

whydoyouneedtoknow
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True Colors

Chapter 1: Letters

"INTO THAT CUPBOARD WITH YOU, BOY!" bellowed Vernon Dursley, the vein on his temple standing out. "AND DON'T LET ME CATCH YOU OUT OF IT UNTIL SUPPERTIME TOMORROW!"

"Yes, sir," said Harry Potter politely, and obediently ducked his head to enter the cupboard under the stairs.

And I won't. Let him catch me, that is.

The door closed behind him. Harry grinned. His uncle couldn't know that what he intended as a punishment was nothing of the sort. The exact opposite, in fact...

His fingers found the spot on the wall which triggered the one-way soundproofing spell, then the one which activated the lookproofing spell, and finally the light switch. No sound from within the cupboard would now reach the outside world, and if Uncle Vernon should happen to open the door, all he would see was a sullen Harry sprawled on the mattress which lay on the floor, with the small chest of drawers at his head and the tiny bookshelf at his feet. The same went for Aunt Petunia or his fat cousin Dudley.

In reality, though...

Harry flopped into the overstuffed red armchair and looked around. In almost every way, his bedroom was perfectly ordinary for a boy going on eleven. His walls were covered with posters of sports teams and musical groups, his bed unmade and littered with clothes, his desk covered with writing materials. Side by side against the other wall sat a chest of drawers and a bookshelf. Should Dudley ever enter this room, he would probably recognize most of the volumes gracing the bookshelf...

No, he wouldn't. First off, he'd never come in here. Second, he'd never recognize a book. I'm not sure he's ever opened a book. The only reason he moves up at the end of every year is because the teachers don't want him to feel bad about himself. Harry snorted. Dudley hardly had a problem in that department.

Of course, none of Harry's belongings had been paid for by his relatives. They didn't even know his snug little retreat existed. And, of course, by the logic of the world they lived in, it couldn't. There simply wasn't enough room in the cupboard under the stairs for all these pleasant, comfortable things. And they would have been entirely dumbfounded to see the people in the posters on his walls moving, or the parchment, ink, and quills on his desk.

But that was Harry's other secret. Bigger by far than his bedroom, this encompassed the people who had made it what it was, who had made *him* who and what *he* was. Strange that his relatives should be a father, mother, and child, he thought, when his other secret was also a father, mother, and child... little Meghan, though she hated him to call her that, and took every opportunity to point out that there was only two years' difference in their ages...

Thinking of Meghan made Harry remember that he'd promised to give her a call as soon as he had time. He got up and crossed to his desk, rummaging through the mess there until he found what he was looking for – an old, tarnished, gilt-edged mirror. "Meghan Black," he said clearly into it.

After a moment, the mirror lit up with the image of a girl's face, dark-skinned and framed with dark braids but with lively gray eyes. "Harry! Your aunt and uncle can't be in bed yet, it's not even dark!"

"No, they sent me to my cupboard."

Meghan giggled. She knew the secret of Harry's cupboard, having played with him in it often when the Dursleys were away. "What did you do?"

Harry grimaced. "I guess I talked back to my uncle. I didn't really mean to, but he had a couple of drinks after dinner, and he started going on about how immoral Letha is, and how he hates her dog, and how he doesn't believe she's a widow..."

Meghan raised her eyebrows. "He's right."

"Yes, but that's not what he means!" Harry considered trying to explain, but gave it up as a bad job. "So what did you want to tell me?"

"Mum's going shopping in Diagon Alley next week and she wants you to come along."

"What day next week?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Yes. I have to know what day to ask if I can be out all day."

"Mum, what day are we going shopping?" shouted Meghan to one side of the mirror.

"I don't know yet," answered Letha's voice distantly. "Why?"

"Harry's on the mirror. He wants to know so he can ask his relatives."

"Tell him he'll know it himself," called Letha.

"She says you'll know it yourself," repeated Meghan.

"I heard her," said Harry, frowning. "But I don't understand. How will I know it?"

Meghan giggled again, and the view of her face blurred as someone else picked up the mirror. "Well, we can't go shopping for you until you have your list," said a deep, amused voice.

Harry suddenly felt very stupid. Of course, of course – his Hogwarts letter, with the list of supplies he'd need! How could he have forgotten?

"Thanks, Padfoot," he said, making a face at his godfather. "Are you coming too?"

"Collar and lead and everything," said Padfoot, making a face back. Harry could sympathize. As much as he loved his cupboard, it was still a cage, where the Dursleys could put him when they didn't want him.

But that's going to change, when I get that letter...

He chatted a little longer with Padfoot and Letha and Meghan before disconnecting the mirror. Afterwards, he lay on the chair, legs up on the back and head hanging off the seat, and thought about life.

His life with the Dursleys he considered in the light of an exciting adventure game. Brave the wilds of Dursley-world, respect the native customs, trade work for food, and look forward to every opportunity to return to civilization, also known as number seventeen, Privet Drive.

But he was being hunted, so he couldn't stay in civilization; he had to live in the wild. Number four was his home, the only safe place for him, as he'd known ever since that tearful day when he'd been four and asked why, *why* he had to go back there where they didn't like him, instead of staying with Padfoot and Letha and Meghan, where he was so happy?

He could have hated the Dursleys, Harry thought. He could have hated them for standing in the way of what he wanted. But, in truth, he had almost everything he wanted. It might have been nice to live openly with his godfather, but that wasn't the Dursleys' fault. And all the privations the Dursleys tried to force on him, the Blacks smoothed over, with the result that Harry's life was a rather pleasant one.

So he didn't hate the Dursleys, exactly, though he often wondered what his life would have been like if they didn't hate him so very much. Would he have ended up like Dudley, a spoiled brat who thought he deserved everything in the world and then some?

No matter. They didn't, so he wasn't, and his life was just fine. And about to get a whole lot better.

There would be a letter soon. A letter written on parchment and addressed in emerald green ink, with no stamp or return address. He knew better than to open it in front of his relatives, who would take it away from him on principle, assuming Aunt Petunia didn't recognize it and start screeching about abominations and freaks. No, he would slip it into his cupboard as he came down the hallway, then, after breakfast, ask permission to go out. And then he would retrieve it and open it with his real family, in his real home.

After all, he only had to be able to call number four "home." He didn't have to feel that way about it.

He checked his watch, a gift from Letha two birthdays ago. The golden hand was pointing to *Time for bed, young man*.

"All right, all right," muttered Harry, getting out of the chair. "I'm going."

The hand swung around to *That's more like it*.

The boy paused before ripping the flap open. "Are you sure you're ready?" he teased the girl.

"Stop it!" She took a swipe at him. "Just open it!"

"Are you sorry you don't have one?"

"Enough," said the man in a quelling tone, but the boy could see mirth in his eyes. "It's not her fault she can't go to Hogwarts yet."

"And she will get there," the woman added. "Maybe not in the traditional way, but she'll get there."

"Now will you please open it before I scream?" said the girl, staring at him in that pointed way which indicated she really meant it.

He slid his finger under the flap and pulled.

Harry jerked awake.

What an odd dream, he thought. He hadn't been able to see any of the people's faces clearly, just outlines or silhouettes, or perhaps he hadn't seen them at all, just heard their voices...

But he'd been able to see their emotions, and the way they looked at each other. Just not their faces. Or maybe he had seen the faces, but couldn't remember them. It didn't really matter.

He often had odd dreams, odd not only for their subject matter, but for the fact that they seemed to be an ongoing series. Most people's dreams, if he understood correctly, were unrelated. He'd been having dreams starring the same cast of characters as long as he could remember – not exclusively, of course, but about twice a week he'd have a dream with them in it.

There were four of them, a boy and a girl about his own age and their parents. It was easy to tell by their looks that they were a family; it wasn't quite as clean-cut as "my father's face and my mother's eyes," but it was close. But now that he thought about it, Harry realized, he couldn't say for certain exactly what any of them looked like...

What he did know was what each of them liked and disliked. They all loved to read, but the girl also enjoyed climbing trees, with the result that she was usually found fifteen feet off the ground with her nose in a book. The father and son shared a love for music and a sly sense of humor, and their mother was a fine cook. She'd tutored Harry in making plain cooking seem fancy when it became obvious that Aunt Petunia was going to regard him as kitchen help. He liked cooking in dreams better than in real life, because in the dreams he never got burned, not even if he took a hot pot off the stove with his bare hands.

Dreams of this family were always linked to other dreams, fuzzier and harder to understand, which seemed to have something to do with animals. Mostly with chasing animals, and catching them, and then a lot of running and jumping and playing, outdoors and in, with a fine disregard for anything in the way.

The dream he'd just had might have been about his dream friends, Harry thought, except that his dream friends were obviously twins, and why would one of a twin-set get a Hogwarts letter and another one not? He knew siblings weren't always both magical, but could that extend even to twins?

Or it might mean my letter is on the way.

This thought snapped him instantly into full wakefulness. He checked his watch. 6:30 in the morning, excellent. That was about the time when the post usually came...

He got out of bed and got dressed in the dark, not wanting to spoil his night-sight by turning on the lights, then opened the door of his cupboard, quietly, carefully, thankful that he'd remembered to oil the hinges two days before. The hall was dark, but there was enough light for him to see his way to the front door, which he had likewise oiled, and out onto the lawn.

He hadn't been there more than five minutes when it happened. Something caught his eye to the right, and there, winging its way towards him, was a huge, beautiful barn owl. And it was carrying a letter in its beak.

Harry lifted up his wrist, bracing himself for the weight of the bird, which settled gently onto his arm, closing its talons ever so gently about his flesh and dropping the letter into his other hand. "Mice in the back garden," he told it. "My aunt's always complaining about them. And there's a birdbath two houses that way." He pointed.

The owl gave a hoot of thanks and spread its wings, and Harry tossed it into the air to give it a flying start. He watched it soar around the house, then turned and went back inside, holding the precious letter in both hands, except when he needed one to open the door.

Back in his cupboard room, he fell onto his bed, feeling as if he wanted to burst out of his skin with excitement. Even though he knew the letter was nothing more than a dry formal greeting and a list of supplies that very seldom changed, it was still special. The look, the feel, even the smell of it was special.

For as long as he could remember, Harry had noticed smells more particularly than other people. Aunt Petunia relied on him to tell if the milk had gone bad or the leftover peas weren't worth salvaging (he occasionally fibbed when he felt he couldn't stand another night of looking at the same vegetables). The Dursleys' house had a scent like a hospital, antiseptic, forbidding, too clean to be a home. By contrast, the house at number seventeen had an odor of warmth and life about it, with overtones of biscuits in the oven, clean sheets, and laughter. It was strange to think that laughter had a smell, but it did. Or at least Harry thought that it did.

He ran over his friends in his mind, working out who would be at Hogwarts with him and who wouldn't. Neville Longbottom, obviously, they'd been born only one day apart – maybe he'd see Neville at Diagon Alley with his parents.

Funny about them. And lucky, too.

Frank and Alice Longbottom had been about to go to bed on a February night after putting their not-even-two-year-old son to sleep. Before they did, though, an owl arrived from Albus Dumbledore, warning them that there was a chance their house would be invaded that night. Forty-five minutes later, four Death Eaters had disabled their security charms and entered the house silently. Had the Longbottoms not been warned, they would have been asleep, helpless. Instead, they had been awake, and with several friends from the Order beside them.

The Death Eaters hadn't stood a chance.

Dumbledore had never told anyone who had tipped him off about the Longbottoms. It was possible he didn't know himself, Harry thought. It might have been someone who wrote to him anonymously.

Luna Lovegood... no, she wouldn't be going to Hogwarts this year. She was a year too young, she'd be a first year to Harry's second.

I like her. She's a little funny, but I like her. Luna's mother Anita, before her death the year before, had done independent magical research, often on projects which were of interest to St. Mungo's Hospital. Letha had got to know Anita quite well, and when they had got together to discuss potions and decoctions and all those things, Mrs. Lovegood had often brought her daughter with her.

You have to get used to Luna, but after you do, she's fun. She just says things, without caring about how they sound.

Meghan... of course she wouldn't go to Hogwarts with him, she was a year younger than Luna. But that didn't mean she couldn't dream.

Dream...

That dream I had. Could that have been me, and Meghan, and Padfoot and Letha talking?

His mind spun over the words that had been spoken, the expressions and looks exchanged. It was entirely possible. He would tease Meghan just that way, Padfoot would stop them, Letha would calm Meghan down, Meghan would threaten him...

Yes, that was what it was, Harry decided. He'd dreamt how it would be when he opened his letter.

After breakfast, Harry broached the subject. "Aunt Petunia, Meghan Black's invited me to her house to stay all day. May I go?"

His aunt pursed her lips. "I wanted you to weed the garden today," she said disapprovingly.

"I'll do it after I get back. Please?"

"Make sure you do." Aunt Petunia turned away.

"I will. Thank you," said Harry to her back, and hurried to his cupboard, snatching up the letter where it lay on his bed.

When he straightened up again, he thought he'd gone blind. Then he realized the light was being blocked by the bulk of Dudley.

"What's that you've got?" asked Dudley, pointing at the letter in his hand.

Uh-oh. "Nothing."

It was the wrong answer. "Dad!" Dudley shouted. "Dad! Mum! Harry's got something in the mail!"

Harry shoved past Dudley, squeezing through partly due to his smaller size and partly to desperation, and ran for his life, houses whizzing by. If he could just get to number seventeen before they started shouting after him... or if their dislike of making a scene would just conquer their desire to stop him having anything at all, anywhere, ever...

Vernon Dursley watched the boy take the front steps of number seventeen two at a time and sighed. "No use calling him back now, he'll just pretend not to hear," he said, turning to go back inside. "Besides, it's probably a birthday card from that little chit. That's why he's been invited over, it's his birthday, and they're trying to make him feel special." Satisfied with this explanation, he returned to his coffee and newspaper.

But it's not his birthday, not yet. His birthday is next week. But Petunia didn't say this. Vernon wouldn't hear her, and wouldn't approve if he did. It wasn't right of her to be keeping such close track of the unnatural brat, he'd say. She should be paying attention to her own son.

She turned to that son now. "Dudley, dear, what did Harry's letter look like?"

"Look like?"

"Was it large or small?"

"Large, bigger than usual. And it was written in green, on kind of yellowy paper."

Petunia nodded. "And... did the address seem... to have more lines than usual?"

"I don't know... maybe. Why?"

"Just wondering, dear. Thank you, you've been a great help."

She leaned against the doorframe after Dudley had squeezed through the door, feeling a bit weak in the knees. She had known it would probably happen sooner or later, but later had always been the more prominent option...

But the boy's almost eleven. You knew it happened when they turned eleven.

And this would get him out of the house. She could remind Vernon of that. He'd only be back for two months a year – they'd make sure he stayed there for the holidays – and they could surely come up with a suitable story for the neighbors. There was no reason for anyone to know.

Unless...

Why did he take it to Aletha Black's house to open it?

Fear gripped her once again.

Harry burst through the door. "I've got it," he chanted. "I've got it, I've got it, I've got it..."

"You've got it, you've got it, you've got it," Meghan joined him, doing a dance step to the chant, which turned into spinning in a circle like ring-around-the-rosy.

Padfoot ran up to them, circled around them twice in dog form, then kicked the door shut and changed in the middle of the circle formed by their clasped hands. Dancing in place, he added a bass line to their song. "He's got it, he's got it..."

"You look like a May Day celebration," said Letha from the kitchen doorway. "Are you going to dance all day, or are you going to open that so we can go shopping?"

"Open it, open it!" Meghan let go of Harry's hands to jump around in excitement. "Open it quick!"

Harry grinned at her. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Just open it!" Meghan did a cartwheel into the living room, then one back. "Now, now!"

Satisfied that he'd dreamed of what this moment might be like, Harry slid a finger under the flap of the envelope and pulled it up.

Everything was exactly as it should be. The letter on Hogwarts stationery, signed by Professor Minerva McGonagall, and the list of supplies, which Harry put back into the envelope so he wouldn't lose it while he was busy staring at the letter.

Padfoot laid a hand on his shoulder, making Harry turn to look at him. His godfather's face was covered with the grin Harry had only ever seen after a particularly successful prank. "Good luck, Greeneyes," he said softly. "You'll like Hogwarts."

"Bet I will," said Harry, returning the grin. "Can I borrow Maya to write back to them?" he asked Letha, referring to her screech owl.

"Of course. And parchment and quills are on the desk in the living room." Letha dropped a kiss on his head. "Congratulations, love."

Harry smiled at her and went to write his "Yes, thank you, I will come" letter, with Padfoot to advise him about phrasing and Meghan to be a pest and read over his shoulder.

"Do you think Neville will be shopping at Diagon Alley today too?" she asked.

"I don't know," answered Padfoot, since Harry was concentrating on his handwriting. "Do you want him to be?"

"Yes."

"Meghan's got a boyfriend," teased Harry, looking up.

"Do not."

"Do so."

"Do not!" Meghan reached down to hit Harry and upended the ink bottle all over his letter.

Harry jumped up with a yell. "Now look what you did!"

"It's not a disaster," said Padfoot, tapping the ink puddle with his wand and making it freeze in place, then starting to vacuum it up. "But you two both need to settle down some. We can't take you out in public if you're fighting like this."

Harry looked at Meghan sidewise. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Sorry," she said back, but she still looked mad at him.

Their first stop at Diagon Alley, of course, was Gringotts, where Harry took some money out of his parents' vault and Letha got some out of the Black vaults for her own expenses.

"I want to buy one thing all myself," said Harry as they walked down the steps of Gringotts. "Just one. May I?"

"Well, Diagon Alley's as safe a place as any," said Letha. "I don't see why not. How about your uniform? I think you're old enough to handle that. Meet us at the Apothecary afterwards?"

Harry nodded happily and ran off towards Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. The little bell over the door tinkled as he walked in, and Madam Malkin hurried up to him.

"Hogwarts, of course," she said, smiling at him. "Come right on back, you can chat with this other young man here..."

A boy with a rather pale face and silver-blond hair was standing on a footstool while a witch pinned up the long black robes he was wearing. Harry followed the boy's line of sight and smiled – a grey dog with pointed ears and intelligent brown eyes was looking back at him, head tilted slightly to one side.

"Right up here, dear, that's the way," said Madam Malkin, and Harry climbed onto the second stool and let Madam Malkin slide a robe over his

head.

"Hello," said the other boy, glancing at Harry out of the corner of his eye. "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"I noticed you were looking at Zelda," said the boy, looking back at his dog, who was now watching both boys. "We go everywhere together, I think I'd be lost without her."

"Everywhere?" asked Harry curiously. "Even to Hogwarts?"

"Well, Father's writing to the Headmaster to find out for certain if I may, but I think I should be allowed. I mean, I've heard of people bringing other kinds of pets than cats or owls or toads, and she's very polite, she won't bite anyone or make trouble."

"But won't she have to go out?"

"No, not her. She can use the loo."

Harry looked from animal to boy, surprised. He had never heard of training a dog to use the toilet before. "How did you teach her to do that?"

"My dad did it. He's very clever that way." The boy gave a little half-smile, looking straight at Harry for the first time. His eyes widened a little as he did. "Wait... you're not... are you Harry Potter?"

Padfoot and Letha had warned Harry that he'd run into this as he became more of a part of the wizarding world. He was famous, and he'd have to deal with it. So it was with good grace that he answered, "Yes, I am."

"Wicked!" The boy looked down to make sure the witch wasn't trying to pin under his right arm, then held out his hand, exposing a tight green leather bracelet on his wrist. "Draco Malfoy. But only my father calls me Draco. Everyone who knows me calls me Ray."

"Ray?" repeated Harry, shaking his hand. "Oh, from D-ray-co?"

"Yeah – my mum didn't want me called Dray or Day, so I guess Ray was the only thing left." Ray shrugged, smiling. "So d'you have any idea what house you'll be in?"

"Not really – Gryffindor, maybe, but I'll have to wait and see. You?"

"Well, my mother and father were in Slytherin... but I don't know. Just because your family's one way, doesn't mean you have to be, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," said Harry, thinking of Padfoot. "I know somebody whose whole family for generations was in Slytherin, and he turned out to be a Gryffindor."

"Really?" Ray's face lit up. "That's brilliant – who?"

Harry tried not to gulp. "I forget his name," he said quickly. "But he was somebody my dad knew."

"All right." Ray was still smiling. "Hear that, Zelda?" he said to the dog. "His whole family was in Slytherin, and he turned out to be a Gryffindor!"

Zelda turned around and lay down, as if this news interested her not at all.

"That's you done, m'dear," said the witch pinning Ray's robes. "Just hop down and we'll get these made up right away."

Ray stepped down from the footstool. "Come on, Zel," he said as the witch waved her wand, sending a line of stitching around the hem of the robes. "We need to go find Mother now."

Zelda got to her feet and stretched. Harry noticed she was wearing a green collar with symbols etched into it, matching Ray's bracelet. It looked tight, but it didn't seem to be bothering her.

"See you at Hogwarts, then, I guess," said Ray.

"See you." Harry watched the other boy go, the dog pacing beside him, his hand occasionally falling to rest on her head or back, as Harry sometimes did with Padfoot.

"Malfoy?" repeated Padfoot in surprise. "You liked a boy named Malfoy?"

Harry nodded, licking one of the ice creams they'd bought and kept cold for after supper. "Draco Malfoy. But everyone calls him Ray."

"Must be Lucius Malfoy's son, I remember him telling me Narcissa was expecting a few months before your mum was due." Padfoot took another bite of his own ice cream and frowned. "Funny, though, I would never have thought any of the Malfoys would have the capacity to be nice. You said he had a pet with him?"

Harry nodded. "A dog with grey fur. Looked kind of like a shepherd, with pointed ears and all that."

"But there aren't any shepherd breeds with grey fur," said Letha. "Maybe it was a cross. Did he say?"

"No. Just that her name was Zelda, and they went everywhere together."

"She sounds pretty," said Meghan. "Did she let you pet her?"

"I didn't try, I was getting my robes fitted."

"Too bad."

"So, one more month," said Padfoot teasingly. "How are you ever going to survive?"

Harry grinned. "I think I'll manage."

Narcissa Malfoy sat alone in the study, reading over a scroll, although she knew perfectly well what it said.

I would have failed in my duty, I who have never failed before.

But I did not.

Thanks to them, I did not.

A peal of laughter caught her ear, and a pale-blond boy ran past the door of the room where she sat. "Zelda, no fair!" Narcissa heard him shout. "Give me my wand back!"

He was such a fine boy, she thought distantly. Lucius had been exceedingly proud the day he was presented with a son, and grew prouder daily, as the boy proved his intelligence and cunning to be above average.

And he prides himself on making certain of his son's safety. She rubbed the bracelet encircling her right wrist. What would he do, I wonder, if he realized what the boy has done to circumvent his plans? What I have done to the same end?

But she did not regret what she had done. Far from it. She had entered into a deal willingly, a deal that profited both sides. As long as Lucius could be kept in ignorance of it, just so long would their family's prosperity last.

And just so long would Ray's happiness.

So she had dedicated herself to making sure that, should Lucius ever discover what she had done, he would be powerless to harm anyone involved.

Including herself, of course. It would hardly have been Slytherin to do otherwise.

Sirius lay awake in bed beside Aletha. It was late, but he couldn't sleep.

Might as well get a jump on this week's letter, then. He got out of bed carefully, so as not to disturb his sleeping wife, and went down the hall into the room they used as a study. Hunting up parchment, ink, and quill, he sat down at the desk and began to write.

Dear Moony,

Harry got his Hogwarts letter today. Merlin, he was excited. I don't even remember being that happy about it, and I hated living at home about as much as he does. I wish you and Danger were still around. Maybe with all of us together, Dumbledore would have thought it was safe for Harry to live with us, instead of with his god-awful relatives to take advantage of the blood magic wards.

Something else funny, too. Harry met a boy at Diagon Alley who said his name was Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, and he liked him. Said he was nice. Is that even physically possible? I thought arrogance was bred into the Malfoy line a long time ago. Lucius Malfoy has enough of it for two. Maybe that's why his son can afford to be nice.

Did I ever tell you what that uppity bastard said to me the day after your memorial service? I ran into him at the Ministry, and he was all condolences. Pretending it was comforting to think you might still be alive, as if he didn't know perfectly well – as if he didn't help make it this way – that when you get captured by Death Eaters, the sooner you die, the better off you are. Then, of course, he insulted Aletha's faithfulness and my magical prowess, in such a perfectly genteel way that I couldn't possibly take offense...

He lay on his side, staring out the window at the stars. She was a comforting warmth against his back, as she had been all his life that he could recall. The others were outdoors but nearby, two more sources of reassurance in an otherwise cheerless world.

One more month, he thought. Will I make it?

I think you'll manage.

He nodded. It was the answer he'd expected.

The moon shone down over all of England, on those who slept and those who hunted.

Vernon Dursley considered opening the door to check on his sleeping nephew, to make sure he wasn't doing anything funny, but a sudden rush of hunger turned him away from the cupboard door and back to the refrigerator, where a pint of rum raisin ice cream was waiting.

Lucius Malfoy thought of looking in on his sleeping son, just to have another glance at the next generation of the House of Malfoy, but an inexpressible impulse sent him to his wife's bedroom instead, where he promptly forgot about his son in what Narcissa had ready for him.

And far away, an old man's quest neared completion, as he drew close to the penultimate piece of the puzzle.

As Sirius continued writing his letter, setting down the events of the past week, his mind detached, wandering.

Why do I still do this? It's been almost twelve years, there's no way Remus and Danger could still be alive... or getting these, if they are, since I burn them after I write them...

Still, he kept writing. And he kept dreaming, every Monday night, of finding a letter on the kitchen table addressed to him in Remus' handwriting, filled with the same sorts of details about Remus' life that Sirius wrote about his own life. Stories about work, about Danger, about their children – if the dreams were to be believed, Remus and Danger had twins about Harry's age, a boy and girl named Reynard and Griselda.

And besides being completely unlike Remus – he believed in simple names for children, that's the only reason Harry's not named for him – that's impossible. Werewolves are sterile.

But he still wrote the letters, and dreamed the dreams, as he had for nearly twelve years.

Letting his letter roll up into its original scroll, Sirius went back upstairs and checked on Meghan before crawling back in beside Aletha.

There was a time I thought I'd lost them both...

His mind processed that thought slowly as he fell asleep, sending him drifting back in time ten years, to the night he and Aletha had thought they'd lost everything, and the two people who had pulled them out of hell, despite being dead themselves...

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True Colors

Chapter 2: Dreaming of You

Sirius Black knelt alone on a flat and featureless plain, his head bowed, tears soaking his robes.

Alone. God, I'm so alone.

The list of people he'd lost seemed endless. It started with Remus Lupin and his wife Danger. They'd been captured by Death Eaters two years ago, not even in a battle, just in a random attack on the restaurant where they were having dinner. No trace of them had ever been found.

Maybe if they had been here, they wouldn't have believed this of me... but we set it up so well, the perfect bluff, probably even they would have been taken in...

The perfect bluff – letting the world believe that Sirius was the Secret-Keeper for the Fidelius Charm hiding James and Lily Potter and Sirius's beloved godson Harry from Lord Voldemort, but in reality using Peter Pettigrew to anchor the charm – had backfired horribly, for one simple reason.

The spy in the Order of the Phoenix, the spy no one had ever been able to locate, was Peter Pettigrew.

And then that street scene. He set that up so well... I could almost believe he even orchestrated Letha being there...

He moaned aloud. Aletha Freeman-Black, his wife of two years, a Healer trainee in her final year of study, had been out looking for him all through that fateful night, and finally come across him, with timing worthy of Murphy's Law, just as Wormtail blew the street sky-high.

If I'd known she was there... or if I'd just been smart enough to tell her about the switch beforehand... but no, I listened to Peter tell me that every person who knew was another person who might be the spy, when I should have known Letha would sooner kill herself than betray us...

Frustrated rage flooded through him, making him snarl. *And now, because of Wormtail, the world thinks I'm a murderer – Letha thinks I'm a murderer...*

Aletha had repudiated him there in the street, screaming abuse at him, accusing him of selling out not only James and Lily but Remus and Danger, inviting him to kill her as well, and finishing up with something which had made his head spin in two directions at once. Her words echoed through his mind now.

"I cannot believe I thought I loved you. I cannot believe I married you. And I cannot believe that I am carrying your child!"

He'd always dreamed of a family with Aletha. They'd hoped for a daughter first, to complement Harry, and then a son of their own, to piss off his mother by presenting her with a half-blood, dark-skinned heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.

And now I'll never know. I'll never know my own child's name, or face, or even if I have a son or a daughter...

"Fitting punishment, I should think," said a mocking voice.

Sirius jerked his head up. "P-Prongs?" he stammered.

James Potter gave him a mirthless smile. "In the flesh, so to speak. What's left of it." He turned, showing Sirius the bleeding gash on the back of his head, identical to the one on James's lifeless body in the ruins of the house at Godric's Hollow...

God, it was last night. Only last night. It feels like years ago.

"It seems somehow right that you'll never know your child, *Padfoot*." The tone turned the nickname into an insult. "Since what you did means my child will never know himself."

"What?"

"You know where he's gone," said a female voice behind Sirius, making him whip around. Lily Potter, her robes torn and dirty, stared at him with hatred in her green eyes. "You know where Dumbledore sent Harry."

"He... it was... your sister." Sirius struggled to his feet, feeling his breath coming short. "Hagrid said he'd be safe there... the Death Eaters couldn't attack him..."

"But who guards the guardians?" Lily's smile was that of a corpse. "I know my sister, Sirius. I know the hulk she married. Their son will be no different. They hate anything outside their own narrow little worlds. They'll try to stamp out Harry's magic. Keep him as downtrodden as possible."

"They'll hate him for who he is," added James. "And what he is. Something he has no control over. He'll learn that he's worthless, useless, a freak, and that no one ever could or did love him." His lips curled back in a rictus grin to match Lily's. "And don't forget about us, of course."

"We're dead because of you," said Lily, her tone as light as if she discussed the weather. "Dead, Sirius. Dead and never coming back. And we're not the only ones..."

As if they'd Apparated in, two more figures appeared around Sirius, boxing him in. He was unable to repress a moan – they were horrifyingly

similar to images that had haunted his nightmares for two years. A sandy-haired man, his face scarred with claw marks and twisted in lines of insane grief, and a woman with a great deal of brown frizzy hair, her clothes in rags, her neck and chest a red ruin, as if a mad dog had torn at her.

Not a dog. A wolf. A werewolf. God, no, please not this...

"You never tried to find us, Sirius," Remus said coldly. "You never really looked. All the time we were praying and hoping you'd come and save us, you were sitting safe in the Auror Office, going through paperwork. You were more interested in your job, in your own advancement – you should have been a Slytherin after all. What were you doing, that first full moon after we disappeared? Sleeping in your comfortable bed next to Letha, thankful that you didn't have to sacrifice any more of your time for your disabled 'friend'?"

Sirius shook his head convulsively. "I tried," he croaked. "I looked, I searched so hard, but there wasn't anything – we didn't have any ideas about where to start, every lead we got was a dead end – we tried, Remus, I swear we tried!"

"Tried and failed," spat Danger. "Look at me, Sirius. *Look at me.*"

Unwillingly, Sirius turned to face her. Her injuries were worse than he'd thought at first. He swallowed against rising bile, then realized something. *Maybe if I can find a chink in this, a way to deny it...*

"Danger, this can't have happened to you. You made sure it wouldn't. You became an Animagus – that's the only reason Remus even agreed to date you, was because you'd proven to him that he wouldn't hurt you on full moons – you started coming along with us to the Shack, you were the true wolf to go with the were, there's no way this could have happened to you!"

"And yet it did." Danger took one step closer to him. "They spelled me human, Sirius. They used magic to force me to stay in human form – and they did it where Remus couldn't see them. They knew he thought I'd be safe from him, and I couldn't reach him to tell him I wouldn't." Her lips lifted off her teeth in a parody of a smile. "I died at his fangs and claws that night, and they killed him in the morning, when he saw my body. When he went mad."

Sirius tore his eyes away from her, only to meet the accusing stares of the others – they were closing in on him, leaving him nowhere to run, nowhere to hide – this was torture beyond anything Death Eaters could do, torture of the mind, and only one piece was missing to make it the worst nightmare he could possibly imagine...

"I cannot believe I thought you loved me."

There it is.

Sirius had to turn to face her, that voice compelled him even as it repulsed. Aletha was sneering at him. "You're just like all the others. All those cold, heartless purebloods, making their status marriages. You married me because a Muggleborn wife would give your little light side act some credence. I should have seen it coming. I should have known you'd return to the way you grew up. Like a dog returns to its vomit."

That is about to be far too apt a simile. Sirius didn't know how much longer he could keep himself from being violently sick. "Letha, please... it wasn't me..."

"Of course it wasn't. Of course. Just like it wasn't you who sold out Danger's parents."

"What?" Danger gasped, staring at Aletha.

"Oh, you didn't know. I'm so sorry. Yes, I'm afraid your parents are dead as well. Death Eaters, you know, they don't like Muggles much. And your sister..."

"What sister?"

"That's right, you wouldn't have known about her. Neenie, we called her, such a sweet little girl. She'd be a bit over a year old now. If she weren't *missing*." Aletha hissed the last word into Sirius's face. "We think the Death Eaters took her, but of course we don't know for sure. Just like we don't know if she's dead. But we can always hope."

The thought of the bright-faced little girl who had just begun to call him "Pa-fuh" hit Sirius like a physical blow. He dropped to one knee again, transformed into Padfoot, and howled in grief and despair. Deep inside, he knew that not even this would stop his torment – that nothing would ever stop it again – that he would be reliving this scene, or variations on it, for the rest of his life –

Another howl joined his, but this howl was one of anger and defiance. A long-furred wolf materialized at his side, snarling at his tormentors, who dodged back, their expressions unsure, even fearful. Sirius had barely time to register that the strange wolf's tail was tufted, her snout too blunt for her to be a true wolf, before she reared onto her hind legs and took human shape.

If a human shape could be sculpted of fire, that was.

"Depart, foul specters!" she cried, her fiery body shining like a torch in the endless night of the dream world. "Your lies have no more power here – be gone, before I destroy you!"

The figures, overwhelmed, melted away into the fog surrounding them, until Sirius stood alone with his unknown defender by his side. Tentatively, he took human form and stood up. "Thank you," he said to her back. "That's not nearly enough, but it's all I know how to say..."

The flames flickered and died, leaving Sirius looking at the back of an ordinary-seeming woman. He stiffened as he noticed her mass of brown

hair in its wild curls. *Oh, God, no, it's starting again...*

"All you know how to say?" said a teasing voice. "Well, that's going to make your conversation pretty boring. So let's do this nonverbally. Gimme a hug, you mangy mutt, I've missed you."

Aletha Freeman-Black lay curled up on her side, her arms and legs sheltering her belly, trying to shield her unborn child from the kicks and blows of her attacker.

If he were anyone else, I could fight him... anyone at all besides him...

But, of course, her nightmares wouldn't settle for second best. They had to bring her the worst she could possibly dream, the truth she'd finally seen that morning on a London street, which hurt worse than any physical blow ever could.

She cried out as a kick caught her on an already-forming bruise. "Hurts there, does it?" sneered a voice she knew, one she had always loved to hear. "Let me try it again, then." He slammed his foot into her again, harder.

She rolled over, trying to get out of range, but he matched her movements with one easy step. "Stupid bitch," he said gloatingly, giving her a parody of the wicked grin she enjoyed on his face. "You thought I really cared about you. You thought that I – the heir of the House of Black – would lower myself enough to love a filthy animal like you. Mother's right. Mudbloods are all fools."

His words struck through all her defenses, leaving her helpless, unable to protect herself. "Sirius, don't," she moaned, scrabbling away from him. "Don't... please..."

"That's right, beg." He was keeping up with her, staying just within range to strike her. "Beg a little more, maybe I'll keep you around for some fun every now and again. You're not bad in bed, after all, probably make a good courtesan if you were trained up a bit."

Aletha sobbed. It was what she had always secretly feared – that her husband didn't truly love her, that she was just a diversion for him, that he would one day return to his pureblood roots and leave her behind.

Sirius stepped on her sleeve, trapping her, and stared down at her, his eyes hard and merciless as stone. "But that freakish little hybrid you're carrying. That has to go. No Muggle-born slave blood will ever flow into the Black family line." His horrid smile returned. "Maybe you could have given the little brat to your friend Danger, if she'd lived. She'd have loved a baby, any baby, since her half-breed husband couldn't give her children... but they're dead now, as dead as your brat will be in just a second."

Aletha aimed a swipe at his legs, but in an instant Sirius had his wand in his hand. He bound her to the ground, arms and legs spread wide, unable to protect herself. "Say goodnight, Letha," he mocked, and drew back his foot to kick her hard in the stomach.

Aletha screamed, praying she could somehow wake herself from this nightmare, even knowing that reality wasn't much better – at least, in reality, her child would live, though she wasn't sure yet if that was a blessing or a curse –

A snarl answered her scream. Sirius looked up, away from her, and his face changed from gleeful to fearful. He brought his wand up, but it was blasted out of his hand by a jet of flame, and a grey wolf knocked him to the ground and pinned him there. It glanced sideways at Aletha, and she was suddenly free of her restraints. She scrambled to her feet and backed away. Sirius had done the sensible thing and changed into his Animagus form – the huge black dog was well-equipped to deal with a wolf, and used to it –

But this, it seemed, was no ordinary wolf.

As the black dog challenged it with a growl, the wolf leapt upwards and became a human, a man surrounded by a halo of flame, who glared at the dog in righteous anger. "Down!" he ordered, and the dog, cowed, obeyed.

The man lashed the dog with fire, making it yelp and whine. "Misbegotten cur!" he snapped. "No true man would treat a lady so – and the man whose shape you take, least of all! Hence, before I destroy you completely!"

The dog slunk away, tail between its legs. The man watched it go, his back to Aletha. She had her hand pressed to her chest, trying to control the hammering of her heart. *Calm down now*, she willed herself. *Calm down. It's over.*

But as the flames covering her rescuer disappeared and she saw his hair, light brown with streaks of gray, she wondered if it was over, or if it was just beginning.

"Danger – great Merlin –" Sirius obliged her, hugging her so tightly she squeaked. "We've all thought you were dead!"

Danger hugged him back, then kicked him in the shin when he knuckle-rubbed her scalp. "Who's to say I'm not?"

"So does that make you my guardian angel?"

She looked thoughtful as he let her go. "I suppose you could say that. No wings, though. And no halo."

"You don't deserve one anyway."

She shook her head cheerfully. "Never have. Now come on, there's places we have to be and people we have to see. One person in particular

you have to see. You owe her an explanation, I think.”

Sirius’ heart leapt. There was only one “her” he owed an explanation to. “Letha,” he breathed.

“That’s right. The real one, this time. And I think we can keep her from attacking you long enough for you to explain.”

“We?”

Danger grinned at him impishly. “You’ll see. Come on.”

Sirius let her drag him away, feeling better than he had in days. This might be just a dream, but it was turning out to be a pretty good one.

“Remus,” Aletha said in shock.

“That is my name.” Remus Lupin smiled at her. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get here earlier – are you all right?”

“Me? I’m fine, just fine, but you – you’re *dead*!”

Remus frowned, then put two fingers on his neck. “That’s odd,” he said. “I seem to have a pulse.”

Aletha fought briefly with laughter and lost. Remus’ style of humor had always appealed to her greatly. He was far more subtle than James or Sirius...

James. Sirius.

Her laughter choked off. She felt bitter tears welling up in her eyes.

One dead. The other a traitor. Both gone forever...

She sank to the ground, fighting the sobs threatening to choke her. An instant later, Remus was there, sitting beside her and holding her, as he might hold a heartbroken sister or cousin. “It’s all right,” he whispered to her. “It’s all right. I’m so sorry.”

The combination of gentle touch and caring words undid her. Within a few seconds, she was bawling on his shoulder, sobbing so hard she knew she’d have no voice left tomorrow, but this crying was different than what she’d spent all day doing. That crying had been like trying to climb up a magical staircase oriented for down. You could work at it all you liked, but you ended up exactly where you’d started. This crying was going to get her somewhere. She didn’t know where, but anywhere had to be better than where she was.

Remus didn’t try to say or do anything until the worst of it was over. He just held her and let her get it all out. But he wasn’t ignoring her, far from it; just about the time when she lifted her head and started looking for a handkerchief, one appeared level with her nose, and when she took it and sat up to use it, Remus adjusted his own position to compensate, moving back on the couch on which they were now sitting. It had materialized, in the strange fashion of dreams, at some point while she was crying, Aletha thought, blowing her nose.

“Better?” he asked politely when she had wiped her eyes as well.

“Yes.” Aletha took a deep breath, feeling the shudders which were still shaking her begin to subside. “Yes. Much.”

“Then may I dare to congratulate you?” His eyes flickered down to her midriff, then back to her face.

Aletha sighed. “I don’t know, Remus. I just don’t know. What kind of life will I be able to offer this child? And will I ever be able to look at her, him, whatever, without seeing Sirius?”

Remus sat up a little straighter, and Aletha sensed a change in his demeanor. “Yes. About Sirius. I’d hoped you might want to talk about him.”

“What’s to talk about?” Aletha knew she sounded bitter, and didn’t care – she *was*. “He never was what I thought he was. What any of us thought he was. He was probably chosen for the role as a baby, trained up to act the part of the brave rebel, the one who dared to be good, so that we’d all like him and trust him. I was a prop, the Muggleborn girlfriend and wife, to make it even more plausible. And then, when his master said the word, he came running home. And he took James and Lily, and Peter and a bunch of Muggles, with him.”

“And your heart.”

“Yes. And my heart.”

Remus looked away, then back at Aletha. He seemed to be getting ready to speak, but he didn’t. It was as if –

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me. Please.”

Remus held up a hand. “Hear me out first?”

Aletha nodded, hope suddenly reawakened against all odds.

"I shouldn't just tell you what I know. It's very hard to believe, and there's no proof for it. Besides, it would be a bad idea for other reasons that I'm afraid I can't tell you about. But there is another way."

"Twenty Questions?"

