, I don’t have much choice. I’m the only one who can link to him reliably. Ray has the blood for it, but not the skills. And if I know Lucius Malfoy, he’ll fight any intrusion into his personal space. I’m our best bet for getting to him.”

“You know we’re here,” Aletha said, taking her friend’s hand in her own. “We’ll keep you safe.”

Peri smiled. “You have no idea how much that means to me.”

“Oh, I have a fair idea. From the days when I was trying to deal with having a baby and a job, and no one to share any of the work with, and no idea where Sirius was or even if he was alive. You and Remus kept me sane through that time.” Aletha squeezed Peri’s hand lightly. “Now it’s my turn.”

Peri’s hand contracted around Aletha’s. “Just don’t let him touch me,” she whispered. “Don’t let him close.”

“Not within ten feet, I promise.”

Try, you slimy worm, just try, and I will personally part you from a few of your teeth...

xXxXx

“So she’s all right again?” Sirius asked Remus.

“As all right as she can be at the moment.” Remus kept his eyes on the two women at the front of the group. “She still has a lot of healing to do.”

“Yeah.” Sirius turned his head to look at a bluebird nesting in a tree along the side of the path they were following. “She’s not the only one,” he said almost inaudibly.

“No shame in that,” Remus said in the same tones.

“But I feel like there should be, you know?” Sirius had his hands around the straps of the backpack and was squeezing the life out of them. “It shouldn’t have gotten to me. I should just be able to pick up where I left off. I thought I was.”

“You were fooling yourself,” Remus said bluntly. “None of us can do that. You spent seven years with no one knowing you were human—that’s not nothing. You have to deal with that somehow. And ignoring it doesn’t count.”

“But I was doing so well...”

“Riding your high.” Remus’ smile was reminiscent. “Just like you always used to do in school. You and James would pull some amazing prank and get caught, and you’d be deliriously happy about the prank for a day or two, until the reality sank in that you were getting punished for it. It’s your pattern, Padfoot. The way you are.”

"That's not fair," Sirius grumbled. "You're not supposed to know more about me than I do."

"What else are best friends for?"

xXxXx

"I smell something," Meghan announced, wrinkling her nose. "Are we back by the sea?"

"It's not the same way we came," Hermione said certainly. "It must be a different sea."

"Or another part of the same one," said Harry. "Peri, where are we?"

"On our way to where we need to be," Peri called over her shoulder.

"Thanks," Harry muttered.

"I could have told you," Ray said, grinning. "She never tells you things unless *she* thinks you need to know them."

"Yeah, yeah. Fix your hair."

Ray felt at his head and scowled at the waves which were starting to infiltrate. "Cut that out," he told them. They went limp under his fingers. "Why does that keep happening?"

"Because it's like Peri said." Hermione moved up to pace the boys. "This isn't just a dream anymore. It's a place where people are what they are, and what they want. Some of what you want is leaking through into what you are."

"Ray wants to stay with Peri and Moony," Meghan chanted to the rhythm of her steps. "Ray wants to be a Lupin and stay with them forever and ever..."

Ray growled under his breath. "Shut up, Meghan."

"Make me."

Ray turned and lunged for her.

"Stop it!" Hermione yanked Meghan out of the way as Harry grabbed Ray by the shoulders. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded, staring at Ray.

"I don't even know if this is going to work," Ray said through clenched teeth. "Do you mind not teasing me about it?"

"What, this?" Harry said, waving his hand around them. "What we're doing? Why wouldn't it work?"

"A million reasons. We get lost on the way there. We get there but we can't get what we want. Or we get what we want and it doesn't work the way we thought it would. Or we think we get what we want, but it turns out to be something else." Ray's breathing was coming faster. "Or maybe I'm just fooling myself. Maybe this is just my dream, something I want to happen, and it's just about to turn into a nightmare—"

"Enough," said Peri's voice firmly, and Peri herself came back around the bend in the path she'd disappeared around a moment or two before. "Ray, if you don't want to be here right now, tell me. We can do this without you. You can go home."

"No," Ray said flatly. "I want to help."

"Griping and worrying is not helping," said Peri, looking down her nose at him. "I don't expect you to act like this is a great adventure, or like there's nothing else you'd rather do, but please don't talk it down or act as if it's doomed from the beginning. It is a chance. Nothing more, nothing less. But people behaving as though it will not work make it less likely to work. Do you understand?"

Ray sagged. "Yes," he said quietly. "I understand."

"Good." Peri laid the back of her hand against his cheek. "And with luck and help from everyone, when this is all over, we can go home and cheer because it worked. All right?"

"All right." Ray looked up at her through his eyelashes and smiled. "I like that plan."

"Move to make it official," said Padfoot, coming up from the rear.

"Seconded," said Letha, sticking her head back around the curve. "All in favor?"

"Aye," said the rest of the group in quasi-unison.

"Excellent," Peri said. "Let's go make it happen."

xXxXx

Waking, sleeping, one thought obsessed him. One piece of knowledge was lodged in his mind like a seed under a tooth, and resisted all his

attempts to get it out

His son was going to die.

He'd failed at the most important thing any man could ever do. His line and name would end.

I would have taken the curse all on myself if I only knew my Draco would live. Of course, I would have seen to it that he was properly lodged to undo the damage done by my carelessness—perhaps Patroclus would have been willing, or Amycus...