"Something like that. I'll give you all the help I can, but there are some leaps you're going to have to make on your own."

"All right. Is what you know about Sirius?"

"Yes. Very much."

All the bitterness and pain she'd been feeling all day spilled into her words. "Why did he do it?"

"Wrong question."

"What?" Aletha stared at Remus, confused. "Why?"

"You're starting from an incorrect assumption."

"An incorrect assumption," Aletha repeated. "All right, let me think."

What am I assuming when I ask why Sirius did it?

Well, for one thing...

"Did Sirius do it?"

"Do what?"

Aletha clamped down on her irritation, reminding herself that Remus wouldn't do this just to annoy her, that there had to be a reason – ghosts, or angels, or whatever he was probably couldn't tell people things directly...

"Did Sirius betray James and Lily to Voldemort?"

"No."

Well, that was direct.

And VERY nice to hear.

But impossible.

"Then why are they dead?"

"Because they were betrayed."

"But you just said Sirius didn't betray them!"

"Yes, I did."

All right. They were betrayed, we knew that already, but Sirius didn't betray them. She repeated it in her mind like a mantra. *Betrayed, but not by Sirius. Not by Sirius...*

Then by whom?

She looked back at Remus eagerly. "Who betrayed James and Lily to Voldemort?"

"Their Secret-Keeper."

"But Sirius was their Secret-Keeper!"

Remus looked away and whistled a few notes of something melancholy-sounding.

"Wasn't he?"

"Is that a question?"

"Yes."

"No."

It took Aletha a moment to sort through the conversation and figure out what Remus was answering. "Sirius wasn't their Secret-Keeper?"

"I hate questions like that," said Remus with a half-smile. "I never know whether to say yes or no."

Aletha interpreted this as a request to rephrase the question. "Was Sirius the Potters' Secret-Keeper?"

"No, he was not."

"Then who was?"

Remus shot her an apologetic look.

"All right. But it wasn't Sirius."

"No, it wasn't Sirius."

Aletha felt muscles she hadn't even known were tense relax. She wanted to cry for joy, but she was still too worn out from her monster crying jag of a few minutes before. It would have to wait.

Besides, there's still more things I need to ask about.

"Why did Sirius kill Peter? And all those Muggles?"

Remus looked apologetic again. "Er, this could be a problem."

"You can't answer, I understand."

"No, it's not that. I'd tell you if I knew. I honestly don't know at the moment. But I know who does know."

"Who?"

Instead of answering, Remus looked away into the mist surrounding them. "Here they come now," he said.

"They? Who's they?"

A figure appeared from the mist, female and slender, with long and somewhat disorderly hair –

"Danger!" Aletha was on her feet, running to greet her friend. "I should have known," she said, hugging Danger tightly. "You two are never far apart, you and Remus."

"True enough." Danger returned the embrace wholeheartedly. "How have you been?"

Aletha smiled ironically. "As of the other day, or as of right now?"

"Never mind, it was a tactless question. But there's someone here you need to talk to, Letha. As in now."

Over her friend's shoulder, Aletha saw the silhouette in the mist, and knew who it was instantly, from the set of his shoulders, the way he moved, everything about him.

She released Danger as Sirius stepped forward into the clear area where the four of them now stood. Her eyes sought his and found them, and held them for a long moment. She wanted desperately to believe in the love and longing she saw there, but there were questions she had to ask first...

Tell the truth without fear, Sirius told himself. You have nothing to fear from honesty.

But somehow, the knowledge of Aletha as the first female Beater at Hogwarts in ten years, rather than his partner and wife, kept intruding on his thoughts as they stared into one another's eyes.

She broke the silence first. "Were you James and Lily's Secret-Keeper?"

"No."

"Who was, then?"

"Peter."

Her lips formed the name silently. "When did you change?"

"At the last minute. Barely a day before Lily did the charm."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"No."

"WHY THE HELL NOT?"

The shout caught him entirely by surprise, and actually made him take a step backwards.

Aletha's face showed an odd mixture of amusement, amazement, and anger. "Do you have *any* idea how much grief you could have saved everyone, *including* yourself, if you had just seen fit to tell *one other person* about this? Someone like *me*, maybe, since I'm your bloody *wife*?"

What the hell. Might as well play it up a little. Sirius hung his head. "I didn't want you to get hurt," he confessed in a mumble. "If you didn't know, you couldn't tell anyone, so they wouldn't hurt you."

"You thought they wouldn't torture me because I didn't know anything?" Aletha had her hands on her hips. "It's never stopped them before. And your brilliant little plan so that I wouldn't get hurt just caused me to have the worst day of my life, so thank you very much for that."

"Hey, I'm not exactly on a picnic here, either!" protested Sirius, stung. "I'm in effing Azkaban!"

"And it's your own fault, too! You could have told me – you could have told *Dumbledore* what you were going to do, and then maybe James and Lily would still be dead, but you wouldn't be in prison with no way to get out!"

"Thank you for reminding me, you're so supportive."

"A-hem ."

They both looked around. Danger was sitting on the corner of the couch, arms crossed, with just a hint of a sardonic smile on her face. "If you're both quite finished," she drawled, "I think there's an explanation coming, about this morning..."

"Yes, what the hell was that?" Aletha's voice pulled Sirius' attention back to her. "Even if Peter was a traitor, that's no reason to kill a lot of innocent Muggles and *laugh* about it!"

"I wasn't laughing because of that!"

"Then why were you laughing?"

"Because Peter's not dead!"

Three seconds of silence.

"Are you telling me you *missed*?" said Aletha in a tone of total disbelief.

Sirius couldn't help himself. He cracked up, and couldn't stop laughing until a jet of fire hit him on the side of the head, making a noise like water on hot metal.

"Enough," said Remus when he looked around. "Just tell us what happened." But his friend had a trace of a smile on his face. The funny side of even the worst situation was seldom lost on Remus.

Sirius took a few deep breaths, calming himself down. "I'd been looking for Peter all night," he began. "I'd just found him. But he was ready for me. He had his wand behind his back, must have had it stuck under his belt or something – you remember, Letha, he had his hands behind his back..."

Aletha nodded slowly.

"He cut off his own finger, to leave it for them to find, and to leave blood on his robes. He blew the street up behind him. And then he transformed. Somewhere in England, there is a rat with a missing toe on its front paw and a lot of deaths to answer for."

Aletha's face contorted, and she swore under her breath. "–sniveling little rat-bastard," she finished. "And they'll never even know to look for him, because he's not registered, will they?"

"Not unless you tell them," said Remus. "And unfortunately, they're unlikely to take you seriously now, because of what happened yesterday."

"Best case scenario," said Danger, "is he gets an attack of conscience and turns himself in."

"What about worst case?" asked Aletha.

"You wake up," said Remus. "And spend a long time wondering if this dream was true or not."

"And I wake up," said Sirius grimly. "In Azkaban."

"And without Peter, there's no good way to prove you didn't do it." Aletha hugged him tightly. "I'm sorry for what I said," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. I was stupid not to tell you." Sirius returned her hug, then, feeling bold, brought one hand around to her front, to run it over her belly. "Boy or girl, d'you think?"

"I don't know. But whichever it is, he or she is going to have a father, do you understand me, Sirius Black? I am not raising this child alone!"

Yes, ma'am." Sirius saluted.

"Don't give me that." Aletha pulled his head down to hers and kissed him hard.

Remus chuckled. "Welcome to the club, brother. We're whipped and proud of it."

Danger smacked him.

"See?"

Sirius sighed contentedly after breaking off the kiss. "Now what?" he said.

"Now, we indulge in an archaic pastime known as 'hanging around,'" said Remus, and whistled shrilly. Sirius and Aletha both jumped as walls formed around them, creating a comfortable, living-room-style space. "While you catch us up on everything that hasn't been in those letters of yours."

"Our letters?" Aletha asked. "You've been getting our letters?"

Danger nodded. "Mine are from you. Sirius writes to Remus."

"It's very nice of you, by the way," added Remus. "Nearly as good as being there ourselves."

"Yes – but how are you getting them?" Sirius frowned, confused. "We always burn them after we write them."

"Once again, long story," said Danger. "And not one we should waste tonight on, because I'm not sure we'll be able to do this again. So, why don't we get the little ones in here and have a good old-fashioned family evening?"

"Little ones?" asked Aletha.

Remus waved a hand at the far wall, and a door appeared that hadn't been there before. "Go on, Sirius," he said, motioning to it. "He belongs to you now, after all."

Sirius didn't remember crossing the room, or opening the door, or anything until he was kneeling in the doorway, holding Harry Potter in his arms.

"Hi there, Greeneyes," he said, picking the boy up and willing his voice not to shake.

"Pa-fuh," said Harry happily, hugging him.

"Pa-fuh!" squealed another voice. "Leeta!"

"Neenie!" Aletha dropped to one knee to embrace the little girl. "Look at you, you're so big!"

Over Harry's shoulder, Sirius looked at the other little boy in the room, who was regarding these new adults curiously. He chuckled. With that hair and those eyes, there was no doubt whom the boy belonged to.

I guess what you can't have in life, you get when you go to heaven...

Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was less than pleased to receive a visit from Albus Dumbledore the next morning.

He was even less pleased to hear what Dumbledore wanted.

"Question Black? What's to question? More than fifty eyewitnesses, including Black's own wife – whom we can't find at the moment, but will soon enough..."

"When did you try to contact her?" asked Dumbledore politely.

"One of our people firecalled her home around noon yesterday, but there was no answer."

"Had it occurred to you that Mrs. Black might be in some distress, and either unable or unwilling to answer her Floo?"

"Perhaps, perhaps, but that's why we were going to try again later... besides, it doesn't matter, really, does it? Not now that the war's over. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is gone, we're rounding up his followers without too much trouble – some of the higher-ranked ones may give some difficulty, of course, at least Black came quietly."

"Still, Bartemius, I should like a few words with Sirius. If that can be arranged."

Crouch heaved a sigh. "Well, seeing that it's you, Dumbledore..."

"The war has been more or less declared over," Dumbledore told Aletha as they ascended the spiral staircase to his office that afternoon. "Some of the Death Eaters are surrendering. Others are claiming they were put under Imperius. Still others have fled, and may be hard to find. However,

since there seems to be no more likelihood of mass attacks at the moment, I am disbanding the Order of the Phoenix until and unless reestablishing it seems necessary.”

“Because you don’t think he’s dead.”

“Precisely. You realize, of course, Aletha, that this ends any power I might have had over you. I am no longer in any position to give you orders.”

Aletha looked sidewise at Dumbledore as he seated himself behind his desk. “But there’s something you want me to do,” she said. “Isn’t there?”

“Astute as ever. And I believe this task may not be altogether distasteful to you. I hesitate to bring up what may be a painful topic, but you were designated the sole heir of Danger’s parents, were you not, since Sirius has no Muggle identity and therefore could not legally inherit from them?”

“That’s right.”

“They left you everything they owned. Including custody of their younger daughter – sadly, no longer an issue – but also their house, number seventeen, Privet Drive, in Little Whinging in Surrey.”

Aletha nodded.

“I do not believe I have yet mentioned to you where Harry Potter has gone.”

Aletha frowned. “He went to Lily’s sister, didn’t he? Petunia, and her husband?”

“Yes, but I believe you are unaware of their direction. Vernon and Petunia Dursley live at number four, Privet Drive.”

Aletha smiled, suddenly seeing where this was going. “In Little Whinging, in Surrey?”

“Indeed.”

“And you feel it might be prudent to have someone nearby. Someone to keep an eye on things, just to make sure that nothing gets out of hand.”

“Precisely. A young widow, left pregnant by her recently deceased husband, would fit the bill nicely, I think. But suburban life can be dangerous. So I would advise this young widow to acquire some form of protection. Perhaps a dog.”

Aletha chuckled. “Yes, I think I’d like to have a dog. But wait – how...” She couldn’t think of how to phrase it.

“How shall you acquire the type of dog you wish?” Dumbledore finished for her, sighing dramatically. “Aletha, I am afraid I was terribly careless today. I shall be roundly castigated for it, I’m sure, but such is the price of carelessness. The *Prophet*, of course, was delighted to hear of it.” He slid a copy of the *Evening Prophet* across his desk to her. “Only because I am sure you will not laugh at an old man’s folly.”

Aletha thought her eyebrows ought to be paying her hair rent as she scrutinized the front page.

SIRIUS BLACK ESCAPES!

Overpowers Albus Dumbledore, Aurors

Public urged to be on their guard

“Sirius did not overpower you,” she said surely, lowering the paper. “I don’t think anyone could.”

“Ah, but he did,” lamented Dumbledore, in such a serious tone that anyone who couldn’t see his eyes, twinkling more than usual, would have thought he meant it. “I looked into his eyes, scrutinized his thoughts most carefully, and discovered the awful truth about his wickedness. Unfortunately, use of Legilimency weakened me momentarily, and Sirius took advantage of this, and of the fact that I had brought his wand with me to our session together, in order to break through his lies by demonstrating that he had cast the curses, you see. He knocked me to the floor, Stunned me with my own wand, took his from my possession, and left the room, Stunning both Aurors who were guarding us.”

Aletha’s expression might have been interpreted by that same oblivious observer as pained, but that was only because she was trying so very hard not to laugh. “And you have no idea where he went, of course,” she was able to say after a few moments.

“None whatsoever.” Dumbledore’s expression was nicely bland. “However, if the young widow we were speaking of a few moments ago will present herself at the Little Whinging chapter of Animal Control in a day or two, which time will likely be needed for her to move into her new home, I believe she will find quite what she is looking for there.”

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True Colors

Chapter 3: Freedom

1 September. A day of wonder. A day of bliss.

At least, it was if you were eleven years old and magical.

It had to be hard on Meghan, Harry thought, glancing at her in the back seat of Letha's car, sitting beside a furry Padfoot with her arms folded and a hint of a pout on her face. She'd done everything with him since they were babies, and now suddenly she couldn't go somewhere he was going, just because there was a two-year age difference between them.

Hope she doesn't throw a fit in the station...

But then Harry remembered that they were meeting the Longbottoms there, and his qualms disappeared. Neville could handle Meghan in all her moods, even better than Letha or Padfoot could. By the time the train left, he'd probably have her convinced she had the better end of the deal not going, and promising to write them both with every detail of what was happening at home.

Harry's mind fluttered, free-associating. *Home. Number four. The Dursleys.*

His aunt and uncle had been less than pleased to discover he'd inherited his mother and father's "taint," but since it wasn't going to cost them anything to send him to Hogwarts, and it would get him out of the house ten months a year, they'd agreed that he could go. Not that he would have minded if they'd said no – what was the worst they could do? Lock him in his cupboard and hide away or destroy the things he'd bought? He had at least two different means of communicating with his family, and things could always be bought again.

Uncle Vernon had been more than happy to let Letha take him to London to catch the Hogwarts Express, but for one terrifying moment Harry'd thought Aunt Petunia had finally figured out about Letha. She'd certainly given Harry a searching look before agreeing that yes, Mrs. Black was very kind to take him, and then proceeded to lecture him about proper behavior in the car.

Harry had been able to keep listening only by reminding himself constantly of one of the only times Dudley had ever been blamed for his own mischief – he'd stuffed an entire chocolate ice cream under the front seat of Uncle Vernon's last car but one. Since Harry had never ridden in the car, never even been near it except to wash it, and had certainly never had a chocolate ice cream (at least, not from the Dursleys), not even his uncle could blame him for it.

Not as if he didn't try, though...

Harry had greatly enjoyed walking out of number four that morning, pulling his trunk behind him and carrying the cage containing Hedwig, his snowy owl, in his other hand. He'd had a curious feeling that it was the last time he'd ever be inside the boxy-looking house, although he knew it couldn't be true. He'd be back next summer, and the summer after that, and all the summers until he was grown.

But that's ten months away. I can stay at Hogwarts for the holidays. Wonder if I'll make friends? Maybe they'll stay too. And there'll be feasts, and Quidditch at least to watch, and next year I can play...

Harry lost himself in pleasant daydreams of the coming school year, which ended only when Letha gently shook his shoulder to alert him to the fact that they had arrived.

Neville and Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom were waiting for them near the entrance to platform nine and three-quarters. Meghan's pout, which had shown signs of becoming permanent, vanished at the sight of Neville, who greeted her eagerly and showed her the toad his Great-Uncle Algie had bought him, which he'd named Trevor. Letha shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom, and Padfoot wagged his tail to them.

"Good luck at school, Harry," said Mr. Longbottom, shaking hands with him. "I think you'll do fine."

"I know you'll do fine," corrected Mrs. Longbottom, hugging him. "Your parents would be proud of you, Harry."

Harry beamed. It was his favorite compliment. "Thanks."

Together, he and Neville crossed the barrier between platforms nine and ten, feeling the little wash of cool across them as they stepped through.

Time sped up until it was rushing past. He and Neville and Mr. Longbottom were lifting the trunks aboard the train and finding an empty compartment... he was hugging Meghan and promising to write every week without fail... he was hugging Padfoot, who had said everything at home and had to content himself now with a soulful look and a big sloppy lick ("Yuck!")... he was being held close by Letha, who kissed the top of his head and whispered, "They would be proud today," before letting him go... he was aboard the train, waving out the door with Neville as it began to pick up speed...

"Let's go sit down, then," said Harry, shutting the door as the train rounded the corner.

The bang of the door closing must have startled Trevor, as he gave an emphatic wriggle and leapt from Neville's hand, vanishing into the next car.

"Oh no!"

"Harry!"

The two exclamations came almost simultaneously, and for an instant Harry wasn't sure which way to turn. Footsteps coming down the car helped clue him in. He turned. "All right, Ray?" he said.

"All right. You?"

"All right. Do you know Neville Longbottom?"

"No, I don't."

"Neville, this is Draco Malfoy, but he likes to be called Ray, and his dog, Zelda..."

"Wolf, actually," corrected Ray quietly.

"Fine, your *wolf* Zelda."

Zelda tossed her head proudly.

"Ray, this is Neville Longbottom, and I'd introduce his toad, Trevor, but he just got away."

"That's too bad," said Ray as he shook hands with Neville. "Do you want Zelda to see if she can find him?"

Neville looked hopeful. "Could she?"

"Have you been holding him for long today?"

"All morning."

"Zel," called Ray, and the wolf came to sniff at Neville's hands. "Since you've been holding him, your scent's on him," he explained. "She'll go and find anything that smells like you, but isn't you, and then either bring him back here or come and get us to get him, if she can't reach him."

"Will she hurt him?"

Ray shook his head. "She fetches things alive all the time. She's very gentle and very smart."

Zelda smacked Ray's leg with the back of her paw, then nosed open the door of the next car and vanished through it.

"She's also temperamental," said Ray. "May I sit with you, or are you full up?"

"We've got room," said Harry. "But shouldn't you go with Zelda? Someone's going to make a fuss if they see a wolf wandering around without a human."

Ray made a face. "Didn't think of that. Neville, you want to come too? It's your toad."

"Er, all right. See you in a minute, Harry."

Harry returned to the compartment and sat down, not really thinking about much of anything, just enjoying the fulfillment of his dream, to be on the Hogwarts Express and going away to school at last.

The door slid open. "That was quick," said Harry, turning to see.

But it wasn't Ray or Neville, it was another boy, fast turning as red as his hair. "I'm sorry, you're expecting someone – I was just going to ask if I could sit here, everywhere else is full, but you've got people coming—"

"It's all right," said Harry, standing up to stop the boy from leaving. "You can sit in here, there's only me and two others. First year, too?"

The boy nodded, coming in. He was tall and gangling, with a long nose and large hands and feet. "Ron Weasley," he said, holding out his hand.

Harry took it and prepared himself for the inevitable. "Harry Potter."

Ron goggled at him. "Are you really?"

Harry nodded.

"And d'you really have..." He pointed to his forehead with his free hand, since he hadn't let go of Harry's yet.

Harry disentangled his hand and lifted his fringe to show his lightning-bolt scar.

"Wow." Ron sounded truly impressed. "Who're you waiting for?"

"Some friends of mine," said Harry, stretching a point, since he wasn't quite sure if he was friends with Ray yet, though he liked the blond boy. "They're in our year. Neville Longbottom and Draco Malfoy. But he likes people to call him Ray."

"Have you known them long?"

I just met Ray at Diagon Alley a month ago, but I've known Neville my whole life."

"Oh," Ron sat down. "Is that your owl?" he asked, pointing to Hedwig, on the luggage rack above Harry.

"Yes, that's Hedwig. Do you have a pet?"

"Just my brother Percy's old rat," said Ron dismissively, pulling a lump of gray fur from his pocket. "He's totally useless. Never wakes up unless he's eating. I suppose he must be magic somehow, but he's never showed it."

"What's his name?" asked Harry, looking more closely at the rat.

"Scabbers. Percy's had him forever, but now he's a prefect and he gets an owl for it, so Scabbers gets handed down the line."

"Do you have any other brothers?"

"Only four," said Ron just a trifle bitterly. "And a younger sister."

"I've got a younger sister," said Harry. "Sort of. She's my neighbor, her mum babysits me, and we've been together so much it's kind of like we're brother and sister. Does yours steal your chips at lunch?"

"Yes – and then tries to claim you ate them yourself when you weren't looking!"

The conversation was in full swing when the door opened again. "I'm glad we were there," said Ray, coming in behind Neville, clutching a squirming Trevor. "Otherwise she might have got warts on her tongue..."

Zelda, coming in last, stopped dead in the doorway.

"What's that?" asked Ron, looking at the wolf.

"Her name's Zelda," said Ray. "Who're you?"

"Ron Weasley. Who're you?"

"Draco Malfoy, but call me Ray. What's that?" Ray pointed at the lump of Scabbers on Ron's knee, at which Zelda was now growling.

"It's my rat, and keep your dog away from him. I don't like that look." Ron bundled Scabbers away in his pocket again.

"She's not a dog, she's a wolf. And she won't hurt your rat." But Ray was looking in the direction Scabbers had been with an oddly angry expression himself, Harry thought. "When did you get him?"

"Why's it any of your business?"

"I'm just asking! –" Ray broke off, frowning fiercely for a moment. Then his face cleared. "I'm sorry if I insulted you somehow," he said carefully. "I didn't mean to. And I promise Zelda won't hurt your rat."

"All right." Ron looked at Neville and held out his hand. "Ron Weasley."

"Neville Longbottom. And this is Trevor."

"A toad! I didn't know anyone still brought those."

"He was a gift," said Neville, reddening slightly. "From my great-uncle."

"You mean someone besides me has great-uncles?"

After Ron and Neville had compared families, everything in the compartment settled down, and the boys could have a good long talk about topics that interested them all. Such as Quidditch, Hogwarts, Quidditch, food (as the lunch cart came around and Harry treated everyone), and Quidditch. Zelda curled up on the seat between Ray and Harry and went to sleep.

"When did you get her?" asked Neville.

"We've been together since I was a baby," said Ray. "I think 'Zel' was one of my first words."

"Is she like a guard dog?" asked Ron. "Would she hurt someone who tried to hurt you?"

Ray nodded. "That's supposedly what she's for. But she means a lot more to me than that. She's really more like my friend." His hand rested on the back of Zelda's head for a moment. "She's almost all the company I have at home. My father and mother are busy with their own things a lot."

This brought the conversation neatly back to their families, with it being Harry's turn to talk this time. He kept to his story about Letha and Meghan being his neighbors and said nothing about Padfoot except as the family pet. The other boys were more interested in his stories about the Dursleys anyway, being all three pureblooded and not familiar with Muggle life.

In what seemed like no time at all, the train was slowing down, and they were getting off, dressed now in their Hogwarts robes, following the bellow of "Firs' years! Firs' years follow me!"

“That’s Hagrid,” whispered Harry to the others. “He’s the gamekeeper.” He smiled at Hagrid as he passed – Hagrid had often come to visit Letha when Harry had been there, and he’d liked the big man who always had something interesting in his pockets. Letha teased sometimes that Hagrid only came to visit her when he knew Harry would be there.

The first years made their way down the steep, slick trail to the shore of the lake, where a fleet of little boats awaited. Harry climbed into a boat with Ron and Neville and craned his neck looking for Ray, finally spotting him far down the shore, already in a boat. He was looking unhappy about something... oh, of course, there were three other people in his boat, so there wasn’t any room for Zelda, who was standing on the shore, whining.

Harry waved to get Ray’s attention, then pointed at Zelda and beckoned. Ray leaned out of his boat and said one or two words to the wolf, and she raced down the shore and leapt lightly into Harry’s boat, almost making Neville drop Trevor again. Ron snickered, and Zelda smacked him with her paw as she had Ray on the train.

“Ow.” Ron rubbed his knee. “What was that for?”

Zelda snorted and turned away from him, resting her head on Harry’s knee and looking up at him amusedly. Tentatively, he offered her his fingers, and felt gratified when she sniffed them and gave them a delicate lick.

Ron shook his head. “That animal is not normal,” he said.

Zelda favored him with a look that said as clearly as words, *And you are?*

Harry tried not to fidget as he stood in line, waiting for the Sorting Hat to finish with Neville.

“He’ll be a tough case for Sorting,” Padfoot had said of Neville. “His father was a Hufflepuff, but he’s the bravest Hufflepuff I know, and his mum was a Gryffindor, but the hardest-working and fairest-minded one I know. So he could go either way.”

The Hat opened its mouth now –

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry wished he could cheer, but there was no guarantee that he’d be a Gryffindor himself. He could hope, of course, but the Hat placed you where it thought you would fit best, and that wasn’t necessarily where you wanted to be...

Neville was jogging back to Professor McGonagall now, a bit red-faced, to return the Sorting Hat, which he’d run off wearing. She set the Hat on the stool and looked at her list, frowning.

Harry felt Ray tense beside him. “What’s wrong?” he asked under his breath.

“Nothing.”

But Ray looked worried, all the same, and only relaxed when McGonagall read out, “MacDougal, Morag!”

It was a short reprieve. “Malfoy, Draco!” was the next name on the list.

Ray went forward to sit on the stool. McGonagall lowered the Hat onto his head, and another long waiting process began. Zelda whined uneasily, watching him.

“He’ll be all right,” Harry told her out of the corner of his mouth. “You’ll see. He’ll be all right.”

The Hat straightened up. “GRYFFINDOR!”

There was a great deal of cheering from the Gryffindor table. Ray, as the Hat came off his head, looked surprised, pleased, and relieved. Zelda gave a joyous bark and bounded forward, leaping at Ray –

No, it was the Hat she was leaping at, and she’d snatched it out of Professor McGonagall’s hand before anyone knew what was happening.

“Zelda!” shouted Ray, although he was handicapped by laughing. “Come back here!”

Zelda wasn’t listening. She’d bounded down the aisle between the Ravenclaw and Slytherin tables, and was now worrying her head into the Hat, for all the world as if she wanted to be Sorted too. She came prancing back up the aisle wearing it, causing gales of laughter, both for the incongruity of the sight and because it was obvious that she couldn’t see where she was going.

And then, to top it all off...

“GRYFFINDOR!” announced the Hat loudly.

More laughter still, and Gryffindor House cheered its newest member, as Ray, rather pink in the face, removed the Hat from Zelda’s head, gave it back to Professor McGonagall, and led Zelda firmly to the House table, where Fred and George Weasley made a production of making room for the wolf on the bench beside them.

Dear Meghan,

The Sorting's over, and we're all in Gryffindor. That's me, Neville, my new friend Ron, and the boy I met in Diagon Alley, Ray. And his pet wolf, Zelda. She stole the thing they use for Sorting, and it Sorted her before anyone could stop it. (No, I'm not telling you how it happens. You'll just have to wait.)

I guess it's true that you can bring other kinds of pets than cats or owls or toads. Ray has Zelda, and Ron has a rat called Scabbers. We have a nice dormitory, with two other boys – Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan – at the very top of Gryffindor Tower. The food's just as good as Padfoot and Letha always said, but I haven't had a chance to go exploring yet. I'll write again soon and tell you how classes are going, and if I've found any new secret passages.

Harry

"Harry?"

Harry looked up. "Hmm?"

"Does that have to go out tonight?" Ray pointed to the letter in Harry's hand. "Because I was just going to ask if I could borrow Hedwig for something."

"When would she be back?"

"Tomorrow morning at the very latest. It's not far."

"What kind of thing?"

"A little package. Nothing heavy or hard to carry."

"How about it, girl?" Harry asked Hedwig. "You think you can do that?"

Hedwig clacked her beak.

"Go ahead," said Harry. "I'll hold onto this and send it out tomorrow."

"Thanks." Ray held out his wrist for Hedwig to step onto, then climbed onto his bed and pulled the curtains shut. Zelda, holding something in her mouth, leapt neatly up after him.

"Harry, have you seen Scabbers?" asked Ron. "He's not anywhere around."

"He'll turn up," said Harry, yawning. "You need the light on, Ray?"

"No, you can turn it off," said Ray's voice from inside his bedcurtains. "Good night, all."

"Good night," the other boys chorused, and Dean blew out the lamp.

He summoned a light within the closed space, then shut his eyes and relaxed all over, surrendering control in the familiar process he'd known since he was a baby. When his eyes opened again, they moved without direction from his own mind, and his wand moved in gestures he himself wouldn't learn for years, sealing the curtains so that no sound could escape.

She dropped what she'd appropriated, and his hand brought the wand down sharply, stopping its flight before it could even start. Another tap and muttered incantation secured the container he would use, and he touched the lid to his light, making an air hole, before securing that too.

Death was not what he desired for this one. Since he was old enough to understand the concept, he had hated injustice. And a long-standing injustice was about to be righted.

Albus Dumbledore returned to his office tired, but elated. His years-long quest was bearing fruit. Four of the objects he had sought, he had found, and dealt with them appropriately, even the one which had been removed from its original place. As far as he knew, only one remained, and he had an idea of where it might be found, and, if he was correct, the people who were in a position to deal with it.

Perhaps, after all, Harry's impossible task will not be so impossible.

A small cylindrical package waited on his desk.

I wonder what this can be?

He picked it up and saw the superscription, and one mystery was resolved. Over the years since the war had ended, he had received many notes from an unknown pair of correspondents, who called themselves his "friends in low places." They were always addressed in the same handwriting that graced this package, though the handwriting itself had changed over the years, becoming more firm and confident. One note, in three terse words, had warned of an attack on a married pair of Aurors and their young son. Another, in a sentence or two, had revealed the current locations

of some of the missing Death Eaters. And a third...

A third started me on this quest I have undertaken.

Minerva keeps asking me why I leave the school so often, and for so long. He smiled thoughtfully. I wonder what she would say if I told her the truth? All the truth? What I have been doing and why, who I suspect sends me this information, and from whom they obtained it, and how?

She might well start proceedings to have me declared incompetent.

But the communication had always been in writing only. Never before had his “friends” sent him a package. That argued for something extremely precious, highly dangerous, or both. Perhaps even the last piece of his puzzle...

Carefully, Dumbledore ripped away the brown paper.

A glass jar was revealed, with an extra sheen to it making him believe it had been charmed Unbreakable. A wise precaution, he realized when he saw what the jar contained. Not the puzzle piece he sought, but still something of great value. His tiredness vanished in a flare of righteous anger and satisfaction.

Finally. Time and past it for justice to be done.

He picked up the jar, considering it and its contents. For one moment, he thought he smelled smoke, and wondered whimsically if his eyes could set things on fire.

If they could, this might well be one of the things I would choose to ignite...

But not yet.

Slipping the jar into a pocket, he turned to his fireplace.

Meghan was up early the next morning, playing quietly by herself in the living room of her home, making fanciful sculptures with her magical building blocks, which stuck together no matter what configuration one put them in. She often built chairs with them for her playhouse, and very comfortable they were too, though Mum said they ruined her posture.

I wonder when Harry and Neville's letters will start coming? She got up to peer out the window, though she knew the boys probably wouldn't write after just one night at school. Still, she wanted to look.

Behind her, the fireplace ignited with a whoosh. She turned in surprise – they weren't expecting visitors. But the first person out of the fireplace allayed her worries. “Hello, Professor Dumbledore,” she said happily. “Would you like some tea? Mum lets me use the kettle on my own now.”

“Thank you, Meghan, perhaps later. Is your father here?”

The question nonplussed Meghan. It had been drilled into her from infancy that she must never speak of her father outside the walls of her own home, or when there were strangers present, and there were no fewer than three – four, she corrected herself as another person climbed out of the fire. Four strangers in their living room, tracking soot on the carpet, and Professor Dumbledore had mentioned her father as casually as if he were supposed to be living with them...

“Dumbledore, what are you talking about?” said one of the men, echoing Meghan's thoughts. “Surely you don't think Black would be here?”

“Where do you think he lives, Rufus, if not with his family?”

The man called Rufus frowned a little, looking Meghan over with his yellowish eyes. “I could see him visiting, perhaps, sneaking in from time to time, but it's unlikely that he's here now, don't you think?”

“Thus, my question. Is your father here, Meghan?”

Meghan looked at Professor Dumbledore in dismay. What was going on, she tried to ask with her eyes alone – were these Aurors here to take her Dadfoot away? Should she tell the truth, or lie?

“Everything is all right,” the Headmaster reassured her, making a small motion with the hand away from the Aurors that reaffirmed what he was saying aloud. “You may speak.”

“He's here,” said Meghan, squaring her shoulders. No matter what was going on, it was her duty to meet it bravely. “Should I go and get him?”

“If you would.”

Harry woke up a little late that morning. He could hear voices calling him, but he wanted to hold onto his marvelous dream, another in the continuing series. He and the dream-family had been celebrating something, something they'd been waiting a long time for. They'd been having such a good time that he hadn't wanted to wake up, but when the boy and girl ran off, the parents started shooing Harry away after them, pushing him back to reality, out of the dream...

Harry, come on, we're going to be late for breakfast."

Harry muttered something indistinct, then pulled his bedcurtains back and squinted at the world. One set of blue eyes, two of brown, and one of gray (Ron, Neville, Zelda, and Ray) were regarding him closely. Zelda's eyes, in particular, were a soft, warm shade of brown that seemed familiar somehow...

He blinked, breaking the almost-trance he'd been in. "Be ready in a second," he said, and climbed out of bed.

It wasn't quite a second, but it wasn't very many minutes before four boys and one wolf were clattering down the stairs and out the portrait hole, which Zelda navigated easily with a leap. "I still can't find Scabbers," Ron said as they walked. "I don't know where he could have got to."

"Maybe he's asleep under the bed or something," Harry suggested, "and just isn't hungry enough to come out yet."

"Yeah, but he normally never misses a meal." Ron looked suspiciously at Zelda. "What does she eat?"

"Same things I do," said Ray. "And usually more of it. Don't worry, she didn't eat your rat."

"How do you know?"

"Because I asked her very nicely," Ray retorted, "and she said that was disgusting. She likes her food cooked most of the time. And even if she did want to go hunting, she wouldn't go hunting a stupid, fat, old rat."

"There are an awful lot of cats around, you know," Harry said, hoping to head off Ron's indignation. "Owls too. And you didn't look under the bed, did you?"

"No," Ron admitted. "I'll look after morning classes. You're probably right, that does sound like something he'd do."

"Trevor's gone too," said Neville gloomily. "Watch where you step in the bathroom." He stopped, looking around. "Where are we?"

"I don't know," said Harry, realizing he'd never seen the hall around him before.

"I'm lost," said Ron bluntly.

Ray blinked a couple of times, and his face seemed to change a little, subtly, but it only lasted a second. "Fourth floor," he said. "And we took a wrong turn at that corridor back there, we wanted to go right, not left." He led the way back to the branching, and proceeded to get them to the Great Hall in three minutes flat.

Ron inhaled the odors of eggs, bacon, kippers, and toast appreciatively. "How'd you do that?" he asked, leading the group into the Hall itself.

Ray shrugged and mumbled something about being lucky, which Harry didn't pay much attention to, since he'd just discovered he was starving, and Hogwarts food was every bit as good as Letha and Padfoot had always claimed. He served himself a huge bowl of porridge, poured sugar on top, and dug in.

"I can see her eating the same food as you," said Ron, staring at Ray and Zelda.

"Good, because if you didn't, you'd need your eyes examined."

Ron ignored this. "But why does she sit at the table?"

"Because she has good manners," Ray said, grinning.

"Something else your dad trained her to do?" Harry asked, licking his spoon.

"What – oh, yeah." Ray pulled the bacon over to himself. "Two pieces or three?" he asked Zelda.

"Weird," Ron mumbled through a mouthful of eggs.

"Harry," Neville said. "Everyone's looking at you."

Harry looked around. It was true. Almost every head in the Great Hall was turned his way, those that weren't hidden behind newspapers.

"Oy, Harry." It was Ron's twin brothers Fred and George, both looking confused. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?" asked Harry, bewildered.

For answer, Fred spread out the newspaper he had under his arm.

Two large photographs caught Harry's eye. One showed his godfather, much younger than Harry was used to seeing him and laughing maniacally, obviously taken on the day he'd been imprisoned. The other –

Harry's heart leapt. The other photograph was of a fat little man, balding on top, fidgeting nervously in his frame. He knew that face. He'd seen it in pictures from the Marauders' school days often enough.

His eyes flew to the headline.

SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT!

True killer, Peter Pettigrew, captured last night

Black discovered to have been hiding in Surrey

Wild excitement rose in Harry.

They found him – they found him – Padfoot's free! Really and truly free! He never has to hide again!

"Harry," repeated George, joggling his shoulder. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Is Sirius Black really your godfather?"

Harry laughed aloud. "Yes. He is. He always has been."

"Always has been?" Ron sounded amazed. "Do you *know*him?"

"See him every day. Or I did, until now." Harry took the paper from Fred and glanced through the article. Bits of phrases leapt out at him... *credibly, but as it seems, wrongfully accused ... hiding in plain sight, in the home of his wife of ten years ... daughter, Meghan, and often sees his godson, Harry Potter ...*

"But he *killed* people!"

"In case you can't read, ickle Ronniekins, it seems not," said Fred, pointing at the paper. "Who's this Pettigrew bloke?"

"He was another friend of my mum and dad's." Harry stared at the picture. "I've always heard about him, but I never thought they'd actually find him."

"A toast," said Ray from across the table, lifting his glass of pumpkin juice. "To freedom."

"To freedom," answered Harry, touching his goblet to Ray's.

"To freedom," chorused Ron, Neville, Fred, and George.

Ray tapped his goblet against Zelda's saucer of juice before drinking from it.

"So what do your mum and dad have to do with it?" asked Fred, sitting down beside him.

"What's he going to do now?" George added.

"What's he like?" Neville wanted to know.

"How did he hide all that time?" was Ron's question.

Trying to answer all four questions at once, Harry barely noticed Ray's appropriation of the newspaper, or his holding it down where Zelda could see it. Her whimper as she pawed at the page, though, got his attention. "What's she doing?" he asked, breaking off his explanation of the Fidelius Charm.

"Oh, she always thinks she can dig people out of photographs," Ray said lightly. "I think she likes your godfather, Harry. She keeps going after him. Stop it now, Zel," he added, rapping the wolf on the head. "You're not a cub anymore."

Zelda took Ray's hand lightly in her teeth, then let it go.

"How old is she, anyway?" said Neville. "You said you'd had her since you were a baby, and dogs and wolves don't live as long as people."

"She's about as old as me. So eleven. But she's still strong, so she should have plenty more time."

"Never mind that," said Ron impatiently. "Keep going, Harry. He was going to be the only one who could tell anyone where they were?"

Ray sighed wistfully, tracing the edge of Sirius Black's photograph with a finger, his other hand lingering on Zelda's back.

Freedom was a nice toast.

It would have been an even nicer reality.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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True Colors

Chapter 4: Beginnings and Endings

Lucius Malfoy sat completely still at his dining room table, one hand loosely gripping a sheet of parchment. "Gryffindor," he said finally, very quietly.

Narcissa looked up from her place at the foot of the table, where she was daintily eating porridge. "I beg your pardon, Lucius?"

"Gryffindor, Narcissa. Our son has been Sorted into Gryffindor."

Narcissa nodded. "I thought he might well be," she said. "This is good."

"Good?" Lucius stared at his wife. "No, this is not good! Malfoys are always Slytherins! For one to be a Gryffindor is a sign that something is seriously wrong..."

"No, it is simply a sign that Draco is not exactly like you, Lucius," said Narcissa irritably. "Do look at things sensibly. Tell me this. Do you expect the Dark Lord to return?"

Lucius sighed, sitting back in his chair. "Expect? I know not. Hope for, yes. Wish for, certainly. But expect is too strong a word."

"But you would prefer a future in which he did return to one in which he did not."

"Yes."

"And some, if not all, of your plans are made with regards to that sort of future."

"Indeed."

"Then consider, Lucius, how it will look, when he does return, to be able to say, 'My lord, my son is a member of the House most commonly devoted to the other side and therefore, if not beyond reproach, at least less likely to garner attention from certain faculty members, some of whom are known to favor that house... and my son has access at almost all times to the sleeping place and belongings of one Harry Potter.'"

Lucius sat up straight. "That is true. I had not considered that. Potter is the same age as Draco, and he would most likely be a Gryffindor himself... that is very true."

A smile appeared on his face, one Narcissa knew well. It meant Lucius was losing himself in blissful dreams of a future in which he ruled over hordes of slaves, Muggle and magical, directing where they could go and whom they could see, reveling in their sorrow and humiliation.

She got up and slipped out. She would not be missed. Dobby would bring her breakfast in the drawing room, and she could enjoy some civilized conversation.

She recalled the one thing she had done, all those years ago, which more than any other had secured her the loyalty of two members of their household...

"Lucius."

They were alone in her bedchamber. Draco, a month-old infant, was in the nursery, being cared for by Dobby. Their other servants were tending to their own business, which Lucius thought to be one thing, but Narcissa knew to be entirely another.

But that does not concern us now.

"Yes, Narcissa?" Her husband looked up from the scrolls he was studying, pale brows drawing in towards the center in a frown.

Sharply she forced down envy and a vain hope, for what never could have been. "I must speak to you about household affairs."

"Then speak."

"Lucius, I know my duties as your wife, none better. I have recently fulfilled one of them."

"Indeed you have, and admirably. Allow me to congratulate you again on such a fine, healthy son as you gave me."

Narcissa concealed her smile and spoke sternly. "But as your wife, I also have rights. I have looked the other way on many occasions, but this will not be one of them, Lucius. I will not tolerate your conduct towards Calpurnia. Turn your eyes away from her, she is not for you."

"Calpurnia?" Lucius looked aghast at her. "Have you gone mad, Narcissa? Why, or how, should I desire an animal?"

"Do not think me foolish, Lucius, I am not. I know quite well what goes on every day in this house, and why certain doors are locked at certain times, and when and how our house and grounds are kept secure. I know that you seek to extend the period when such security may be had, and for all I know you shall succeed. But success or failure, Calpurnia is not to be touched. I will not have that... *thing* ... taking my rightful place."

"Then perhaps, madam, you should make more effort to fill your *rightful place*, as you call it! And I will have the equal promise from you, that

Caesar's visits to this bedchamber will cease!"

Narcissa laughed coldly. "A shot in the dark, Lucius? You're slipping. But you have my word. Caesar shall not enter this bedroom again, unless you yourself call him here."

"And you have mine, madam," said Lucius angrily, picking up his scrolls. "The chastity of Caesar's wife shall henceforth be without reproach."

Thankfully, no promise was necessary in the other case. Not even Lucius would harm his son's favorite plaything.

Narcissa amused herself for a moment by picturing her husband's face if and when he found out why his son had taken to that plaything so avidly.

A few of the teachers protested when Zelda accompanied Ray to class, but the wolf was so well-behaved that by the end of Transfiguration on Thursday, Professor McGonagall had actually smiled at her. Professor Sprout, in Herbology, was delighted that Zelda could, and did, smell out and dig up some of the Creaking Crocus bulbs she'd planted the previous year, and Professor Flitwick congratulated Ray on having such a well-trained animal after Zelda sat still and allowed him to charm her fur different colors.

"Potions today," said Harry at breakfast on Friday, pouring sugar onto his porridge. "Double Potions, with the Slytherins."

"Wonderful, I can show you Tweedledum and Tweedledee," said Ray, glancing at the Slytherin table. "Otherwise known as Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. I think my father may have told their fathers to tell them to watch me. I couldn't get them to leave me alone at the station. I finally had to try talking in words of one syllable." He adopted a very slow, drawing tone. "Buh. Ger. Off."

Ron snickered. "Did it work?"

"Must have. I've barely seen them since."

"Well, that might be because you're a Gryffindor now," said Neville, reaching for the milk. "And they're Slytherins. Did your father expect you to be a Slytherin, d'you think?"

"Oh, I'm sure he did. But I had my own plans."

"Speaking of plans, what are you doing this afternoon?" asked Harry, who had just opened the note Hedwig had brought him.

"Not too much. Why?"

"Hagrid's invited me to tea," said Harry, showing the note around. "I thought some of you might like to come along."

"I'll go," said Neville.

"Sure, why not?" said Ron through a mouthful of sausages.

Ray nodded. "As long as Zelda can come."

"Do you ever go anywhere without her?" asked Ron, swallowing.

"Well, you won't see her at all tomorrow. She's feeling what I call dennish. That means she likes to hide away in a little place, like under my bed, and not come out all day. And she takes my things with her, like my robes, or my wand..."

"Your wand?" asked Harry, looking at Zelda in confusion. "What does she want with your wand?"

Ray shrugged. "Don't know."

"Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Ron gritted his teeth. Harry'd told them all about Professor Snape's rivalry with Harry's father and godfather in school, but it seemed awfully unfair for Snape to be quizzing Harry, and only Harry, this way.

"I don't know, sir," Harry said.

Snape's eyes flared with triumph. "Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Ron could see Ray with his hand raised. Zelda was pressed against his leg, staring at Snape.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again, looking startled. "There... is no difference, sir," he said uncertainly. "They're two words for the same thing. I think."

"You think, Potter?"

“Yes, sir, I do.”

The Gryffindors laughed.

“Five points from Gryffindor for cheek,” Snape snapped. “And another five, Mr. Malfoy, if you don’t put your hand down immediately.”

Ray’s hand snapped down to the table.

“What happened?” Ron asked as he ground snake fangs with his pestle.

“I don’t know for sure.” Harry picked through their pine needles, tossing out the brown ones. “It was like someone told me they were the same. Like she whispered it in my ear, except there wasn’t anyone that close to me.”

“She?”

“It sounded like a girl’s voice. I don’t know where it could have come from...”

Three sharp barks and Neville’s yelp cut off their conversation.

“What is going on over here?” Snape swept over to Ray and Neville’s cauldron, where Neville, with a handful of porcupine quills, was cowering away from a growling Zelda, standing between him and the cauldron. “Mr. Malfoy, if you can’t control that animal it will have to be removed.”

“She... yes, sir.” Ray snapped his fingers, and Zelda relaxed. “Neville, hang on,” he said quickly as Neville went to drop the quills into the cauldron. “We have to take it off the fire first.”

“Oh, right.” Neville set down the quills and picked up a potholder. “Why?”

“Because if you had left it on the fire, Longbottom, you would have created the exact opposite of what you intended to create,” Snape said. “And it might well have served you right for your own foolishness, if even an animal can realize how wrong you are.”

“He’s really got it in for Gryffindors, hasn’t he?” Harry said under his breath as Snape stalked away.

“That was weird.” Ron looked more closely at Zelda, now lying under Ray’s desk, head on her paws. “How did she know?”

“Ray’s good at Potions. Zelda’s probably been around them a lot. Or else she’s psychic. Who knows? Let’s get this done.” Harry picked up Ron’s mortar and dumped the crushed snake fangs into the cauldron, then began to stir it counterclockwise.

The afternoon was uneventful, except for an encounter between Zelda and Mrs. Norris, involving a great deal of growling on one side and spitting on the other but no actual bloodshed. The boys meandered down to Hagrid’s hut around three o’clock.

Hagrid let them in, holding back his boarhound, Fang, who started making friends with Zelda immediately Hagrid let him go, then licked all the boys’ ears thoroughly as Harry introduced them.

“So, great news about Sirius,” said Hagrid, pouring out tea for everyone. “An’ how long’ve you known and never told no one?”

“All my life, pretty much,” said Harry tiredly. “Everyone wants to know about him this last week, everyone’s asking questions... except you, Ray,” he said suddenly, turning to the blond boy. “You haven’t asked me one thing about him, I just realized that. Why not?”

Ray grinned. “Why should I? Everyone else already asked everything I wanted to, I heard you when you answered them, so why ask you questions over again?”

“Thank you,” said Harry heartily. “I wish I could just write up a little sheet of answers and give them out to anyone who asks. Yes, I like having him around. No, he isn’t mean to me. Yes, he likes to play jokes. No, he’s never hurt me. On and on and on.”

“I just can’t believe he was always there,” said Neville, blowing on his tea. “I was at your house – Mrs. Black’s house – lots of times, and he was always there, but I never saw him. I never even knew he was there.”

“That would be creepy,” said Ron. “I mean, if you did know that someone was there, but you never saw them. They just sneaked around where you couldn’t see them.”

“Like living with a house-elf,” said Ray. “Or...” He stopped.

“Or what?” asked Harry.

“Nothing.”

Zelda came away from her game of chase-Fang’s-tail to rub against his shins comfortingly.

“So, let’s see yeh here, little lady,” said Hagrid, reaching over to pick her up. She yipped in surprise, but let him lift her into his lap, where she looked more like a spaniel or a terrier than the mostly-grown wolf she was. “Hmm, now where’d yeh get her, Ray?”

"She was a gift from my father, sir. A belated first birthday present."

"So yeh've had her a while, then."

"Yes, sir. All my life."

"Don' go callin' me sir, I won' know who yer talkin' ta," said Hagrid with his booming laugh as he stroked Zelda, examining her closely. "Now this's interestin', this is... see her tail, here? 'Snot supposed ter be like that."

"Like what?" asked Ron, peering at it.

"Like it is. With the tuft on the end, like. Wolves have long, smooth tails. An' the way her face is shaped, an' these claws o' hers... 'f I didn' know better, I'd say she was a werewolf, not a true wolf at all." Hagrid laughed again. "But she can't be, o' course. Werewolves only have that shape at full moon, and this little lady stays this way all the time, don' she?"

Ray nodded.

"So I'd imagine yer father thought she might scare people off better if he made her look like a werewolf. Yeh'll have ter ask him sometime."

"Will you?" asked Neville as they walked back to the castle later. "Ask your father if he changed how Zelda looked?"

"No, probably not." Ray was squinting up at the setting sun. "I know he must have, so there's no point." He scratched his arm, frowning. "I need to get back to the dorm, there's something I have to do."

Saturday was fair and sunny, with barely any clouds at all. As Ray had predicted, Zelda was nowhere to be seen when they got up that morning. He peered under his bed, waving Ron and Harry away. "She's there," he announced. "And doesn't look like she wants company. And since she's got claws and sharp teeth and I don't, it's usually best to do what she wants."

"But can't you control her?" asked Ron. "Make her do what you want?"

"Usually, yes," said Ray, tapping his wrist, where he wore a green leather bracelet inscribed with symbols. "But on her den days, I don't think even my father would try. She's very grouchy."

A snarl came from under the bed.

"As you see."

Ray went to bed early on Sunday night, claiming he didn't feel well.

"He's probably homesick," said Fred.

"Doesn't want anyone to see him cry," said George.

Ray's bedcurtains were pulled when the other boys went to bed, and instead of leaping onto the bed as she usually did, Zelda lay down on the rug at the foot.

He must really want to be alone, Harry thought, if even Zelda can tell.

But one good crying jag must have done the trick, because Ray looked perfectly normal on Monday morning, even better than usual. He got as excited as everyone else over the notice on the board about flying lessons, and was as thoroughly disgusted about having them with Slytherin.

"Ray, can I see your History of Magic notes?" asked Neville on Wednesday night.

"Er, from today?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, no."

"Why not?"

"I haven't written them yet."

"How can you not have written them?" asked Ron. "We had class already. Do you have a perfect memory or something?"

Ray shrugged. "More or less. More less than more." Zelda sneezed loudly. "Bless you, Zel. But I do tend to remember stuff. So I'll give you a copy when I have them, Neville. Probably tomorrow after flying lessons."

Thursday afternoon was clear and breezy, and Harry couldn't help but feel excited about the prospect of flying. He'd never flown before that he could

recall – it had always been too difficult for Letha to manage everything that was often necessary for a flying holiday – but he knew that his father had been fabulous on a broom, and had taken him out once or twice as a baby, to his own delight and his mother’s irritation.

“That’s not right, not right at all,” snapped Madam Hooch, prying Ray’s fingers off his broom. “Who taught you to grip that way?”

“My dad,” said Ray.

“Well, you can tell him from me that he taught you entirely wrong. This is how you do it.” She rearranged his hands and moved on to the next person.

Ray snickered. “No wonder Dad’s not much good on a broom,” he said over his shoulder to Harry.

Within a few minutes, they were taking short, practice flights, just up a few feet and back down. Harry loved it, it was everything he’d thought it would be, and his only annoyance was that he wasn’t allowed to go as far, as fast, or as long as he would have liked.

“Now, split into groups of five and we’ll cover some basic flying etiquette,” Madam Hooch ordered. “You, you, you, you, and you. First five.”

Harry had been “you” number three, Ray number four, and Neville number five. Numbers one and two were the hulking Slytherins Ray said had been trying to follow him around, Crabbe and Goyle.

“You there, Goyle, you’re big, so you’re at point.” Madam Hooch pulled him into position. “You two, Crabbe and Malfoy, you’re behind him, and Potter and Longbottom, behind them – not directly behind, spread out, make a V shape, take advantage of the wake. Now, on my whistle, take off. Point man, fly to that oak over there...” She pointed out the tree, a handsome specimen about sixty feet high. “Turn around and return. You others, stay in formation behind him. Outside men on the turn, give your partners plenty of room, inside men, turn tight. Ready?”

The whistle sounded. Five brooms rose from the grass.

It was easier taking advantage of Crabbe’s wake, Harry found. He kept his eyes on Goyle to see which way he turned at the tree, so that he, Harry, would know if he were inside or outside for the formation turn...

Goyle turned to the right, Harry would be on the outside. He swung his broom slightly to the left, preparing to turn –

Crabbe turned too tightly and slammed into Ray. Neville, unable to stop in time, plowed into both of them. As if in slow motion, Harry saw Ray, unfamiliar with the new grip Madam Hooch had shown him, lose his hold on his broom and slip off, starting to fall...

Harry shot under the tangle of people just in time to grab Ray by the arm. “Hold on,” he panted, and dived, slowing down well before he got to the ground, until he was hovering about six feet up, close enough for Ray to let go and drop to the grass. Then he landed, feeling his heart pounding, but with excitement, not with fear.

The most prominent thought in his mind was, *I want to do that again.*

“Well done, Potter,” said Madam Hooch, arriving beside them. “Malfoy, are you all right?”

“Yes’m,” said Ray. “Neville, can you grab my broom?” he shouted up.

“I can try.” Neville had managed to stay mounted through this, and had been disentangling from Crabbe while Harry saved Ray. Now he flew over to where Ray’s broom was hovering, took a hold of it, and came down in a careful spiral, landing about ten feet away from them, a bit sloppily but without hurting himself.

“Thanks,” said Ray, jogging over to retrieve the broom.

“Harry Potter,” called a voice from the direction of the castle. Everyone turned to look.

Professor McGonagall was striding toward them. “Can you spare him for a few moments, Rolanda?” she said to Madam Hooch when she was near enough.

“Of course, Minerva. I’ll take your broom, Potter...”

“No, he’ll be needing it,” said Professor McGonagall. “Come along, Potter.” She set off along the wall of the castle. Harry followed, feeling a bit bemused. What would she need him to do that required a broom?

“Have you ever flown before?” she asked as they turned the corner.

“No, Professor.”

Professor McGonagall let out a loud sigh. “Wonderful,” she said, stopping. “All right, Potter, mount up.”

Harry straddled his broom, wondering what this was all about. Professor McGonagall drew her wand and waved it in a small circle in the air. A sphere of glimmering gold, about the size of a golf ball, appeared there, and she caught it as it fell. “Do you think you can catch this?” she asked, holding it up.

Harry was trying hard not to let himself get too excited. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Very well, then, do it.” Professor McGonagall threw the ball high into the air.

For an older witch, she had a good arm, Harry registered as he kicked off. The ball was moving at a good clip, but even on this less than stellar broom, he knew he could get to it in plenty of time... closer... closer...

His hand closed around it about ten feet off the ground, and he returned to Professor McGonagall at that height, dropping it into her waiting palm.

"Again," she said briskly, and threw it more laterally this time, so that he had to fly faster to catch it before it hit the ground, but he still made it with five feet to spare.

"And once more." This time she threw it straight up, and Harry, feeling like showing off, flew into its path as it fell and let it carom off the stick of his broom before chasing after it and catching it.

"Was that intentional?" said Professor McGonagall sternly as he returned the ball to her and landed.

"Yes, Professor," said Harry meekly.

She shook her head. "Your father's son all over. Well, Potter, do you know Oliver Wood? At least to look at him?"

Harry nodded – Fred and George had pointed out the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team within the first two days of school.

"Introduce yourself to him at some point as the Gryffindor team's new Seeker, and ask him when practices begin."

Harry closed his mouth quickly and simply nodded.

"You have no broomstick of your own, I am sure, since that would be against the rules... but I have no doubt your godfather will be glad to, shall we say, donate a broom to the school with the intention that you use it during practices and games." She held out her hand, and Harry took it. "Congratulations, Potter. Your parents would have been proud."

She walked away, leaving Harry staring after her, hanging onto his broom for support.

"You lucky *bastard!*" exploded Ron in the Great Hall.

"That's great, Harry!" enthused Neville.

"And I went and fell off in front of her," grumbled Ray. "She'll never think I'm any good."

"She doesn't make the decisions about it," said Harry, taking a big bite of shepherd's pie. "Only in special cases, like this, because I'm a first year and not supposed to have a broom."

"But she's going to get... your godfather to donate one, she said?" Ray asked.

"Yes, so it won't be mine, but I can still ride it." Harry drained his goblet of pumpkin juice and refilled it.

"I wonder what kind you'll get," said Ron. "Seekers need to be really fast. Maybe a Cleansweep Seven, they're good."

"Or the new Nimbus, the Two Thousand," said Neville. "They're fantastic, from what I hear."

Ray nodded. "I'd really like a Nimbus," he said. "Mother said maybe for my next birthday."

"When is your birthday?" asked Harry curiously.

"5 June. Yours?"

"31 July. How about everyone else?"

"1 March," said Ron. "I was early."

"30 July, right before you," said Neville. "Mum likes to tell stories about being in the same hospital room with your mum."

"And Zelda's is 19 September," Ray finished, stroking Zelda's head fondly.

"Hey, that's coming up," said Harry. "We'll have to have a party."

"That sounds like fun," said Ray. "Just the five of us. We'll sneak down to the kitchens and cadge stuff out of the house-elves."

"You know where the kitchens are?" asked Ron in surprise.

Ray nodded. "Right down the same hall as the Hufflepuff common room, behind a painting of a bowl of fruit. Tickle the pear, it giggles and turns into a door handle."

"Wow," said Neville, sounding deeply impressed. "How do you know so much about the castle, anyway?"

"My dad likes to know a lot about wherever he is. So he learned all about Hogwarts while he was here, and he taught me. Some of my favorite bedtime stories when I was little were about how to get places inside the castle."

Zelda's birthday came and went, with the party in the kitchens being a great success, and October was on them before they knew it. Oliver Wood had been skeptical about Professor McGonagall's decision to add a first year to the Gryffindor Quidditch team, until he saw Harry fly. "Practices are Monday, Thursday, and Saturday at seven," was all he'd said when Harry landed. "Don't be late, and don't skip."

One Thursday evening early in October, Ray yawned ostentatiously. "Blimey, I'm tired," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "I think I'll turn in early. Don't tromp around like a herd of erumpents when you come to bed, all right?"

"It's not even seven o'clock," said Harry in surprise. "And you're nowhere near done with the reading for Charms."

"I'll finish it in bed, then. Come on, Zelda."

Zelda turned around three times and lay down at Harry's feet.

"Fine, be that way," said Ray in mock-offense. "Good night, everyone."

"Good night," rippled around the small group as Ray ran up the stairs.

"He doesn't look too tired right now," said Ron, dipping his quill. "Neville, what were those things we looked at in Herbology called again?"

"Which ones, the ones that scream or the ones that bite?"

Dear friends,

Irony is rampant in our world. My work suggests the last item I search for may be closer to you than it is to me. I have kept you up to date on the progress I make, so you will know what it is I seek. Any assistance you can render would be greatly appreciated.

'Mithrandir'

He walked through the house as light-footed as any cat, moving surely and swiftly to his destination, where he knelt and unfastened the catch, avoiding all the traps set around it for the unwary. Unwary was something he could not afford to be.

Many items resided in the cache he uncovered, but he was interested in only one.

It's wonderfully ridiculous, this. He thought it would be safe here. He thought it would be so safe, he felt free to brag about it. And now, thanks to a few kindnesses shown...

He lifted it out and summoned his accomplice, who quickly cleaned away all traces he might have left on the items in the cache, physical or magical. No one would be able to trace the theft of this object to him.

He closed the lid again and slipped out of the room, leaving his friend to finish the eradication of their tracks. There was one thing he needed to make sure of before he could go through with this.

She was lounging in a chair in the library, immersed in a book, but looked up at his approach. "You have it?"

He held it up. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked, sitting down beside her. "You know you'll be ill for at least a week. More likely two."

She gave him one of those looks that he sometimes told her she should patent. "You paid pretty heavily for a week or so after that night I needed mine, and I don't recall hearing you complain. Why should you expect me to?"

He sighed. "I don't. I just wanted to be sure."

She smiled. "Always trying to protect me. I think it's why I love you."

"All right. Let's get you back to our room before I do this."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"I'm glad you think so."

She squealed as he lifted her out of the chair and carried her down the hallway.

Returning to their room was a good idea for a number of reasons. The obvious, of course, but it would be quite bad for them if they were discovered elsewhere than where they ought to be. As well, it might expose one of their allies, and that would never do.

It made them laugh, sometimes, to think of how different the household's true structure was from the one that outsiders perceived.

Ray sat up straight for a second, then got up and went to get parchment and quill.

"What are you doing?" asked Harry.

"I just had an idea," said Ray absently. "I want to write it down before it gets away... There, done." He blew on the ink to dry it. "Scuse me, everyone, I need to run upstairs for a minute." He folded the parchment, scribbled two words on the outside of it, and slipped out of the door, closing it carefully behind himself.

"Where's he going?" asked Ron. "What's upstairs from here?"

"Not much," said Harry, thinking about the castle. "Only a few of the towers are taller than this, and there's not many classrooms up this high..."

"There's the Owlery," said Neville. "That looked like a letter."

Harry shrugged. "None of our business anyway."

Dear sir,

Mission accomplished. The item is nowashes. Congratulations on completing your quest. Please take good care of 'Arthur' and 'Ralph.'

Your friends in lowplaces

whydoyouneedtoknow
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True Colors

Chapter 5: Speaking Secrets

"Why doesn't Zelda go with you to Defense Against the Dark Arts anymore?" Harry asked Ray at the Halloween feast. "She used to go to every class."

"She thinks it's a waste of time, and she doesn't like the way Quirrell smells."

"Makes sense," said Ron. "Even we can smell him, and she can smell loads better than we can. Is it garlic in his turban?"

"How is she going to tell me that?" Ray asked, flattening one hand on the table. "All she knows is it's a bad smell."

"Sorry. I forget she's not a person some days." Ron looked across the table at the wolf, who looked back at him levelly. "She's so smart, and she goes everywhere with you. Except Defense class."

"She can be an honorary person," said Neville, lifting his goblet. "Here's to Zelda."

"To Zelda," the other boys chorused, and tapped their goblets together foursquare before drinking.

Zelda gravely bowed her head, then leapt down from the bench, trotted down the Great Hall, and slipped around the door.

"The honorary person needs to use the honorary loo," Ray said, grinning.

Harry snorted. "The honorary loo? Does it have awards on its walls?"

"How should I know? I've never been in the girls' toilet."

"She uses the girls' toilet?" said Neville.

"What else should she use?"

"Don't know. I didn't think about it all that much. I suppose I thought she used the same one you did."

"Why, so I can hold her paw?" Ray chuckled, taking the edge off the words. "No, she can manage on her own. I remember at home one time..."

The slamming open of the doors of the Great Hall cut him off. Professor Quirrell sprinted in, his turban askew and his face pasty white. "Troll," he gasped out. "In the dungeons..."

Anything else he had to say was drowned out by screams as most of the school attempted to be the first one out the door. Professor Dumbledore raised his wand above his head, and a lion's roar froze everyone where they were.

"Thank you," the Headmaster said into the sudden silence, taking charge of the situation with those two words. "Prefects will lead their Houses back to their common rooms immediately. Teachers will accompany me to the dungeons."

"How did a troll get in?" Neville asked the others as they followed Percy towards the doors.

"Maybe Peeves thought it'd make a good joke for Halloween," said Ron. "Don't think one could get in on its own, they're too stupid."

Slytherins and Ravenclaws filled the doors, forcing the Gryffindors to wait. As they did, a sudden thought struck Harry. "Ray, what about Zelda? She'll come back here and she won't find us."

"She'll follow our scents upstairs," Ray said confidently. "I'll wait for her outside the Fat Lady – I don't think the troll will get up seven flights of stairs. I don't think it even knows what stairs are for."

"Which means it'll stay down with the Slytherins," said Ron. "If we're lucky, it'll pulp a few of them."

"If it was Crabbe and Goyle, how could you tell?"

The door cleared out, and they started moving again.

Halfway up the marble staircase, Ray froze, his entire body stiffening. "No," he breathed. "No... oh, God, no..."

In an instant he was on the banister, then over it, running before his feet hit the ground on the other side.

"Ray, wait!" Harry pounded down the stairs, Ron and Neville just behind him. "Ray!"

Ray disappeared around a corner.

Harry said a word he'd learned from Padfoot when Letha wasn't around. "Somebody go get a teacher," he added. "He's probably headed for the girls' toilet."

Neville dashed away. Ron had his wand out. "He was fine until a couple seconds ago," he said under his breath as he followed Harry down the

hall. "What happened?"

"Don't know. But we have to help him." Harry sniffed. "Ugh. Do you smell that?"

Ron coughed. "Smells like the bathroom when we're all home," he said. "When people drop their socks in there, and forget to flush..."

"Bet your mum loves that."

"Oh, doesn't she."

A sudden yell from ahead silenced them both. Harry peered cautiously around a corner, using only his left eye.

"It's there," he whispered. "And so are they. They can't get away, Ray's hurt, it looks like he fell and twisted his ankle. Zelda's standing in front of him, I think he's trying to tell her to get away, but she's not listening..."

"Does it see them?"

"Not yet..." Harry swore again. The troll had just turned around and noticed boy and wolf.

He jumped out from behind the corner and nearly fell – the floor was worn slick by long use – but recovered his balance in time. "Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, stupid, over here!"

The troll turned to regard him, a puzzled frown on its lumpy face.

"Harry, no, don't do this," Ray hissed. "I can take care of myself, get out of here!"

"How can you take care of yourself when you can't move?" The troll was starting to advance on Harry. "Hang onto Ron, he'll get you out of the way."

"And what're you going to do?" Ray demanded.

"This." Harry charged at the troll, then as the club swung high, dropped into a controlled fall and skidded between its legs, silently thanking all his hours of practice on freshly waxed kitchen floors. The club smashed into the floor where he had been a few moments before.

The troll stared down at the club, then began to make a noise like rocks being crushed that Harry thought might be its laughter. Around its side he could see Ron pulling Ray up, Zelda behind him and pushing with her head. It would have been funny if there wasn't still a very large troll between them.

Look out!

The voice belonged to a girl, but there was no girl nearby. Just Zelda, who had suddenly darted out from behind Ray. Ray lost his balance and fell backwards, grabbing Ron's robes, and Ron, taken by surprise, went down with him.

The troll's club smashed into the pillar where their heads had been a moment before.

Zelda raised her nose and howled. The noise echoed around the hall until Harry could have sworn there were twenty wolves there instead of one, and the troll roared in response to the challenge, looking around for the creature that had given it. Ron and Ray both seemed dazed by their fall – Ron was rubbing his head and blinking, and Ray was pointing at the troll, but with his bare hand, as if expecting a spell to shoot from his finger –

Use your wand, nightbrain! They know enough already!

As Ray fumbled his wand out of his robes, the troll spotted Zelda, and the howl ceased as the wolf leapt to her feet and ran. She darted in and out between its feet, snapping her jaws at it, dodging strikes with the club –

"*Incendiam Apparatis!*" Ray shouted. The troll roared again and tried to strike at the fire all around its head with its club, but the club just passed through it harmlessly, swinging in wide arcs around and around –

Ron leaned over and said something, and Ray nodded. The fire was suddenly in only one place, to the troll's left, and the troll spun and struck at it, but the fire had already moved, to the troll's left again –

Harry, realizing what they were trying to do, jumped up with a yell and started running as Zelda did the same. The troll bashed its club down where they had been and turned to try it again, swinging in the meantime at the fire which still hung, teasingly, off its left shoulder. Around and around, around and around, smash and bash and run and yell –

And then the troll stopped. Harry backed away and looked up at it. It was swaying back and forth on its feet, and – *no way. I'm seeing things.* But he wasn't. The troll's tiny eyes were crossed. It was well and truly dizzy. And the swaying was getting more pronounced –

Harry dived out of the way as the troll fell to the floor just where he'd been standing.

An exclamation from the corridor caught Harry's attention. He rolled over to see Professor McGonagall, Neville in front of her, both of them staring.

"I miss everything," Neville said.

The boys sat in a semicircle in front of the fireplace in the common room, Zelda curled into a ball beside Ray, her tail over her nose. Five plates sat off to one side, stained with ketchup and gravy. A week ago, even a day, Harry might have offered to let Zelda lick his, as he sometimes did with Padfoot for a joke, as he would have with any pet animal.

Now he wasn't sure what he should do.

"She didn't... talk," Ron said, breaking a long silence. "Down there. Did she?"

"No, she didn't," said Ray quickly. "Of course not. How could she have?"

"So I didn't hear anyone tell you to look out," said Harry. "And nobody called you a darkbrain."

"Nightbrain," said Ron. "Wasn't it?"

"What does that mean?" Neville said. "People have the same brains in the day and at night."

"Some people think differently at night," Ray said reluctantly. "Some people don't think as well. They get sleepy as soon as the sun goes down. It's a hereditary condition, it's rare, but it exists. And I have it."

"Is that why you ran off to bed a couple weeks ago?" Harry asked. "Because you were extra tired?"

"Yes." Ray looked greatly relieved. "Yes. That's what it is. It hits me about once a month, and I have to be in bed before sunset, or I'm no good for anything. I'm not dangerous, I'm not a werewolf or anything, but I need extra sleep on those nights. That's all. Just... don't tell my father, all right? He thinks I'm perfect. He expects me to be perfect. If he knew I had something like this, he'd hate me, either that or want to fix it, and it can't be fixed by normal magic."

Light magic, Harry had no trouble translating. *Magic that doesn't require something illegal*. He knew the Malfoy reputation well.

"Mother and I have managed to keep this from him all my life, and I want it to stay that way. Don't give me away? Please?"

"Course not," Ron said scornfully.

"I won't tell," said Neville, stifling a yawn.

Harry shook his head. "Wizard's honor," he said.

"Thanks." Ray sighed deeply.

"Why didn't you just tell us?" Harry asked, yawning himself.

"I don't know. Didn't want to. Didn't want you to think I'm weak." Ray cracked a smile. "But if it weren't for this one potion I take, I'd have to go to bed by sunset every night. Now that would be weak."

"We don't think you're weak," said Neville.

"Your jokes, maybe," Ron added. "But not you."

Ray aimed a punch at Ron's ear. Ron deflected it and shoved Ray, with time out for a yawn of his own in the middle of it. "So when are you due for your next night in bed?" he asked.

"This Saturday. I can schedule them, more or less, by taking or not taking my potion. I just have to have them within about a month of each other."

"You can schedule them?" Harry said. "I thought they just came."

"Well, not exactly. You really want to know about this? It's boring."

"Boring to you," Neville said. "You've lived with it. Just like Harry's lived with his godfather, so that's boring to him, but we all want to hear about it."

"OK, if you say so." Ray leaned back against Zelda. "See, it's not actually my condition that makes me have these nights. It's the potion I take for it. It'd make me sick – sicker – if I took it for more than a month at a time. There's trace ingredients that build up when you take it for a long time. So once a month, I need a day when I don't take it, and that means my body does what it would normally do, without the potion."

"Send you to bed early," said Ron. "And make you sleep a lot."

"Basically, yeah." Ray shrugged. "Like I said, boring."

"But now we know," Harry said. "So we can keep Seamus and Dean from wondering, and let you sleep on those days. Just tell us when they are."

"You'll know. Sunset comes early in winter." Ray looked out the window, his eyes considering. "I used to be afraid of winter when I was little. I was afraid my father would find me in bed and want to know why, and everything would come out. But he never did."

"And now you're at school all winter," said Ron. "Are you going home for Christmas?"

"I don't know, I hadn't decided yet. Mother said it was up to me."

"I'm staying here," Harry said. "Even with Padfoot being free now, I still live with my aunt and uncle. He's trying to get my custody from them, but it takes time to get through the paperwork, because it has to be Muggle and magical at the same time. So I might as well stay here until everything's all settled."

"Mum and Dad are going to visit Charlie, and taking Ginny with them," Ron said. "I might as well stay for the holiday."

"All my relatives always come over," said Neville. "They pinch my cheeks and tell me what a sweet little boy I am. I think I'm due a break."

"Well, if you're all staying, I think we can stay too, right, Zel?" Ray rubbed the wolf's head, and she bumped her nose into his hand. "Not one of those nights, but I think I'd better head for bed anyway. Good night, everyone."

"Night," the boys all said as Zelda preceded Ray up the stairs.

"We were talking about something else," Ron said, frowning. "Before we got into why Ray goes to bed early some nights. Weren't we?"

"I don't remember," Neville said. "I don't think so."

Harry rubbed his forehead. "I think we were," he said uncertainly. "But I don't remember what it was."

"Can't have been important, then," said Ron. "Come on, pudding isn't quite finished, let's get a little more before it's all gone."

Ray collapsed on his bed, shaking. "We did it," he said quietly. "We really did it."

Zelda leapt onto the bed and curled up beside him.

"Not that you weren't good," Ray went on. "Making them all think they'd just dreamed it was great. But I had to tell them more than I really wanted to about me."

Zelda snorted.

"I know, I know. But I think I'll start sealing my bedcurtains shut on my special nights." Ray put his arm over Zelda. "I can't lose you, Zel. Or Mum and Dad, either. I'd never forgive myself."

Zelda slid her nose under his neck comfortingly.

Harry whistled through his fingers as Angelina Johnson scored for Gryffindor and dived to congratulate her, glorying in the reactions of the handsome Nimbus Two Thousand Padfoot had donated to Hogwarts.

Only problem is, now he won't get me one for my birthday...

Harry took up his station high above the game and resumed searching for the Snitch. *But I could do well on almost any broom, it was just that he didn't want me to have to fly one of the old school clunkers, they always pull to the left...*

As if his thought had communicated itself to his broom, the Nimbus twitched to the left. Harry patted it and continued flying. "Easy," he murmured, to himself as much as to the broom. "Take it easy... just play the game..."

But the broom twitched again, and again, more violently each time, and suddenly Harry realized he wasn't in control of the broom any longer – if the Slytherin Seeker spotted the Snitch now, the game would be over –

The hell with the game, what about me?

Harry clung to the broom as it went through a rapid series of climbs and dives. Something Padfoot had written in his latest letter was suddenly running through his mind.

"Our success rate on broomsticks is one hundred percent. Everybody who's ever gone up has come back down."

The ground was very far away, and getting farther by the second. Harry gritted his teeth and hung on for his life.

"What's doing it?" Ron asked, staring up at Harry's bucking broomstick.

"Dunno," Hagrid said, sounding worried. "Must be powerful magic, no kid could do that..."

Ray snatched the binoculars from Hagrid's hand and pointed them towards the teachers' section. "What're you doing?" Neville asked.

"I bet it's Snape," Ray muttered, focusing the binoculars. "Snape hates Harry, he hated Harry's dad, Harry's godfather... there, look!" He shoved the binoculars at Ron and Neville, who used one eye apiece on them. "Snape's jinxing the broom, he has to be. He's not blinking, he keeps talking, it's a spoken jinx."

"What can we do?"

“Stay here. Tell Zelda if anything changes.” Ray dashed away.

“Tell Zelda?” said Neville in confusion. “Why?”

Zelda whined softly, looking up at Harry, now hanging from his broom by one hand. The twins were trying to grab him, but every time they got close, the Nimbus flew higher. They were backing off now, circling below, hoping to catch him if he fell.

Please let him be all right, a girl’s voice whispered. **Hurry, Ray, please hurry...**

“Who said that?” Hagrid said, looking around.

Ron dropped to one knee beside the wolf, still staring up at Harry. “He’ll be all right,” he said, willing it to be true. “He’ll be all right.”

Zelda stuck her nose into Ron’s hand, then suddenly pulled it free and barked excitedly. Up in the air, Harry’s broom had stopped shaking. He pulled down on it and swung a leg up and was astride once more.

Yes! the girl shouted. **Yes, yes, it worked!**

A memory stirred in Ron, of the night they’d knocked out the troll. He’d thought he heard a girl talking then too, but there hadn’t been any girl nearby...

“Look at Harry!” Neville shouted, and Ron’s attention was diverted.

On the field, Harry had a hand over his mouth as if he was coughing. As he took it away, something flashed golden in it. “I’ve got it!” he yelled to Madam Hooch, waving the golden thing in the air. “I’ve got the Snitch!”

“No fair!” howled Marcus Flint, the Slytherin captain. “You didn’t catch it, Potter! You almost choked on it!”

“Still got it,” Harry shouted back. “Gryffindor wins!”

“That’s my decision to make, Potter,” Madam Hooch scolded.

“But it’s right, isn’t it?”

Madam Hooch inspected him sharply. “Yes, it’s right,” she admitted finally. “Successful Snitch capture by Harry Potter!”

“GRYFFINDOR WINS!” roared Lee Jordan from the commentator’s box.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Ron chanted with Neville and Hagrid, jumping up and down. Ray appeared up the stairs, panting and disheveled, and joined in the chant, as Zelda bounded around the outside of their circle, barking loudly.

“Come on!” Ray yelled. “He’s down on the field!” He lowered his voice and leaned in. “I have to tell you something weird. Later.”

Zelda led the way, tail waving joyously.

“Snape was cursing you, mate,” Ron told Harry in Hagrid’s hut. “We saw him.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Ray said from his place on the floor, his back resting against Zelda. “It can’t have been him.”

“Why not?” Neville asked. “The jinx on the broom stopped when you did whatever you did to him.”

“But I never got there, Neville. That was the weird thing. I was still on my way there when Z... I mean, when I noticed Harry was all right again.”

“What were you about to say?” Harry asked.

Ray sipped his tea. “Nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing. Nothing doesn’t start with a ‘zzz’ sound.”

“You told us to tell Zelda if anything changed,” Neville said. “But what good would that do?”

“And what about that night with the troll?” Ron added, suddenly recalling something that had perplexed him at the time. “How did you know it was after Zelda?”

“Leave off,” Hagrid said sharply. “Let the boy alone. Ev’ryone’s entitled ter their own secrets.”

“No, it’s all right,” Ray said, looking up. “Thanks, Hagrid, but I think I ought to tell everyone. You, too. It’s another part of what my father did when he gave me Zelda. There’s a bond between us. She knows when I’m in trouble, and comes to help. But it works both ways – I don’t think he meant it to, but it does. So I know when she’s in trouble, and I go to help her.”

“So you protect her, even though she’s supposed to be protecting you?” Harry asked.

"If she needs help, I give it to her," Ray said. "If that's protecting her, then yes, I protect her. Going to tell on me?"

Ron frowned. "Why would we? You're not doing anything wrong."

Ray snorted. "You don't know my father and his definitions of wrong. Anything that isn't exactly what he expects is wrong. Anything that isn't exactly what he wants is wrong. If he knew the truth, he'd probably think my whole life was wrong, and you know what? I don't care. I don't care, I don't care, I don't care!" He jumped to his feet and flung his teacup across the room, where it shattered against the wall and showered tea everywhere. "He can take what he expects and shove it up his ugly arse, because this is my life, and I finally have a chance to live it the way I want!"

Silence greeted this outburst, broken only by slow, heavy clapping. Hagrid was applauding.

"Fine sentiments," he said, going to the cupboard for another teacup. "Really fine. Rather yeh not show 'em like that anymore, though, it's hard on the crockery. More tea?"

"Yes, thanks." Ray sank back down to the floor, aided by Zelda's teeth in his robe. "Sorry, Hagrid. Sorry, everyone. I didn't mean to go off like that."

"It's all right, mate," said Ron. "Everyone blows up sometimes."

"My gran makes me mad like that sometimes," Neville added. "She thinks she can run all our lives, Dad's and Mum's and mine too."

"I know what it's like to live with people who think everything you do is wrong," said Harry, days at the Dursleys parading through his head. "But as long as you have someone around who can tell you it's all right, even if they can't always be there, then it's easier."

Ray smiled lopsidedly. "I know what you mean. I have people like that. Dobby, for one."

"Who's that?" Ron asked as Hagrid poured Ray a fresh cup of tea.

"Our house-elf. He's always helped me when I needed to hide things or keep them out of my father's way. Thanks, Hagrid." Ray accepted the new cup of tea and sipped at it.

"Here now, watch yerself," Hagrid said worriedly. "I jus' poured that, it's boilin' hot."

"I like it hot." Ray took another sip. "Tastes good."

Hagrid shrugged. "Yer tongue. Yeh know, yeh reminded me o' someone when yeh went off like that, Ray. Not yer mum or dad, though, I remember them, they weren't like tha'. If they got mad, it was cold. Who was it, now..." He chuckled. "Oh, this's funny. Someone none o' yeh ever met, probably most o' yeh never even heard of – Harry'll know her name, but I don't think any o' the rest o' yeh will... an' she never went by her name, anyway."

"She never went by her name?" Ron said, sounding confused.

"Nah, she had a nickname everyone used. No spoiling it, Harry," Hagrid said quickly.

Harry made a face and snapped his fingers. "Nuts."

"A nickname everyone used," Neville repeated slowly. "Was it something odd? Something that you wouldn't think was a person's name?"

"Yeh have heard of her, then." Hagrid sounded pleased. "Old photographs an' such?"

Neville nodded. "Mum and Dad used to tell me about the war, and what happened to everyone they knew."

"Who is it?" Ray asked impatiently. "What was her name, nickname, whatever?"

"Well, her real name was Gertrude. But she got tagged when she was just a little bitty girl with the name Danger, an' that's what everyone called her. Muggleborn, she was, an' smart as a self-spellin' wand. She was here not too long after yer parents, Harry, yeh know that."

"I know." Harry closed his eyes, seeing on the backs of his eyelids smiling faces and waving hands from photograph albums that seldom saw the light of day. "She liked Moony. Remus Lupin. One of Dad's friends," he added for Ron and Ray's sakes.

"What happened to them?" Ray asked quietly.

"Disappeared," Hagrid said heavily. "They hadn' been married more'n four months when it happened. Having dinner out together, and Death Eaters attacked the restaurant." He shook his head. "Never seen again, either of 'em. An' the wors' part is..."

"It was four days to full moon," Ray murmured.

Hagrid turned sharply. "Here now, how'd yeh know that?" he demanded.

"I've heard this story before. Just... never with names." Ray had his hands clenched in Zelda's fur. "My father told it to me once or twice. He thought it was funny."

Harry's breath caught for a second. "Do you know?" he said quickly. "Do you know what happened to them?"