But it does not matter now.

It will never matter again.

He had been robbed of even the most paltry of revenge against the one who had laid this curse on him. The best revenge, of course, would have been to turn it back to her son, to watch him wither and die and rob the world of its hope for a savior, but publishing her name and what she had done, not to him but to his innocent child, would have given him some measure of satisfaction.

At least I was able to destroy one enemy. He had used all that he knew and all that he could guess of Miss Grant to place deep doubts within her, using his skill to ensure that pleasure of this sort was linked in her mind forever with pain and suffering—for a woman like that will surely never have been gifted with such an experience before, so I have set the template.

He had seen the withdrawal in her eyes as her last scream had died away, and had no doubt that had he not been interrupted he would have been able to drive her so deep she would never surface. *Even as it is, she will take a long time to coax from the place she has run to. And will she be the same woman when she emerges? I think not.*

But even that shred of satisfaction was being torn from him by this place. His mind would circle back, inevitably, to the inescapable conclusion.

The curse was killing his son. The child who meant the continuation of all he held dear would hurt and despair and die.

And he could do nothing about it.

"Nothing," he said aloud to the bare, featureless plain about him. The word vanished on the wind. "Nothing!" he shouted, hearing a thread of echo—or was he imagining it?

The wind picked up, as if to mock him.

"Are you sure?" asked a man's casual voice. "Nothing at all?"

"Black," Lucius acknowledged, turning to see his wife's cousin standing beside him. The man wore a Muggle jacket and trousers and stood in his habitual slouch. "Come to gloat?"

"Not exactly. Just here to say hello." Black removed one hand from his pocket and fanned it once. "Hello."

Lucius snorted. "You always thought you were funny."

"So did a lot of people." Black shrugged. "Guess you never did."

"The most amusement I ever got from you were those few weeks we spent together after the end of the war." Lucius smiled thinly. "You remember, I'm sure."

"How could I forget," Black drawled. "*Such* fun." His return smile was hardly any broader than Lucius'. "Be glad my wife never found out exactly what part you played in those games. She'd be glad to try and top what she did to Bella."

"Her friend has already more than done that." Lucius stared into the distance.

"Friend?"

"Your lady of the night was always close with James Potter's Lily, was she not?"

"Call her that again and insults won't be the only thing coming out of your mouth," Black said coolly. "Yes, they were friends. What did Lily ever do to you?"

"Not just to me. Oh, no. Did you have some impression that Lily Potter was a model of decorum and virtue?" Lucius felt a tiny surge of triumph. In this one, small way, he might still have his vengeance. "She struck not only at me, but at my son. My innocent child. I am dying, slowly, painfully. As is he."

"You deserve it," Black said. "Him...there has to be some mistake. He's not dying."

"Oh?" Lucius cocked an eyebrow. "How would you know?"

"Well, when I last saw him, he didn't look like he was dying."

"You have seen him?" Lucius looked Black up and down. "How, when you are dead?"

"Me?" Black pointed at himself. "Dead?" The pointing finger poked his chest once or twice. "I don't feel dead."

"So you survived, then." Lucius shrugged a shoulder. "No great loss. You still have no way to contact your wife or your friends without dying. How have you lived all these years? Hand to mouth, or should I say paw?"

"Very comfortably, as it happens. I found a nice family to take me in, and all I have to do is look adorable most of the time and bark at a few neighborhood bullies to scare them away from their little girl and her friend." Black looked smug for some reason. "Until the day I got to try and bite you, that is."

"Try to bite me—" Lucius stopped. "The brown dog," he said. "The one that attacked me when I took Potter. That was you."

"Guilty as charged." Black sketched a bow.

"Then you are dead. You could never have survived what I did to you."

"You forgot, Camelot has a health clinic," Black said. "With a Healer on call, and a Healer's apprentice. They patched me up just fine. I'm barking up the wrong tree just like before." His grin was back. "And we got a little off topic, didn't we? We were talking about your son, and the last time I saw him. I might even be able to show him to you. Want to see?"

"Very well." *If I was wrong—if the curse does not extend to him—*

Perhaps I can die in peace after all.

"Here you go." Black drew his wand and flicked it forwards, first drawing a large square with it, then waving it back and forth within the square. "A screen," he said. "Like a Muggle cinema."

"I see," said Lucius, although he didn't.

The square turned jet black, then lit up with a picture. Draco stood alone, dressed like Black in Muggle clothes, twining string around his fingers. A man came up behind him and tapped his shoulder, and Draco turned and smiled to see him.

"Who—" Lucius bit off the question as he saw the man's face more clearly. "Lupin," he said, half-growling the name. "What is *he* doing with my child?"

"Looks to me like cat's cradle," Black said insouciantly. "What did you think?"

Draco pinched the string back off Lupin's fingers and turned his hands deftly inside out to reveal a new pattern. Lupin went in for his own change and fumbled, dropping the string and ending up with a loose loop around one wrist. Draco laughed, though no sound came to Lucius's ears, at the crestfallen expression on the man's face, then held up his arms as though he were much younger. Lupin obliged, first embracing the boy, then lifting him up and slinging him around so that he was riding piggyback on Lupin.

"You saw this yourself?" Lucius demanded, turning on Black.