Ray didn't look up. "Not really," he said. "I don't know if what he told me is true."

"What did he tell you?" Harry slid off his chair to sit on the floor. "Ray, please, I want to know. Padfoot and Letha have always hoped they'd find something out, anything. Even knowing they're dead would be better than nothing."

Ray shook his head. "Harry, you don't understand. He told me twice, but the story had a different ending each time. And neither one was good." He tried a smile, which didn't quite work. "I don't really want to talk about it. Not now."

"What does full moon have to do with anything?" Ron asked, looking baffled.

"Mr. Lupin was a werewolf," said Neville. "He was always careful about his transformations, and he was a good person the rest of the time, but he was still a werewolf."

Ron shivered. "Got it." He looked over at Hagrid. "So Ray reminds you of this Danger girl?" he asked.

"Little bit, yeah. She used ter shout just like that when she got cheesed off about summat. Yeh didn' want ter get on her bad side." Hagrid chuckled. "Yeh either hated Danger or yeh loved her. An' a lot o' people thought they'd hate her when they heard about her, an' when they met her they loved her. Funny world, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Ray said, looking up with something like his usual smile on his face. "Funny world."

"So you never got to Snape, Ray," said Harry as they walked back up to the castle. "Maybe he saw you coming and got distracted that way."

"No, he wouldn't have."

"Why not?" Neville asked. "Do you have an Invisibility Cloak?"

"Not quite. But I can be inconspicuous when I need to. I knocked a couple people over, Professor Sprout and Professor Quirrell, I think, and they never saw me."

"You knocked people over and didn't get caught?" Ron looked envious. "Wish I could do that."

"You wouldn't want what comes with it," said Ray, grinning. "Last one to the castle's a lame dragon!"

"Precision," said Professor Snape, sweeping around the classroom and glowering into people's cauldrons. "Precision is the key to proper potion-brewing."

Ron turned his face slightly away from Snape, chopping his kneazle whiskers a little finer. *Last class of term, and he's still on about this stuff. Why can't he just lay off?*

Ray was stirring their cauldron carefully, Zelda watching in what looked like fascination. Ron scowled in their direction. *It's still not normal. No animal should be that interested in schoolwork. No human should be that interested.*

Ray turned away from the cauldron to measure out squid ink. Ron dumped in his kneazle whiskers, then picked up the stirring stick and began to mix them in.

Look out! screamed a voice, and something hit him hard, knocking him to the floor, as an explosion went off in his cauldron, showering sparks everywhere. If he'd still been leaning over it, he would have got it full in the face.

"Thanks," he said breathlessly, looking around at his savior. It had been a girl's voice, it must have been one of the girls who had pushed him...

But it wasn't a girl. It wasn't even a human.

It was Zelda, breathing hard and looking at him with fear plain in her eyes.

"I knew it," Ron breathed. "I *knew* it..."

Ray leaned down and grabbed Ron's arm. "Get up and don't say anything," he said between his teeth as Snape descended on them. "I'll explain later."

"Fifteen points from Gryffindor because you stirred your cauldron the wrong way," Harry said in disbelief as they climbed out of the dungeon.

"He'd have been worse off if Zelda hadn't knocked him down," said Neville. "He would have had fifteen points off *and* a trip to the hospital wing."

"Yeah, about Zelda." Ron stopped and turned back to face Ray. "I think we deserve an explanation. Like right now."

"Would tomorrow do?" Ray asked coolly.

"No, tomorrow would not do. I want it now."

"What about Zelda?" Harry asked.

"I heard her talk. I know I heard her talk. And she knew my potion was going to explode, and knocked me out of the way before it did." Ron stopped, looking at Ray. "You were right next to it with me," he said. "And you didn't get hurt – you don't even have any burned spots on your robe. How did you do that?"

"Practice," said Ray. "And I can explain this much better tomorrow morning, if you'll permit it. I'll have a nice visual aid for you then. Do you think you can trust me that far?"

"I don't know if I trust you at all."

Harry stepped between them, removing Ron's hand from Ray's arm. "Lay off," he said to Ron. "He owes us."

"Is that the only reason you trust me, Harry?"

Harry turned to face Ray. "You do seem to have a lot of secrets for someone our age."

Ray straightened his robes. "Didn't you have a secret your whole life?" he said quietly. "Someone who counted on you not to mess up, not to say his name where it shouldn't be said?"

"Oh, come on," Ron said impatiently. "This can't be anything like that."

Harry looked at Zelda, who met his gaze without flinching. "Maybe it can," he said. "Tomorrow morning, Ray."

"Tomorrow morning."

Harry woke up before sunrise the next morning, realized what he was going to find out today, and couldn't get back to sleep. His mind spun in circles – Zelda was a magical construct, not really alive at all. Zelda was a creature he'd never heard of, bound to Ray against her will. Zelda was a human in animal form, Ray's sister or his cousin or his aunt...

Harry thumped his head against the pillow. *I should never have listened to that recording of H.M.S. Pinafore.*

Finally, when he couldn't stand it anymore, he reached for his glasses and pushed his bedcurtains aside.

Ray was sitting at the foot of his own four-poster, reading a book. His hangings were drawn.

"She in there?" Harry asked, pointing.

"Yeah. Are you still mad at me?"

"I was never mad at you."

Ray shrugged. "Okay."

Ron's bedcurtains parted. "Who's up?" asked the disheveled red mop.

"Me and Ray," Harry said. "And you."

"And me," said Neville, poking his head out. "I woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep."

"Hey, me too," said Ron.

"Me three," said Harry. "I guess we all really want to know."

"Wow," said a voice that belonged to none of the boys. "I never thought I'd be so popular."

The curtains around Ray's bed were drawn back from the inside.

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True Colors

Chapter 6: Knowledge and Truth

Harry stared. The girl sitting on Ray's bed was about his own age, but no one he had ever seen before. She wore shabby blue robes, bare feet tucked up beneath her. Her brown hair hung in tangled curls to her shoulders; her eyes were warm and brown and familiar. It seemed impossible, it was impossible, but it was also one of the things he'd been thinking himself, and here she was...

"Zelda?" he said.

The girl smiled hesitantly.

Ron came around the bottom of Harry's bed to see better. "Zelda?" He sounded less believing than Harry felt. "How did... are you..."

"Have you always been human?" Neville asked over Ron's sputters.

Zelda nodded. "I was born human," she said. "And I was human all the time until—"

"Until he decided to make you his pet!" Ron had found his voice again. "Or until his father decided for him!" He rounded on Ray. "So this is why you do so well on homework — your *slave* does the work for you!"

Ray was on his feet. "Shut up! You don't know anything about it!"

"I know enough to see a human being with a collar around her neck!"

"Ron," Harry said.

"For all your pretty words, you still treat her like dirt!"

"Ron."

"If you really believe in all that stuff you keep saying about getting away from your father, why don't you do something about it and—"

"Ron!"

"What?"

"Look at her," Harry said, pointing to Zelda. "Do you see any collar?"

Ron looked, and deflated. "I know it was there yesterday," he said. "I saw it then."

Neville got off his bed and crossed the room to Ray's bedside table, where he picked up a strip of green leather. "Is this it?" he said.

Zelda accepted it from him and turned it over in her hands. "I don't mind wearing it, Ron," she said, looking up at Ron. "Not when I'm the wolf. It's just part of my life."

"That sounds like you've been brainwashed," Ron grumbled.

Zelda bared her teeth at him. "Take it back," she growled. "Now."

"Hold it," Harry said, stepping between the two. "Ron, we don't know enough to be yelling. There's probably a good reason for it."

"You don't have a brother that works with dangerous animals," Ron shot back. "You don't know a controlling collar when you see one. I do. As long as she has the collar on, that bracelet Malfoy wears could make her do anything."

"*Don't* call him that," Zelda snapped.

"Just because it could doesn't mean it will," Neville pointed out over her. "It depends on what Ray does."

"And he never makes me do anything I don't want to," Zelda said hotly. "I wear it because otherwise I couldn't be here, at Hogwarts. When people see the collar, they think Ray has me under control, and they let me go places animals aren't allowed to go otherwise."

"But why are you an animal in the first place?" Harry asked. "Is someone looking for you?"

"No. Not exactly." Zelda's smile returned. "It's a long story. Do you want to get breakfast first?"

"Hell with breakfast, I want to hear this," Ron said, sitting on the bottom of Harry's bed.

"You must really be interested," Ray muttered, his back still to the rest of the room, as it had been since Ron had stopped shouting at him.

Ron made an obscene gesture at Ray's back.

"My parents fought in the war when I was a baby," Zelda began. "They never meant to get me involved, but it just happened. There was a battle,

and I was there. They were both killed, and I got hit with a curse, something no one really understood. Mr. Malfoy – Ray's father – took me home with him, to study what the curse did."

"He'd seen that curse used before," Ray put in, turning to face them. "He knew what it ought to do, and he wanted to see if it would do it again."

"Did it?" Neville asked.

"It did." Zelda rolled her shoulders forward. "It turned me into a magical creature. Like a werewolf, but not. I don't lose my human mind the way a werewolf does. I'm me all the time. I get grouchy on full moon nights, but I don't go around killing things."

"Except pillows," Ray said, sitting down on the end of the bed. "And my best dress robes."

Zelda slapped his ear lightly. "The other difference between me and a werewolf is how often we change," she said. "A werewolf only changes once a month. I change every day, or I ought to. I turn human when the sun comes up and wolf when it goes down."

"But you've always been the wolf, every time we've seen you," Harry said. "And we see you almost every day. How does that work?"

"There's a potion I take," Zelda said. "When I drink it, it keeps me in the form I'm in for the next twenty-four hours. So if I took it now, I'd be human until this time tomorrow morning, and by then I'd be human again anyway."

"So why do you take it when you're the wolf?" Ron looked suspiciously at Ray. "If he makes you..."

"*He* is sitting right here, thank you," said Ray huffily. "And I don't make Zelda do anything."

"All the changing is hard on my body," Zelda said quickly. "Mr. Malfoy studied it, and found out that my wolf form is more stable. So if I stay in wolf form most of the time, I'm more likely to be healthy." She grinned. "Besides, people talk a lot more in front of something they think is an animal. I get to hear all kinds of things."

"Not from me any more, you're not," Harry said. "And no peeking when we're changing clothes, either."

Zelda bristled. "I never do! That's disgusting!"

"If changing is bad for you, why are you human now?" Neville asked. "Just to show us?"

Zelda shook her head. "It's actually for the same reason as Ray," she said. "The potions we take have an ingredient in common, one that builds up and could make us sick if we don't take time off from them. So just like he needs his night with extra sleep, I need my day to be human, about once a month."

Harry frowned. An idea had slipped into the back of his head, but it was refusing to let him see it. Something to do with Ray and Zelda, and something Hagrid had said...

"And that's why the Hat sorted you," Ron was saying now. "Because you're really human."

Zelda nodded. "And I have the perfect memory, not Ray," she said. "I help him write his notes after class sometimes. Especially History of Magic." She looked around at them, a smile teasing the corners of her mouth. "I could help you, if you like. I won't give you answers, but I'll help you study."

"She's great that way," Ray said. "I think she likes not being human. It means she doesn't have to do the homework."

"You know that's not true!" Zelda smacked him again. "I'd love to do homework! I just think the professors might be a little surprised to see me handing things in!"

"Does anyone else know about you, Zelda?" Harry asked. "Any of the teachers or anyone?"

Zelda shook her head. "Just me and Ray, and Ray's parents," she said. "And now you. And..." Sudden fear crossed her face. "You can't tell anyone. Oh, God, I didn't think of that. You have to promise, give your word, that you won't tell anyone, *anyone*, about me."

"Why not?" Ron asked in surprise. "Will something happen?"

"It's another part of the curse," Ray said somberly. "It's the other reason she stays in wolf form most of the time. Because if anyone tells anyone else that she's human, she'll die." His smile was almost a grimace. "I was praying that showing you, instead of telling, wouldn't activate it, and I guess it didn't. But maybe that's because you already knew it, or suspected it. And I wonder why they suspected it?" he said over his shoulder to Zelda.

"Well, I wouldn't have been talking if you hadn't got yourself into trouble!" she shot back. "First the troll, then going after Professor Snape—"

"It wasn't Snape, you said so yourself. Snape hates Harry, but he wouldn't try to kill him, not after Harry's dad saved his life..."

"What?" said Ron and Neville together.

Ray looked at Harry. "You want to tell?"

"Sure," Harry said slowly. "Sure, I'll tell."

But how do you know?

He repeated this question aloud after the story was told.

"My dad told me," Ray said. "He didn't put names with it, but he made it obvious other ways."

"But how did he know?"

Ray shrugged. "I don't know how he knows what he knows."

"I'm hungry," Zelda announced, her head and shoulders dangling off Ray's bed. "Do I get fed today, or should I scrounge?"

Ray rolled his eyes. "You know where I keep the chocolate. And I'll bring you something from the kitchens later. I think that's her way of telling us to get out," he added to the other boys. "Besides, I'm getting hungry myself, and breakfast is almost over."

"Wand," said Zelda, extending her hand.

"Fine, fine." Ray pulled his wand from his pocket and handed it over. "Don't do anything you can't undo on your own."

"Why does she need your wand?" Neville asked.

"Because I don't have one of my own," Zelda said. "And since I'm not human very often, I like to practice spells every time I have the chance. Knock before you come back in."

"Knocking on our own dorm door," Ron said as the boys filed out. "What else are we going to have to do?"

"Lie," Harry said. "If anyone asks us about Zelda."

"But why would they?" Neville asked. "The only reason we thought she was different is because we were with her enough to notice. Nobody else is around her long enough to notice anything, not even Seamus and Dean, or the girls in our year."

"Girls," Ron said. "She's a girl. Won't we get in trouble if anyone finds out we had a girl sleeping in our dorm with us?"

"Most of the time, she's not a human girl," Ray said. "She's just my pet." He spat the word scornfully. "And if anyone knew differently, we'd have bigger problems than them finding out a girl slept in our dorm. Trust me, Ron, we're not going to get in trouble for that."

Harry slowed, letting the other boys go in front of him, watching them. *You're still hiding something, Ray. You've still got secrets you're not telling. You're a Gryffindor and I like you, but you're still a Malfoy, and I've heard stories about them all my life. And you know an awful lot about me and my family. More than I'm comfortable with you knowing.*

He'd write to Padfoot and Letha, Harry decided. He'd tell them more about Ray, and as much of Zelda's story as he could without revealing that she was human.

The thought about Ray and Zelda danced in the back of his head once more, laughing impishly and running away as he tried to pin it down. *But it's important, I'm sure it is. I just need to think about something else, and it'll come to me.*

He wished he didn't have the feeling that he ought to figure it out right away.

Happy first day of Christmas holidays.

"Wow," Neville said as Zelda sat up, sleekly furry and gray once more. "Doesn't that hurt?"

No, but it itches when my fur grows. Zelda scratched behind one ear.

"How are you doing that?" Harry asked. "Talking to us, I mean? Your mouth isn't moving."

And you're not hearing me with your ears. I talk into your mind when I'm like this. Zelda looked chagrined. **You never would have known I could talk if I'd been more careful. I can pick who I want to hear me and only talk to them, unless I'm in a hurry or frightened. It's the difference between whispering in someone's ear and shouting.**

"Thanks for shouting at me," Ron said. "I'd hate to spend the holidays in the hospital wing."

"You wouldn't be there for all the holidays," said Ray, rubbing the back of his neck. "Just last night, probably. C'mere, Zel, I'll get between your shoulder blades."

Oh, would you? Thanks. Zelda whined with pleasure as Ray scratched her back.

"Something very wrong about that," Ron muttered.

Get your mind out of the gutter.

On Christmas morning, Harry was awakened by the dipping and swaying of his bed. "Meghan, gerroff," he mumbled.

Sorry, Harry, I'm not Meghan.

"Wha—" Harry rolled over and opened one eye. "Oh. Morning, Zelda."

The wolf sat down next to the small heap of presents. **Good morning, and happy Christmas.**

"Thanks, you too." It wasn't actually all that early, Harry realized. It just felt like it. "Anyone else awake?"

Not yet, I don't think. Why did you think I was Meghan? I thought you weren't allowed to sleep away from your relatives' house.

"Well, not at night. But I used to take naps when I was little, and Meghan thought it was really funny to jump on the end of the couch and wake me up."

Zelda wolf-grinned. **I think I'd like her. I hope I can meet her someday. So, are you going to open these? She sniffed at Harry's presents. The top... two? No, three are from your family.**

Harry reached out to his nightstand, found his glasses, and put them on, bringing Zelda and the presents into clearer focus. "How do you know that? You've never met them."

Zelda's tail twitched. **They smell like grown-up man, grown-up woman, and little girl. And just a bit like Dungbombs. I don't need to be a seventh year to figure it out.**

Harry scooted down the bed to sort through the presents. "Will you be able to be a seventh year?" he asked, tossing the wilting holly leaf from the Dursleys out through the crack in the hangings. "Are you going to stay all that time?"

Where Ray goes, I go. And I have to get an education, don't I?

"I don't know. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Human. Human all the time, without having to hide and pretend. Zelda sighed, closing her teeth around the flap of wrapping paper Harry offered her and pulling at it gently. **I don't mind the changing. I just wish I didn't have to lie so much.**

Harry set aside the box of flying Quidditch logos Meghan had sent him without even opening it to find the Chudley Cannons one for Ron. "I know how you feel."

I know you do. But no one else does. No one else grew up with a secret, things they could never do, never say, never tell. Zelda spat out the wrapping paper and looked at Harry contemplatively. **You know, we're a lot alike, you and me. We both live with people who treat us like dirt, and we both have other people who tell us we're OK. Right?**

"Right. But who do you have? Other than Ray?"

Isn't he enough? Zelda said quickly. **One person who knows the truth can make the difference. And he doesn't treat me like a servant or a pet. More like his sister, or his cousin...**

"Or his aunt."

Zelda sat up so fast she nearly fell off the bed. **What?**

Harry laughed. "It's a song. 'And we are his sisters and his cousins and his aunts, his sisters and his cousins and his aunts.'"

Oh, Gilbert and Sullivan. Zelda made the quiet barking noise that was her laughter. **I remember now. Come on, let's get the others up. They shouldn't be sleeping still – it's Christmas!**

Ron's foot was sticking out from under the covers. Harry couldn't resist. "Your nose," he whispered to Zelda. "Put it on there."

Grinning all over her pointed face, Zelda sidled up and did just that.

Ron came awake with a yelp. "What the—"

Hap-py Christmas! Zelda caroled into his mind while Harry laughed.

Ron glared at them both and suggested something rude, then ignored them in favor of creating a small hailstorm of wrapping paper.

Aww, we should have done Ray first, said Zelda in disappointment as she turned around. **Ron woke Neville.**

"Morning, Neville," Harry said. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas." Neville's hangings were parted at the bottom. "Waking people up?"

That's what noses are for. Among other things. Zelda put her front paws on the bottom of Neville's bed and sniffed his presents delicately. **One from each parent, one from your gran, a few from great-aunts and uncles...**

Gerroff." Neville pulled his presents farther up the bed. "You've never met my family – how can you tell all that?"

"That's what I said," Harry commented.

Zelda looked smug. **The nose knows, gentlemen. And Ray isn't awake yet. Should we go annoy him?**

"Why not." Harry followed Zelda across the room. "Why'd you say we should have done him first?" he asked as he parted the hangings. Ray's back was to them, his hair disarrayed as he never allowed it to be in the daytime.

Because. You might want to go around to the other side and watch.

Harry tiptoed around the bed and pulled the hangings open on the other side, noting the distant smile on Ray's face. Zelda set her paws delicately on the bedframe, lifted the blankets off Ray's back with her teeth, and leaned in, aiming her nose for the level of Ray's waist –

Ray's eyes shot open, his whole body stiffened, his mouth opened and closed. Silently.

"Wow," Harry said as Ray sat up, teeth clenched, rubbing furiously at his back. "How'd you do that?"

"What? Wake up without yelling?"

"Yeah."

"Practice." He glared over at Zelda. "I've had lots of it."

Zelda's tail fanned the air behind her. **Only because you never learned that if you get me last thing at night, I have to get you first thing in the morning.**

"You sound like the Marauders," said Harry. "That's how Padfoot says they always did."

Ray ignored this in favor of his presents. "Open all yours already, Harry?" he asked, starting to rip the red and green striped paper off the top parcel.

"No, I actually forgot about them."

"You what? Hey, Ron, Neville, listen to this. Harry forgot about his presents!"

"Forgot about presents?" Ron said incredulously. "On Christmas Day, you forgot about presents?"

"He was too busy waking you up, so you could have your presents," Neville said placidly. "He thinks more about others than he does about himself. My mum says that's the sign of a good friend."

Ron made gagging noises, but Harry grinned. Neville was only this poncy when he was having someone on.

"Stow it," Ray said, firing a Bertie Bott's Bean across the dorm at Neville. "Harry, go open your presents before Neville gets any sappier."

Harry returned to his bed and picked up a small gift that had fallen out of the middle of the stack. It was from Hagrid, and proved to be a hand-carved whistle shaped like a wolf. Harry blew on it, and an eerie howl filled the dorm. Zelda yelped and cowered in place.

"It's just Hagrid's present," Harry said, taking the whistle away from his lips.

Warn me next time you're doing something like that! It hurt!

"Hurt?" said Ron. "How could it hurt?"

"Zel can hear more than we can," said Ray. "Higher notes, and they hurt her ears. There's probably some of those in there."

No, really, genius? I can speak for myself now, you know.

Ray rapped the top of Zelda's head. Zelda snapped playfully at his fingers.

Harry set the whistle aside and started on the other presents. Padfoot had sent him a broom maintenance kit, which Harry interpreted as a good omen for a broom of his own on his birthday. Letha's present was a small book of potion-making hints, with an inscription inside the front cover – *You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, but a Fly-Finding Formula works even better.* The gifts from his friends were mostly chocolate and other sweets, as were the gifts Harry had bought them. Finally, there was only one parcel left, a flat one, very light.

"Who's that from?" Neville asked, looking across the room as Harry held the package up.

"Don't know. I've had all the presents from the usual people."

"Only one way to find out," said Ray.

Harry tore at the paper, and something silver and slippery flowed past his hands and puddled on the floor. Zelda froze, then raced over to investigate. **It smells like you,** she reported, sniffing at the thing. **But... not you. Not exactly. It's a very old smell.**

It can't be," Ron said in amazement. "Who do you know..."

"Can you tell who it's from?" Harry asked. His heart was thumping like the drums at a Weird Sisters concert – he knew what this was, what it must be, he'd heard about it all his life but never thought he'd see it...

Zelda shook her head. **The only other smell on it is trunk. It's been in storage a long time.**

"There's a note," said Neville, pointing.

Harry sat down on the floor and picked up the slip of parchment. "Your father left this in my possession before he died," he read aloud. "It is time it was returned to you. Use it well."

"Your father," said Ray. "That would explain why you thought it was him, Zel. They look so much alike, they probably smell alike too."

"Do you smell like your dad, then?" Ron asked.

Ray shrugged. "Do I?" he asked Zelda.

What? Oh. Yes. You do. Zelda was still sniffing at the cloth, her voice distracted.

"Do you mind?" Harry said, pulling it away from her. "It was my dad's."

I know. I just... never mind. Sorry.

"So try it on," Neville said, pushing wrapping paper aside. He knew what James Potter had once owned that looked like water woven into cloth.

Harry swirled the Invisibility Cloak around himself and grinned as the other boys stared. To their eyes, he knew, he had just vanished.

Zelda gave a smug chortle in the back of her throat. **I know you're there,** she announced. **I can smell you. And if I can, Mrs. Norris can, so you'll still have to be careful if you're going out sneaking with this.**

"I know. Don't worry." Harry pulled the Cloak off his head.

"That's freaky," said Ron. "Don't do that."

"Floating Head of Dooooom," Ray moaned. "Wooooo..."

Ron looked at him. "Has anyone told you lately you're weird?"

Zelda was helpful where lessons were concerned, but the help was more than balanced, in Harry's opinion, by the fact that she was a nag. A polite nag, but a nag nonetheless. **Have you finished that essay for Professor Snape?** she would ask, just when the game of Exploding Snap was getting exciting. **What about those definitions for Professor McGonagall?** when he'd planned on sleeping late.

Still, it meant he, and the other three boys, had their homework done by New Year's Day, and could therefore spend it exploring the castle, aided by the Invisibility Cloak. Daytime explorations were safer than night, since it didn't officially count as sneaking until you were somewhere you shouldn't be. Harry had the Cloak bundled into a pocket (it compressed into a surprisingly small package), ready to drape it over those who needed to be hidden.

I know what we can look at, Zelda said, prancing a little as they climbed a flight of stairs. **We can look at the forbidden corridor.**

"The one on the third floor?" said Ron. "Why, so we can die a painful death?"

No, silly, just to see what's there. Ray and I looked a couple times already, but we can't quite tell what it is. I know it's something alive, and canine, but it's like nothing I've ever smelled before.

"And I think I know what I saw through the keyhole, but I want to make sure," said Ray, stepping around a suit of armor. "Harry?"

Harry extracted the Cloak and carefully draped it over them. "Wish you were human today, Zelda," he muttered. "You don't quite fit."

I can stay here. Ray can tell me what he sees. Zelda backed out from under the Cloak and into the corner behind the armor. **Is that better?**

Harry worked himself in under the Cloak. "Still a little cramped, but it'll do."

Good luck.

They reached the door without trouble, and were assured of its being the correct one not only by its being locked but by the loud snores coming from within. Several spirited rounds of rock-paper-scissors determined that Neville had to keep watch, so Harry, Ron, and Ray peered at the door handle together.

"I wonder if just an Opening Charm would do it?" Ray said, drawing his wand. "It seems kind of basic, but if it's just locked to keep us from opening the door by accident..."

“Yeah, whatever’s in there is probably the real security,” Ron said, wincing at a particularly loud snore.

Harry chewed his lip. Something about the snoring didn’t seem right.

“Harry?”

He realized Ron and Ray were both looking at him. “Yeah, go ahead,” he said, recalling the topic of conversation. “Unlock it. Just be ready to shut it again fast if whatever it is comes out at us.”

Another very loud snore almost drowned out Ray’s whisper of “*Alohomora!*” and it wasn’t until Ron pulled the door open that Harry put his finger on what was wrong with the snoring. *There’s nothing wrong with it, there’s just more than one thing doing it...*

Then he looked through the door.

Or it could be that.

“Er, I think I’ve seen enough,” Ron said weakly, staring at the enormous three-headed dog.

“Just a second.” Ray was on his knees. “Look at this. Is that a hinge?”

“I think it is,” Harry said. “Ron, can you give me a boost?”

Neville came to help, and in a moment Harry was standing on their shoulders, peering over the dog. “There’s a latch on the other side,” he whispered down. “It’s a trapdoor.”

The snoring hitched, then resumed.

“Let’s get out of here before it wakes up, please,” muttered Ron, helping Harry down. “We’ll be in enough trouble if anyone finds out we were here, I’d rather not get mauled too.”

Neville lifted the handle and pushed the door shut delicately, making hardly any noise at all. Ray applied his wand to the lock again, and the boys piled back under the Cloak and started for the Tower. Zelda joined them on the fifth floor near the library, where they took off the Cloak again behind another suit of armor.

Three heads? were her first words.

“Unless we missed one,” said Ron.

“I don’t think we did,” said Harry. “And it’s lying on a trapdoor. Guarding something.”

Ray frowned. “But what would be so important that they’d let a three-headed dog live in Hogwarts to guard it?”

Zelda tilted her head and drew a deep breath as if thinking. Her eyes widened. **Oh no – hide!**

Harry spotted an open door and pointed at it, pulling the Cloak out of his pocket with his other hand and holding it up like a shield, praying it would work even though he wasn’t actually wearing it, because now he could hear what had frightened Zelda.

Voices. Two men’s voices. And they were getting closer.

“...question your decision to allow such an item to be sequestered here, Dumbledore, and without even contacting the Board of Governors...”

Ray and Zelda were in the room, Neville too, and Ron was beckoning Harry closer. Harry shook his head, dropping the Cloak so that it covered him head to toe. He wanted to hear this.

“...friendship with Flamel only goes so far...”

“Really, Lucius, I see no reason you should be interested. And I would like even more to know how you came by this information.”

Lucius? As in Ray’s dad?

“I have my sources, Dumbledore. As I’m sure you have yours.”

Harry stuck his invisible head around the corner and had his suspicion confirmed. The man in front of him could have been Ray after a dose of Aging Potion, down to the green leather bracelet around Lucius Malfoy’s right wrist.

Harry frowned. *What’s he doing with one of those?*

“I would very much like to know who broke into my house a few months ago and destroyed a very valuable item. Whoever it was, they did so without tripping any of my security charms, and without leaving any traces of themselves behind.”

Dumbledore was smiling vaguely. “Don’t your... sources tell you things like that?”

“Don’t play with me, Dumbledore, I know you had something to do with it. Are you going to tell me or are you not?”

Not. But I might, if sufficiently persuaded, give you a hint."

Malfoy scowled. "Your dealings with Flamel will remain with me. For the moment. Now what is this hint of yours?"

"That perhaps you should look within, rather than without."

"Philosophy. I want answers."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "Do not we all. Would you care for a cup of tea before you go?"

"No thank you. But I would like to see my son."

Harry shook his head in disgust. *And has it ever occurred to you that he might not want to see you?*

Dumbledore's gaze flicked down the hall towards Harry for just a second before returning to Malfoy. "I'm afraid I can't oblige you, Lucius. I would rather not be accused of showing favoritism to a school governor, after all."

"Then perhaps a school governor shall feel himself obliged to tell the other governors exactly how you are endangering the welfare of this school and of its students." Malfoy's voice was no louder than it had been, but it had a silky and dangerous undertone that Harry recognized as one Snape often used. "Perhaps he shall see fit to reveal to the general public that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is now the hiding place of the—"

Dumbledore raised his hands in surrender. "Very well, I shall send a message to Gryffindor Tower that Draco is wanted in my office."

"And if he is not in Gryffindor Tower?"

"Then I am afraid you may have to leave without seeing him. The castle is large, Lucius, and to search all of it quickly is beyond even my powers."

Malfoy sneered for a moment, then turned and stalked around the corner. Dumbledore looked down the hall towards Harry and made a shooing motion before he followed.

Harry slumped against the wall. *I think I understand why Ray likes it better here.*

But what was his dad doing with a bracelet like Ray's?

The suspicion about Ray and Zelda wiggled in the back of his mind again, and grew to include other things, stories and ideas from home, Hagrid's tale and Zelda's human face... he was close to an answer, he could feel it...

"Harry?"

Ron's whisper shattered the framework of ideas, and the suspicion skittered away, giggling madly. Harry groaned inwardly and turned to face his friend. "Yeah?"

"You have to see this. Come on."

Harry would have argued more, except that Ron got him into the room before he could get any arguments mustered, and once in, he forgot all about it.

"Whoa."

"And that's not all of it," said Ron excitedly, as Harry stared at the tall, golden-framed mirror. "It shows stuff – it might even be the future – it showed me wearing the Head Boy badge, and holding the Quidditch Cup!"

"I don't think it's the future, though," said Neville. "Not unless I suddenly get good at Potions."

Harry stepped closer to the mirror, into which Ray was currently staring. "Oy, Ray, budge up," he said.

Ray didn't move.

"My turn, mate."

"Just a second," Ray said hoarsely. He brought his hand up and stared at it, then into the mirror at its reflection. Zelda, standing behind him, whined softly as he turned away. "There, I'm done."

Harry took Ray's place and gazed into the mirror. For a moment he saw only himself, then other figures solidified into place – Padfoot and Letha and Meghan first, arranged on his left, Meghan making a face at him. A moment later, four other figures took their places on his other side – a man, a woman, and two children –

My dream family. Harry squinted, but their faces were still unclear, as if blurred by long distance. *I wonder why I haven't dreamed of them much here at Hogwarts?* The figures were drawing near, the faces becoming more distinct, in a moment or two he'd be able to see them clearly for the first time ever –

Here comes Filch!

Harry tore himself away from the mirror and dashed out of the room, Ron and Neville hard on his heels. Ray seemed to be missing, and Harry caught his breath after a frantic three-floor run to ask Zelda where he'd gone.

I don't know. Zelda scuffed her paws on the stone floor uneasily. **He's shutting me out, and I don't like it.**

"I'm sure he's fine." Harry took a few deep breaths to get himself back under control. "I just hope he didn't go back to the Tower. His dad sent a message there that he wanted to see him."

His dad what? Oh – you mean – yes, that's right. I didn't know Mr. Malfoy wanted to see him. Zelda shook briefly as if she were wet. **I hope he didn't go back to the Tower too. That would be bad right now, that would be very bad...**

Harry bit down on his urge to ask why. That question, around Ray and Zelda, rarely had an easy answer.

And I'm starting to wonder if it ever has a true one either.

Ray stood on top of the Astronomy Tower, watching his father walk down the path towards the gates, keeping his anger internal with disciplines drilled into him from babyhood.

I will not let you win, he vowed. I will not let you have the last word forever. Someday I will laugh in your face, and tell you exactly what I think of you, and why. Someday I won't have to lie anymore. Someday I will dance on my stupid bracelet, and yours too, and Mother's.

The image he had seen in the mirror rose in his mind's eye, unbidden. The snowy wind whipped up around him, but he barely noticed.

Someday it will be true.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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True Colors

Chapter 7: Right and Wrong

“So what do you think could be hidden behind that dog?” Ron asked, staring into the common room fire.

“Honestly, I have no idea.” Ray, who had returned an hour or so ago looking windblown but satisfied, had his arm over Zelda. “It has to be valuable, but Harry, you said Father was talking like it was dangerous, too?”

Harry frowned, trying to recall the conversation. “Not so much that it was dangerous itself, I think,” he said slowly. “More like it was dangerous to have it here. Like bad things might come here. Looking for it, maybe.”

“Something very magical, then,” Neville said. “There are creatures that get stronger by eating magic from other things and creatures. And Dark wizards who do it too. Like Voldemort.”

Ron shuddered. “Don’t do that.”

Oh, stop it, Ronald. It’s only a name. A name can’t hurt anyone. Zelda’s tail thumped the floor a few times. **Usually.**

“My point exactly.” Ron flung out his hand. “Usually.”

“But why will saying Voldemort’s name hurt you?” Harry asked.

Ron groaned. “I can’t believe you don’t know this! If you say his name, you get his attention! Names are attached to the things they name, everyone knows that!”

“Names,” Harry said slowly. “Names... wait a minute! Malfoy – your dad, Ray, sorry—”

“Call him Malfoy, that’s fine with me.”

“Fine. Malfoy said a name – someone Dumbledore’s friends with – someone who’s got something to do with whatever that dog’s guarding.” Harry pounded on his forehead. “Ugh, what was it? What was it?”

“Look at the fire,” Neville suggested. “Mum always says she can find what she’s looking for just by watching the shapes in the flames.”

“Flames,” Harry repeated. “It sounded like flames. But it wasn’t. Not quite, not nearly...”

Not... Flamel? Zelda said tentatively.

“Yes!” Harry shot a fist into the air. “Zelda, you’re brilliant! Flamel, that was it!”

Ron, Neville, and Ray all looked baffled. Ron voiced the obvious common thought.

“Who’s Flamel?”

Harry shrugged. “Don’t know. Guess we could look it up.”

Zelda sighed gustily. **Or you could ask the person who told you about it.**

Harry turned exaggeratedly to her. “All right, oh wise oracle, who’s Flamel?”

His full name is Nicolas Flamel. He’s a famous alchemist. He’s the only one ever known to have created the Philosopher’s Stone.

“You’re kidding,” Ray said, staring at her.

No.

“What’s the Philosopher’s Stone?” asked Neville.

“It’s this little rock, about so big.” Ray cupped one hand. “It’s red, translucent, sort of like a ruby. But it’s incredibly magical. Touch it to anything made of metal, and it turns into gold. And if you know the right incantation, it produces the Elixir of Life.”

“What does that do?” Ron asked, looking fascinated.

“It makes you immortal, as long as you have it.” Ray’s familiar half-smile appeared. “I wondered, when I read about that, who would want to live forever.”

“Are you crazy?” said Ron, staring at him. “Who *wouldn’t* want to live forever?”

“Don’t start, you two,” Harry said. “Zelda, you wouldn’t know if Flamel knows Dumbledore, would you?”

Zelda’s twisted wolf-grin looked remarkably like Ray’s smile. **They’ve been alchemy partners since Dumbledore was a teenager. Some people think Dumbledore drinks just a little Elixir every so often, and that’s how he’s got so old, even for a wizard.**

"So that's what the dog's guarding," said Harry. "The Philosopher's Stone."

"It's probably not just the dog, either," said Neville. "Not for something that valuable."

"What, the dog isn't enough?" Ron scoffed. "The dog that could rip your head off three different ways before breakfast?"

But there has to be some way past the dog, Ron. Some way for people like Flamel, or Dumbledore, to get at the Stone if they need it.

Ray nodded. "And if they know the way past the dog, then someone else could use it too. There's bound to be other things down there. Just in case."

Ron shrugged, admitting defeat. "Probably really neat magic, too," he said, turning back to the fire. "Wish I could find out what it is."

A line of thought occurred to Harry. Curious, he followed it, and found something valuable at the far end. "I bet we could," he said. "If we ask the right person."

"Who's that?" Neville asked.

"Hagrid."

Hagrid? Zelda sat up. Harry, I like Hagrid, I've nothing against him, but why would you think he'd have anything to do with the Philosopher's Stone?

Harry grinned. This question, he could answer. "Number one, Dumbledore trusts him. And number two, who else around here would know how to take care of a three-headed dog?"

Hagrid was duly visited and queried the next day. He was shocked that the boys knew about "Fluffy" (which name nearly made Ron pass out), but admitted the dog was his, bought from a Greek wizard last year. "Sweet critter, really he is," he said. "Not as nice as Fang, o'course." He waved towards the boarhound, curled up in his basket as usual. "But he's deadly if yeh don' know how ter deal with him."

"You know how to deal with him, though, don't you?" Ray asked, leaning forward. "You must, to have brought him into the school without letting him get away."

"Ar, that was easy," Hagrid said, waving a dismissive hand. "I just sent him off ter sleep an' carried him in."

"What did you use, charm or potion?" Neville asked.

Hagrid chuckled. "You don' need no charm or potion fer Fluffy! Yeh jus' gotta sing him a lullaby, tha's all..."

An expression of sudden worry crept onto his face, escalating rapidly to panic. "I shouldn'a told yeh that!" he blurted. "Ferget I said it!"

"Said what?" said Ron.

Hagrid heaved a great sigh and smiled. "Knew I could count on yeh."

"But we were hoping you could tell us a little more about what's down there," said Harry, seizing the moment. "Not what Fluffy's guarding, we don't care about that..."

Epecially not since you already know, Zelda interjected.

Harry ignored this and went on. "...but what else is there besides Fluffy, because Fred and George told us Professor Quirrell assigned them an essay in their first year about protective magics, before he took his year off."

"Yeah, we were hoping we could find out some of the stuff they used down there," Ron picked up. "Research it, and maybe take one thing apiece so it doesn't look like we cheated."

"We'll get extra points for knowing about advanced magic," Neville added.

"Please, Hagrid?" Ray said, tilting his head to one side in an almost feminine manner. "It would really help us."

"Well..." Hagrid wavered visibly. "I can' tell yeh much abou' the actual spells an' such," he said finally. "But I can tell yeh who did a part, and you'll prob'ly be able to take it from there. Professor Quirrell did a bit, o' course, Defense professor, an' all the Heads o' House..."

"What, even Snape?" Ron blurted.

"I thought we were over this," Hagrid said impatiently. "Snape's a Hogwarts professor, he wouldn' try anything Dumbledore wouldn' like. Dumbledore trusts him, so do I, an' tha's final. Now where was I?"

"Quirrell and the Heads of House," Neville supplied.

"Well, Dumbledore himself, o' course... an' I think that's it. But that's six, an' there's only four o' you, so yeh shouldn' have much trouble findin' some

good examples for that essay." Hagrid stood up. "Now, who'd like some tea?"

"How come you acted like that, when we were working on Hagrid?" Harry asked Ray on the way back to the castle.

"Like what?"

"Like this." Harry tipped his head to one side in imitation of Ray. "Please, Hagrid?" he fluted in a falsetto.

"Stop it," Ray said, scooping up a handful of snow without breaking stride. "I did not sound like that."

Harry garnered a handful of his own in self-defense. "Maybe not just like that, but you were close," he said. "What were you doing?"

Ray shrugged, suddenly looking uncomfortable. "I remembered what Hagrid said after the Quidditch match," he said. "When he said I reminded him of that girl he used to know, the one who married your dad's friend. I thought maybe if I tried to act a little like a girl, he'd see her in me again, and..."

Harry nodded. "Okay. I can see that now." Something occurred to him. "She had a sister, you know. Danger, I mean, the girl Hagrid thought sounded like you. A really little sister, just about our age. She would have been at Hogwarts with us, or maybe a year below."

"What happened to her?" Ray asked.

"Nobody knows." Harry looked into the distance, wondering, as he so often had. "She disappeared the day her parents were killed, before she was even a year old."

Ray winced. "Don't tell me any more," he said roughly. "Please. I don't want to know when it happened, or what she looked like, or what her name was, or anything."

"Why not?"

Ray had turned away and was busy packing his snow extra tight. "Father keeps a record book," he said so low that Harry could hardly hear. "With dates and pictures, and names when he bothered to learn them. He makes me read pages of it when I do something he doesn't like. I don't want to know if I ever saw her face, or read her name, without knowing about it."

He hurled the snowball. Zelda, far ahead, spun and leaped to catch it in a white crystalline explosion.

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly.

"It's not your fault." Ray bent to pick up another handful of snow. "But you are stupid."

"I am not st—"

Ray's fresh snowball caught Harry squarely in the mouth.

"How can it be the last day of holidays already?" Ron groaned, picking at the hearthrug.

"Easy," said Neville pedantically. "First it was the first day of holidays, then it was the second day, then it was the third day..."

"No!" Ron clapped his hands over his ears. "Isn't it bad enough it happened, without you talking about it?"

Ray chuckled, unwrapping a Chocolate Frog. "Ron, are you always like this?" he said.

"Like what?"

Loud, impulsive, and whiny.

"I am not whiny."

"You like to complain," Harry put in.

"It's not the same thing."

Fine. Zelda snapped her jaws suggestively beneath Ray's hand until he broke off a piece of Frog for her. **Loud, impulsive, and complaining.**

"Pretty much," Ron said, opening his own Frog. "At least that's what the twins tell me."

"Zelda, isn't that bad for you?" Harry asked, watching the wolf nibble delicately at the chocolate.

What? Oh. No. I have enough human in me that the chocolate's not poisonous, at least not badly. Besides, I'm not eating enough of it to hurt me...

Zelda's thoughts broke off in a yelp as the common room fire suddenly turned green. A small form appeared in the flames, spinning more and more

slowly, then tumbling out to make a semi-graceful landing on the hearth rug.

"Meghan!" Harry leapt up to hug his little sister. "What are you doing here?"

"Surprise," Meghan said, smiling at him cheekily. "Hello, Neville."

"Hi, Meghan. Are your parents coming too?"

"Right behind me," Meghan said, then looked around the circle. "You have to be Ron," she said, waving. "And you're Ray, and that's Zelda." She knelt and extended her hand, palm down, fingers slightly curled. Zelda rose and sniffed the fingers politely as Letha stepped from the flames.

"Gentlemen," Letha greeted the boys, inclining her head to them. "If you'll wait a moment for my husband to arrive, we can keep to one round of introductions, though I think I can put names to faces fairly easily."

Ron took a surreptitious scoot back from the fireplace. Harry covered a snigger – it seemed his friend hadn't quite overcome nine years' worth of fear of the terrible Sirius Black. Ray caught his eye and winked.

Neville, meanwhile, was instructing Meghan on where Zelda liked best to be scratched, and the wolf was sprawled on her back, her eyes glazed with pleasure. Harry would have told him to save his trouble, except that Zelda was, necessarily, a bit different than Padfoot...

All right, stopping there. Harry pulled his mind to a halt before it could start delineating anatomical differences. *She's human under that fur. Not going there.*

He swallowed silently as something else came to him. He was used to telling Padfoot everything, all his secrets, all his problems. But he couldn't tell about Zelda...

"If anyone tells anyone else she's human, she'll die," Ray's voice reminded him in memory.

Harry laughed with everyone else as Padfoot stumbled out of the fire, sneezing, but inwardly he was working out the parameters. *I can tell them she's smart, that ought to be all right. But I can't tell them how smart, or all of what she's done. I can tell them she likes to watch us work, but not that she helps...*

And he absolutely could not mention that she talked.

"So about your letter," Padfoot said to Harry later, when they were the first out of the game of Exploding Snap. "Just how strange is strange?"

Harry shrugged. "Well... he's a Malfoy. You told me enough stories about Lucius Malfoy that I assumed they were all like that. But I liked him even when we first met, in Diagon Alley, and now he's my friend. Him and Zelda."

Oh no – no – I shouldn't have said that...

"Zelda? The wolf?" Padfoot looked at her, curled under Ray's chair, her nose twitching at the smoke from the explosions. "Yes, you mentioned she was a bit odd, too..."

"Hagrid says she looks like a werewolf," Harry said quickly, praying he could cover. "Do you think Malfoy – I mean Mr. Malfoy – do you think he could have given her something extra along with that? Some kind of extra brains?"

Padfoot frowned, his eyes still on Zelda. "I suppose he could have. You can transfigure for just about anything if you know what you're doing. More brains isn't beyond the bounds of reason. I'd tell you more, but she won't come anywhere near me."

"Maybe I can get her to come," Harry said, and slid off the couch to cross to the table. Ron was winning, he noticed in passing, only slightly handicapped by a sooty nose. He dropped to his knees beside Ray's chair. "Come on, Zelda," he coaxed. "My godfather wants to meet you. He's nice, you'll like him..."

No. The voice in his head was sulky, but something else hid behind the sullenness.

Harry looked closer, then slid a finger quickly under one of Zelda's eyes. Zelda growled and snapped at him, but Harry's hand was already away, and his fingertip shone with tell-tale wetness.

"You're *crying*," he said in surprise, his voice masked by a large explosion on the table above.

Yes, I am. And I don't want to talk about it. So go away! Zelda lifted a paw and bared her claws at him, growling louder.

"All right, I'm going, I'm going." Harry backed away slowly. "Did I say something?"

No. Zelda sighed. **Just... don't let him change forms, Harry. Humans in animal form can see other humans in animal form. If he changes here, with me, he'll see, and he'll know, and he'll say something...**

"Oh." Harry stood up, and dodged automatically as cards exploded in front of Ray. Zelda coughed on the smoke.

"So, what's the verdict?" Padfoot asked lightly as Harry returned to him. "I saw you talking to her."

"She doesn't come out. Maybe some other time."

"Well, maybe if I changed..." Padfoot was already on his feet.

"No!" Harry shot to his feet as well and caught Padfoot's arm. "She'll... she'll think you're going to fight her for territory," he said in a rush. "Ray told us she's very territorial, she doesn't like other creatures on her ground. She'll try to fight you, and you'll get hurt, or she will..."

"More likely me," Padfoot said, dropping back to the couch. "She has claws, I don't. All right, human I stay."

"Yes!" Ron shouted, and slammed his hand down, causing a table-wide explosion. Harry masked his sigh of relief under coughing.

When the smoke had cleared, Padfoot and Harry joined the others at the table. "Congratulations, Ron," Padfoot said, sitting down. "So, Ray, Harry tells me your friend is territorial?"

Ray frowned for a moment. "You mean Zelda, sir?"

"Yes, Zelda."

"Very much so, sir," Ray said smoothly. "She has a clear understanding of her own pack, and who is and isn't included."

"Where did she come from?"

"I don't know, sir. I know my father gave her to me when I was very small, but not much else. As far as I recall, she's always been there."

"Who exactly is her pack?" Letha put in. "You, her, and who else?"

Ray indicated Harry, Ron, and Neville. "She's accepted them, now," he said. "And she likes Seamus and Dean as well. At home, she accepts Father and Mother, of course, and Dobby, our house-elf..." He stopped.

"Anyone else?" Letha asked.

Ray shrugged. "Basically anyone I accept," he said. "But it has to be for longer than an hour or two. And I think it would upset her to see a human turn into an animal. No offense, sir," he said to Padfoot.

"None taken."

Harry sat back in his chair, relaxing, as the conversation moved to other topics. *I did it. I saved it.*

He ignored the niggling thought at the back of his mind that said he didn't remember telling anyone Padfoot was an Animagus.

"So what do you think?" Aletha asked Sirius that night, as they sat together by the fireplace.

"He's a nice boy. Despite all my preconceptions to the contrary."

"Oh, so you admit you can be wrong."

Sirius gave her a look. "Yes, I admit I can be wrong. The sky can now fall. But he is. He's nice, he's polite, and he's hiding something."

"You noticed it too. What, do you think?"

"I don't know. But he reminds me of someone. Not Lucius, and not Narcissa. Someone I used to like." Sirius twisted himself around until he was lying with his head in Aletha's lap. "A long time ago."

"Meghan liked Zelda a lot. I could barely pull her away." Aletha began to stroke her husband's hair. "I suppose that's Malfoy's paranoia showing through, that he'd give his son an attack dog for a present."

"Attack wolf, please. And not just paranoia. What better weapon to have when Lord-He's-Ugly comes back from wherever he's been hiding these last ten years?"

Aletha smiled faintly. "I would have thought he'd keep it for himself, though, rather than hand it on to Ray."

"Maybe he has one for himself. And one for Narcissa. Male and female, probably, and he had them mated, and that's where he got Zelda."

"So why wouldn't he tell Ray that?"

"Because breeding magical creatures without a license is illegal."

Aletha chuckled, winding a tendril of black hair around her finger. "You have everything so neatly summed up in your world, don't you?"

"Well, some things."

"Like what?"

Like this." Sirius reached up, twined his own hand in Aletha's hair, and exerted gentle, steady pressure downwards.

Two pairs of eyes closed as the fire flickered higher.

Upstairs, Meghan frowned over her letter. She'd discarded three drafts already, searching for just the right words.

I know Neville will tell me the truth. But I have to figure out what to ask.

She yawned and set her quill down. *Maybe I can figure it out better in the morning.*

As she climbed into bed, she barely noticed the dim flash of light from her desk, though she did wrinkle her nose a bit at the sudden smell of smoke in the room.

In a castle in Scotland, two breaths were exhaled.

Phew. That was too close.

Agreed. Zelda's voice grew wistful. **But maybe all this – all the close calls, people finding out – maybe it means it's time for us to try something.**

Try what? Ray laughed without humor. **Try dying? Or watching people die? He's got us covered everywhere, Zelda. He knows everything we could try, and he's guarded against it.**

He doesn't know everything. Zelda nosed Ray's hand. **He doesn't know about you.**

Me. Great. This is where you beg me to help you, because I'm your only hope, right?

Zelda wolf-grinned. **Just call me Princess.**

Ray groaned silently.

Holidays over, the boys returned to their usual round of classes, homework, and complaining, with Quidditch practice thrown in for Harry. Letters from home were frequent and cheerful. Padfoot had been contacted by the Auror Office, with a view to returning to his old job...Letha hinted about starting the search for a new house, as soon as Harry's custody application went through...the dance studio where Meghan took classes had chosen her to perform a solo in their concert in March...

Overall, Harry had never been happier. Little pieces of thought concerning Ray and Zelda continued to nag at him, but he had decided to ignore them.

They're my friends, no matter what, he rationalized. And they're allowed to have secrets. If someone hadn't found Wormtail, I'd have a secret too. They're really no different from me.

By the beginning of February, this thinking had begun to sink in, to the point where Harry laughed aloud at a joke of Ray's, without thinking about who'd told it, while packing up after Defense class.

"L-l-less noise, p-please," said Professor Quirrell repressively.

The boy was happy. That cut to the quick. What right did the boy have to be happy? What right did he even have to be alive?

"Ray, where do you learn those?" asked that abysmally cheerful voice.

Ray. *That is Draco Malfoy, is it not?*

A look through his host's eyes confirmed it.

Which means Lucius will be in contact with the school. With his personality, he will likely have moved into some position of control as well.

Perhaps it is time to broaden my horizons.

Harry frowned as he shut the door of the Defense classroom behind him. "Was Professor Quirrell just whimpering?" he said.

"Probably at the thought of having to mark all our essays," said Ron. "Does it matter?"

"Oh, dear, trouble and more trouble," said Alice Longbottom, beaming at her husband and Sirius as she opened the door. "Come in, come in."

Is it anyone interesting?" called a voice from the kitchen.

"Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head over, dear," Alice called back in syrupy tones. "Just a couple of little boys looking for some little girls."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said Frank, hanging up his cloak, "but I'm more interested in big girls myself."

"And is that my big girl you've got in there?" Sirius asked.

"Letha?" Alice caroled. "One of these boys wants to know if you're his big girl or not."

"Dadfoot!" cried a smaller voice, and footsteps pounded through the hallway.

"Oof," said Sirius, staggering slightly. "No, here's my big girl." He hoisted Meghan into the air, kissed her as she squealed happily, and set her down. "What you've got in your kitchen is a perfect-size woman."

"I must go and have a look, to see what you consider perfection," said Aletha dryly, stepping around the corner.

"The same thing I always have." Sirius snaked an arm around Aletha's waist. "This."

Meghan rolled her eyes to herself as both sets of grown-ups got disgustingly mushy.

"So I was hoping to give you some inside information on some of the estates we might someday have to try to get inside," said Frank after dinner, Meghan safely ensconced in another room with an unused potions set of Neville's. "We're allowed in now – they try to deny us, but they can't stonewall forever – but in time of war, they can refuse us access unless we're in immediate danger of death."

"And most of them would rather help that along than prevent it, at least for us," Sirius finished.

"Indeed," said Alice. "Also, you'll find this helpful if you're ever called to one of them for something seemingly routine. The owners sometimes find it amusing to call for a Ministry official, but 'accidentally' forget to disable their security."

"All right," said Aletha, setting down her fork. "Who has the most outlandish security system in your experience?"

"Malfoy," Alice said immediately. "Definitely Malfoy."

"Oh, Nott's up there," Frank objected. "Those wards – nasty things, with freezing and burning charms laid on them alternately..."

"Yes, but Malfoy wins for outlandish." Alice held her hand out a little higher than the level of the table. "A pair of huge... well, *I'm* sure they're wolves. Frank thinks they're just transfigured dogs."

"Why would he go to the trouble of getting wolves, if he was going to alter them anyway?" Frank countered.

"Alter them?" Sirius asked.

"They look like werewolves," said Frank. "Which gave me quite a start, the first time I saw them. Luckily, that was one of the times Malfoy was being polite. He'd activated the charm on his front walk, so they couldn't get at me. But I've been there once or twice when they weren't restrained at all."

"They run loose on the grounds?" Aletha asked, sounding appalled. "What if they got away?"

"Oh, they're collared," Alice said. "Controlling collars, probably with the bracelets around Malfoy's wrist, and tied to the house and grounds, so that they can't run off. But once you step onto his property, they're there within a minute at most." She frowned. "It's odd. They'll growl at you if they can't get onto the path, and when the charm's inactive they'll come right up and walk beside you, but they've never offered me harm."

"Probably because Malfoy knows even he'd have a hard time weaseling out of hurting an Auror," Sirius said.

Frank shrugged. "Possibly. Whatever the reason, I'm grateful."

"Out of curiosity," Aletha said. "Have you ever managed to see sexes? Are they a mixed pair, or the same?"

"Mixed pair, definitely," said Alice. "Probably mates, it's only logical if they work together that way. Why do you ask?"

"Has Neville written you anything about a boy named Ray?"

"Yes, and his pet... ah, I see." Alice nodded in satisfaction. "That does make sense. I suppose he uses the same spells to keep her tame that his father uses on the household guardians..."

Ray seemed nervous over the next few days. "A letter from home," he explained over dinner one night. "Nothing terribly wrong, just my father being my father."

"A controlling, sadistic bastard with a fetish for torture?" Harry asked.

Ray gaped in mock astonishment. "It's almost like you know him."

"I know of him. That's enough."

Amen.

"If he's that bad, why'd your mum never leave?" Ron asked. "Why doesn't she leave now?"

Ray's smile twisted but remained genuine. "He has... a hold over Mother. That's all she'd ever tell me. But she's always watched out for me, kept me out of his way when he gets bad. Not that it was particularly hard – he cares for his precious bloodline, not for me. I don't think I ever called him Dad, because I never saw him until I could say 'Father.'"

Neville shook his head. "I can't even imagine it," he said. "I always knew who my dad was, even when I was too little to talk. I would crawl over to him when he got home and pull on his robes until he picked me up."

"Neville, you're odd," said Ron. "I wouldn't tell anyone that about myself. If it were true," he added hastily.

Neville grinned self-deprecatingly. "Mum and Gran love to embarrass me with these old stories. I just learned not to be embarrassed."

Ron looked intrigued. "How?"

"It's as if there are different rooms in my mind. I have to step out of the front room, which is where I react right away, and go through the hallway into the back, where I can stop and think about what's going on..."

Harry ducked under the table, leaving Ron and Neville to their conversation. **Hello**, Zelda said cheerily as Harry stepped carefully over her paws. **Going to talk to my graceless brother?**

"Yeah." Harry emerged again and seated himself next to Ray. "You call your father Dad sometimes," he said. "I'm sure I've heard you do it at least once."

Ray shrugged. "He likes to hear it once in a while, but not much. He says informality is like rudeness, to be used when necessary."

Harry snorted.

"I know." Ray smiled more openly. "I suppose you could say that..."

Before you say it, a little more meat, please?

"Beef or pork?"

Beef, please.

Ray speared a large chunk from his stew, plopped it onto a bread plate, and bent down to set it on the floor. "As I was saying," he said, sitting up, "my father in public is a very different person from my dad in private."

Under the table, Zelda began to cough. **I'm fine**, she sent hastily. **Just some juice... went down the wrong way...**

Harry gritted his teeth. He was sick of these little fractions of ideas that never sat still long enough to be worked into a proper whole.

Mithrandir –

The chicken-toed has called upon his favorite son, offering both a copy and the original, though the original is somewhat warped. The apple is still the primary goal, but Arthur is also very desirable. Ralph will inform you if information is sought through him.

Your friends in lowplaces

Albus Dumbledore held out the note to Fawkes to dispose of, then selected a sherbet lemon from a dish. The familiar sour sweetness brought him no joy.

He had little trouble deciphering the message, though he doubted it would have meaning to any other. *I have who, and who else, and what they seek, all within the same letter. Though some of it, I knew already.*

And a painful reminder of what I know, and what I cannot act upon. What I have been forbidden to act upon, by those with the most right to speak.

Dumbledore straightened in his chair, an idea coming to him.

But now..

Now there is one with not only the wish to speak, but with the ability. And with other abilities which may serve well to amend a problem I have

spent years wondering how to solve without an undeserved death. If the situation is presented in precisely the right manner...

Yes. Yes, I believe there is a chance.

He rose to set the preparations in train.

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True Colors

Chapter 8: The Best-Laid Plans

Albus Dumbledore sorted through the parchments on his desk in a manner that would have looked random to an onlooker.

For good reason. It was.

The sound is all I need to make it seem to anyone listening that I am merely shuffling scrolls. If someone is watching, they will more likely think that I have lost what little sanity I am credited with.

Though he might in fact be mad for attempting something of this complexity, even with his background in the studies of Legilimency and Occlumency.

A human mind is by nature busy, or a portion of it is. The “monkey mind”, I have heard it called. The mind that must be doing something. The trick to Occlumency, and to what I am now attempting, is either to quiet that mind or to keep it occupied with some trivial task, to free the rest of the mind to focus.

He focused his will on quiet, on stillness, on receptivity. Anywhere but here, it would have been a very dangerous act—any passing Dark creature might have sensed his openness and taken advantage—but the Head’s office at Hogwarts was shielded by the innate magic of the castle itself.

And as that magic has its root in those who devoted their lives to the school, and have never really left...

He doubted that any Dark creature could find him here. Even the one he was beginning to suspect was nearer than he would like. But the one he was trying to find...

Though is “one” the correct term any longer, I wonder?

But speculation would not get him any nearer to his goal. He set aside all thoughts and wonderings and let his mind open.

Among the parchments on his desk, his left hand closed over one in particular. It was a scrap torn from a larger document, with three words written on it in a scrawling, childish hand. ‘Longbottoms attacked tonight’.

The people who sent this message risked their own lives for friends, and not only their own, but another very precious to them. They have done so again and again over the intervening years. They will not deny me what I need now.

Especially when it could be the key to their own lives as well.

A wisp of a touch. Another. Startlement. Fear.

Do not be afraid. It is I.

Disbelief. Worry. And buried very deeply, hope.

Hold to that. It may yet be possible.

Urgency, overriding all else.

Yes. I would not have done this were there any other way. Tell me what you can.

Images. A letter, thrown into a fireplace. A hand reaching for the poker. Flames, leaping high under the prodding of the logs, their light casting the green leather about the pale wrist into harsh relief. Letters and words rising from the parchment into the flames, visible only to those with eyes to see.

And those who can ask them for aid.

Dumbledore read and sighed. *I had hoped this would not be.*

Uncertainty, tinged with sadness.

It is sad, Dumbledore agreed, but we may yet prevail. If we can trick him...make him think that he has won, while safeguarding those who will surely find a way into places they should not...

Weary agreement, then curiosity.

If we work together, and recruit extra help... Dumbledore imagined the people he had in mind, and joy sparked high. *We may yet prevail.*

Hope returned, no longer buried but strong and proud, and with it came resolve.

We will prevail. Indeed. Dumbledore smiled. *In that spirit, I will say farewell, and may our next conversation be face to face.*

A sense of mischief, and a whiff of pride, before the connection was broken.

Dumbledore opened his eyes and shook his head over the mess he'd made of his desk. "Dear, dear," he said aloud. "Where my mind will go when I let it wander..."

Fawkes made a chortling sound to himself.

History may judge me harshly, but I care not. Dumbledore began to stack his parchments neatly once more. *The truth will out eventually, and even if it never does, the outcome will be the one I desire, with no one harmed but those whose own actions have brought it upon them.*

What more can any man desire?

"ZELDAAAAAA!"

Ignoring Ray's anguished yell, Zelda continued to prance around the common room, tail and head held high, jaws firmly clamped around bright green fabric.

"Awww," said Lavender Brown, giggling. "They've got little yellow smiley faces on them."

Ray tackled Zelda, holding her down with his legs. "Give—me—that," he said through clenched teeth, wrestling his boxers out of her mouth. A snort from behind him made him glare over his shoulder. "You *could* give me a hand, instead of standing there laughing," he snapped at Harry, Ron, and Neville.

"We could," Ron said. "But it's more fun to laugh at you."

"I'll remember that." Ray tore the boxers free with one final tug. "Bad Zelda," he said, thumping her on the side with a fist. "Stay out of my wardrobe."

Zelda sniffed and leapt up as he climbed off her, shaking her fur back into place, then trotting over to the first-year girls, who made much of her, glancing back at the boys and giggling. **It's your own fault for leaving the door open**, she sent back towards Ray and the other boys.

"But you know better," Ray said under his breath, plopping down in one of the armchairs and stuffing the shorts into his pocket.

If I was really what I look like, I wouldn't have. I'm not the only one with a part to play here—

Zelda's voice cut off abruptly. Harry sat up. "She all right?" he asked Ray.

"She's fine. Just thought of something more interesting." Ray slouched in his chair, the part of his face that was still visible carnation pink. "I can't believe she did that."

"It's like she said," said Neville. "If it really is dangerous for people to know what she is, then she has to act like she's just a pet, or people will get suspicious."

Ray gave Neville a long look. "Has anyone ever told you you make too much sense?"

Neville nodded. "Mum says that sometimes," he said. "And Meghan Black, but only when she's annoyed with me."

"Only when you've stopped her doing something mad," said Harry.

"Just for once," Ray said, pulling his legs up onto the chair, "just for once, I'd like to meet someone who doesn't make any sense at all."

"Why?" asked Ron.

"Because I think they'd be fun to know." Ray squirmed around until his knees dangled over one arm of the chair. "And I'd like to hear what they think about things."

"I could introduce you to my sister's friend," Ron said, at the same moment Harry said, "I know this girl a year below us..."

They stopped and looked at each other.

"Magical," Harry said.

Ron waved his hand beside his head. "Blonde."

"Big eyes." Harry mimed a look of surprise.

Ron rolled his own eyes. "Says the weirdest things."

Harry held up one finger, then two, then three.

"Luna Lovegood," they said at the same moment.

Neville applauded them quietly.

"Luna Lovegood?" Ray sat up. "That's a pretty name. What's she like?"

"Funny," Harry said. "Usually when she doesn't mean to be."

"The kids in the village near where we live call her Loony Lovegood," Ron added. "They think we're weird enough—she's a few steps beyond even us."

"Her dad edits *The Quibbler*," said Harry.

"You mean that crazy magazine that prints all sorts of strange rubbish about the Ministry hiding new kinds of magical creatures?" Ray grinned. "I like her already. What does her mum do?"

"She doesn't," Neville said quietly. "She's dead."

Harry and Ron both turned to look at him. "I didn't know you knew her," Harry said.

"I don't. But when you mentioned *The Quibbler*, I remembered a call Dad went out on a year or two ago. The DMLE thought the way she died was strange, and they wanted an Auror to check out the scene and make sure there hadn't been any Dark magic to it."

"Was there?" Ron asked avidly.

Neville nodded. "Nothing Dad could identify, though," he said. "She was scrying, looking at things magically, and the bowl she was using just—exploded." He made his hands into fists at chest level, then sent them flying apart. "Her daughter was in the room with her, but she only got hit with a few of the shards, right here." He touched his arm.

"Because her mum sheltered her," Harry said, remembering how pale and sad Luna had been when he'd seen her a month later. "She saved her life."

"We never knew," said Ron, shaking his head. "We just knew she'd died in an accident with one of her spells. Luna never said she was *there* ..."

"She wouldn't." Ray had his eyes closed. "Not unless she thought it was something you'd need to know about. She wouldn't be afraid that you'd pity her, or that you'd laugh at her. She never is. She thinks what she thinks, even if no one else in the world does." He opened his eyes. "Right?"

"That's scary," said Ron. "How did you do that?"

"What?"

"Do you know her?" Harry asked. "That's exactly what she's like. She never thinks about what she'll sound like before she says anything. She just says it."

"I'm a good guesser, then." Ray slid out of the chair. "I'm going to put these in the wash. Be back in a bit."

"It's sort of strange that we both knew her, though," Harry said to Ron as Ray headed for the stairs. "Is your sister Luna's age?"

"Yeah. Ginny. She'll be at Hogwarts next year." Ron sighed. "And she thinks it's amazing that I know you, and she keeps dropping big hints in her letters that she wants to meet you."

"Is she going to get all gushy?" Harry asked with a feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach.

"Nah. She'll probably start blushing and not say anything for hours, just stare at you."

Harry shrugged. "People stare at me all the time anyway."

"She got the same way over one of our neighbors when she was eight," Ron said reminiscently. "But it went away after a while. You know how girls are."

I beg your pardon? said Zelda, rearing up to rest her front paws on the back of Ron's chair. Ron yelped and jumped a foot.

Ray vaulted over the banister, loped over to their group, and dropped back into his chair. "OK," he said resignedly, looking around at the chuckling Harry and Neville, the sniggering Zelda, and the red-faced Ron, "what'd I miss?"

"This doesn't make much sense," Sirius said over his shoulder to Frank Longbottom as they climbed the stairs at the Hog's Head. "Why couldn't we meet up at the school?"

"My guess would be, he doesn't want us seen," said Frank.

"Who would he be worried about seeing us?"

"Who knows," Alice put in from farther down the stairs. "Why don't we keep walking and find out?"

"Frank, you married a genius," Sirius said.

"I know. She reminds me every day." Frank ducked away from Alice's swing.

Aletha lifted her head as she heard footsteps approaching. "That's them," she said surely.

"How do you know?" Molly Weasley asked from across the room.

"Would you know your husband's walk if you heard him coming down the hall?"

"I think so..."

"You think so?" Arthur Weasley raised an amused eyebrow at his wife.

Molly smiled. "Yes, of course I would."

"So do I." Aletha pulled the door open.

"What are you doing here?" Sirius said in surprise.

"I'm glad to see you too." Aletha corralled her husband and pulled him over for a kiss. "Promise me you won't say anything right away," she whispered in his ear. "I know you'll want to."

"All right, I promise. Why are we whispering?"

"Because I'm too lazy to put up a Privacy Spell." Aletha trailed a hand along Sirius' jaw, then returned to her seat, pulling over another chair.

Sirius went to shake hands with Arthur Weasley, who he'd met a few times since returning to the Ministry, and be introduced to Molly before returning to sit beside Aletha. "So why are we all here?" he asked the room at large. "I know who invited me here, and he doesn't seem to have arrived yet..."

A flash of fire made Molly gasp and Arthur jump. Albus Dumbledore released Fawkes' tail and nodded to the six people in the room. "Thank you for coming," he said, conjuring himself a chair and Fawkes a perch. "I apologize for the cryptic notes, and for the somewhat inconvenient place and time, but I believe the matter to be sufficiently grave."

"What is it about?" Frank asked directly. "Not the children?"

"Not precisely. Your children are all well, apart from the usual mischief common to that age. But it is in reference to your children that I wish to speak with all of you." Dumbledore's face was somber. "Your children, and their enemy. And I do mean enemy, rather than a schoolyard rival."

"Enemy?" Molly Weasley scoffed. "Nonsense, what possible enemy could—" She broke off, looking at Sirius. "Oh, dear heavens. You—you can't mean—"

"I wish that I did not," said Dumbledore. "But I do. Lord Voldemort."

The Weasleys both shuddered. Alice looked closely at Dumbledore. "You're sure," she said.

"I am."

Alice scowled. "I'd hoped we'd finished with him."

"So had I," said Sirius. "How did he survive what happened with Harry?"

"Through a number of measures, Sirius, all of which have since been...removed."

"Removed?" Aletha said. "As in, no longer working?"

"Exactly so."

Arthur Weasley closed his mouth. "Good," he said fervently. "Do you need our help somehow in dealing with him? I don't know what I could possibly offer, but whatever it is, you'll have it for the asking..."

"Make no promises until you hear me out," Dumbledore said. "What I am asking may tax you to the utmost."

"I lived through the war," Molly said. "I lost my brothers to it. Nothing would be too much to ask to keep that from happening to anyone else."

Aletha winced and looked away.

"It can't be coincidence that we're all parents or guardians of students," Alice said. "Gryffindor first year boys, at that. And one of them the person Voldemort would be most interested in, if he really has returned—I don't doubt you, Headmaster, but I'd so much rather it not be true."

"As would I, Alice. And you have touched on the point I hesitated to bring up." Dumbledore took a deep breath. "If Lord Voldemort is to be stopped, he must be exposed. The easiest way to expose him is to induce him to show himself. And the simplest way to do that is to seem to offer him something that he wants. Something...or someone."

Silence blanketed the room.

Severus Snape stopped outside the room and ran over his mental checklist once more. His story was unshakeable, consisting as it did almost entirely of truth. His excuses might not save him from punishment, but when had they ever? Most important of all, his suggestions, carefully phrased to seem helpful, were ready.

I had hoped I would never have to do this again. But nothing in life is easy.

He knocked.

“C-c-come in!”

“Quirinus,” Severus acknowledged, opening the door. “I hope I am not intruding.”

“N-not at all.” Quirrell’s weak eyes darted from Severus to the small bag he carried. “Is it s-something about lessons? I haven’t m-missed a m-meeting...”

“No, nothing about lessons.” Severus closed the door behind himself. “May I sit down?”

“Of course.” Quirrell flicked his wand nervously at a chair. It rocketed out from its place and careened towards Severus, who caught it neatly. “Oh, forgive me, my n-nerves are on edge...”

“I see.” Severus seated himself and waited for Quirrell to do the same. “I have come to apologize.”

“Apologize? T-to me?”

“Not precisely.” Severus let his eyes linger beside Quirrell’s head for one moment, then another.

Soft, mocking laughter filled the air, and Quirrell flinched. Inwardly, so did Severus. *As much as I hate to look the fool, I had hoped that I would in this case...*

“You see, Quirinus,” whispered a voice Severus knew well, “already they begin to gather.”

“My lord.” Severus bowed his head. “I rejoice to find you again, though in less than ideal circumstances.”

“You show a talent for stating the obvious, Severus, as always. What have you brought for me?”

“A restorative, my lord. Highly recommended for those in your...unusual circumstances.” Severus opened his bag and took out the vial filled with the potion he’d brewed. *If I had acted on my own, I would have poisoned this, but instead I trust another. So strange.*

Quirrell accepted the potion in shaking hands and drank it off. “Ahhh,” sighed the voice of Lord Voldemort. “Tell me, Severus, what of these stories that you denounced me, that you turned against me to become a spy?”

“I convinced Dumbledore to believe my pitiful tale,” Severus said, curling his lip in contempt. *I do not even have to act. Merely allow my true feelings at this hideous wreck to surface.* “He gladly accepted a wayward sheep back into the fold, and gave me not only my life and my freedom, but work here at Hogwarts, and little by little his trust. I have ten years’ worth of observations about him to report to you, my lord, and free access to any and all areas of the castle. Will this be of use to you?”

Again Voldemort laughed. “First a statement of the obvious, then a question which can have only one answer. Has your wit deteriorated over these years, Severus?”

“I would trust your judgment over my own on that matter, my lord. Those with the capacity to appreciate wit in this place are few.”

“Indeed.” Quirrell’s eyes were shut, his face slack. His mouth did not move as Voldemort’s voice continued. “So, if you have such free access to the castle, what of the forbidden corridor on the third floor?”

“I am learning, bit by bit, how to defeat the safeguards behind that door, my lord. I created one of them myself, and I have knowledge of most of the others. Perhaps, together, we have all that is needed.” *Except for the final hurdle, the one you could never clear...*

“Excellent.” Quirrell’s head nodded. “Tell me, then, how does one pass the dog?”

They spoke for most of an hour, discussing the nature of the different puzzles and tasks between the Philosopher’s Stone and one who might desire it. “And what of the room beyond your own?” Voldemort asked finally. “What lies there?”

“The Stone, my lord, as far as I know. Dumbledore may have set a final guard, but surely it will not be much. I can think of no wizard but you who could master this maze unaided, and Dumbledore believes you still defeated and far away.”

“Are you certain?” Voldemort’s tone was considering. “Why should he go to so much trouble to guard the Stone if he does not believe I might try to steal it?”

“To dissuade or hold back troublesome students, my lord. And those of your followers who might think it a sure path into your favor to win you the single most prized item in the wizarding world. Besides...” Severus Occluded his mind even more firmly than usual for the lie he was about to tell. “Dumbledore’s magic is beginning to fail. He hides it from the world, but the teachers have all seen it. He cannot last much longer.”

Excellent,” Voldemort purred. “I shall burn him and his phoenix together, and mix the ashes with the blood of Harry Potter...”

Severus bent down again to close his bag, hiding his shudder.

“I don’t like it,” Sirius said for probably the thirty-third time.

“Neither do I,” said Aletha patiently, shaking out the folds in the best tablecloth, “but Dumbledore has a point. Harry’s grown up knowing he’s a hero, and even if he hadn’t, as soon as he found out about him and Voldemort, his personality means he would feel personally responsible for anyone and anything Voldemort went after. Something like this, with the possibility that Voldemort could not only steal a valuable object but come back to power and start killing people again? We’d have to chain him to the floor to keep him away.”

Sirius reached across to catch his end of the tablecloth. “Yes, but weaving this whole intricate plot around the possibility—”

“Probability,” Aletha corrected, smoothing the fold wrinkles flat. “You know him as well as I do. Give him even a hint of an adventure, especially one involving Voldemort, and he’ll be all over it.”

“Do you really think he’d risk his friends?” Sirius said hopefully.

Aletha chuckled. “I think you’d have to chain *them* to the floor to keep them away. Think about who they are.”

“I try not to, for one of them.” Sirius shook his head, coming around the end of the table. “That still makes no sense, Letha. None at all. Harry making friends with Lucius Malfoy’s son...”

“And you claim not to be biased.” Aletha led the way into the kitchen.

“I’m not—look, this isn’t about his being pureblood. The Weasleys are pureblood, and look at them. I’m talking about what’s it called. Inheritance. Bloodlines.”

“Heredity?”

“Yes, that. Heredity and environment.”

“What big words you use, Grandfather.”

Sirius caught Aletha’s arm and punched her lightly on the shoulder. “Stop it. You know what I’m trying to say.”

“Yes, I think I do.” Aletha pulled on Sirius’ arm to bring them closer together. “You’re saying that hereditarily, Lucius Malfoy’s son ought to have been a pureblood snob. And his environment should have enhanced that until he was totally unbearable.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Sirius sighed. “Why do you always say what I want to?”

“Because I know how your so-called mind works after all these years?”

“That could be it.”

Aletha leaned upwards and caught Sirius’ lip between her teeth. A few moments passed without any speech at all.

“So what were we talking about?” Aletha asked dreamily when they’d finished.

“I was saying it was odd how Malfoy’s son appears to have beaten the odds.”

“You did it.”

“Yeah, well...”

“I think you’re just worried about your position as the only one ever to break free of the purebloods.”

“Ha.” Sirius considered it. “Well, maybe a little.”

Aletha tapped his nose with a finger. “Naughty. Wouldn’t it be better if all the pureblood kids could do that?”

“Look, woman, I already know what I think. Stop trying to confuse me with the facts...”

Harry raced with Ron and Neville across the marshy lawn, his feet squelching in the soggy ground. For the last two days, the temperature had been unusually warm, and almost all the snow had melted. Ray was out in front of them, Zelda even farther ahead.

“Why can he run so fast?” Ron panted.

“Don’t know,” Neville gasped from a few paces behind. “Practice?”

“Maybe.” Harry pressed a hand to his side as they slowed down near Hagrid’s hut. “Ray, how come you can run so fast?”

Nothing like being direct," Neville said under his breath.

Ray shrugged. "Just can," he said in a too-casual tone. "Never thought about it much. Why?"

"Just wondering," Harry said, matching Ray's tone. "Seeing as how you beat us every time we run anywhere."

"Zelda beats everyone," Ron said, giving the wolf a friendly knee to the side. "Four legs and all that."

Power to the paws, Zelda said with a smug wolf-grin. **Are we going inside, or are we going to stand out in the wet all day?**

Harry went up the steps and knocked, and a few moments later, they were all hanging wet cloaks by Hagrid's fire to dry. Ray turned his inside out and held it over Zelda so she could shake before he hung it up.

"Are yeh controllin' her when she does tha'?" Hagrid asked Ray with a faint frown.

"Only a little. She's been trained not to shake indoors."

"Tha's wha' I thought." Hagrid took the teakettle off the hob and poured the boiling water into five mugs and a saucer. "Who's a pretty girl, then," he said to Zelda, who was sniffing the air beside the table hopefully. "Don' yeh put tha' nose up here, though, these aren' fer you." He indicated the pile of cakes on the table, which looked as if they held chocolate chunks instead of the usual raisins. "New recipe I'm tryin'. Wouldn' be good fer her."

"Do you have anything she can eat, then?" Neville asked. "It wouldn't be good manners to eat in front of her."

"Good manners?" Ron looked at his friend strangely. "Neville, she's an animal."

Humph.

"Mum says good manners aren't ever wasted," said Neville virtuously.

"Besides, if we don't give her something to eat, she'll sit there and look at us," Harry added, helping himself to a cake.

"And the chocolate won't hurt her," Ray finished, taking two cakes in one hand and picking up Zelda's saucer of tea with the other. "She eats it all the time."

"She does?" Hagrid frowned. "How much?"

"As much as she can wheedle out of me." Ray set the saucer on the floor and balanced the cake on its edge.

Zelda put her nose near it, then sat down to wait for it to cool. **Not even to show off for Hagrid am I burning my tongue**, she said. **Though it does smell really good.**

Hagrid shrugged. "Well, I s'pose she's really summat special, then."

"Always has been," Ray said fondly. "Always will be."

"So what've you been doing?" Ron asked, taking two cakes off the pile as well.

"Oh, this'n'that..."

The boys knew from experience that "this'n'that" for Hagrid could have more adventure attached than any of their parents' work. "Like what?" Harry asked.

"Oh, clearin' out some o' the deadfall in the Forest, gettin' it ready fer spring. Checkin' on the creatures—unicorns' foalin' time is soon, thestrals too..."

Stories about Hagrid's adventures in the Forest took up nearly an hour. Harry had just checked his watch with a pang of conscience about his undone mountain of homework when Hagrid said, "And then there was the odd chappie in the pub las' night."

"Odd chappie in the pub?" Ray repeated. "How was he odd?"

"Kep' his hood up, so's I couldn' see his face, I s'pose. Couldn't'a seen it anyway, I was that drunk. He helped wi' that, though, so he ought'a known abou' it."

"Did he buy you drinks?" Neville asked.

"Well, if he didn', someone who looked jus' like him did." Hagrid chuckled. "Don' know how I got back here afterwards. Don' really remember much at all, come to think."

"What did you talk about?" said Harry.

"Women, jobs...said he worked at the Ministry, at Regulation and Control..."

"Of Magical Creatures?" Ray said.

"Yeah." Hagrid's brow was furrowed. "I tol' him abou' what I do, all the animals I take care of...he seemed interested in Fluffy, fer some reason..."

Ron choked on a sip of tea. Neville sat up straighter. Zelda's lapping paused.

"What did you tell him about Fluffy?" Harry asked carefully.

Hagrid shrugged. "Not t' much, jus' wha' he eats, how I clean up after him, how I take him around... yeh remember, I tol' yeh 'bout it already, how all yeh have ter do is play him a bit o' music..." His eyes widened as he realized what he'd said.

Oh no, said Zelda.

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True Colors

Chapter 9: Guess Who

Harry woke with a near-silent gasp. He lay on an old mattress on the floor of a stone-walled room, his mind spinning madly. *Quirrell—the Stone—Ray—Portkey—*

"If you wake up and you don't know where you are or how you got there, calm yourself down, then think it through," Padfoot's voice echoed in the back of his mind. *"Go back over the last things you remember. It might give you a clue."*

Harry focused on his breathing, on making it deep and even, and his thoughts settled with almost magical speed.

Last things I remember. We went after the Stone, because McGonagall wouldn't believe that someone was after it, and the Floo was down so we couldn't get a message out. Ray sang Fluffy to sleep, and Neville told us how to beat the Devil's Snare, but not before it caught his leg all wrong and twisted his ankle, so he stayed in the key chamber while the rest of us went on. Ron played us through the chessboard but got taken, so we had to leave him there, and Ray and Zelda and I passed the troll and got into the room with all the little bottles...

"It's a logic puzzle," Ray said in Harry's memory, his face paler than usual in the strange light of the purple and black flames. "Are you any good at them?"

"No. You?"

"No—but I know who is." Ray set the scroll on the floor. "Go to it, Zel."

Yes, oh high and mighty master of the universe. Zelda leaned down to peruse the lines, and within a few minutes had the potions sorted out. **This one on the end will get us back through the purple,** she said, pointing it out with her nose. **And this little one gets you onward, through the black. Who's going where?**

"I'm going on," Harry said in a firm tone. "There's only enough for one in that thing, and if it's Voldemort in there, I have to face him myself. You two go back. It looks like it can be shared."

"Yes, but it doesn't have to." Ray approached the black flames. "Watch."

He stuck his hand into them. Harry sucked in a breath, but Ray's skin remained porcelain-fair, and no sign of pain appeared on his face. "It was a gift," he said, pulling his hand out again. "Given to my dad, passed down to me. It's why that explosion didn't hurt me, the day Ron finally figured out Zel really could talk, and why I drink my tea so hot. I've never been burned in my life, and usual fire I can control, keep it from burning other people..."