Black shrugged, pointing to the screen. "Could I do this if I hadn't?"

Movement caught Lucius' eye, and he turned back. Miss Grant sauntered into the picture, her walk easy and comfortable. Lupin stretched out a hand and caught her arm, and she pretended to be affronted, but let him pull her towards him. Draco, still clinging to Lupin's back, made some comment that made both adults laugh. Lupin helped the boy slide to the ground before taking Miss Grant gently into his arms and not kissing her, but merely holding her, stroking her hair, cupping her face in one palm. She returned the favor, running her hands up and down his back, resting her head against his chest.

"How touching," Lucius said sardonically. "May we move on? I have no wish to see a lycanthropic mating ritual."

"Don't worry, that part's almost over." Black nodded in satisfaction as the two broke apart. "Yes, here comes the part I thought you should see."

The scene around the three, which had been as blank as the rest of the plain, now added color and depth, until it was clear they sat in a small living room. Miss Grant seated herself in an armchair, leaning back slightly. Lupin sat on the couch nearby, reaching out to take her hand. Draco climbed onto the man's lap.

"How did you see this?" Lucius demanded of Black.

"I was at their house. Shh, this is the good part." Black flicked his wand at the screen again, and voices became audible.

"Moony," said Draco, looking up at Lupin, "what's a family?"

"That's a good question, Ray," Lupin said slowly. "A very good question."

Draco slumped. "That means you're not going to answer," he muttered.

"No," said Miss Grant, smiling. "It just means we need a minute to come up with as good an answer as it deserves."

"Oh. All right."

How long have they been on such good terms as to be using nicknames?" Lucius asked, his teeth starting to ache.

"Long's I've known them," Black said lazily. He seemed to be in high good humor.

"A family," Lupin began on the screen, "is a group of people who love one another and take care of one another. They often live together, but not always, and they're often related by blood, but..."

"Not always," Draco finished, nodding. "I get it."

"A family can just happen," Miss Grant said, "or people can decide to start one. Usually, people decide. And Moony and I have decided we want to have a family." Her smile was sad. "Most often, when a man and a woman who are married or going to be married say that, it means they want to have children."

"But you can't," said Draco. "I remember."

"So we'll just have to find children somewhere else," Lupin said. "We can start with the one Peri's going to have." He winked at Miss Grant. "And we were hoping we could get another one. A nice big boy, about eight years old, who needs parents to take care of him and love him. And who wouldn't make *too* much trouble, but we wouldn't want one who never makes trouble, because that would be boring."

"We were hoping you knew a boy like that," Miss Grant said, her face solemn, though her lips were starting to curve. "And could tell us where to find him. Do you think you could do that?"

"I think so," Draco said, his face more alight than Lucius had ever seen it. "I think I could. When do you want him?"

"As soon as possible," Miss Grant said. "Is he close by?"

Draco nodded, sliding off Lupin's lap. "Should I go and get him?"

"Please do," Lupin said.

"This is a farce," Lucius said with some dignity as Draco ran from the room. "I refuse to watch any more of this."

"Just wait," Black said, sounding amused. "There's a couple more things I think you should see."

Draco dashed back into the room, panting. "Hello, sir," he said, bowing to Lupin. "Hello, ma'am." Again to Miss Grant. "Does someone here want a boy?"

"Yes, very much so," said Miss Grant. "What's your name?"

Draco hesitated. "It's silly."

"Don't worry about that," Lupin said, waving his hand. "If we don't like it, we can change it."

Draco brightened. "I have a nickname I like," he said. "Almost everyone calls me Ray."

"Almost everyone," Lucius repeated slowly. "Do they indeed?"

To his surprise, Draco seemed to flinch at the sound of his voice. "I really like that name," he said, his eyes flicking from Lupin to Miss Grant. "Can I keep it?"

"Of course," said Lupin. "Now, what about your face? You can keep it, or change it, as you like."

Draco put a hand to his face, looking uncertain. "Would it hurt?" he asked. "To change me?"

"Not at all." Lupin drew his wand, but didn't point it at Draco. "We can try different looks until we get it right. May I?"

"All right." Draco shut his eyes and screwed up his face as though he expected to be shot in the next moment.

Lupin chuckled and waved his wand gently over Draco's head. A shimmer of sparks drifted down, making the boy wrinkle his nose as they passed. Then a brown-haired child stood there, his face similar to Draco's but subtly different. His eyes, as he opened them, were a rich blue Lucius thought he'd seen before. When Lupin passed behind the boy, inspecting his work, Lucius knew he had.

"What do I look like?" the boy said in Draco's voice.

"Here," Lupin said, conjuring a mirror.

Draco grasped it and stared into it. Slowly, his lips curved up. "I look like my mum," he said, glancing over at Miss Grant, who smiled at him. "And like my dad." A worshipful glance went towards Lupin.

Black quickly flicked his wand at the screen, returning it to darkness. "So," he said, shoving his hands back into his pockets. "Still worried about your son?"

A chill cloak had settled about Lucius, one he knew well. It heightened his senses, quickened his thoughts. "You came to show me this, merely out of the kindness of your heart?" he said softly. "Or was it for some other reason?"

"I just wanted to see your face." Black grinned. "You should see your face."