"But this isn't usual," Harry finished. "Is there any way I can convince you to go back instead?"

"Not if you're going on, no."

You should have been a Hufflepuff, Zelda griped, coming to rub against her brother's legs. **Be careful, you two. Please. I don't want to have to explain to Ron and Neville why I left you behind to die.**

"You're not leaving us behind to die." Harry knelt to hug Zelda. "You watch. Tomorrow morning, we'll be laughing over how scared we were, and telling bad jokes on each other like always."

I hope so. Zelda rested her head on Harry's shoulder and licked his ear once, then turned to Ray and reared up, placing her paws on his shoulders. They looked into each other's eyes for a long moment before Ray gently kissed Zelda's nose.

"I'll see you afterwards," he said as she dropped down to all fours. "Old Auntie."

Zelda stuck out her tongue at him, which was more impressive on a wolf than on a human. **Just pour the potion, you young whippersnapper.**

The potion was duly poured into Ray's cupped hands, and Zelda lapped it up and darted back through the purple flames, her muttered **Coldcoldcoldcoldcold** making both boys grin a bit. Then Harry picked up the smallest bottle and drained it (silently repeating what Zelda'd said), and Ray followed him through the black flames.

And Quirrell was there—Quirrell, how weird is that, we were all so sure it had to be Snape—and he pulled Ray aside and made me look in that magic mirror again, and the Stone dropped into my pocket, and I tried to hex him but he disarmed me and made my wand into a Portkey and summoned me over to him—

And now I'm here.

Wherever here is.

A questing hand found a lump still in his trousers pocket, but nothing in his robes. *Philosopher's Stone, but no wand. Brilliant.*

He sighed aloud in frustration.

"Finally, he's awake!" snapped an unfamiliar girl's voice. "Hey, you! Want to come over here and give us a hand?"

"Don't be rude," said another girl's voice, but this one Harry knew. "He's a friend of mine."

"Luna?" Harry rolled over quickly to see, by the glow of a candle stub on the makeshift brick-and-board bookcase at the end of the room, that Luna Lovegood was indeed sitting in a rickety chair at the other end of his double mattress, her ankles roped to its legs and her wrists behind her back, probably tied there. Beside her in the second of the room's three chairs sat another girl, similarly restrained, whose furious expression and bright red hair gave him a clue to her identity.

"You're Ron's sister, aren't you?" he asked her, standing up and hurrying to their sides as quickly as he could with his legs still tingling from lack of use. "Ginny?"

"That's my name, and who might you be?" Ginny eyed him suspiciously as he went to one knee in front of Luna. "You're no Malfoy, that's for sure..."

"This is Harry Potter, Ginny," said Luna. "Harry, this is Ginny Weasley, but I think you knew that already."

"Yeah." Harry started untying Luna's ankles. "I'd say nice to meet you, but I don't think any of us want to be here. Where are we? Other than a grotty cellar somewhere?"

"Malfoy Manor, I think," said Luna, as Ginny was now blushing hard and looking determinedly away from Harry. "At least, the man who took us certainly looks like you described Ray in your letters, Harry. What animal does he control with his bracelet?"

"I don't know, but I'd bet it's some kind of wolf, and it'll probably be..." Harry stopped, remembering what Ray had told him about telling other people Zelda was human. "Smart," he finished. "Smart enough to think through puzzles, and maybe even take orders, or decide not to. Which is what the collar's for." Luna's ankles came free, and he ducked under the dented card table beside her to work on her wrists. "But what would Ray's dad want with you?"

"He said something about reclaiming the lost generation," Luna said, looking puzzled. "I don't know quite what he means. We weren't lost—we were in Ginny's back garden, watching the gnomes, I was showing her what Dad got me for my birthday..."

"He means our parents have 'betrayed' us by raising us to believe Muggles are human," Ginny said, her tone low and breathy. "And he's going to 'fix' us." The sneer quotes were audible. "One of us, at least. Whichever one his precious *son* decides he'd like to marry when he's of age. And the other one is going to be some kind of sacrifice."

"Over my dead body," said Harry through his teeth, taking the last loop of rope off Luna's wrists. She got up without having to be told and started walking around, flexing her fingers and rolling her shoulders. Harry scooted over to start on Ginny.

"Yes, well, I think that's the idea." Ginny turned a little more away from Harry, though maybe that was just to present him with a better angle at her wrists. "You are The Boy Who Lived, after all. He seems to think killing you, along with whichever of us his dear Draco doesn't want, will bring his Dark Lord back from whatever hell he's gone off to."

"The sad part is, he might be right." Harry hissed under his breath as a fingernail snagged on a bit of rope. "Padfoot says Dumbledore doesn't think Voldemort's really dead—" Ginny jumped and half-turned to stare at him, and he sighed. "How am I supposed to fight him if I'm scared of his name? It's just a bunch of letters, and it doesn't mean anything. Not the way most names do. Like mine means 'leader of armies.'" He snorted, unlooping the last bit of rope from Ginny's wrist. "You two want to be an army?"

"I'd be in an army you led," said Luna, coming to sit down in her chair again. "My name means 'moon,' but I think you probably knew that. My mum named me, because she said the night I was conceived, the moon was full and round and so big she felt she could reach up and touch it. What about you, Ginny?"

"My full name is Ginevra," Ginny said, massaging her wrists as Harry came around to her front to work on her ankles. "Mum says it's another form of Guinevere, like Arthur's queen." She smiled a bit. "Dad likes to call me his little princess. But it means 'fair one,' and I do burn awfully in the summertime if I don't use Mum's sunblocking potion every day. So I guess it fits."

"What about your other friends, Harry?" Luna asked. "The ones you've written me about? Ron, and Ray, and Neville? Meghan I know, it means 'pearl,' and you call her that sometimes as a nickname, but what about the boys?"

"Neville... I'm not sure." Harry pulled the rope free from Ginny's ankles and tossed it aside. "Ditto for Ron..."

"Advisor to rulers," Ginny said promptly. "Fred and George tease him about it all the time since he made friends with you."

Harry looked up at her in surprise. "I didn't know that."

"He doesn't tell you everything." Ginny's cheeks darkened again, but she didn't turn away this time. "And Ray—I assume that's Draco?"

Harry nodded. "And that means 'dragon,' obviously, like Hogwarts' motto. His wolf, Zelda, I think he said once it was Griselda for long, but I don't know what that means."

"Patient gray one," said Luna. "Mum used to tell me a story about a queen with that name, who had a lot of bad things happen to her, but she was patient through it all and finally she got what she really deserved."

"Well, Zelda's gray, all right. Patient... not so much." Harry laughed. "She can be a bit of a nag when you're not doing what she wants."

"How can a wolf nag?" Ginny asked, frowning.

"Wait until you meet her. You'll see." Harry looked around the room. "How did we get to talking about names? Shouldn't we be looking for a way out of here?"

"I don't know if there is one," said Luna. "When Mr. Malfoy put us in here, he said this room had held people for longer than either of us had been alive, and they had never escaped." She peered around curiously. "I suppose you could live in here. It does have a toilet. And I need one. Pardon me."

"You *could* live in here, but I don't know who'd want to," Ginny said as Luna shut the door of the tiny cubicle, which also held a shower and sink, behind herself. "Though I suppose 'they never escaped' means they didn't have much of a choice. Whoever they were."

Are, corrected a woman's voice.

"Who said that?" Harry looked around for the speaker.

I'm outside the door, Harry, and yes, I know who you are. You too, Ginny. Please don't shout, voices carry very well around here.

Harry ran to the door and knelt down beside it, Ginny a few steps behind him. "Who are you?" he said in a low tone. "Can you help us?"

You can call me Calpurnia, for the time being. And yes, I can help you. It's what I've come for. The woman chuckled slightly. **Ah, irony, how I love you. You're in my bedroom, you two—or is it three?**

"It will be in a moment," said Harry as the toilet flushed. "Are you one of the people Malfoy said had never escaped from here?"

Yes, but we're hoping to change that tonight. With your help, Harry, and yours, Ginny, and Luna too. And several other people, but you three are important just now. Harry, I take it you don't have your wand any longer?

"No, Quirrell took it." Harry frowned—something about this situation felt familiar, but he couldn't place it. "I do have the Philosopher's Stone, though. Why didn't he take that? Or Malfoy?"

Overconfidence. It's their greatest weakness. They have you, you have the Stone, they don't feel a need to claim it from you just yet. Also, they're not certain that there isn't a spell on the Stone itself. But I am. And there isn't.

"Which means any time they want it, they can have it," said Ginny as Luna came to join them. "Unless Harry can stop them somehow."

Precisely. Hello, Luna—

Harry blinked. Luna still had her head cocked in a listening attitude, but Calpurnia's voice had cut off for him, and by her startled expression, for Ginny as well. "It's not your ears," he said softly, leaning towards the red-haired girl. "She's talking in your mind, and she can pick who she wants to hear her. It must be something only Luna needs to know."

"In my mind? How—" Ginny shook her head. "No, don't tell me. There's too much weird stuff going on here anyway. Is Ron all right? He has to've been with you, he wouldn't have let you do whatever you did alone. Weasleys are like that."

"He should be fine, he just got hit on the head. It was a giant chess set," Harry added hastily as Ginny looked likely to laugh. "He had to let himself get taken so we could win the game and keep going, and he did."

That's not just a Weasley trait, Calpurnia said. Prewetts do it too. Which means Ron gets it from both sides of the family.

The voice, heard again after a few moments without it, snapped into place in Harry's mind, and he knew why the situation seemed familiar. He'd heard Calpurnia speak before, and often.

I just never knew she was real before.

What about you, Ginny? continued Harry's dream mum from the other side of the door. **What have you learned from your brothers?**

"Plenty," Ginny said hotly. "Why?"

Because there's no magic on this door. The nature of the ones who spend their time in here means that it has to be locked, and unlocked, with a physical key. Lucius Malfoy carries that key on his person at all times, and I'm magically forbidden—as is my husband, who's closest to Malfoy most of the time—to try to steal it. But keys aren't the only way to open locks.

She has a husband. Harry's mind hummed, accepting the information. *That must mean my dream dad is true too. But what about their kids? A brother and sister, both about my age...*

"I'll need something to work with," Ginny said, looking around the room. "Luna, do you still have that pin you were showing me?"

"I think so." Luna reached into a pocket of her robes. "Yes, here it is. Harry, you won't have seen it, Daddy bought it for me at a junk shop in Hogsmeade, isn't it pretty? He thinks it might have belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw herself, it's in a style that was done when she was alive..."

Harry stared at the bronze brooch in the shape of an eagle, enameled in blue, which seemed to have been half-melted, then restored to approximately its original shape. "I don't know about Ravenclaw," he said, "but this belongs to Letha. Or it should."

Oh, does it? I didn't know." Luna sighed. "I suppose I should give it back, then."

"Give it here to start with," Ginny said, holding out her hand. "I need it."

Luna glanced at Harry, who nodded. Undoing the clasp on the back of the brooch, she passed it to Ginny, who took it firmly by the main body and inserted the pin into the keyhole on the door.

"How do you know it belongs to your unfairy ungodmother?" Luna asked Harry quietly.

I beg your pardon? Calpurnia said.

"That's just a stupid thing I call her sometimes," said Harry, trying to ignore the burning sensation in his ears. "Because Muggles call all magical things 'fairy,' but Letha's definitely not a fairy. And she wasn't there when I was born, so she couldn't be godmother. And I thought you knew all that," he added towards the door, crossing his fingers behind his back—a strange woman living in the Malfoys' house wouldn't have any reason to know those things about his family, but his dream mum seemed to know all about them...

I did, but I hadn't heard it put together in quite that way before. And I have to admit, I'm curious as to how you know it's Letha's brooch myself.

"Her mum's wearing it, or one a lot like it, in some old pictures. And Letha said it went missing after her mum died and her dad took off. Actually, she said a lot of things went missing, but this is the only one I've heard about that's ever turned up..."

A loud click made him jump. "And it may just have saved our lives," said Ginny, grinning. "I've got the door unlocked. Calpurnia, can you help us get out of here?"

You girls, yes, but Harry has to stay. The woman's tone was flat and definite. **Tonight is his best chance.**

"Best chance of what?" Harry asked, accepting the brooch from Ginny and sliding it into the pocket opposite the Philosopher's Stone.

Of doing what you've always known you had to do, Calpurnia said. **Voldemort is here, Harry. Here, and for the first time in a very long while, he's vulnerable. Or he will be, after one more thing is done to weaken him. Unfortunately, that 'one more thing' also involves you. Therefore you must be here.**

Harry nodded and swallowed as silently as he could manage.

But you two, Ginny, Luna, you should go home right away, Calpurnia went on. **I can get you as far as the Floo, you're both old enough to use it alone—**

"You want me to—to run away and leave him here?" Ginny bared her teeth at the door. "Weasleys don't leave their friends behind!"

There's a difference between courage and foolhardiness, Ginevra Molly Weasley, and I'd hope you're old enough to see it! Calpurnia snapped back. **You're ten years old, you know next to nothing about magic, you don't even have a wand yet—**

"But we have to stay," said Luna, her voice soft but oddly penetrating as her right hand went to her left arm, rubbing at the scars her mother's scrying bowl had left behind. "Harry will need us. The way he needed Neville, and Ron, and Zelda, to get this far. The way he still needs Ray, and Meghan when it's over. We're his strength, not his weakness. Or maybe we're both. It gets tangled up."

I hadn't thought of that. Calpurnia's voice was musing. **The power he knows not... you do know that much of it, I trust, Harry?**

"Yeah." Harry was grateful he was on his knees, as no one could see how much they were shaking. "Padfoot's told me. As the seventh month dies, to those who have thrice defied him, mark him as an equal, the whole bit."

"What whole bit?" Ginny asked.

"It was a prophecy," said Luna before Harry could answer. "Very strange, but that's how prophecies are. It's why Voldemort attacked Harry, because he thought Harry was the only one who could beat him. And by attacking Harry, he made it true." Her eyes searched Harry up and down, finally resting on his scar. "I think I see," she said. "I think I understand. It's going to hurt a lot, Harry, but then it will be all over and you can be free."

"Luna," Ginny said, "you're making even less sense than usual—and why are we still sitting in here?" she demanded suddenly, looking around. "I got this door unlocked five minutes ago, why haven't we left yet?"

"Wait—" Harry got his hand onto the doorknob before Ginny could turn it. "There's something about Calpurnia I think you should know. She may not look the way you're expecting. Just don't say anything about it, not out loud, you could set off a curse she's under and then she'd die, and I think a couple other people too..."

Smart boy, Harry, Calpurnia said, and the soft sound of footsteps came from the hallway outside. **He's quite right, girls. Think whatever you like about me, but don't speak it aloud. Not yet.** Her mental tone had a definite feeling of long-restrained savagery to it. **Not until this is all over.**

"I don't understand," Ginny began.

"You will," said Luna, standing up. "But you're right about one thing. We should go. It's almost time."

Harry pulled himself to his feet by the doorknob, forcing back his shivers for the sake of the girls. They were both younger than he was, less experienced with magic. He had to protect them, to keep them safe.

But I don't have to do it alone. Calpurnia—my dream mum—she can help me, and my dream dad too, and Ray is around here somewhere, he'll be on my side—

The knowledge steadied him, just as the presence of his friends had done through the labyrinth beneath the school to get to the Philosopher's Stone. He turned the doorknob, pulled the door open, and stepped out into the hall.

The full-grown grey wolf bowed to him, sliding her front paws forward and lowering her head and collared neck to the floor before standing back up. **It's good to finally see you in the flesh, Harry**, she said, nuzzling at his hand. Automatically, Harry rubbed behind her ears as he did for Zelda. **I'm sure you hear this all the time, but you really do look just like James...**

"Except the eyes," Harry finished. "I've got Mum's eyes."

So you do.

"How do you know that?" Ginny asked, following Luna into the hall. "Did you know her—" The girl's voice broke off in a gasp.

Yes, I did, Calpurnia answered anyway. **But this is getting into dangerous territory**. She snorted a brief laugh for no reason Harry could fathom. **I understand that you're curious—I certainly would be in your place—but please, don't ask anything else about me, not until everything is over.**

"And then we won't need to ask," said Luna. "Because we'll already understand."

Something like that. Luna... Calpurnia slipped between Harry and Ginny, who was still staring wide-eyed, to face the blonde girl square on. **You're positive that you and Ginny have to be here? It's not just wishful thinking?**

"Ask Harry," Luna said, looking up at him. "Would he have got to the Stone without the others?"

"I wouldn't have," Harry supplied before he could be asked. "I don't know enough. I can't do enough. Not on my own. Not now, maybe not ever."

"And you're going to have to push me into the Floo if you want me to go," said Ginny, planting her hands on her hips. Her shock at meeting a talking wolf seemed to have been overridden by her reflexive defiance of any adult who tried to treat her like a baby. "Nobody kidnaps me and gets away with it."

Calpurnia sighed. **If I survive this night, your parents are going to kill me in the morning. All right. Follow me, you three. And for heaven's sake stay quiet.**

Sitting on a bed in the hospital wing at Hogwarts, Ron hugged a shivering Zelda, unsure if he was comforting her or the other way around.

I was ready for me to get hurt. Or Harry or Ray, or Neville or Zel. But not this. Not Ginny. That's not fair. She's just a baby—Luna too—they don't know anything about anything, they shouldn't have got caught up in this—

Across the room, his mum was crying, his dad holding her the same way Ron was holding Zelda...

Well, not quite. Mum hasn't got her nose under Dad's arm.

He looked down at Zelda. "That can't smell very good," he said. "Are you sure you want to stay like this?"

It smells like you, Ron. That's good enough for me. Zelda's tail thumped twice against the bed, then stilled. **I can't hear Ray. It's too far from here to wherever he is, and we're not closely enough linked. I'm not used to not being able to hear him, and it's scaring me. All the more because neither of us thought, neither of us realized...** She looked up at him, her brown eyes miserable. **It's my collar, Ron, it's still on me, still active, and that means if something goes wrong tonight and Ray dies, so do I.**

"No!" Ron shouted. He was half-aware that he'd just drawn the attention of everyone else in the room—his own parents, Luna's father, Harry's godfather and his wife, Meghan and Neville, and Neville's parents—but he didn't care. "Zelda, no, you can't!"

There might not be any way to stop it. Zelda shut her eyes, pressing her head into his side. **I just wanted to say thank you for being my friend. In case I don't get another chance.**

"Don't talk like that!" Ron shook her, then thumped his open hand against her back. "You're not going to die! I won't let you!"

"Ron," said his dad's voice.

Ron looked up. The other people in the room had formed a ring around him and Zelda. They were all watching him with concern, except Neville, who looked flat-out scared. Meghan was pressed against his side, staring at Zelda with wide gray eyes.

"Ron, why are you talking to Draco Malfoy's pet wolf?" Dad went on, in the tone he used when he'd caught the twins in the middle of one of their madder experiments. "And sounding as though you expect her to answer?"

"And why would you think she might die?" Mum cut in. "She seems perfectly all right, though I'll admit I'm no expert, but she hasn't shown any signs of being hurt since we got here, and that was hours ago."

"She's linked to Ray," Neville said, everyone's eyes swiveling to him as he spoke. "Through the collar she wears. She's supposed to protect him, so if he gets hurt, so will she. And if he dies..."

"But she isn't with him!" Mum protested. "She can't possibly protect him from here!"

"With that sort of enchantment, it won't make a difference," said Mr. Longbottom grimly. "She isn't meant to leave his side—I'm rather surprised she can, as a matter of fact. He must have ordered her to go."

"And that makes even less sense than her being able to," said Mr. Padfoot, shaking his head. "Why wouldn't he want her to come along and protect him from whatever he and Harry were going to face?"

"She couldn't," Ron said. "I thought we told you. In that potion room, there was only enough potion for one person to go on through the black fire, and Ray doesn't get burned himself but it wasn't normal fire so he couldn't keep it off either of them, and Harry had to go on, so he drank that potion and Zelda drank the one that would get her back..."

He trailed off, seeing the sick worry in Neville's eyes, the wondering astonishment in Meghan's, the hooded disbelief in the adults', and realized with a sinking feeling that he'd said too much.

Like I always do.

"And how do you know that?" asked Mrs. Letha, her arms crossed. "Since, by your own account, you weren't there?"

The moment of silence stretched, became endless, pressed down on everyone, until...

I told him.

Zelda raised her head and looked around the circle. **Please, no one say anything just yet**, she added, a bit unnecessarily in Ron's opinion, as none of the adults had yet got around to closing their mouths enough to speak. **Yes, I can talk, but I can't tell you why, nor can anyone else. Not while I'm wearing this thing around my neck.** A growl of frustration, and she shook her head hard. **But I can talk in riddles, sort of. And you can say things that are from the past. You just can't say that they're still going on.** Her eyes fixed on the Blacks. **Do you understand?**

"No, but that's normal," said Mr. Padfoot. "Go on—Zelda, was it?"

Yes, that's what I'm called.

"And what is it short for?" asked Mrs. Letha, the soft intensity in her voice bringing everyone's eyes to her. "Not—Griselda, by chance?"

Yes. Yes, it is. Zelda's breath was coming in short pants, and her claws had begun to slide in and out of their sheaths. Ron winced and eased her paws a little further forward so she didn't lacerate his leg.

Meghan gasped suddenly, and pulled on Neville's arm. He leaned down to listen to what she whispered, frowned, then nodded.

"Zelda," the little girl said, looking intently at the wolf. "Do I have your old bedroom?"

Slowly, Zelda nodded.

"Oh my heavens," said Mrs. Longbottom, her eyes widening. "She can't be—"

"I haven't the faintest idea what's going on here," said Mr. Lovegood. "Does anyone else?"

"I'm beginning to," said Mr. Padfoot, still watching Zelda. "I think I'm beginning to."

"It's to do with how we got our house, Sirius and I," said Mrs. Letha. "We inherited it from the parents of a dear friend of mine. Her name—nickname, really—was Danger. Real name of Gertrude, Gertrude Granger, so you can see why she might go by the other. She was married to one of Sirius' best friends, Remus Lupin. They both vanished during the war with Voldemort. Kidnapped by Death Eaters and never seen again. Shortly thereafter, Danger's mother found out she was pregnant again, and she had a little girl about two months after Harry was born. They named her... I can say the name?" she asked Zelda.

As long as it's only telling stories about the past, you can say it. Zelda lowered her head, and Ron thought he and Neville were probably the only ones who could hear the fervent **I hope I hope I hope...**

"They named her Hermione," Mrs. Letha said. "We used to call her Neenie. A beautiful little girl—and a month before her first birthday, her parents were killed, and she vanished. No one ever knew what had happened to her."

"Do you mean—" Mum began, staring at Zelda. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"Mum, don't!" Ron half-shouted. "Don't say it!"

"I won't, I wouldn't—but Merlin's silken robes, how awful—and all this time—"

I've been all right, Zelda said softly. **Really, I have. Maybe not as good as I could have been, but Ray watches after me, and I watch after him, and we get along.**

"And Malfoy has an adult pair who look a lot like you," said Mr. Longbottom, his voice hard. "Would I be wrong if I made a guess about them right now?"

No, sir. Zelda dropped her jaw in a wolf-grin. **They're always happy to see you. They say you're one of the only really good things that's come out of what happened to them.**

"Me?" Mr. Longbottom frowned. "I'm afraid I don't see how—"

"I do," said Mrs. Longbottom, sitting down on the bed behind her abruptly, as though her knees could no longer hold her. "The tip, Frank, the anonymous tip—we'd have been asleep otherwise, helpless, we might not even have had time to hide Neville—"

"Great Merlin." Mr. Longbottom closed his eyes. "We owe them our lives."

"As do we," said Mrs. Letha, taking Mr. Padfoot's hand. "Or at least any semblance of them worth living."

So you see, Luna's in good hands, sir. Zelda looked up at Mr. Lovegood. **Or paws, if you like that better. Ginny too,** she added to Mum and Dad, and to Ron himself. **And Harry—I don't think I even have to say it. They love him like they love me, or... well, like they love me,** she ended. **They always have.**

"Somehow I thought they might," said Mr. Padfoot. "So. Now, we wait."

"Yeah," Ron said, tightening his hold on Zelda. "Now we wait."

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True Colors

Chapter 10: Endgame

Harry crept up the steep cellar stairs, his nerves on edge, Luna in front of him, Ginny behind. Calpurnia brought up the rear, her paws silent on the stair treads.

Listen carefully, you three, she said when they had almost reached the top of the stairs. **People's lives are on the line tonight. I want you to promise me that no matter what you think is happening, you will trust me, and my husband—he goes by Caesar right now, that's what you'll hear him called.**

"We already said we would," said Ginny through her teeth. "Why are you making us promise again?"

Because the magic on us, and the needs of tonight, mean we must do things that you may think mean we have betrayed you. That we work for Voldemort. She ignored Ginny's jump and Luna's cocked head. **We are spies of a sort, and as such, we must make him *think* that we work for him.**

"Like Professor Snape," Harry said. "That's what he did at the end of the last war."

Yes indeed. Calpurnia lifted her nose for a moment. **And it's interesting that you should mention Severus, Harry. He happens to be here. If things should go badly wrong, you three, seek help from him or from Narcissa.**

"Narcissa," said Luna. "That's Ray's mother, isn't it?"

Yes. You'll have a hard time mistaking her, she's the only woman up there. Calpurnia snorted slightly. **Now, Harry, Ginny, follow my lead and do what seems right. Luna, go.**

Lucius Malfoy bent his knee to his resurrected lord, hearing his wife and son do the same behind him, seeing Severus doing so out of the corner of his eye. Quirrell lay unmoving on the floor beside the chair, his turban half-unwrapped and askew.

A pity he died, but I suppose most men would, if they had shared their minds with the glory of the Dark Lord for most of a year, then had it suddenly removed. He rose again, looking without outward distaste on the thing sitting in the armchair before him. *This form may be unpleasant to look upon, but it is temporary. Harry Potter is here, he carries the Philosopher's Stone with him, and once the one is dead and the other in my master's hands...*

Then the world is ours.

Behind him, Draco drew in his breath. Lucius turned and saw his son looking towards the hallway door, staring as if at a lovely vision. "Of course," the boy breathed. "Of course the door opened for you."

Door opened? I do not like the sound of that...

He turned, following Draco's line of sight.

In the doorway stood the Lovegood girl, her dark blonde hair slightly tangled and her wide blue-gray eyes fixed on Draco. She started forward, her hands held out in front of her. Draco matched her step for step. Both of them were smiling as if greeting a long-lost friend, though Lucius knew quite well they had never before met.

And I left her tied up and locked in, along with the Weasley brat and Potter...

Narcissa's Calpurnia backed into view behind Lovegood, tugging at a mouthful of cloth, and Lucius sighed as he recognized the basic black of Hogwarts robes and the well-worn grey Ginny Weasley had been wearing. "Caesar," he called, snapping his fingers. "Fetch the Potter boy. Your lady wife seems a bit outmatched."

His own guardian wolf slipped around him, gave a brief bow of the head in token of acknowledgement, and left the room for the hall, passing Lovegood and Draco as he did so. The two had met at precisely the halfway mark between their starting points, and were clasping hands like lovers. Lovegood's smile was knowing, Draco's half-incredulous.

"Now, Draco," Lucius said, getting his son's attention. "What were you saying about a door opening?"

"Only that the Manor must recognize its future mistress, Father," the boy said, sliding an arm around Lovegood's shoulders as he turned to face Lucius. "It refused to leave her locked up, especially when it knew I was waiting to meet her."

Lucius did not bother to hide his smile. *Ever the romantic, my Draco. Narcissa must have been telling him stories again. Still, this produces an outcome I desire—as, of course, would any decision he could have made, which is why I limited it so.* "May I assume this means you have chosen?"

"Oh, yes, sir." Draco stroked Lovegood's hair with his free hand, and she tilted her head into the caress like a cat. "Will she stay with us, or go home again?"

That depends entirely on her father's attitude towards the new regime. For tonight, though, she will remain here. As will you." Lucius waved the two young lovebirds aside, allowing Calpurnia, her teeth fixed firmly in Ginny Weasley's robes, and Caesar, herding Harry Potter with nudges from his nose, to enter the room. "I would have you see how wars are lost and won."

Won for us through quick and decisive action, and lost to our enemies through a lack of it. By the time Dumbledore realizes anything is amiss, to say nothing of the fools at the Ministry, the Dark Lord will be ascendant, and nothing will ever bring him down again...

You have more friends in this room than you do enemies, Harry, said a man's quiet and confident voice, the same voice which had coached Harry through his most difficult Charms homework all year long. **Keep it in mind.**

Harry dipped his head slightly, deep enough so that it would register to the blue-eyed wolf walking behind him, shallow enough that it would look like nothing but a twitch to Lucius Malfoy, who stood watching with a smirk on his face.

Luna said it would hurt, but then it would be over. He clung to that as to a life preserver. I can handle when things hurt. I don't like it, but I can do it.

Malfoy stepped forward and took Harry's arm, flicking his fingers to dismiss the wolf. Caesar bowed his head, then turned and went to stand with Ray and Luna, who were near the back of the room clinging to each other. Calpurnia sat nearby, still holding onto Ginny's robes, though her jaws' grip had loosened somewhat. Ray's mother, Narcissa, had drifted towards them, as though she wanted to be near her son or to meet the girl he'd chosen for his bride.

Which is sort of stupid since we're none of us nearly old enough—I don't even like girls that way yet—and what side is Ray on, anyway, if he's talking about keeping Luna here with him—

All thought vanished as Malfoy gripped his shoulders and rotated him to face the armchair which sat in front of the fire. Professor Snape, his face impassive, turned the chair so that its occupant could look Harry in the eye.

Harry stiffened, half with pain as his scar went wild, half with the horror of what he was seeing. The *thing* in the chair was the size of the Meghan he remembered hazily clinging to his robes as she learned to walk, but its arms and legs were too thin for its body, its head too large, and it was covered all over in painful red scabs as though it had fallen and scraped all its skin off—

"So you dislike the sight of your own work?" asked a soft, cool voice, issuing from the lipless mouth on the oversized head. "You were the cause of my near-destruction, Harry Potter, but now you bring me the agency of my restoration. Is not irony delightful at times?"

Harry stifled an inappropriate laugh at hearing Calpurnia's words from earlier repeated by Lord Voldemort himself.

"So to further our delight, I have decided that you shall suffer a peculiarly suitable fate." Voldemort waved one undersized hand, and Malfoy pulled Harry backwards to the corner of the hearth. A metal pole stood up from the stone there, notched shelves on its sides showing it was meant for storing fireplace tools, but no tools hung there now. Instead, a thick rope was threaded through the notches, and Harry felt the first stirrings of panic as Malfoy pushed him to his knees and tied his hands behind him tightly.

"The hereditary power of the line of Salazar Slytherin, from which I descend, is the speech of snakes," Voldemort said, caressing the wand he had drawn from a pocket of the robes that lay loose about his hideous body. "Called Parseltongue. I use it to speak to those I find useful—*like you, my dear Nagini. Come, and see the boy on whom you will feast tonight...*"

Harry gripped the pole behind him with both hands, trying to force his fear down, but he couldn't stop himself from shrinking back as the biggest snake he had ever seen slithered out from behind the armchair and approached him, flicking its tongue out at him as if to taste him beforehand.

"Of course, there is always the possibility that my method of killing you will make you distasteful to Nagini. Or even nonexistent." Voldemort leaned forward, his red eyes locking onto Harry's green. "Do you know, Harry Potter, what I shall use to kill you? Have you riddled it out yet?"

Harry swallowed twice to make sure his voice was working. "No," he said, and though his voice shook, it neither cracked nor seized up. "I haven't got any idea what you're talking about."

"I am talking about the power of the line of Gryffindor, Harry." Voldemort shook his head, as though he were a teacher displeased with a slow student. "You may not descend from that line, but you are certainly a *worthy* champion of their cause." The word was hissed in distaste. "The power of Gryffindor is control over fire. And I shall fight fire with fire. Cursed fire, Dark fire, a fire which destroys everything in its path..."

Harry glanced towards Ray. The blond boy had released Luna, who was now standing beside Ginny and Calpurnia, and knelt down beside Caesar, holding tightly to the wolf's green leather collar. Uncertainty niggled at Harry again—Ray was a Malfoy, after all, and he seemed to be holding back one of the people on whose help Harry had counted most...

"—sure you can shield against it, Severus?" Voldemort was saying as Harry began to listen again. "I doubt Lucius would thank me for burning down his house, after he has been kind enough to shelter me in my hour of need."

"Quite sure, my lord." Snape came around to the front of the chair and dipped a shallow bow. "The magic is new to me, but I feel confident in its effects. You may notice that I shall be closest to Potter throughout—if my shield were to fail, I would be the first to know it, though surely not the last."

Voldemort chuckled. "As always, Severus, such a way with words. And what of the Stone?"

Snape came to stand beside Harry, his black eyes searching Harry's face, as if he were looking for some hidden weakness. Harry glared back,

and it was Snape who looked away first. "I shall safeguard it as I do myself, my lord," he answered Voldemort.

"Excellent." Voldemort sighed as if vexed by a trifling detail. "How tiresome of Dumbledore, to lay that one final spell upon it, that it cannot be taken from its bearer by force but must be given freely. But his magic is failing indeed, for his criterion for deciding whether or not it is 'given freely' is whether or not the Stone's current possessor puts up resistance..."

"And a corpse resists nothing," Malfoy finished, chuckling. "My lord, with your permission, I shall withdraw a short way—not that I do not trust Severus, but I should prefer to share this greatest of moments with my wife and son."

Voldemort waved a hand, and Malfoy crossed the room to stand beside Narcissa, who was watching Professor Snape closely. Luna had her arms around Ginny, who knelt beside Calpurnia, leaning into the wolf, her hands knotted around two handfuls of fur at the back of Calpurnia's neck, the only interruption in an otherwise smooth sweep of grey.

"I thought you might want to know, Harry," Voldemort said, snapping Harry's eyes back to him. "If it should happen, as seems likely enough, that your body is too burned to be of use to my darling Nagini, little Ginny will take your place." He laughed again, softly. "How fitting that her body and her soul should both be used to the same purpose."

Harry clenched his fists around the metal behind him and bared his teeth at Voldemort. *You sick bastard, Ginny's my friend, don't you dare touch her...*

Then the blast of fire hit him, and all he could do was scream.

Sirius stiffened as a faint noise became audible from the distant manor house. "Harry," he said surely. "That's Harry, someone's hurting him, I have to—"

"Stay put," said Dumbledore, who had come up behind him without his noticing. "And I will take your wand to enforce it if I must."

"Aren't you listening?" Sirius whirled on the Headmaster. "This is my godson I'm talking about! He could be *dying* in there! I'm not just going to stand here and—"

Dumbledore's wand slashed through the air, and Sirius found himself silenced. "There is more than one life at stake here tonight, Sirius Black," the older wizard said in deadly quiet tones. "And unless I am much mistaken, most if not all of them are precious to you. Harry is enduring pain, yes. But you know in whose capable hands—so to speak—he currently rests. You know to what lengths they would and will go to keep him alive, and to ensure he suffers no more pain than he must to end this restoration of Voldemort before it has truly begun. If you wish the best possible outcome to this night, you will heed my words and remain where you are until we have further information. Do you understand?"

Sirius glared for a few more seconds, then slumped and nodded. Dumbledore removed the Silencer. "Thank you," he said. "I know what it is asking of you."

"Do you?" Sirius looked up. "Do you really?"

"I do." Dumbledore met his eyes. "Which is how I know that to stand by while one you love is in pain and do nothing, because nothing is the best that you can do, is the bravest act in the world." He laid a hand on Sirius' shoulder. "You are a true Gryffindor tonight. And you will, I sincerely hope, have the reward such courage deserves, and soon. Wait and hope, Sirius. Wait and hope."

"Yes, sir." Sirius turned back to his post, gritting his teeth against the distant cries.

Hang on, Harry, he willed. We're here. We'll come for you.

Just as soon as we can.

Harry had never even imagined a human being could hurt this much. A wildcat raked its fiery claws down the line of his scar, a hawk tore it open with great talons of flame, wolves and lions shaped of fire ran back and forth inside his head—he could barely hear his own screaming over their roars and howls, but he could feel how he was tearing up his throat, the throat that was beginning to swell shut from breathing smoke—

The fire shut off, and Harry dropped to the ground, the rope on his hands burned through. His head still pounded, his throat felt as tight as a mokeskin bag, his wrists were sore and chafed, but he was *alive* —

"Lie entirely still."

The voice came from above him, and Harry rolled his eyes upward to see Snape looking down. "The illusion on you will work only if you can maintain it," the Potions professor went on without moving his lips. "Be silent and still until the Dark Lord looks elsewhere. Then strike."

Strike? With what? And how? Harry shut his eyes again and let himself sag against the floor. *I don't think I could move even if I was allowed...*

And why do I still smell smoke if the fire's stopped?

The high-pitched noise which had been intruding on Harry's ears for a few moments suddenly solidified into Voldemort's laughter. "So this is how it ends," the Dark wizard said, his voice merry. "Harry Potter, the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord, himself vanquished at the age of eleven. Severus, check him to be sure, and take the Stone—but no, you are tired, and no wonder, holding a shield against Fiendfyre..."

"My lord," said a boy's voice, breathy with excitement. "May I?"

"Of course, Draco."

Light footsteps running across the room, and then hands against Harry's chest and neck, where life still beat out its treacherous pulse. Harry lay still as ordered and waited to be unmasked.

"So, Potter," Ray said conversationally. "This is what Gryffindor friendships come to in the end." His hand slid into Harry's pocket and removed the small item inside it. "The Stone, my lord!" he proclaimed.

But—

"Very good," Voldemort breathed. "Very good indeed."

Illusion, Harry realized dimly. If there can be an illusion on me to make me look burned and dead, there can be one on Letha's brooch to make it look like the Philosopher's Stone—and Ray is on my side, I knew he was, he always has been—it still doesn't make sense, him being a Malfoy and all, but maybe someday it will—

"Keep good track of it, Draco," Voldemort ordered. "I shall use it in just a moment. First I wish to guarantee my life one final time. Severus, my chair... Lucius, the girl..." A horrid hissing noise, and Harry heard the sound of the snake Nagini slithering towards her master.

But I understood him when he talked to her earlier. Why don't I now?

Desperate to see what was going on, Harry opened his eyes a crack. Snape was turning Voldemort's chair a little further away from the fire, its wing meant the Dark wizard could no longer see where Harry was lying—

I think that counts as looking elsewhere.

Harry pulled his legs in and got to his knees, just in time to hear Ginny scream.

"Let go of me!"

"That was Ginny," Ron muttered. "I know that was Ginny. Someone's trying to hurt her. Why are we just standing out here?"

Because we have to, Ron. Zelda sat very still in her place, one paw around Meghan, who was clinging to her tightly. Neville stood a few yards away with his parents, all three of them staring at Malfoy Manor. **Because if we go in there now, Voldemort won't be defeated, and my family will never be free.**

"Yeah, well, if my sister dies getting your family free, I'm never speaking to you again," Ron grumbled.

If your sister dies, it will mean my family is already dead trying to help her, Zelda shot back. **So I don't think I need to worry too much.**

They returned to their silent vigil.

Harry jerked around. Malfoy, his face twisted in pain, was staggering backwards from Ginny, who darted towards a small table and snatched up one of the tiny ceramic ornaments decorating it. "*Here's what I think of you!*" she shouted at Voldemort, and hurled her missile straight and true. Harry heard Voldemort hiss again, and saw the red flash of scaly skin as the evil wizard dodged Ginny's throw—

Malfoy lunged forward again and caught Ginny's arms, twisting them behind her. She shrieked and squirmed, but Malfoy held her out at arm's length. "Here, my lord!" he shouted, his voice still shrill with pain. "Kill her quickly!"

Harry, now! cried Calpurnia, but Harry was already moving. Dashing around the side of the chair, he stopped directly between Voldemort and Ginny.

"Nobody kills my friends!" he yelled, and pulled the Philosopher's Stone from his pocket. "You want this? You can have it!"

And with all his strength, he flung the Stone at Voldemort, who seemed frozen in place with shock.

He thought he killed me, but here I am alive—he thought Ray had the Stone, but I do—

The Stone buried itself in a red-scabbed forehead with a sickening squelch.

And he thought nothing could ever kill him.

Voldemort collapsed against the back of his chair, his scarlet eyes already glazing over.

I guess he was wrong.

Harry went to one knee, shaking, as it began to sink in what he'd just done.

It's over. All the stuff I always used to hear stories about—over. Done with. I've been a hero, and now I never have to again.

Luna was right. It hurt a lot, but now it's finished. And I'm free...

"Potter!"

It was Lucius Malfoy's voice, and the tone was comprised of equal parts shock and rage.

Or maybe not so free.

"Lucius!" snapped Narcissa. "Leave the boy. We have a more pressing concern."

"More pressing than the brat who has somehow cheated death and killed our master?" Malfoy returned. "What might that be?"

"Look around you," said Narcissa a bit thickly.

Harry looked up, and his eyes widened.

He'd been right to wonder how he still smelled smoke.

I guess Snape's shield didn't work as well as he thought it did...

The entire outside of the room was on fire. Dragons and manticores, basilisks and gryffins, chased one another around its edges, but never seemed to venture more than a few feet from the walls. Calpurnia was herding Ginny, Luna, and Ray towards Harry's place near the room's center, Luna already starting to cough.

I don't think this is good.

Harry held his sleeve up to his mouth, breathing through it, and kept looking around. A serpent of fire slithered through the spot where Nagini had been lying a few moments before. As Snape came unhurriedly towards the center of the room, he pushed Voldemort's chair backwards, and two fiery lions seized on it and began to tug-of-war with it. The turbaned body which had been hidden by its bulk was visible for only a few seconds before a flame-bodied dragon rampaged through it, reducing it to ashes in an instant.

This is definitely not good.

"Would someone care to tell me," Malfoy said through clenched teeth, "how it is that none of us noticed until this very moment that we were standing in a deathtrap?"

Perhaps I can shed some light on that, said a man's voice, and Narcissa and Snape parted to reveal the blue-eyed wolf called Caesar. He stepped forward calmly, regarding Malfoy with detachment. **And perhaps, Lucius, if you are willing to be reasonable, it need not be a deathtrap after all.**

Molly cried out, pointing, and Arthur gasped as bright orange flames erupted from four points on Malfoy Manor's roof simultaneously. Within heartbeats, an entire wing was engulfed in leaping fire.

"Now we may move in," said Dumbledore, opening the Manor's gates with a wave of his wand. "But before we attempt any rescue, we must clear a firebreak around the house—"

"What?"

"Are you mad?"

"They'll die!"

"As will we all, if those flames are not contained," said Dumbledore calmly. "Someone has loosed Fiendfyre, and it has gone far beyond the time frame in which it can be controlled. We must take all burnables away from the area which has already caught fire. Then, and only then, should we make an effort at rescuing those trapped inside—but I rather think, at that point, no rescue will be necessary."

"Because everyone inside will already be dead!" snapped Aletha.

"No." Dumbledore gave her a small smile. "Because they will already have rescued themselves."

Aletha stared at him, then gave a slow nod.

"Sirius, Aletha, Gerald, follow me, please," Dumbledore requested, moving off to the right. "The rest of you work your way around the house in the other direction. Clear at least four feet of earth around the house, removing anything that could burn. We will meet at the back, from whence I believe our missing ones will emerge."

"How does he know all this stuff?" Ron muttered to Neville as they followed their parents towards the north side of the house.

"If I knew that, I'd be him." Neville glanced once at the figure of the Headmaster, ghostlike in the pale pre-dawn light. "And I'm just as glad I'm not. I have enough trouble being me."

Make enough trouble, you mean. Zelda grabbed a branch in her teeth and dragged it away from the house. **Though that's really more Harry and Ray's department than yours.**

"Can you hear Ray from here?" Ron asked, uprooting the grass of the lawn with his wand in a four-foot strip and sending it sailing over his shoulder.

Oh yes. Zelda's tail wagged. **And he says things are going just fine...**

"You," Malfoy snarled, staring down at Caesar. "You planned this."

Can you blame me? Caesar sat down, curling his tail around his front paws. **You always knew I'd make trouble for you if I could. It's why you laid so very many prohibitions on these lovely collars of ours.** He scratched at his with a hind leg. **But what one man can devise, another can find a way around.**

"You call this a way around?" Malfoy stabbed a hand at the flaming walls surrounding them. "You kill me, all very well and good, you have your revenge. But you kill yourselves as well! What sort of revenge is that?"

Caesar stopped scratching and got to his feet. **The revenge of those who are not afraid to die,** he answered, in a tone so cold it should have frozen the Fiendfyre in its tracks. **The revenge of those who would gladly die if it meant you would die with them—yes, and your precious reputation, too!**

Malfoy went paler than usual.

Think of it, Lucius. Just think. Caesar paced towards his master, his eyes glinting weirdly as the animals of flame cavorted around the edges of the room. **No one knows I am here, so no one will ever know this was my doing. All the evidence will point to you. You, and you alone, will be credited with your own death, with Narcissa's, with Severus' and Quirinus'—I'm sure Dumbledore would be only too happy to allow the Ministry to trace Quirinus' Portkey here, and Severus' last use of the Floo is a matter of public record—**

Ray was on one knee, his arms around Luna and his eyes on Caesar, who was circling Malfoy as though he scented blood.

And the children, Lucius, the cool mental voice went on. **Yours will be the credit for ending the Lovegood family. For killing the first Weasley girl in two hundred years. And for the deaths of both Harry Potter—won't that make a lovely headline, *Boy Who Lived Killed in Malfoy Manor Fire*—and of your own precious child!**

Caesar's mouth hung open in a grin, as though the thought of Ray's death brought him fierce pleasure. **Imagine it, Lucius. The name Malfoy, just another entry in *Nature's Nobility*. On the list of names extinct in the male line. But wait! What is this? Why, it has a star next to it. A footnote. And in that footnote, what have we here? Of course, of course—the name of the man who single-handedly ended his own line—who killed his own family, his own son, and all because he knew too little to judge when a spell was too dangerous to try at home—**

"Enough!" Malfoy snapped, but the word emerged as half a cough. "What is it you want?"

Caesar halted directly in front of Malfoy, staring up at him. **You know what I want,** he said softly. **You know perfectly well what I want.**

Malfoy glared down at him with hatred. "Never."

Very well. Caesar turned his back and walked over to the little group of children, Harry holding one sleeve over Ginny's mouth and the other over his own, Ray letting Luna breathe through a fold of his robes. **I'll call the fire in to take them. Make it quick. One instant's pain, then they'll be gone. Harry can meet James and Lily at last. Luna will see Anita again. Ginny can get to know her crazy uncles, understand why Molly named the twins for them. And Ray... He glanced back at Malfoy. You'd know better than I would who'll be there for him. If anyone. But don't fret—you and Narcissa will be along to take care of him soon enough. Now, then—**

"No!" Malfoy nearly choked on the word, but got it out clearly enough. "Don't—"

You know my price, Lucius. Caesar turned slowly in place. **Are you willing to pay it or aren't you?**

Narcissa stood silent beside Severus, watching the drama unfolding before them. Calpurnia leaned forward eagerly, her claws flexing in and out, her tail twitching wildly as though she longed to wag it but did not yet dare.

"Swear you will never tell," Malfoy said hoarsely, dropping to one knee. "Swear you will tell no one where you have been for these years."

No one shall learn it from me, Caesar said firmly. **Nor from my wife, nor her sister. You have my word.**

"And you have mine." Malfoy nodded. "Lead us out of here. I will give you what you want when we are all safe."

Caesar laughed coldly. **Absolutely not, Lucius. Payment first. Then services.**

Malfoy drew himself up indignantly. "I put my faith in your word, and you dare to question mine?"

I have lived by your side for twelve and a half years. Caesar's silent voice was accompanied by an audible growl. **I know what your word is**

worth. I will have my payment now, or our bargain is void.

Malfoy ground his teeth for an instant, then nodded stiffly. Caesar bounded to his side, and Malfoy placed his right hand against the green leather collar, touching two fingers of his left hand to the bracelet on his right wrist.

The collar split in the back and fell to the floor. Caesar looked down at it, and it flared up and was gone in a flash of fire. **Just to be sure you don't get ideas**, he said, glancing at Malfoy. **Severus, Narcissa, love, now!**

Calpurnia sprang forward, bounding towards the hall. The fiery creatures parted as she approached, leaving an archway free of flame. Severus snatched up Ginny in one arm and caught Harry's shoulder with the other, dragging him a few steps before his feet found the rhythm of their run. Narcissa scooped Luna off the floor, and Ray fell in beside her without needing to be told.

Man and wolf looked at each other as the back of Ray's blond head disappeared into the hallway. "After you," said Malfoy, indicating the hall.

No, I insist. Caesar bared his teeth. **After you.**

Malfoy opened his mouth—

And a beam fell across the center of the room with a ground-shaking crash.

If you want either of us to get out of here alive, go, Caesar said testily. **I can only hold back the flames, not keep the house intact. We'll be pushing it as it is.**

Malfoy was on his feet, racing for the hall. Caesar followed him, staying at his former master's heels as closely as he ever had when compelled by the collar he no longer wore.

The battle was done. There only remained to survive long enough to collect the spoils.

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True Colors

Chapter 11: Storytelling

The two teams of “landscapers” met, as Dumbledore had said they would, in the back garden, which was lit as brightly as day from the leaping, tumbling flames of the Fiendfyre. Dumbledore vanished the last bush himself, then waved everyone back to a safe distance. Zelda trembled against Ron’s legs, watching the back door, which stood open like a black hole into the depths of the house.

“This isn’t just about your family, is it?” Aletha asked, kneeling down beside the wolf-girl.

No. It isn’t. Zelda licked her chops, her fur standing out on end. **No matter what else happens tonight—today—my life is never going to be the same as it was. And even if it’s better...**

“It’s still a change and it’s still frightening. Yes.” Aletha put her arms around Zelda, and got a cold nose against her neck for her troubles. “Even if things do go badly wrong, you’ll always have a home with us,” she murmured into a pointed ear. “I’ve heard so much about you, I feel as if I know you already.”

So do I. Your letters were always— Zelda broke off with a gasp. **They’re coming!** she shouted “aloud” to the group. **They’re coming, they’re all alive, they’ll be all right, they’re coming out right now!**

Before Zelda had quite finished speaking, a form very like her own materialized out of the gloom of the doorway. Four legs, pointed ears, long gray fur, tufted tail, were backlit by the glow of the Fiendfyre. With a wordless cry of thankfulness, Zelda galloped forward and slid under the adult female wolf’s left foreleg, lifting her head to nuzzle at her sister’s cheek and receive loving licks between her ears in return.

If I could just ask everyone to stay fairly quiet, a woman’s strong voice called out as the two wolves turned to face the entrance of the house again. **Certainly don’t stop yourself from making sure your children are unhurt, but please try not to shout or scream. There’s someone whose illusions we don’t wish to disturb just yet.**

“Is it just me, or does that sound a tad bit vindictive?” Sirius muttered to Aletha.

“Some things never change,” Aletha returned. “Remember how long she used to hold grudges?”

Arthur, Molly, here she is, the woman said as a human form appeared in the doorway, carrying a smaller one over its shoulder and shepherding another beside it. **Sirius, Aletha, you too.**

Meghan darted forward and caught Harry as he nearly fell. Sirius was there an instant later, scooping both of them up, carrying them away from the house, back to one of the ornamental benches that were set up all around. Aletha steadied him his last few steps until he could collapse onto the bench and sort out his armful of mixed children, both of whom were now gasping for breath.

“Thanks, Pearl,” Harry panted, shaking ashes out of his hair. “I thought I was going to choke for sure there.”

“Don’t you know to breathe through your robes?” Aletha asked, watching Molly take Ginny from Severus Snape’s arms as Arthur supported the Potions Master, who was limping badly on one leg.

“Tried.” Harry spat a gob of soot into a nearby bush and made a face at it. “It got in anyway.”

“Well, you’re all right now,” said Sirius, scooting Meghan over to Aletha’s lap, Harry being a lapful by himself. “Why didn’t you ever tell us Zelda was really—”

A tiny, ash-streaked hand covered his mouth. “She’s still got that collar on,” Meghan hissed at him. “Do you want her to die?”

“No, of course not...” Sirius looked up and sighed. “Merlin’s iron cauldron. Trust Narcissa to walk out of a house on fire looking like a picture out of *Witch Weekly*.”

Aletha chuckled. “I can see the article now. *What to wear when disaster strikes.*”

Ray released his mother as soon as they were free of the house itself and darted to Zelda and the adult wolf, standing nearby. A moment later, he held up a long strip of green leather and shook it triumphantly at the other boys, who pumped their fists or waved back. Hauling off, he flung Zelda’s collar towards the house, where a small fiery canine leapt up to catch it and worry it into ashes.

“Good arm he’s got,” Sirius said, and felt the vibrations of Harry laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“Tell you later.” Harry had his eyes shut, as though he were too tired to stay awake any longer—and *well he might be, the sun’s almost up. Been one hell of a night...*

Narcissa, not quite as pristine as Sirius had suggested but still surprisingly complete for having walked through the equivalent of an oven, surrendered Luna to Gerald’s arms and went to sit down beside Snape, who was enduring Molly poking with her wand at his injured leg. Arthur had Ginny in his arms, from whence she was busily explaining something to Ron, sitting beside them. Neville stood a respectful distance from Frank, Alice, and Dumbledore, who were in quiet colloquy over something that seemed to require a lot of pointing at the Manor. Ray knelt between Zelda and the adult wolf, an arm over each of their backs, all of them watching the door.

Who're they waiting for? Who's missing? The kids are all out, Dumbledore said he thought Quirrell was probably dead by now, Snape and Cissy made it all right..

A human form coalesced in the darkness of the doorway and stumbled out, resolving itself into a coughing Lucius Malfoy.

That'd be who. Shame he couldn't have been caught inside—I mean, not that I'd wish that on a friend of Harry's, losing his dad that way, but personally I think the world could do without old Lucius. Is that everybody, then? I keep feeling like we're still missing someone..

One of the doorposts cracked across with a sound like an Apparition. A moment later, the door crumbled in on itself, leaving the back of the house an unbroken expanse of fire-engulfed wood.

"No!" Meghan gasped, and Sirius sucked in air between his teeth as he realized who was still unaccounted for.

Come on, he willed his missing friend, staring at the burning wall as though he could knock it down with the power of his eyes alone. Come on, I just found out you're alive, you can't die on me now..

CRASH.

The wood above and to the left of the door splintered, and a flaming four-legged form soared outwards, landing lightly on the rock path behind Lucius, who had fallen to his hands and knees in his struggle for breath. It posed for a moment, fire still wreathing its body as if it were one of the creatures of the Fiendfyre, now celebrating their sole possession of Malfoy Manor, then shook as though coming out of the water, and the flames in its fur winked out in succession from its blunted snout to its tufted tail.

"Beautiful!" Sirius enthused. "Just beautiful! I noticed a little stumble on the landing, a slight hesitation before the shake, but that sequential action on the fire was gorgeous, so I'm going to give it an eight point five!"

Aletha and Meghan both smacked him.

"What?"

In a tree somewhere behind them, a bird called. Another answered it.

"Is it morning?" Harry mumbled, shifting his position on Sirius' lap.

Sirius glanced at the sky behind him. "Just about. Why?"

"Because I want to see it happen." Harry sat up, stretching his back. "I want to see them change back."

"That's right," Aletha said as Ray drew his wand and held it out to Zelda. "She said they change at sunrise and sunset, or they would without that potion, and they never took it tonight—dear God, Sirius, do you realize who we're about to see? Who's been here, alive, for all these years?"

"It's starting to sink in, yeah," Sirius said, watching Zelda trot over to the wolf who had followed Malfoy out of the Manor, Ray's wand between her teeth. Ray himself had vanished into what was left of the garden. The female wolf was on her feet and coming towards them. "I just hope there's a bloody good reason Dumbledore's never done anything about them, if he's known the whole time, the way it sounded like he did."

Mostly, said the woman's voice in their minds as the wolf stopped beside them, **he never did anything because we asked him not to. Because Lucius had us covered every way we could have tried to escape, even with Dumbledore's help. One or two of us might have got away, but never all three. Not unless we were able to pull off something like this. But—**

She broke off with a gasp, as Zelda and the male wolf froze in place. Everyone's eyes fixed onto one of the three.

The sun had risen. The change was beginning.

Slower than Animagus, Sirius noted as he watched, *but doesn't look as painful as a werewolf transformation. Good thing, if they have to do it every morning and night. But no, they do have a potion they can use to stay in one form most of the time—still, if this is natural to them, it's better that it doesn't seem to hurt them too much—*

Paws twisted into hands and feet, fur blurred and smoothed into robes and hair, lupine snouts shrank into human noses, ears rounded and slid down the sides of heads. Aletha was on her feet, her arms extended, her face alight with joy as the last features on the face of the woman in front of them settled into place.

"I never stopped hoping," the woman said softly, stepping forward into Aletha's embrace. "None of us did."

"Neither did we," Aletha breathed, hugging her friend gently at first, as though afraid she would disappear, then tighter and tighter every second. "Danger, my God, it's really you, you're back, you're alive!"

Meghan insinuated herself into the hug. "Hi," she said upwards, examining Danger's face closely. "You look a lot like your pictures. Only older."

"Thank you for boosting my ego, little one," said Danger, bending to kiss Meghan's forehead. "You, on the other hand, look exactly the way your mummy describes you in her letters. Right down to the attitude."

"Letters?" Aletha pulled back slightly to look at Danger. "You get my letters? How?"

Danger opened her mouth to answer, then paused. "I think that's about to be answered for you," she said, turning towards the center of the garden, where a slender man in well-worn robes was testing the heft of his borrowed wand. "Along with a great many other things. May I sit down?"

"Of course, of course—" Aletha steered Danger to the bench and sat down on the other side of her from Sirius, Meghan climbing up to her mother's lap.

Sirius shook off his feeling of unreality and put an arm around the woman who, along with Lily, had been the closest thing he'd ever had to a sister. "It was really you, then?" he asked quietly. "That night in Azkaban, with the dream that sent Letha to Dumbledore?"

"Yes, that was really us." Danger laid her head against his shoulder. "I wish we could have saved Lily and James as well, but tell the truth—would you have believed a dream telling you Peter was the spy?"

"Probably not," Sirius admitted. "No."

"So we did what we could." Danger reached out and brushed Harry's hair out of his eyes, and he rubbed his head against her hand before turning to watch what was happening in the garden's center. "The same way we always have."

Lucius Malfoy finished a vigorous bout of coughing and caught his breath, wiping his mouth with one hand.

This is far from the best thing that has ever happened to me, but it is hardly the worst. I am alive, Narcissa and Draco are alive, and my fortunes have suffered only a slight setback. It will be a nuisance to rebuild my home, but it will also be an opportunity to add several features I have admired in other houses I have visited. If, after all, I decide to rebuild here—the promise was made that no one would be told where our household guardians have been all these years, but someone like Dumbledore or Black might still guess and make trouble for me...

He ignored the quiet sounds of the other people in the garden around him and the roaring of the Fiendfyre alike in favor of his thoughts. *Narcissa has been hinting for months about taking a holiday. We can easily go abroad for a time, travel in France or the Germanic states until the furor dies down. Draco can finish out his year at Hogwarts, then come to us over the summer, and transfer to Durmstrang for next year if it becomes inadvisable for us to return here permanently.*

Getting to his feet, he looked into the distance, noting the streaks of dawn beginning across the sky to his left, the pall of smoke obscuring what stars were left to his right.

Tonight has certainly been a night of endings, but they say that in every ending lies the seed of a newbeginning.

Let me see if I cannot find the truth of that for myself.

He drew his wand to conjure himself a drink of water.

"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted a man's hoarse voice behind him.

Lucius stumbled forward a pace and fell to one knee on the rocks again, the wand torn from his hand.

Who—and why—

He thrust himself back upright and turned just in time to see his wand fall neatly into the palm of a man he had not seen for more than twelve years.

Seen in his human shape, that is...

"Elm, isn't it?" said Remus Lupin, holding up Lucius' wand and inspecting it in the light from the Fiendfyre. "Elm and dragon heartstring. Not a combination I'd prefer, but I suppose it'll do." He handed the other wand he was holding to the girl standing beside him. "Thank you, love," he said, and the girl smiled before running off towards one of the benches which ringed the garden.

"Caesar!" Lucius snapped. "Return my wand at once!"

Lupin whirled, training the wand on Lucius with perfect dueler's posture. "Call me by that name again and you'll be speaking out the other side of your head," he said softly.

Lucius retreated a step or two, startled. *He was always so docile—so obedient—*

"You really don't understand yet, do you, Lucius?" Lupin shook his head, as if baffled by a child's obstinacy. "You think you'll get away with this, like you got away with being a Death Eater. You think you can somehow set everything back to the way it was, erase these last twelve years, pretend they never happened. Perhaps you even think tonight was an accident or a fluke, that you can overawe me and return me to my 'rightful place.'" He smiled, looking rather more like his wolf form than should have been possible with his human face. "Allow me to disillusion you. A night like tonight has been my goal all along. To destroy your master, free my family, and show the world the true face of Lucius Malfoy."

"You swore," Lucius said, feeling his breath coming faster. He could not, he would not let this—this—*animal* win. "You swore you would tell no one where you have been!"

"And I won't." Lupin's smile broadened until 'grin' was the only descriptor possible. "Because I have no need to. Look around you, Lucius. What a terribly ungracious host you've been, not even saying hello to your guests..."

Lucius turned in place, feeling a chill begin to strike inwards towards his heart.

Albus Dumbledore stood directly behind him, regarding him with eyes that twinkled not at all. On a bench to Dumbledore's right sat Arthur Weasley and his wife, their two youngest children at their feet. The girl stuck out her tongue as she saw Lucius looking at her. Beside them stood Frank and Alice Longbottom with their son, and slightly behind them, half in shadow, stood Severus and Narcissa.

Why did they not tell me—say something—warn me that I was being watched, that others were observing—

Gerald Lovegood had found a seat in the low fork of a tree, and his daughter perched above him, her feet swinging idly. The next bench over held Sirius Black and his Mudblood wife, and sitting between them, her head on Black's shoulder and her eyes closed—

Calpurnia . Lupin's precious Danger. What hold did she have over Narcissa, I wonder, to allow her to slip her collar at the same time as her mate?

Each adult on this bench held a child on his or her lap. Black's wife cradled their daughter, who like the Weasley brat was making a face at Lucius. Black himself had his arm around Harry Potter, whose grin resembled Lupin's quite closely. Lucius could not see the face of the girl on Danger's lap, but her wild cascade of brown curls made him sure it was his son's Griselda, Hermione as her name had originally been.

And because of that same mass of hair, I cannot see if she is still collared or not. Perhaps, if she is, I can still salvage some good from this night...

If I can find Draco. Where has he gone?

"I suppose I do owe you one debt of gratitude from all this time, Lucius," Lupin's voice broke into his thoughts again. "One order you gave that I was more than happy to obey. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for giving me the chance to kill Fenrir Greyback." The former werewolf twirled his wand idly in his hand, never letting it stray from its aim towards Lucius. "I suppose once it was established that the spell worked on purpose, and with a human transfigured into a wolf, in the same way as it had worked by accident and with an Animagus the first time, you had no further need for him?"

"The Dark Lord said—" Lucius heard his voice crack and forced himself to calm. "The Dark Lord believed the werewolves would come to heel more easily without his leadership. Especially once he was no longer debilitated by full moons, but able to change, with his full mind, every night."

"Indeed." Lupin chuckled. "I'm sure it had nothing to do with your taking the other half of his spell-binding into your own household."

"Nothing at all," Lucius lied, remembering Narcissa's biting words when she had learned what he intended to do with the wolf cub which had been Hermione Granger.

"A creature which is magically linked to Fenrir Greyback, and you wish to give her as guardian to my son? Have you taken leave of your senses? Prove to me first that she will not savage the very one she is set to guard!"

Looking at Lupin, whose grin had altered not a whit except to grow slightly broader, Lucius wondered when his wife had acquired the gift of prophecy.

"Tell me more about this spell," Sirius called. "How's it work? What was this accident?"

"I'm so very glad you asked." Remus tapped his chin thoughtfully, or so most of his audience probably thought. Sirius knew the Marauder sign for *thank you* when he saw it.

Though it used to be he was the straight man, and I'd do the funny lines...

"The spell is where our story begins, really," Remus said, beginning to walk around Malfoy, who eyed him warily. "It's why we were kidnapped in the first place, Danger and I. Voldemort had learned I was a werewolf..." His eyes flickered to the shadow where Snape stood beside Narcissa. "But not that Danger was an Animagus. So he took a great deal of pleasure in telling me, when we were brought before him, that he would give me some company the next time I transformed." He smiled. "I assume he was expecting me to panic, not to laugh. Certainly he seemed surprised by my reaction."

I would've been too. Might have given yourself away a bit there, Moony...

"The next thing he told me, though, surprised me in my turn. Namely, that I would be transforming that very night. If you'll recall, the night we were kidnapped wasn't a full moon—it was still four nights away—so I couldn't understand what he was saying. Until I realized he meant that he'd found a way to force a lycanthropic transformation." Remus' face went grim. "Then I did start to panic, just a bit. After all, the one saving grace of being a werewolf has always been that one *knows*, to the minute, when one's life will go out of control and when that state will end. If it could be forced..."

Sirius tightened his grip on Harry. *Werewolf attacks not just one night in twenty-eight, but every time the sun goes down. Possibly even when it's still up. And because they resist magic, you can't stun them, can't shield against them, can't set wards that will hold reliably...*

"And then he sent me into true full-blown panic." Remus stopped with his back to Malfoy Manor, where the Fiendfyre was beginning to die down, though the animal forms still leapt and danced through the blackened remains of walls and windows. "He told me that once I had transformed under the influence of his spell, I would never again regain my human form. My human mind, though, he planned to let me keep. So that I could be, as he put it, trained." His face bore testament that he had known, all too well, what that training would consist of.

Imperius . Or if that didn't work right, Cruciatus was never a werewolf, or are you actually gay?' Best pickup line in the history of the universe, there, Danger...

"Danger was to serve as my test victim." Remus waved a hand at his wife as he began to circle Malfoy again. "We would be caged together while the spell was performed on me. If I attacked her as soon as the transformation was finished, the Death Eaters would get a show and Voldemort would know that the spell still needed some refinement. If I did not, if I remained where I was or showed her some sign of affection, then it could be assumed the spell had worked properly, and I could be placed under the Imperius Curse and forced to attack her."

"We are talking about the same Remus Lupin here, aren't we?" Aletha murmured so quietly that only Sirius and Danger could hear her. "The world's stubbornest man, and startlingly resistant to the Imperius?"

Danger chuckled under her breath. "I wasn't about to share that with Voldemort," she said. "And I wasn't about to share my Moony, either. Not after what I went through to get him."

"God, yes." Sirius snorted. "Are you ignoring me because you're a werewolf, or are you actually gay?" Best pickup line in the history of the universe, there, Danger."

Harry went into a suspicious-sounding fit of coughing. Hermione's shoulders were shaking. Meghan looked up at Aletha curiously. "Mummy," she said, "what's gay?"

"We'll talk about it later, love," Aletha said.

"Danger," Remus continued, shooting a glance at their bench, "being her usual impetuous self, tried to knock me out of the way of the spell before Voldemort performed it. She was, of course, in her own wolf form at the time, to ensure that I wouldn't bite her even if the spell did take effect on me. But she mistimed her jump, and the spell struck us both at once. And that made all the difference in the world."

"Of course," said Alice as soft sounds of understanding erupted around the circle. "One human in wolf form, and one werewolf in human form—it thought you were both the objects of the spell, it tried to force you both into the werewolf form, but it only had enough power for one, so it was only able to do so for half the time it was meant for!"

"Precisely." Remus inclined his head to her. "We're not quite sure why it became sun-dependent rather than moon, but perhaps someday we'll find an answer. What matters to us is the result—we change, naturally, from human to wolf at sunset and from wolf to human at sunrise. And we never lose our human minds."

"Full moons do get a bit interesting," Danger chimed in. "We seem to share the wolf mind between us on that night. It can make us unpleasant to be around, or so we're told, but we don't attack humans indiscriminately or try to destroy whatever we're near."

"Don't we, now?" Remus murmured. Danger bared her teeth at him. "In any case, once the Death Eaters—and we—had determined these things about us, Voldemort was ready to try training us to fight for him. Unfortunately, since we are half werewolf each, we were resistant to all the spells he tried. They worked, but not well, and with that and our own personal opposition to his agenda, after a while he lost interest in us in favor of more productive work." He met Malfoy's eyes without fear. "We probably would have been killed outright, if Lucius hadn't been willing to try one more thing."

"Collars," said Molly in a tone that would have sent her children running for the hills. Ron flinched a little, even knowing it wasn't aimed at him.

"Yes." Remus rubbed at his neck, his face thoughtful. "And even they didn't work quite the way he'd expected. They're supposed to give the master total control over the animal—allow him to give it any command he likes, and have it obey—but he could never force us to *do* anything through them. He could set punishments, though. And did." The wand tracked back around towards Malfoy, who eyed it with a mixture of covetousness and fear. "Pain for small transgressions. Tightening to cut off our breath for larger ones. And, for truly egregious offenses, a poison that made us ill for days in small doses and would have killed in larger ones... administered to the one of us who had *not* so offended."

"So either of you could have run away at any time," said Frank in a tone of clarification. "If you didn't care that the other one would die painfully for it."

"You have grasped the general idea." Remus tossed the wand into the air and caught it again. "Doing magic, of course, would poison us. And communicating our identities, or even our humanity, to anyone who did not already know was punishable by instant death." He smiled fondly towards Hermione. "Some of us found ways around that. But that comes later. Those first weeks here..." His eyes caught Malfoy's and held them. "That was the only time that made me think seriously of sending Danger away and letting myself die for it."

"Frigid nights patrolling the grounds," Danger said, her tone cold and flat. "Knowing full well that anyone trying to sneak into this manor would likely be a friend of ours, and that we would still be forced to attack them or die ourselves. Endless days in a pitch-black cellar, trying to keep each other alive with only the warmth of our bodies and our robes, praying we'd be remembered long enough to be fed. Were you just being your usual self, Lucius, or were you actively trying to break us? You came very close, you know. Closer than I like to remember."

"What stopped it?" Aletha asked, finding Danger's hand and pressing it. "How did you fight back?"

"Several ways." Remus leaned against a convenient tree. "First, we made friends with Dobby the house-elf. We had a lot in common with him, so it wasn't terribly hard. Once we'd done that, we were able to persuade him to bring us a few little luxuries, things no one would miss. Candle ends and matches, so we could see each other's faces once in a while. An old blanket or two, to be sure we didn't freeze. Table scraps, if someone didn't finish a meal or didn't care for it. And, of course, books."

"Books?" The word seemed forced from Malfoy. "All this time, you've been pilfering from my library?"

"Not pilfering," said Danger in a tone of complete reason. "It would only be pilfering if we didn't return them. They kept us from going mad with boredom. And in one of them, we found something we thought we could use."

"It was an oath." Remus had his eyes closed, the better to remember. "A magically binding oath of devotion, said to help those who had some great and difficult task in hand by providing them with whatever power would be most useful to them that they lacked." He chuckled deep in his chest. "The way we were living, simply getting from day to day seemed like a 'great and difficult task'. And after what we'd been through together already, we had no doubts we could remain devoted to one another. So we swore the oath. And everything changed."

"That night, while we were sleeping, I discovered I had the ability to direct my dreams," Danger said. "I could even share one with Remus without setting off our collars, and craft one and send it to another mind we knew without getting too much pain from it. The usual strictures still applied, so I couldn't use a dream to tell anyone where I was or what had happened to me, or anything that could have harmed my 'master.'" Her sneering tone would have done Snape proud. "And my actively sharing a dream with someone who wasn't Remus would have made him quite ill." She flashed a smile at Sirius. "I did it once anyway, though. When it was most truly needed."

"That explains your letters to us," said Aletha, nodding. "But what about ours to you? How in the world can you get a letter that we've burned?"

Remus cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him. "Observe," he said, and blew on his palm.

A fire kindled where his breath touched, burning in midair without visible fuel or support.

Malfoy looked from the flickering flame, to the remains of his house, and his face twisted in rage. "You did this," he hissed. "You planned this—you made this happen—"

"Yes, yes, and yes." Remus tossed the flame into the air and wiggled a finger at it, and it twisted into a five-pointed shape and drifted towards Malfoy. "Gold star for you, sir."

"Using magic for our own benefit only, as long as we weren't trying to escape or tell someone we were human, didn't seem to trigger the collars," Danger said as Malfoy leaned away from the flaming star. "So Remus could set fire all around the cellar walls to keep us warm and give us light. And while we slept, I could give us a dream of being human and free together. Especially nice when we began to spend more time in wolf form." She glanced to one side. "When Severus developed our potion."

Sirius' head whipped around. "You developed it?" He started to get up, but Danger's hand on his arm held him back.

"I was not aware of the identities of those for whom it was to be used," said the Potions Master from his place several trees over. "In fact, I was unaware that any such people existed. It was put to me as an academic question, one with which I toyed for nearly a year before coming up with a usable formula."

"And it still has a flaw Lucius would love to erase," Danger put in. "Once a month, we need a day off from it, or the trace ingredients in it build up and poison us. So we could be kept as wolves for a month, but then we'd have to have a day as humans." She stretched luxuriously. "So nice to have my arms again..."

"I suppose it was a blessing in disguise, really," Remus said thoughtfully. "Being kept as wolves most of the time. It meant we were permitted out of our room during the day. Which led directly to one of the most important things that happened to us while we were here."

"Ah yes." Danger grinned, looking around the circle. "All right, everyone, here's a question for you. If you're an evil overlord, or trying to be, what's the most fun you can have on the cheap?"

"Taunting your enemies," said Luna, swinging her feet. "Especially if they can't do anything about it."

"Ten points to the perceptive young lady in the tree," said Remus, bowing to her. "We spent the better part of a year being Lord Voldemort's very favorite *captive* audience."

Several people groaned. "Now I know you're all right, Moony," said Sirius. "You're still punning."

"I haven't been pun-ished nearly enough to make me stop it, Padfoot," said Remus, grinning at his friend.

"Somehow I don't think you two should ever meet my twins," said Arthur.

"Too late," Ginny murmured.

"What was that?" said Molly to her daughter.

"What sorts of things would he tell you?" Gerald asked Remus over this. "His plans, or what he'd already done, or both?"

"Some of both," said Danger. "He especially loved to tell us about the people he'd killed, or was going to kill. But he also branched out into areas like how he'd made sure he could never be killed himself. Including specific descriptions of all the items he'd crafted for that purpose, and their locations and protective enchantments."

"We made sure to give him the response he wanted," Remus said. "The shock, the horror, the hopelessness of our own position and our friends'."

"And we kept careful track of everything he'd said, and waited." Danger smiled. "Because by that point, we knew that someday we would be able to get messages out, to someone who could do something about it."

Remus turned to face Malfoy. "And that is what made it all worthwhile," he said coldly. "Through every game you ever played with us, every humiliation you ever threw at us, I kept this day, this moment in mind. The day when Voldemort would lie dead on the ground, and you stand wandless and defeated in the wreck of your life, wondering what happened to you. *We* happened to you, Lucius. We have ruined you. And I cannot find it in my heart to be the least bit sorry for it."

"Ruined me," Malfoy repeated, nodding ruminatively. "That you have. But not completely, Lupin. Not completely. One thing I have done, you cannot touch. One achievement you cannot sully."

Remus twirled the wand between his fingers. "And what might that be?"

Malfoy laughed. "I'm rather surprised you ask. You certainly used his name to great effect inside the house. My son, Lupin. My Draco. Unless you are willing to resort to outright murder, my name will live another generation, and no man who has achieved that can be said to have been totally ruined..."

"Oh, Merlin's beard and boots," said Narcissa in a tone of deep disgust, drawing everyone's eyes as she stepped forward. "Lucius, please. Do not force me to make this public in such a way."

Danger squeezed Sirius' hand. "She's more like you than you knew," she whispered. "Listen to this."

"Make what public?" Lucius was asking, his face bewildered. "What are you talking about, Narcissa?"

"I am talking about Draco. Your Draco. The son you are so very proud of." Narcissa looked her husband in the eye. "Do you not think now would be a good time to face facts, Lucius? You will likely be spending the rest of your life in Azkaban for what you have done to these people—can you not spare one moment to be truthful to yourself?"

Lucius stared at her. "Truthful to myself—what in the world can you mean? Something about Draco?"

"Something about Draco?" Narcissa shook her head, as though she were trying to shoo away a fly. "*Everything* about Draco. The fact that there *is* no Draco. *He does not exist*, Lucius. He never did."

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True Colors

Chapter 12: Fools and Madmen

"Narcissa, have you lost your mind?" Lucius exclaimed. "Draco, not exist? He was here with us less than an hour ago! I spoke with him, I touched his hand, I saw him decide to take the Lovegood girl for his own!"

Narcissa sighed deeply. "I apologize for this," she said, turning to make eye contact with the people sitting around the edge of the semicircle. "I had hoped to keep it quiet, but it seems it must come out at last." Her eyes rested on Sirius. "You recall my pregnancy. Though we were not in contact personally, I am sure you knew of it."

"Of course. Lucius made sure everyone knew." Sirius glanced at Remus. "Mentioned it to me the day after a certain memorial service, in fact. And said something about making sure we all had strong guardians for our homes and lives."

"He never could resist gloating," Danger murmured without opening her eyes. "The more fool, he."

Narcissa smiled at this. "I was brought to bed during the day of the fifth of June, 1980," she continued, gazing at her former home, which had collapsed quietly during Remus' story into a pile of smoldering embers. "So much is well known. What very few people have ever known is that I did not give birth to a son that night." She looked back at her husband. "I gave birth to a daughter. A daughter who came forth weak and dying."

Lucius stared at his wife, his mouth silently forming her last word.

"The cord had become tangled around her neck in the birthing process, the Healers told me." Narcissa lifted her face to the sky, now streaked with dawn. "And she was obviously a strong witch already, for the accidental magic she performed, trying to save her own life, instead rebounded on me and injured me within. The Healers were able to keep me alive, but the damage was beyond repair. I would never bear another child."

Which would have been the kiss of death for their marriage, if Lucius had found out about it. He might have been willing to give her a decent stipend, pension her off somewhere, but he'd never have agreed to stay married to her, not with his precious line to further...

"The feelings, the emotions, evoked by my daughter's birth and imminent death seemed too much to bear. I could not understand them, and I had no one with which to share them. The Healers were kind, but professional and distant, and I doubted somehow that Lucius would be understanding." Narcissa smiled thinly at the snickers which swept the circle. "My salvation came from, to me, unexpected quarters."

What is she—oh, of course! Sirius wanted to smack himself on the forehead as Narcissa clasped hands with Remus. Moony always was the one of us who'd take the first years to the infirmary after they fell off their brooms and hurt themselves. And I've seen Danger pick worms up off the pavement after it rains and bring them inside to her windowbox. Even with what had happened to them, what Cissy'd been a part of... but no, she wasn't, was she? She was likely Danger's mistress in name, but Lucius would have kept the true mastery for himself...

"You'd never done anything to hurt or humiliate us," Remus said, his eyes distant as though he were seeing not the poised Narcissa of now but the grieving young mother of that June night so long ago. "We had no reason to hate you, other than a generic anger towards everyone who knew about us. And you were in pain, a pain we understood far too well."

"So you *comforted* her, werewolf," Lucius sneered. "Did you begin then and there, or did you wait until the morning when you were human again?"

Remus slashed his wand down in Lucius' direction. Lucius recoiled, then smirked and opened his mouth to say something cutting—

And stopped with his mouth still open as no sound came out.

"Please, go on," Remus said politely to Narcissa.

"Thank you." Narcissa had a small, wicked smile on her face, one which made her look rather more like Andromeda than Sirius had ever thought possible. "Remus did, in fact, comfort me that night, Lucius, but not in the way you are insinuating. He and Danger—Caesar and Calpurnia, as they were then called—sat with me and listened to my words, admired my child and commiserated with me over her fate, allowed me to dry my tears against their coats and even embrace them. It was a new phenomenon to me, to have another person care for me although I had never done anything for them. It affected me deeply."

I just bet it did. Sirius recalled his own first experiences with friendship, how it had changed everything he thought he'd known about the world and himself. But I still want to know what Cissy's talking about, saying her kid doesn't exist. If there's no such person as Draco Malfoy, who's Harry been to school with for nearly a year?

He glanced down at Harry as the boy shifted position. His godson was looking over Sirius' shoulder, into the depths of the garden. Sirius turned, curious, to see what Harry was looking at.

Not what, who. It's a kid. Can't see him clearly, but he's about Harry's size...

The boy shifted on his feet, giving Sirius a moment's glance at his face.

A moment was enough.

Well. That explains everything, doesn't it now.

Narcissa's story and Remus', what Harry'd been telling him in letters and anecdotes all year, twelve full years of dreams about the Lupin family had all locked together in Sirius' mind as soon as he'd seen the person standing behind him clearly. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, what was Remus and Danger's final revenge on Lucius Malfoy.

And Prongs and I have just been completely eclipsed. This is far and away the best prank I have ever seen, heard of, or dreamt about.

Beautiful work, Moony. My congratulations.

Sirius sat back to watch it play out.

Narcissa turned her smile on Lucius, and watched him edge back from it, wary of this new side of her.

All I have said so far has been truth. What I owe these, my friends—for so I think I may call them—for their kindness to me on that night.

But now I shall delve into my imagination for a time.

Now I shall have my own revenge.

"After a time, I noticed that Danger was moving oddly," she said, twining her fingers around the edge of the pocket in which she kept her wand. "I asked if she were hurt, and she dissembled. I then noticed that her shape had changed. For some months, she had been growing, as you thought, Lucius, stout. You had, I believe, cut down her rations as a result of it. Tonight she was slender once more."

Lucius nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing.

"Having just been through such an experience myself, I tasked her with the most likely explanation, and she admitted it. She had, that very morning, borne her own first child."

I would never have thought to ask that question. I was too sunken in my own grief, in watching my little girl struggle for her every breath, and come closer and closer to losing her fight. The Healers were gone, I had sent them away after bribing them well to keep quiet about the night, so I was alone with the Lupins, and they, not I, broached this subject..

"I sent Dobby to fetch the child. What he brought me, once it had been unwound from the blanket in which it had snarled itself, appeared to be a wolf cub. Healthy, vigorous..." Narcissa allowed her smile to grow slightly. "And male."

Lucius was beginning to shake his head. *Likely hoping to stave off the truth. Try as you like, husband mine. I plan to help you, though I doubt you will appreciate it..*

"Danger said he resembled his father in human form, while Remus averred he was like his mother. Both of them, though, agreed that he was beautiful. And that their hearts would break, should he be enslaved as they had been."

This part of the tale is true enough. Though they never told me the last in so many words, I could see it in their eyes, hear it in every word they spoke. They had thought they would never have children—to have such an unexpected blessing turned into a curse would have been unbearable for both of them.

"I cannot recall which of us thought to mingle drops of the children's blood, making them relations, and then magically exchange their forms, but it worked beautifully. The little boy who had been born in that cellar room, to a woman with a collar around her neck, was very shortly the image of an infant Lucius. And my own precious daughter, whom I had named Cassiopeia, took on fur and four legs, and it was in that form, a few minutes thereafter, that she breathed her last. She seemed calmer as a wolf cub, more settled. I hope that she died at peace."

No need for Lucius to hear that I know she did, that the bracelet around my wrist gave me power to allow Danger free use of her magic on me and mine, that she gave me a dream to share with my daughter for those last few moments of her life... I was able to hold her not only in my arms but in my heart, to show her beyond all questioning how much I loved her, and I will always believe that she understood and accepted that love, and that she loved me in return.