"Thank you, I will pass." Lucius turned more towards Black, listening carefully. There were sounds beyond the screen that should not be there... "So Lupin and Miss Grant plan to adopt my son. And raise the child I so kindly gave Miss Grant."

"So it seems." Black stretched an arm around to scratch his back. "Quite a father you were, Lucy boy. Draco didn't even wait a week before he started calling some other bloke his dad."

"I was subverted," Lucius said coldly, beginning to move towards the screen. *At least two people, likely more.* "I allowed Miss Grant too much leeway. And I was not as attentive as I should have been." *A fault I plan to rectify now.*

"So what're you going to do about it?" Black rolled his shoulders and shook out his hands. "Draco seems pretty happy without you."

"So I would assume." *Three people, not two. And three people with familiar voices.* "Or rather, so I would have assumed." Lucius flicked a finger through the periphery of the screen, confirming that it was not solid.

"Would have?" Black asked, looking worried.

"Yes, would have. Had I been deceived as you wanted me to be!" Lucius whirled and was through the screen, stepping on Lupin's foot, knocking Miss Grant flying. Draco yelled and tried to run, but Lucius seized him and backed out of reach, holding him as a shield. "No tricks," he warned Black as the boy squirmed in his hold. "Or should I say, no *more* tricks."

The screen vanished. "You're in charge," Lupin said, helping Miss Grant to her feet. "No more tricks." His voice was controlled, calm, but Lucius could sense the underlying fury.

"What were you hoping to accomplish with this little play?" he asked, shifting his grasp on Draco to use only one arm, drawing his wand from his robes with the other—proof positive, if he hadn't known it before, that the scene before him was not normal. "Simply to torture me, or something more?" His wand touched the boy's skin, and Draco stiffened. "Behave yourself, Draco, I am not about to harm you."

He murmured the same diagnostic spell that he had done on himself, then looked over at Black. "So your claim that he was not under the curse was a false one," he said. "This all makes very little sense..."

Draco had not stopped trying to get away. Lucius tightened his grip. "Stay still," he warned the boy.

"No." Draco's struggles increased. "I hate you. You're not my father."

"You can hardly deny it, with your true face." Lucius murmured the charm to end a glamour.

Brown hair and blue eyes stayed where they were. "This is my true face," Draco said defiantly, twisting enough to stare up at him with hatred. "You can do anything you want in dreams."

"Can you?" Lucius began to smile. "Can you indeed?"

The boy is doomed anyway.

A child is the property of his parents.

And if he hates me so much, and his life would mean so much to this rather odd couple... His eyes moved coldly over Lupin and Miss Grant.

Why should I let him live?

A wand pressed against his back. "Let him go," said a woman's voice, cool and strong. "Or you and Bellatrix will be able to trade stories about me."

"Just a moment," Lucius answered, recalling the spell his Master had shown him once, the spell to drain magic and life force from another wizard. "You would not deny a father the chance to farewell his child?"

"Give me your wand," Freeman-Black ordered, her tone unimpressed.

"Very well." Lucius released the wand. "Though how could you imagine I would harm the flesh of my flesh, the blood of my blood?"

"I imagine a lot of things," Freeman-Black said slowly. "Let. Him. Go."

Lucius tightened his hand around Draco's arm. "One more moment," he said reasonably. "Just... one..."

Surripio Anima!

Draco screamed and thrashed in his arms. Black and Lupin dashed forward, but Freeman-Black was faster, felling Lucius with a blow to the side of the head. He laughed as he fell, through the ground, through endless dark.

Do what you will, fools. The boy will die.

Sooner, now, than later, with what I have done.

xXxXx

“Ray!” Peri snatched him up and held him. He was limp in her arms, his eyes shut, his flesh cool to touch. “We have to get him home.”

Aletha had her wand out and was running it up and down his side. “The bastard snatched some of his magic,” she said viciously. “Some of his life. He doesn’t have as long as he did before. He may not even be strong enough to wake up.”

“Oh, God,” Remus whispered beside them. “He said it. He said it himself.”

“What?” Sirius asked, looking across them. Harry, Hermione, and Meghan were crowded next to him, the girls starting to snivel, Harry breathing hard.

“He was afraid of this. Of making himself worse. Of not ever waking up again.” Remus reached out to brush brown hair away from Ray’s forehead. “What have I done?”

“You didn’t do it,” Hermione said, her lip quivering. “You didn’t. Not you.”

Peri caught Remus’ hand in her free one. “I’ll be there,” she said quietly. “You may have to wake me, but I’ll come. Just like I promised.”

“I know you will.” Remus pressed her hand to his lips. “I know.”

xXxXx

Hermione opened her eyes in time to see Moony lean over and kiss Peri. “Just like Snow White,” she whispered. “Except Snow White wasn’t going to...” She stopped, shivering.

“Neither is Peri,” Harry said harshly. “We can’t let her.”

“We can’t stop it,” said Meghan, her eyes damp. “And we can’t stop Ray’s either.”

“We have to.” Harry slid off the bed, watching Peri stir and open her eyes. “We helped get Peri back. We can help her again, and Ray.”

“But we failed,” Hermione said dismally.

“Are you sure?” Harry ran a hand along the bottom rail of the bed. “Are you sure we failed? We found out a lot we didn’t know before.”

“Ray isn’t going to wake up!” Hermione snapped. “I think that’s failing!”

“He looks like he used to again,” said Meghan, looking up at the pale-blond Ray. “Like his father did.”

“Blood of my blood,” Harry murmured. “Even though Ray looked like Moony and Peri, his father could still hurt him...”

Meghan was still looking at Ray. “That’s where the curse is,” she said thoughtfully. “In his blood. I saw it.”

Hermione gasped as a new idea flooded through her mind.

Maybe we didn’t fail after all...

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Vivens cum Pericula

Chapter 18: Desire

He could feel himself waking up, and fought against it. Waking up meant more hurting, more crying, more fear. Why had he ever wanted to wake up? He wanted to sleep, sleep and sleep, sleep until he didn't hurt anymore and there was nothing to be afraid of...

But I don't hurt anymore.

Surprised, he tested this theory. Fingers curled and uncurled, knees bent and straightened, shoulders rolled. *Huh. I don't. Guess maybe I can wake up then.*

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

The room was filled with rich golden light, the color of marmalade on the breakfast table in the morning. He drew a deep breath and imagined he could taste it on his tongue, sweet and citrus-tangy. *It's so beautiful. I never saw light like that before.*

A soft sound in one corner of the room made him turn. Peri slept in the big stuffed chair, her hair falling in waves around her face.

Peri doesn't have wavy hair. Not for real.

His heart began to pound. He climbed carefully out of bed and crossed the room to the small mirror hanging on the wall. *I have to see myself. I have to look at my face...*

But he knew even before he looked what he would see.

Brown and blue. Just like I always wanted.

Ray traced the outline of his face with a finger, trying out expressions. A smile, a frown, a silly face with fingers in his ears, then back to the smile. He'd probably be using that one a lot.

Just like Moony said—it's beautiful, and you see the people you love, and things are good for you all the time. He looked around the room, then back at himself. *And it wasn't even very hard to get here. It hurt at first, but after that, it was just like sleeping and waking up again.*

Being dead wasn't nearly as bad as he'd thought it would be.

His legs were starting to get shaky, though. He hurried back to the bed, then changed his mind and went over to Peri's chair. "Scoot over," he said, tapping her shoulder.

She murmured something in her sleep and wiggled aside, making just enough room for him to fit in beside her.

There. Ray snuggled down and let his eyes drift half-shut, enjoying the warm light and the familiar scent of Peri.

Will I grow up, now that I'm dead? he wondered idly. *I did want to see what it was like to be a teenager, and then a man. But it might not be so bad if I have to stay eight years old forever. Especially if it means Peri will take care of me forever.* He smiled and rubbed his face against her arm.

Moony's probably really sad, though. The thought made him sad himself. *I wish he could have come with us. That would have made it perfect. But it would have made Harry and Meghan and Neenie sad, and Letha and Padfoot...*

And what about the baby? He opened one eye and peered at Peri's midriff, but she didn't look any different than usual. *Will Peri still have the baby? Or did she already and I just don't know? Or does the baby not count because it wasn't born yet?*

He sighed deeply. *Dying is complicated. I wish we could all have just stayed alive. Then I wouldn't have to worry about any of this.*

But they'll all die someday. Then we'll be together again.

Wish I didn't have to wait, though.

Peri turned over in her sleep, mumbling to herself again. "...don't care," Ray caught in between the hopelessly garbled words. "...only chance...can't be worse...try it..." Her arm went around Ray and pulled him closer to her, and she bent her head and kissed the top of his without waking up. "Hello, love," she said clearly, then settled back against the chair, her breathing returning to its regular deep pattern.

Ray smiled. *I love the way she always knows it's me. Maybe it's the wolf side of her—she knows my smell.* He inhaled deeply again. *And I know hers...*

He stopped, surprised. He'd always known what Peri smelled like, but her scent was telling him more today than ever before. He could smell that she'd been through a great deal of stress lately, but that it was over—that she felt safe and relaxed and happy right here and now—and that not very long before she'd come to this room, she'd been with someone else—

Moony.

Ray sniffed again, not sure whether he wanted to be right or not. But he knew Moony's scent almost as well as he knew Peri's, and Moony's scent was strong on Peri's robes, holding the same feelings Peri had been having: the worry and fear earlier, the relaxation and comfort now.

I guess they were worried and scared before they died. But once they finished with it, there wasn't anything else to be worried or scared about. He exhaled a long breath. Who could be worried or scared here? It's safe. And you get everything you ever wanted.

Wasn't he the living proof of that?

Well, maybe not living anymore. Ray laughed quietly to himself. *But the proof anyway.*

I wish I could tell Harry and the girls about this, and Letha and Padfoot. I wish I could tell everyone. Maybe they wouldn't cry so much when people die.

It's not so bad, once you get the first part over with.

It's really not so bad.

He closed his eyes and drifted back towards sleep, the golden light and Peri's quiet breathing a surer lullaby than any music.

Though there was music. Somewhere nearby, someone was humming.

I know that song. Peri used to sing it when we'd dance together. When she'd hold me up by her face. Ray smiled. *It's perfect for right now and right here. "Heaven, I'm in heaven..."*

And he even knew the person who was humming.

"Hi, Moony," he said as the door creaked a little.

"And a good morning to you, sir. Or should I say, good evening. It's almost dinner time." Moony came into the room and shut the door quietly behind him. "We were starting to wonder if you would ever wake up," he said, smiling at Ray. "But then Letha told us earlier today that you would, and everyone's been waiting eagerly for it. Peri said she'd tell us right away." He put his hands on his hips in pretended anger. "I'll have to have a word with her when she wakes up."

"Letha's here?" Ray said, suddenly worried. "And who's everyone?"

"Your friends—you do remember them." Moony looked a little worried himself. "Harry and Hermione, and Meghan, and Padfoot?"

"Of course I remember them. But they shouldn't be here."

"Why not? I invited them."

"You did?" Ray swallowed hard. He couldn't think of any way to 'invite' people to heaven that wasn't a bad thing.

Moony wouldn't do that—

But he'd never thought Moony would die just to be with him and Peri, either.

"Ray, you're white as a ghost." Moony was beside him, kneeling down, looking concerned. "What's wrong?"

"Did you kill them?" Ray blurted. "Harry and Hermione, and Meghan and her parents—did you kill them?"

Peri roused at the sudden noise. "What's going on?" she asked sleepily.

Moony blinked a few times. "I've just been asked possibly the oddest question of my life," he said slowly. "Ray, why on earth would you think that?"

"We're dead," Ray said quickly. "We're dead, and the only way they could all be here is if they're dead too, and I want to see them but I don't want them all to be dead, and you said you invited them and I don't know what that means for being dead and I don't want it to mean what I think it means —"

"Breathe," Peri ordered, and Ray obeyed automatically. "What do you mean, we're dead?"

"We have to be," Ray said, staring at her. "You look different. And so do I. And we're better—I'm better. Are you?"

"Yes, I'm all better." Peri stroked his face once, tenderly. "And so are you. But it didn't happen by our dying. We're alive, Ray. Alive, and going to stay that way for a long while, if I have anything to do with it."

"And I might have a few words to say on the subject as well," Moony added, his tone hinting at laughter. Ray would usually have minded this very much, but his brain was too busy turning over Peri's impossible truth.

We're alive.

Not dead. Alive.

But how did we get the curse off?" he asked, looking up. "And why do I look like you still? What's going to happen now?"

"One question at a time, love," Peri said, scooting up in the chair. "Ooph, you're getting too big for this. Go sit with Moony, please?"

Ray slid off the seat and into Moony's grasp. Moony hugged him first, then helped him sit down, and Ray put his back against Moony's side and crossed his legs. "How did the curse get off?" he asked.

"Fair question." Peri caressed her belly, smiling secretly. "You're sitting against the answer."

Ray craned his neck around. "You took it off?" he asked Moony.

"Not exactly," Moony said, shrugging as if it was no big deal. "It wasn't my idea, at any rate. Hermione came up with it first, and Aletha expanded it to make it work."

"What did you *do*?" Ray insisted.

"The curse was contained in your blood, Ray," Peri said. "It was all through you, of course, but it was strongest in your blood. Probably because when we talk about families, blood is the metaphor we use. Like bloodlines. Hermione had the idea that if your blood changed, then the curse wouldn't know you were you anymore, and you might be safe."

"Aletha thought we should change all of your blood," Moony picked up. "Not just the part from Lucius. Because your mother was married to Lucius, that might have put her under the curse even if they'd never had a child. We wanted to be extra careful."

"How did you change my blood?" Ray looked at his wrist. The veins there showed a little greener than usual, but looked otherwise perfectly normal.

"Your mother helped us with that," Peri said with a sad smile. "You were only a baby, but I've told you the story of the day she helped me disguise that I was Muggle-born. We used a variant of that spell—the one she used with me just adds on another bloodline without taking anything away. We had to make sure that all your blood from your father was gone from you." She sighed. "I'm sorry we had to take your mother's as well."

Ray closed his eyes to remember his mother. "She's still here," he said, putting his hand on his chest. "Just like you were, Peri."

"Good for you," Moony said quietly. "Never forget her."

"I won't." Ray opened his eyes. "Whose blood do I have now, then?"

"Oh, we just used any old blood we could find," Moony said nonchalantly. "We didn't bother to make it anyone special."

"Moony!"

Moony grinned at him. "Whose blood do you think you have, you pestilential nuisance?" he asked. "Looked in the mirror lately?"

A tiny dragon materialized inside Ray's chest, breathed fire, and screeched for joy, the sound coming out of Ray's own mouth as he opened it. That was the only explanation he could come up with. Peri was on the floor hugging him, Moony was hugging both of them, and he was trying to hug them both at once and deal with the incredible heat in his chest and the shouts that were emerging from him without any conscious effort on his part.

"What about Peri?" he asked when he could speak without yelling again. "What about the baby?"

Moony's grin got wider, and the hand he laid on Peri's stomach was proprietary in the extreme.

"Well, we'll need something to do with ourselves after we send you away to school," Peri said, matching the grin.

"I think a two-year-old will help to fill the house nicely," said Moony, cocking his head to one side. "What do you think, Ray?"

Ray dived at his dad and latched onto his neck.

My dad. My real dad.

He would have been real anyway, but now everyone will know about it.

Now no one will ever call me a Malfoy, ever again.

"What about my name?" he asked, loosening his grip a little as Moony tapped his arm. "Can I stay Ray?"

"Of course." Peri leaned back against the chair, her smile showing no signs of shrinking. "Maybe it should stand for something else, though."

"Maybe."

"Thinking of your mother?" Moony asked.

"Mm-hmm." Ray scooted around so he could look at both his parents—I *have parents, real parents*—at the same time. "She was the only one who ever called me Draco. But I don't think I should just give it up. I don't have any of her blood anymore, so it feels like...forgetting her."

Moony and Peri both nodded. "You may not have her blood," Peri said. "But you have her locket." She pointed at Ray's chest. "Have a look."

Ray fished under his shirt and pulled out the golden locket on its chain. "That's right, you said it was hers before it was yours."

"And you do have something of hers," Moony said. "In it. Open it."

Ray found the catch and pulled it open with his thumbnail. A tiny photograph of his mother waved at him from one side of the locket. On the other side was a lock of fine blond hair. He waved back at the photograph and felt his eyes tear up. *She loved me a lot. And she took care of us. I shouldn't just walk away from everything she gave me—*

"You're not," Moony said, and Ray realized he must have been speaking aloud. "She wanted you to be happy, and to be alive. And you are."

"And you don't have to give up everything she gave you," Peri added. "How would you like to keep Draco as a middle name? It would still be part of you, part of your life. Just like she will be. Hidden but always there."

Ray nodded slowly. "I like that," he said. "But then, what would my first name be?"

"Anything that could have given you your nickname," Peri said. "Maybe Raymond, or Reynard."

"Reynard," said Moony. "Now what made you think of that?" He chuckled. "Aside from what I hear you calling him when you think I'm not listening."

"Oh, hush. I've never tried to hide it."

"What?" Ray asked. "What is he talking about?"

Peri sighed. "Your *father*," she said with emphasis, "is teasing me about calling you my little fox. Reynard is a fox from French folktales. He's a trickster, not always safe to be around."

Ray perked up. "I like that."

Peri groaned. Moony laughed. "You brought it on yourself, love."

He put an arm around Ray and pulled him close. "Reynard Draco Lupin," he said, smiling down at Ray, though his eyes shone bright. "Welcome home, son."

The dragon in his chest must have breathed smoke, Ray thought. There was no other reason for his eyes to be watering this much.

He put his face against Moony's chest and let the tears flow.

Against my dad's chest.

I have a dad.

And a mum. Another mum.

He closed the locket and stroked it with a finger.

I'll never forget you, Mum. I promise. But this is the truth now. It's not wrong to say it.

"I love you, Reynard Draco," Peri murmured in his ear, holding him from behind.

"Love you too." Ray turned his head a little to be sure his words were clear. "Mum."

He'd never known Peri could laugh and cry at the same time.

xXxXx

A few days later, the Lupins (married the day before in a small ceremony with only their son, his three best friends, and two of the friends' parents attending) received a social call from Albus Dumbledore.

"Quite an adventure you have recently weathered," the Headmaster remarked, looking out the front window at Ray wrestling with Harry on the lawn. "I would have offered my help, but was unsure if it would be welcome. Or, as it happened, necessary."

Could he have—? Peri cut herself off. Never mind. It happened as it happened, and it's over. "Thank you for the kind thought," she said. "But you wouldn't come here just to congratulate us."

"Would I not?" Dumbledore smiled, turning back to them. "Good manners are invaluable. But I admit to another motive as well. I was informed, by...shall we say, mutual friends, that you might have some information that would help me in a personal quest. I would, of course, be willing to trade."

"Personal quest," Peri said, sketching idly on a napkin. "Something like...this?" The picture she pushed across to Dumbledore was blurred, but quite obviously a locket similar to Ray's, though large and embossed with a letter S. "Or this?" She pulled the napkin back and sketched a seal ring, large and heavy to fit a man's hand.

"I see we understand each other." Dumbledore smiled.

"I think I'll leave," Remus said, standing up. "I have a feeling I'm not needed here."

"Don't go far." Peri winked. "This won't take long."

"I'll be outside with the children." Remus left the kitchen.

xXxXx

"So, what was that about?" Remus asked later when Peri had joined him outside.

"Oh, just something to do with Harry." Idly, Peri drew her finger across her brow in the lightning-bolt shape. "And his oldest *friend*." She mimed casting a spell.

Remus sat upright. "You mean..."

"Don't bother saying it." Peri's smile was highly predatory. "He didn't die. But he's going to, very soon now." She smiled across at Harry, now with the other children pestering Sirius to turn into Padfoot and chase a ball for them. "Once is enough for Harry to have to dodge death."

"Agreed." Remus pulled Peri close to him. "So what did Dumbledore want to trade with you?"

"Just a little secret from one of those mutual friends he mentioned." Peri hummed with pleasure as Remus began to rub her back. "A secret I think you'll like."

"In that case, I'll be glad to hear it, or let it remain a secret, as the case needs to be."

"I want it to stay a secret a little while longer." Peri laid a hand on her stomach and closed her eyes, imagining she could feel the tiny life within her. *You are the key to it all, little one, you and I and this wonderful man who is your father...*

xXxXx

"All right," said Aletha, undoing the scarf from around Harry's eyes last. "You can look now."

Harry looked. "Trees," he said after a moment of consideration. "What about them?"

"Where are we, anyway?" Hermione added. "We Apparated, so we could be almost anywhere."

"Who's yelling?" Ray asked, cocking his head.

"Ray's question will answer Harry's," Aletha said, pointing at the trees. "And I suggest you go find out those two answers, and see if you can't answer Hermione's along the way." She smiled. "I think you'll like what you find. Go on."

The three raced for the trees.

"And no rocks!" Aletha shouted after them, then turned to look in the direction of the ramshackle house which was the nearest building to this orchard.

If everything went well, Sirius should be caging one rat right about now. And the Terrible Trio are about to become the Quality Quartet. She hadn't believed Peri's stories about her otherworldly origins at first, but some of the things the other woman knew were too amazing and too exact to be true any other way.

Though I really didn't need to know that about the night Meghan was conceived...

xXxXx

"Hi, Ginny," said Ron resignedly. "Hi, Luna. Everyone, this is my sister Ginny, and her friend Luna Lovegood. Ginny, Luna, this is Hermione Granger, Reynard Lupin, and Harry Potter. Harry and Ray's families might be moving here."

"Hello," said Luna, standing up from the step where she'd been sitting to shake hands. "Are you really Harry Potter?"

"Yes, I'm really Harry Potter."

"Do you have a scar, then?"

Harry pulled back his fringe.

"I thought it'd be bigger," said Luna. "Oh well."

Ray snickered. Harry elbowed him.

"Was it funny?" Luna asked.

Ray nodded.

"I suppose it was, at that." Luna giggled in a distant sort of way.

Ginny hid her face in her hands. Harry knelt down in front of her and tapped her shoulder. "I'm not offended," he said. "And I don't bite."

"Thanks." Ginny smiled and shook the hand he was holding out. "It's nice to meet you."

xXxXx

Neville Longbottom sat sadly on an unoccupied bed at St. Mungo's while his gran talked with a pair of Healers. His eyes were drawn to the article one of the other patients had pinned up on her wall:

BOY-WHO-LIVED TO LIVE WITH GODFATHER!

Sirius Black returns after being presumed dead

Claims he was cursed into canine shape for seven years

Some people are so lucky. Neville glanced at his gran and the two green-robed Healers, then back at the article, and the picture that went with it. *I'd do anything if I could have a godfather. Or my real father back again. But I never will.*

His gran told him his father and mother were heroes, that they'd been trying to do something worthy, though she'd never tell him what. Neville thought that was a little unfair. *Shouldn't I at least know what happened to my own parents?*

One of the faces in the picture struck him as familiar. *A woman. Dark skin, beautiful—she looks proud—where have I seen her before?*

Another glance at the Healers, which turned into a full-fledged stare. *That's her. Right there. Right here. She wants to help my mum and dad, I think—Gran was saying something about not wanting to let them be experimented on, but what if she could really help them?*

Movement from a different direction this time. Neville turned to look as a girl, a few years younger than himself, slid out from behind the screens where his parents lay. She looked a lot like the woman from the article, the woman who was a Healer, and she was breaking into the conversation to tell that woman something—

And now she was coming down the ward, looking at him—smiling at him—

"Are you Neville?"

Her voice was as silvery as her long-lashed eyes. He almost forgot how to nod.

"I'm Meghan." She held out her hand, and he shook it dumbly. "I think your parents got hurt trying to help my dad a long time ago." She looked at the floor, then back up at him. "But my mum and I might be able to help them now."

Neville hadn't thought he could like her any more than he already did. He'd been wrong.

xXxXx

"Lupin, Reynard!"

Ray stepped forward, holding his head high to disguise his shaking knees, and sat down on the stool beside Professor McGonagall. She let him see a fraction of a smile before she dropped the Sorting Hat over his head.

"Well, well, a name-changer," said a small, buzzing voice in his ear. "And what a change! Dark to light, shadow to bright—you've got quite a lot of loyalty in that heart of yours, to keep to your friends when your father was telling you another way was the right one."

Not me. Peri taught me.

"She couldn't teach you what wasn't already there," the Hat retorted. "But you're right, you'd make a mess of Hufflepuff. What about Ravenclaw? You've got a fine mind, quick and ready, and you love to read and study, and to teach others, if the way you help your sister Abby is any measure—"

But it's not all I love. I'd go crazy.

"True. Well, then, I have just the place for you. You could go far here, help your father with his cause—quite a man, he is, a one-of-a-kind." The Hat chuckled. "I always knew he would be, of course. What do you say to...Slytherin?"

NO. Absolutely, positively, not.

"You're a bigoted lot these days, aren't you? There's nothing the matter with Slytherin House..."

I don't want to live under the lake, I don't look good in green, and I don't want to be famous. I want to be with my friends and do good things, not great ones. Please. Put me where I belong.

"Well." The Hat's voice warmed. "With an attitude like that, there's only one place for you. But remember this, my boy. Only two things can break a human heart. One is not to get its greatest desire. The other is to get it."

Ray's hand went to his chest. *I know,* he said silently. *I know that.*

"I'm sure you do. Very well, then. GRYFFINDOR!"

Are you proud, Mum? Ray wondered as the Hat came off his head and his Housemates cheered for their newest member. *Are you proud of me today?*

Somewhere in his heart, he was sure that she was.

Head held high, Reynard Draco Lupin took the first steps towards his future.

The End