Narcissa blinked away the tears which came, even now, to her eyes when thinking of her dear Cassie and cast a sidelong glance at Lucius. He, judging by the look of suspicion and horror on his face, had drawn exactly the conclusions she wished him to draw from the story so far.

But to this point, I have been only slightly mendacious. Here, I abandon all attempt to hold to the truth. It might seem unnecessary—the true version of events would destroy Lucius' peace of mind quite admirably—but I wish to destroy him entirely, to leave him not even the illusion of comfort. As well, it dovetails with a goal of my friends', which I believe I shall find amusing.

Very well. On with the show.

"I had thought, at first, of keeping the Lupins' child and raising him as my own, but then a thought came to me. Albus Dumbledore had known these two people who sat on my bed as wolves, known them well. And all Britain knows how much he enjoys his office at Hogwarts, with all the curious contrivances therein. Including the book in which is recorded the name and birthdate of every magical child born in these islands. If he should happen to look into the book and see that a little boy had been born that day who had the last name of Lupin..."

Which did not occur to me, and would never have. Remus thought of it, in conjunction with the spells on their collars, which would have caused their deaths if anyone had referred to them, with certainty and by name, as being alive. He was, in fact, rather eloquent on the subject of irony, if

somewhat profane. I seem to recall Danger nipping him for using such language in front of the children.

The memory made her smile fondly, and it was with that expression that she continued. "If Dumbledore, being presented with such undeniable proof that Remus and Danger lived, should search for them, it was very likely that he would find them. In that finding, of course, he might well kill them, due to the magic laid on their collars to prevent their discovery. I therefore sent Dobby to him with a note, asking if he could meet me at my home the next morning." She lifted an eyebrow at Lucius. "My husband being away, as he had shown no desire to be mixed up in 'all that messy birthing nonsense.'"

Whereas the true note merely asked him to say nothing about the two most recent arrivals in his book, and to adjust it for other eyes so that it would reflect one rather different arrival instead...

"Dumbledore came as I had requested, and I confessed as much as I could without killing those I was beginning to think I could call my friends. He heard me out, asked enough questions in coded language to make me sure he had understood me perfectly, and examined the Lupins' son there with me. With his greater knowledge of magic, he was able to return the boy's appearance to its original state without changing his blood, which retained its magical bond with my daughter's. Her being fully human mitigated the tendency towards change the boy had inherited from his parents, meaning that he would not change into the shape of a wolf on any night except that of the full moon, and would never lose his mind as a werewolf does."

As it is, the child does change only one night a month, but that is artificially induced, by the same potion which keeps, or kept, his parents and his "servant" in their wolf form through all but one day a month. And I see in Lucius' eyes that my little touch about the mingling of the bloods is having the effect I wanted—though he now knows that the boy he called Draco was not sired by him, he can allow himself to feel proprietary towards the child still.

Time to release the Bludgers.

"However, Dumbledore agreed with my reluctant admission that I could not maintain the façade of having given birth to the boy. His parents farewelled him, and I gave Danger permanent permission to contact him through her dream-magic..."

Which she could have done anyway, through his blood to her, and does regularly to not only her own child but to others.

"...and he took the child away with him. I did not know with whom or how he would foster the boy, given that the wizarding community of Britain is not terribly large..."

Dumbledore sighed, causing Lucius to whip around. "I fear I should have told you this years ago, Narcissa," he said, his face the perfect mixture of resignation and worry. "Though perhaps you already knew from other sources." He nodded to Remus, and to Danger where she sat on her bench with Hermione. "As you have said, our people are not numerous. It is quite possible to know the name of literally every wizarding family in Britain. And I feared that Lucius, if he ever discovered what you had done, might be motivated enough to search for a family which had mysteriously developed a son around that time. For that reason, among others, I chose to take the boy to a Muggle, rather than a magical, home."

Somehow I thought he would know the perfect thing to say.

Lucius' color rose alarmingly. Narcissa glanced at Remus, who nodded in agreement and removed the Silencing Charm.

"My son?" Lucius breathed in the dead silence which had fallen over the garden. "You left my son with a houseful of Muggles?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "I thought it had just been established that Narcissa's child was a girl and not a boy," he said. "And that she died shortly after her birth."

Lucius waved this point away. "His blood was partly mine, it could have been purified—yes, and he *belonged* to me, which makes him doubly mine!"

"Belonged to you?" Remus asked softly, dangerously.

"Yes." Lucius turned to face him, matching his tone. "He belonged to me. He was my property. As were you, werewolf. As was your Mudblood wife. As, if the world were properly ordered, you would still be! And none—" He spun to face Narcissa. "None of this farrago of nonsense explains to me why my son Draco, the boy I have known for twelve years, the child who was in my house only this past night *does not exist!*"

Have I mentioned, husband, that I love you best when you make my work easier for me?

Outwardly, Narcissa merely nodded, letting the movement set her tone of sorrow and weariness. "I had thought you might return to that point. Lucius, I am sorry to make it so public, but for that same twelve years you mentioned, you have been... not quite yourself."

"In what way, Narcissa?"

"You have been..." Narcissa paused, as though trying to think of the correct term.

"Off your trolley," the Weasley boy supplied loudly, making his friends snicker.

Narcissa bestowed a quasi-freezing look on him, hoping he knew she was not as put out as she appeared. *Then again, judging by his mother, he will be unmoved by my best work.*

"Not quite the way I would have put it, perhaps," she said, drawing Lucius' attention back to her. "But, sadly, accurate. I told you, Lucius, when you

returned home on that sixth day of June, of our daughter's birth and subsequent death. You took it calmly. I was relieved. I imagine my horror on the next morning, when I discovered that your calm was a veneer over the fact that you had rejected reality and substituted your own more palatable version, as evidenced when you asked after our son's welfare, and told me that you wished to name him Draco..."

Lucius glared at his wife. *This is outrageous. She is inventing these lies on the spot. Certainly I asked after my son on that morning, certainly I told her what I wanted to name him, but Dobby brought him to her bedchamber while we were talking, we discussed what he should be named while she fed him—I held him myself, in my own arms, I felt his weight and his strength, and I knew he would be a wizard to contend with when he was grown!*

"I tried to remind you of what I had explained the previous night, and you laughed and commended me on my joke," Narcissa went on. "I tried to persist, but stopped when I feared you might become violent. I see now that was my mistake. Perhaps, if I had broken through your delusion then, we would never have come to this pass."

"Don't blame yourself, Cissy," said Lupin, laying a hand on Narcissa's shoulder. "You couldn't have known. You were only trying to do what was best for everyone, and I'm sure Lucius understands that." He smiled at Lucius, condescendingly, as one might smile at a small child.

Or at an idiot. A madman, too addled in his brain to know truth from falsehood.

Or... Lucius clenched his teeth. Or at a slave. One whom you have told many times that it is well for him that you took him in hand, for otherwise he or his wife or both would surely have been dead by now, killed by the relentless effects of full moon after full moon and their own recklessness in handling those times.

He drew a long breath, forcing himself to calm. *Obviously Lupin resents the truth, and takes pleasure in attempting to turn it back on me. But I will not play their game. Even if parts of this story are true, whether Draco was born originally to Narcissa or to Lupin's Danger, he is real, he is my child by blood, he is the son I have raised...*

A flicker of movement at the edge of the cleared area caught his eye.

And he is here. How convenient.

"Draco," he said in a tone of command. "Come to me."

The child-sized silhouette drew back slightly.

Lucius frowned. "Draco, what is the matter? Come here."

"I'm sorry, Lucius, but I think you're a bit confused," Lupin said delicately.

"Confused?" Lucius cocked an eyebrow at the werewolf. "In what way?"

"Well..." Lupin waved a hand in the direction of the half-visible child. "You seem to have mistaken my Reynard for your Draco." He turned his motion into a beckoning gesture. "Come on, son, it's all right. He won't hurt you."

The boy stepped forward, lifting a branch that hung in his way to peer out from underneath it. He was slightly built, his movements graceful but giving the impression of controlled strength and speed. The black robes he wore carried the rampant lion of Gryffindor.

So far, he is like my son...

But this boy's hair, somewhat mussed from his passage through the garden, was a sandy brown and lay on his head in waves, and though Lucius could not see the child's eyes, which were fixed on Lupin, he would have laid money that they were the same clear blue he had grown used to seeing daily in the face of the wolf called Caesar.

So either that much of Narcissa's story was true, or Draco has been placed under a glamour charm. I will reserve my judgment until more evidence appears.

The boy's face, which had been politely curious, bloomed into joy, and he broke from his place to run to Lupin, his arms out. Lupin laughed once, in a somewhat choked voice, as he caught the boy into a tight embrace. "There's my boy," he murmured into hair only a shade or two darker than his own. "There's my Ray."

Ray. What Narcissa calls our son, when she thinks I am not listening. Proof, proof positive that she has tried to feed me a complete fabrication. And, too, had this child been raised anywhere but this house, how would he have known Lupin? Neither he nor his wife have been off my grounds for as long as this boy has been alive. No, this is Draco. His appearance has been altered, his behavior changed with a Confundus Charm or perhaps even the Imperius, but he is my son, and I will have him.

He started forward.

The boy gasped in fear and clung to Lupin tighter, as Lupin's wand—*my wand, which he has stolen as he tries now to steal my son*—came up to cover Lucius. "It's all right," the werewolf murmured, pulling the boy close with his other arm. "It's over now. He can't ever get you."

Get him? As though I were a monster, something to come prowling at night? Lucius snorted. *Fine sentiments indeed from a werewolf—a*

monster of the night himself! The Confundus must be very strong indeed, to compel Draco to such closeness with him.

"Reynard," said Dumbledore, stepping forward so that he was beside Lucius. "Do you know this man?"

"Through Mum's dreams I do, sir," the boy answered respectfully in a clear treble, glancing at Lucius for a second before looking back at Dumbledore. "But I haven't ever seen him before, not with my own eyes."

I am wrong. It must be the Imperius that Draco is under—for that is Draco, I recognize his voice—to force him to say such laughably untrue things. And they accuse me of performing illegal magic. Who are the ones using an Unforgivable Curse on a child, then?

"Very good. And in your mum's dreams, who have you been told that he is?"

Blue eyes flashed with anger. "Lucius Malfoy, sir. The man who's held my parents as slaves for longer than I've been alive. Who killed my grandparents and stole my sister-aunt away from them to do the same to her. Who would've done it to me, if Mum and Dad hadn't got me safely away. I had to grow up in a foster family because of him, and I hate him for it!"

The vitriol in the boy's tone sent Lucius half a step backwards. *Could even the Imperius produce such a convincing act? He seems truly livid, as though I have somehow wronged him...*

No. He shook his head. That way lies madness. Beyond doubt he is being compelled into this story. How, without my wand, can I break this compulsion to let him speak freely, to tell the world the truth?

"Can you tell me about your foster family, Reynard?" Dumbledore continued. "Are they kind to you?"

"Well, my foster mother is." The boy smiled shyly at Narcissa. "She's always looking out for me, making sure I understand my lessons, keeping me out of my foster father's way when he's angry or when he drinks. And even he's not so bad, when he's in a good mood. He'll teach me things if I ask him just right."

"What sorts of things?" Dumbledore asked, for all the world as though he were really interested. "Has he taught you how to ride your broomstick properly? Or how to manage a magical creature?"

The boy laughed aloud. "I think you're being silly, sir," he said. "My foster parents are Muggles. They know about magic—I think they have a second cousin who's a witch—but they're not magic themselves. And you know that, because you're the one who brought me to them and asked if they would take care of me. And the one who took me away again when I was a bit more than a year old, and brought me back with a little gray puppy that was really a girl..."

He paused, looking curiously at Lucius. "I suppose I have seen him before, then, though I don't remember it. The day he gave me... well, I had to call her Zelda when she wore the collar. But I always knew her real name was Neenie. Hermione. Just like she's always been a sister to me, a twin almost, even though it looked like she was my pet and we're aunt and nephew by blood..."

The word broke through Lucius' growing sense of unreality, through his feeling that this was surely a nightmare, some demon of his mind haunting his sleep. "Blood," he repeated in a hoarse whisper. "Yes. That is the answer."

"I beg your pardon, Lucius?" Dumbledore turned towards him.

"I demand that our bloods be tested," Lucius said, pointing towards the boy, who shrank away from him, clinging to Lupin. "To show, once and for all, that this *is* my son. No matter who gave birth to him, he could not have looked so much like me for so many years if he did not bear my blood, and I want that proved here and now." He whirled towards Narcissa. "And you can explain to me how I could have given over control of Griselda to an imaginary child."

"Reynard has told you that himself." Narcissa waved towards the boy, a faint smile in place on her face. "By the time Hermione arrived in our lives, I had given over trying to convince you that Draco was not real, contenting myself instead with keeping our lives running smoothly despite your... malady. I demanded that you deal with her bond to Greyback, not only because it would certainly be detrimental to her, but because I needed time to contact Dumbledore and have him retrieve the boy. Though you kept the full mastery of her collar for yourself, as you did for Danger, and she was therefore forced into a mostly lupine existence, she was still safe and happy with Reynard and his parents. As I had known she would be."

She has an answer for everything. Lucius turned back slowly, observing the werewolf and the child, now holding out his arm obediently as Lupin explained something to him. *And the boy truly looks happy with Lupin. Could it be—is it possible—*

No. It is not possible, and therefore it cannot be. If only I could see through whatever spell they have performed, see the truth of the matter plainly...

For one instant, the scene before his eyes flickered. The brown and blue of "Reynard" were replaced with the blond and gray of his own Draco, the cheerful smile with an expression of horror, as the creature which clutched him with one twisted paw ran its red tongue along his outstretched arm with a gloating laugh—Draco's eyes lifted to Lucius and filled with incredulous hope, as though he were scarcely able to believe his father could have come in time—

Lucius blinked, startled. The brown-haired boy in front of him was indeed regarding him, but the look in the blue eyes was challenging, perhaps even a bit aloof. His arm was extended before him, Lupin's pressed against it, and Dumbledore's wand had wreathed them both in red smoke, the positive result of a lineage spell.

So he is Lupin's brat by birth, then. No matter, that can be changed—Lupin and his bitch will have to die, of course, and the boy should do it

himself for the best results, but that may take some time—still, it can be done, and it will. I will have my son again, no matter what obstacles lie in my way. Narcissa may have been trying to disguise him with the bonding she worked all those years ago, but it still means my blood runs in his veins, and no amount of trickery can overcome that...

“Lucius?” Dumbledore’s voice broke into his musings. “We are ready for you.”

“I don’t want him touching me,” the boy objected, pulling back as Lucius approached.

“You need not touch,” Dumbledore assured him. “Only hold your hand near enough to his that the spell may recognize you both.”

My poor child. Afraid of me, who wishes only to restore you to your rightful place, but not of these, who would warp and twist you into a degraded existence. Lucius went to one knee in front of Lupin and the boy and held out his arm, leaving a careful three inches of air between his skin and the child’s. *Still, this will allow you to see their lies for what they are, and I will trust to your Gryffindor courage to lead you unafraid on a quest for the truth...*

He turned his head to smile at Narcissa as Dumbledore lifted his wand to cast the spell. *You were right, my dear. Despite his Sorting, my son is a true Malfoy after all.*

“*Revele cognationem,*” Dumbledore intoned.

Lucius returned his attention to the spell.

The smoke surrounding his hand and the boy’s was a bright blue.

Blue. Negative.

He shut his eyes for a second, then opened them. The color had not changed.

I share no blood at all with this boy, and never have.

“Dad?” The treble voice quivered, as with weariness or great joy. “Can we go home soon?”

“I think we can do that.” Lupin’s own voice was wavering, as though he had never expected to speak these words. “Son.”

Slowly, Lucius lifted his head, rage beginning to frost his vision. Lupin, his face beatific, cradled the boy against him. The small brown head rested on his shoulder, eyes closed trustingly, a tear trickling from beneath one long-lashed lid, as though Reynard were weeping for the joy of being in his father’s arms at last—

No. I must not believe the falsehood. I must strive to see the truth. The spell was faked, must have been faked—this is all faked, I am being deceived, but I saw through the illusion for a moment earlier—if I try my hardest, turn all my magic to the task, perhaps I can do it once more—

He focused, putting to work the concentration and strength of a trained wizard, one with ten generations of magical ancestors behind him, and with a tangible snap, he broke through. The child in Lupin’s arms was suddenly his own Draco again, Lupin the twisted creature reminiscent of Fenrir Greyback, and the peaceful embrace transformed like magic into a desperate struggle. Draco writhed, panting in terror, as Lupin poked and prodded at various parts of him, laughing coarsely. “You’ll need some feeding up,” the werewolf said with a leer, “but I’m sure Danger can handle that...”

Draco turned his head and saw Lucius, and his eyes lit once more with disbelieving joy. “Dad!” he screamed, stretching out his arms.

“Release my son, animal!” Lucius lunged forward to snatch his child to safety.

Lupin’s wand was up in a flash, and Lucius was blasted backwards across the garden, away from his shrieking son, away from the cackling *thing* that held him. “Draco...” he panted, trying to get to his feet. “Draco... no...”

“Quickly,” hissed the withered and hideous figure which knelt beside the werewolf, waving one shriveled hand as though to signal someone. “Before he has another chance.”

Rough hands seized Lucius and pulled him upright. He looked at his captors and barely managed to stifle a scream of his own—one was a blank-faced, drooling idiot of a man, the other a mad-eyed woman who let out a penetrating giggle as she saw him looking at her—

“Dad, please,” Draco sobbed, reaching towards him again. “Please.”

“Don’t look,” the werewolf commanded, turning Draco’s head away forcibly. “Don’t look at him.” He grinned once at Lucius, exposing yellowed and stained teeth, then bent over Draco’s exposed neck, licking his lips.

“*NO!*” Lucius fought, twisting as though he were crazed himself, but the madman’s grip on him did not falter—the woman’s loosened, and he redoubled his efforts, but she drew a wand and pointed it at him, giving voice to her insane laugh again—only this time, there was a word contained within it—

“*Stupefy!*” she shrielled.

Draco’s hopeless wail followed Lucius into darkness.

Ray clung to his dad, shaking, keeping his face buried in the man's robes rather than look up at Malfoy, now slumped unconscious against Mr. Longbottom. **I saw it**, he said in family speech. **When he went mad. I saw it in his eyes—he wasn't seeing the real me and you anymore, he was seeing something his mind had made up instead—**

I know. Dad held him tightly, stroking his hair every so often, not commenting at all about the tears that had to be soaking through his robes by now. **I never intended that. Nor your mum. Narcissa... possibly. But it would have happened in any case. And he brought it on himself, Ray. He made his own decisions, and we made ours, and now it's over.**

Ray nodded, not trusting either of his voices, and repositioned his face to find a dry spot.

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True Colors

Chapter 13: Homecoming

Quiet reigned once more in the back garden of what had been Malfoy Manor. The Longbottoms had taken Malfoy, still unconscious, to London for booking, leaving Neville in Sirius and Aletha's charge until they returned. At the moment, he was sitting with Meghan and Aletha, alongside the Weasleys and the Lovegoods, listening to Narcissa explain the truth behind her story and why she had told it the way she had.

The truth is simple enough. Remus tilted his head back to the sun, reveling in its play on his skin. Ray is ours and always was. We wanted him hidden, Narcissa needed a living child to show Lucius, we made a deal. She disguised him with a strong glamour charm, and Danger "encouraged" Lucius to think of the name Draco, so that we could keep calling our boy by his own nickname. Dobby would take us to and from his nursery during the day so that we could tend him without being caught, and Narcissa kept Lucius away at night so he wouldn't see his son turning into a wolf. Ray takes the same potion we do, except he uses it to stay human, and—until today—spiked it with a second potion to keep himself looking like Lucius.

Sirius claimed he had grasped the truth in the moment he'd seen Ray's face and had no need to listen. Remus suspected his friend's disinclination to move was more closely related to Harry being asleep on his lap and Danger against his shoulder.

With my Kitten on her lap, sucking her thumb as usual.

Remus knew he should do something about his little girl's bad habit, but at this precise moment, with his son sleeping beside him, making sun-warmed brown hair available for stroking, he couldn't muster enough strength to care.

Besides, her having a thumb to suck at all is a victory. We've won—more than won, we've triumphed—we're free, we're together, we're all of us alive, and our enemy destroyed himself...

"Why so pensive?" asked Dumbledore, sitting down beside him. "If I may ask."

"I had no idea he'd do that." Remus twined his fingers through Ray's soft brunet waves. "I have no idea what he did, for that matter. He snapped, that much is obvious. Ray said he wasn't seeing reality properly anymore..."

"He could not accept what his senses were telling him," said Dumbledore, gazing up at the morning sky, blue with a few wisps of white cloud. "Thus, he denied it, with all his heart and soul, and with all his magic, which was and is considerable. He sought another truth, and found it—not a truth as we would understand it, but the truth of himself."

Well, at least I know Dumbledore hasn't changed any since we've been away. "I'm sorry, I don't think I understand."

"Lucius Malfoy believed that only he could see the truth," Dumbledore explained. "Thus, the 'truth' that he saw was a truth not about you, or about me, or about Frank and Alice, but about himself. Because he found reality frightening, his new world was colored with that fear. He projected onto us what he fears most, both in us and in his own mind."

"And what he saw when he looked at me was a beast." Remus gently pulled one of Ray's waves straight, then released it to watch it spring back. "A monster, preying on the innocent."

"Indeed. Consider also that he saw this, or thought he saw it, while you performed a father's rightful duty to the child he has always considered his." Dumbledore smiled at Ray as the boy rearranged himself closer to Remus without waking. "He is envious of you, Remus, and angry at having been tricked, and he cannot bring himself to believe that his period of supremacy is over. So he has retreated into a world in which he will forever be supreme, since there is no one else there to challenge him."

"I could almost pity him," Remus said, tracing the curve of a delicate ear with his fingertip. "He's as much a slave now as we ever were—more, since our collars were put on us from the outside. We could always fight against them, and hope one day to win free of them. His chains come from within, and considering where he's headed, it doesn't seem likely he'll ever have a chance to be free." He sighed. "It's a shame, really."

"You are a better man than I am, Remus Lupin," Dumbledore said softly.

"Am I hearing this right?" Arthur asked. "No one who was not here tonight will ever know there truly was a child who called himself Draco Malfoy?"

"A few people will be told of it," said Narcissa. "But the rest have already been affected by a very subtle magic." She nodded towards Danger and Hermione, asleep against Sirius on their bench. "Tell the truth—did not all of you, when you met or heard about my son, feel somewhat disconcerted? Did it not startle you that there should be a polite Malfoy, or one who cared about others? And most of all, that one should be Sorted into Gryffindor?" *Which terrified me, no matter how good a face I put on for Lucius—I had known it was likely to happen, but at that moment we were in more danger of being discovered than we had been for years...*

"That did surprise me rather," Molly admitted. "Doubly so when Ron wrote about becoming friends with him. From what I knew of the Malfoys, it seemed..." Her cheeks pinked, but she finished the sentence. "...impossible."

"The magic relies on that," said Severus. "In much the way a Memory Charm on a Muggle, to make him forget he has seen magic, works with his necessity for continuity in his world. In many cases, Obliviators have only light work, because Muggles who witness magic usually *want* to forget that they saw these strange things, to allow their lives to continue uninterrupted."

“So this magic works like a Wrackspurt does,” said Gerald, nodding. “Muddles the brain and allows the person to make up his own mind, or hers, about what was really there—and when everyone around him is insisting that this particular boy has always had brown hair and blue eyes and the name of Reynard Lupin, and was raised by a Muggle foster family...”

“Precisely.” Narcissa nodded, smiling slightly. “Special attention was, of course, given to those associates of Lucius’ who had encountered Draco here at home, but most of them dislike Lucius already, and seized gladly on an excuse to believe him mad and his precious son a delusion. They now believe that the child they saw was an illusion-figure, cast subconsciously by Lucius to keep his story believable.”

“This is going to be really weird,” Ron said. “I was just getting used to having Ray and Zelda around, and now Ray’ll still be there but he’ll look different, and Zelda’s named Hermione and she’ll be over in the girls’ dorm...” He frowned. “What’s going to happen about her? I don’t think you can make people forget a wolf running around Hogwarts.”

“Which is why they do not plan to try,” said Severus, giving Ron his usual look of bare tolerance for idiocy. “Her story will be told almost as it happened, save for the detail of the name of her ‘master’. You may decide for yourself if you wish it known that you were cognizant of her humanity before this general revelation.”

“Why wouldn’t we want people to know that, sir?” Neville asked, as Ron seemed to still be lost somewhere in Severus’ third sentence.

“Your peers may be offended if they discover that you knew something they did not, especially something of this magnitude, and for such a length of time.”

“I think maybe they’ll understand when they find out she would have *died* if we’d told,” Ron said testily.

“Or perhaps they will argue that you learned of it without killing her, so why could they not have learned in the same way?” Severus shot back. “I think you had best be prepared, Weasley—”

Narcissa folded her arms, concealing her wand’s aim, and fired a wordless Impediment Jinx. Severus froze for an instant, then turned to glare at her. She shook her head minutely. “You will, of course, know how to handle your Housemates better than we,” she said to the boys, taking over the conversation. “There is no great rush, but a decision sooner rather than later would be best.”

“I’m no good at lying,” said Neville with the directness he’d inherited from his father. “I’d rather tell the truth. Besides, if I tried to say I didn’t know Zelda was human, someone would catch me out with how good of friends we are already. And they’re never going to believe Ray and Harry and I knew and Ron didn’t, not with how much we all go around together, so it’s not really your decision anyway, Ron,” he said to his friend. “Sound good?”

“Sure.” Ron looked past Narcissa and Severus. “And I think she’s waking up. Excuse me, please.”

He was on his feet and halfway across the garden before anyone could muster a protest. His parents looked at each other. Molly had a small, smug smile on her lips. Arthur seemed reminiscent. “There’s nothing wrong with starting young,” he said. “Though I tend to think he gets it more from your side of the family, dear.”

“I’d say you might well be right,” said Molly, surveying Neville and Meghan, both watching Ron advancing towards a yawning Hermione with the complacency of those who had never felt a moment’s anxiety about this particular subject. Narcissa noted the attitude, along with the tiny brown hand twined comfortably with the broader, paler one, and mentally added a branch to her family tree.

Mine once more, nowthat I have some chance of being acknowledged by those of its members who are neither dead nor incarcerated...

“May we speak?” Severus said quietly behind her. “Alone?”

“Of course.” Narcissa nodded politely to the adults of the group she’d been speaking with, then started for a small bower near the back of the garden. Her own white narcissus grew there in abundance around a small flat stone with a simple carving on it, half-hidden behind a backless bench. She had long ago enchanted the nook for privacy.

Considering my usual pastime when I come here, it was necessary.

Severus stepped within the spells, tilted his head as if listening to some sound or the absence of one, and nodded, recognizing the magic, as Narcissa had thought he would. “Your own work?” he asked.

“I would trust no other with this spot.”

“Why—ah.” His keen eyes had noticed the stone, with the uneven W-shaped arrangement of five stars etched into its top. “Your daughter.”

“Yes.” She only trusted her voice for the one word, and even that hurt to say.

I had not realized howmuch that story would pain me to tell over. And howmuch I will miss visiting her, telling her of my life, of her father’s, of that of the boy who was freed by her death... howstrange, to think that if she had lived, she might even nowwear a bracelet and he a collar...

She shook her head, dismissing the thoughts. “What did you wish to say, Severus? Or ask?”

“Ask is perhaps the better term.” Severus seemed to find the tiny gravestone fascinating, as he had not taken his eyes from it since he had first seen it. “I wondered why you felt it necessary to lie about Draco’s existence, to goad Lucius into madness. If there was any reason, beyond a desire for revenge.”

“There was.” Narcissa reached up to an overhanging tree and plucked a leaf bud, twirling it between her fingers. “The contract by which I was married made specific provisions for the dissolution of the marriage. As long as Lucius still wished me to be his wife, I was obliged to remain so—and though learning how I have tricked him for all these years might have caused him to repudiate me, it might also have caused him to cling more tightly, to try to ruin my life even as I had ruined his. However, now that he has lost his sanity...”

“The contract no longer applies.” Severus sat down on the bench. “Clever of you.”

“Thank you.”

They sat in silence for a long moment, silence and understanding.

“Your hair is really very red,” Hermione said, touching the side of Ron’s head shyly.

“Thought you knew that.”

“I did—I do—but this is the first time I’ve seen you like this. Outside, in the sunlight.”

“We’ve been outside together loads of times.”

Hermione looked away. “Never when I could see colors.”

Ron felt his ears heating up. *Muffled it again. Can’t I do anything right?*

“It’s so strange to be outdoors as a human,” Hermione went on, walking in a small circle around the bit of garden they’d migrated to, touching trees, bushes, hedges as she passed them. “I never had, did you know? Only in dreams, and it isn’t the same. It was a lot better than not having anything, but I don’t even know if I get sunburned.”

Ron pulled back a sleeve and held out his arm. “Check against me,” he said. “I burn easy as anything, soon as it gets hot out, but once I’ve got over my first one and I remember to use Mum’s potion, my freckles all just run together for the rest of the summer.”

Hermione laughed, rolled up her own sleeve, and laid her arm against his. “I’m not nearly so fair as you,” she said, looking critically at the skin thus exposed. “And Mum—Danger, I suppose I should be calling her, but I never could safely and I didn’t want to say Calpurnia, that’s not a name she liked, and she’s the only mum I’ve ever known—she says she did used to get sunburned, but not too badly. So I should probably be careful, but I don’t have to stay all the way out of the sun.” She looked up at the sky. “And I’m glad. I like sun. I always did, and now I like it even better.”

“I bet.” Ron watched her twirl in the center of their clearing for a moment. “Zel—I mean, Hermione?”

“Either’s fine, Ron.” She tilted her head back over her shoulder to smile at him. “I know you mean me.”

Ron nodded. “I’m going to miss having you around,” he said. “I mean, not that you won’t be around—you’re still a Gryffindor and we’ll still have classes together and eat together and things—but I’m...” He broke off in frustration. “I don’t even know what I was trying to say.”

“I think I do.” Hermione spun around one final time and came over to him. “And I did want to ask you a favor. We’ll likely be going back to Hogwarts soon—Mum and Dad are going to stay there for a while, Professor Dumbledore says they may, and of course Ray and I have classes, we’ve got to finish our first year...” She beamed for a moment. “I can’t *wait* to write my first essay. But that’s not what I wanted to ask you.”

“I’m listening,” Ron said when Hermione seemed more inclined to scuff her bare toes in the gravel of the path than to speak.

She looked up. “Would you take me flying?”

“Flying?” Ron stared at her in surprise. “Sure—but why?”

“I’ve never been.” Hermione laughed a little. “A wolf body doesn’t fit very well on a broomstick. And I’m a little bit afraid of it, actually. Because I’ve never done it, because Ray fell his first time in lessons, because I’ve spent so much time with four legs and close to the ground, I don’t know. But I don’t want to be afraid of it. It’s important for me to learn. So would you help me? Please?”

“That sounds great.” Ron found himself grinning and didn’t know why, but he didn’t care either. “I’ll have to borrow Harry’s broom, though—you know I don’t have one of my own—and why not ask Harry for this?” His good mood soured as the thought came to him. “Or Ray? They both fly better than I do.”

“Which means they’ll try tricks and scare me,” Hermione retorted. “You fly just fine, but you won’t think it’s funny to take me way up high and then do a freefall dive, or shoot through the goal hoops going so fast I can’t see anything clearly. I trust you, Ron. Please, will you do this for me?”

Ron felt a great bubble of happiness swelling in his chest. *She trusts me. And she wants me to do this. Me, nobody else.*

“Course I will,” he said, holding out his hand. “Weasley honor on it.”

“Nothing better.” Hermione met his hand with her own. “I’m glad I know you, Ron.”

They stood smiling at each other, holding hands, for one instant before—

“Hermione!” Meghan launched herself into their clearing, charging at the older girl. “Hermione, Dobby just showed up, Ray’s mum, or no, not his

mum, but Mrs. Malfoy, or maybe Miss Black now, she freed him last night but she asked him for a favor and he said yes, so she sent him to Diagon Alley and he went in and out of all the stores and left the money behind and he's brought you back the things you need, except a wand because you have to be there yourself for that, but he brought your Hogwarts robes and your uniform and Ron and Ginny's mum and mine and yours say they can fit them for you, and they're coming with them right now!"

"Did she breathe at all there?" Ron inquired.

Hermione laughed and hugged Meghan. "I don't think so," she said to Ron. "Thank you, Pearl."

"Hermione?" Meghan looked up at her. "I used to have these dreams... I still have them, really, I never stopped... but they had a family in them, with a mum and a dad and a boy and girl Harry's age... the girl's like a big sister to me, and she likes to read, and she's very smart, and she calls me Pearl just like Harry and Mum and Dadfoot do..."

Ron edged away as his own mum, Harry's ungodmother, Hermione's sister-mum, and Luna and Ginny came into the clearing, the three older witches with their arms full of fabric and all five of them talking at once.

I really don't think I'm wanted here just now.

But later on, if Harry'll let me use the Nimbus... which is a school broom, really, but no one else uses it... still polite to ask, but I can't see how he'd say no...

He went on his way whistling cheerily, lost in daydreams of flying with Hermione.

"Minerva, do you have a moment?"

"Of course, Albus, do come in." Minerva waved the Headmaster into her office. "Please tell me you have some idea where Harry Potter and his friends have gone—not to mention Quirrell and Severus? No one seems to know where they are, the house-elves tell me their beds were never slept in, and the boys were trying to tell me some ridiculous story about the Philosopher's Stone last night—"

"Calm yourself, Minerva, your students are well. Severus also, and I know what has happened to Quirinus." Albus beckoned to someone else in the hall. "But I believe this takes precedence. A young lady to whom you must be introduced, or perhaps I should say reintroduced."

"Reintroduced?"

An eleven-year-old girl stepped hesitantly through Minerva's office door. Large quantities of curly brown hair and robes already bearing the red and gold Gryffindor crest framed an earnest, hopeful, *familiar* face—

"Merlin's wand," Minerva breathed, coming around her desk. "You're Danger's sister, you must be—oh, good heavens, what was your name, I can't recall..."

"Hermione, Professor." The girl held out a hand, a bit awkwardly, as though she were unused to the gesture. "Hermione Granger. And I just have to say that your lectures are wonderful. Ray's always whining about them, he doesn't like Transfiguration, but I think it's my favorite subject of all!"

This little peroration produced several conundrums. Minerva chose to address first the one closest to the subject she'd been on before Hermione had arrived. "Ray? Do you mean Draco Malfoy?"

"I would have, yesterday," Hermione said, a smile beginning to light her face that heightened her resemblance to her sister even more. "But now I don't anymore."

Minerva shook her head. "Now you don't anymore? What might that mean?"

"May I show you, Professor? Please?" Hermione gestured to the door. "It isn't far, and I think it will make you very happy."

"Well, all right." Minerva glanced at Albus. He seemed perfectly calm, until one looked into his eyes and noticed their brighter than usual sparkle, and the tiny smile that kept slipping onto his face. Clearly, whatever Hermione wanted to show her, he already knew about it.

So Hermione Granger never died after all. But where can she have been all this time? Minerva followed the girl out of her office and up the nearest flight of stairs. And how does she know what my lectures are like? I've never had her in class, until a moment ago I thought she was dead

—
And she wears the Gryffindor crest. But Albus would never have Sorted a student without my presence, especially not one he suspected might become a member of my House. She also mentioned, as if she knows him well, Draco Malfoy, my most unexpected charge of this year—well, perhaps second most unexpected, his pet wolf Zelda seems likely to take the prize from him—

Hermione knocked at the door of the Defense professor's office. Minerva sighed inwardly, readying herself to deal with Quirinus Quirrell's nattering timidities.

But it was Harry Potter who answered the door, his bright grin very like his father's, reinforcing Minerva's feeling that she had accidentally dropped a Time-Turner and thrown herself twenty years into the past. *At least he is well, and I assume his friends also, or he would not look so happy. But that does not answer the question of what is going on here.*

“Good morning, Professor,” Harry said politely, stepping aside to allow Sirius and Minerva to enter. The walls of the office were bare, the desk likewise, and Sirius, Aletha, and Meghan Black sat in the guests’ chairs, Meghan bouncing up and down on her mother’s lap.

“The people I think you want to see are in the back,” said Sirius, hooking a thumb at the door. “They said don’t bother to knock, just go right in.”

“People—” Minerva broke off short as her earlier thoughts rushed together in her mind, along with something Augusta Longbottom had once told her that Frank had passed along about the security on a certain wizarding manor, and her sense, heightened yet again by Meghan’s presence, that time had reversed itself, that she was seeing once again the students she had taught as the war with Voldemort worsened, the students by whose side she had fought as a member of the Order of the Phoenix...

She was across the room, at the door to the private quarters, the knob was turning under her hand, she was inside the dim and quiet bedroom beyond—

Remus Lupin turned around at her entrance, and Danger rose from her seat on the bed, the bed on which lay a sleeping boy, about Harry and Hermione’s age and wearing the Gryffindor crest as they did but no student of hers that she recognized, but clearly, clearly the son of the two people in front of her, impossible as that was, impossible as their very existence was—

“You’ve come back,” she said.

It was only after the fact that she heard how hoarse her voice was, as though she were crying. But that was ridiculous. She was Minerva McGonagall, Professor of Transfiguration, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. She had no need to cry.

“I’m only sorry it took us so long,” Remus answered, coming forward and holding out his hand.

“Oh—” Minerva caught him by the shoulders, shook him once, then embraced him, letting go only to do the same to Danger as she came near enough. “What does that matter now? You’re here, you’re alive, and with a child of your own—he is yours?”

“Yes, this is our Ray,” Danger said, smiling through tears of her own as Minerva released her. “You’d have known him as Draco until today, but his true name is Reynard Lupin.”

“I don’t envy you in two years when Meghan arrives,” Remus added. “Not that Harry isn’t as much Sirius’ as James’ after so long, and he seems to have found worthy companions in Ron and Neville. And, of course, Ray.”

“Yes, I must say I’d wondered at how very much that foursome reminded me of another set of young Gryffindors I knew once,” Minerva said, trying to regain her usual acerbic tones. “Though I suppose I should call it a fivesome—I never had understood until just now why the Hat chose to Sort young Malfoy’s wolf...”

“So tell me again about your young man,” said Gerald Lovegood to his daughter as they knelt by the bridge across the stream near their home, Gerald with his Plimpy net, Luna with a bag to hold the catch. “What sorts of wandless magic can he do?”

“Oh, Ray can do lots of things.” Luna shook her bag sharply as a small squabble erupted inside it. “He can control fire like his dad—it was Mr. Lupin who really shielded Harry from the Fiendfyre and made sure the bit of You-Know-Who’s soul inside Harry burned up in it, Professor Snape was just there so You-Know-Who would think he was doing it instead—and dreams like his mum—Ray was the one who did the illusion on Harry to make him look dead, since Mr. Lupin was still wearing his collar then so Mrs. Lupin could only do enough magic to make everyone not see the house starting to burn—and he turns into a wolf when the sun goes down, and human again when it comes up. Unless he takes his potion, of course.”

“Intriguing.” Gerald swooped the net down and pulled up a Plimpy, knotting its legs together expertly and tossing it into Luna’s bag. “So it breeds true, then. And you mentioned he could speak silently in the wolf form?”

“That’s part of the dream power. He can give people a moment’s daydream of hearing him speak. But he and Hermione will both pass that on to their children as well, so they should all be able to speak even when they’re wolves.” Luna smiled, swishing her fingers through the water. “Maybe my children will be natural wolf Animagi. Or change only one night in two, or even have their wolf shape during the day.”

Gerald netted another Plimpy. “I look forward to finding out.”

Harry ran across the lawns towards Hagrid’s house, glancing over his shoulder every so often to see Hermione and Ron behind him, Ron making sure Hermione didn’t fall while she got used to running on two legs instead of four. Neville and Meghan followed behind them, spinning around each other every so often for sheer joy. Ahead of him, Ginny was just slowing to a halt at Hagrid’s steps, hand pressed to her chest.

Looks like next year we’ll have a new contender for fastest person who isn’t actually part wolf.

Hagrid came out his door as Neville and Meghan stopped at the steps, Fang charging past him to bestow his usual raptures of introduction on Ginny, then to sniff around the hems of Hermione’s robes with a puzzled whine. Hermione laughed. “I don’t think he knows quite what to make of me,” she said, stroking Fang’s head.

“Not sure I know what ter make of yeh,” said Hagrid, frowning at her. “This’s Ginny, that’s easy enough, an’ Meghan I know already—an’ while I’m on th’ subject, where’s Ray an’ Zelda?”

Ginny and Meghan went into fits of giggles, and Ron and Neville stifled snorts of laughter. Harry grinned. “One of them’s here,” he said. “You just aren’t looking right.”

Hagrid gave him a hard stare. "Some people are gonna get themselves in trouble one o' these days with their jokes," he said, then turned back to Hermione, who had reduced Fang to a puddle of boarhound bliss. "Pardon me fer bein' rude, but I can' help feelin' I've seen yeh somewhere before, Miss..."

"Granger. Hermione Granger." Hermione looked up with a shy smile. "Thank you for worrying about me yesterday, Hagrid, but chocolate doesn't hurt me, no matter what shape I'm in. And Dad said to tell you he and Mum will be down a bit later to say hello, and that he's glad Ray reminds you of Mum and not him, because that might mean you'd forgot which of them actually broke part of your tea service while they were here, even if it was an accident and he did get rid of the erkling that had been trying to lure off the first years."

Harry's ears were ten minutes recovering from Hagrid's bellow of disbelieving joy.

"Real subtle of Dumbledore, giving you this place," Sirius commented, looking around the Defense professor's office. "You always did say you thought you'd like teaching."

"And I will. Next year." Remus was leaning back in the desk chair, his feet up on the desk, his eyes closed. "Voldemort being dead, there's a bit less need for Defense lessons at the moment. Dumbledore plans to let the subject go, except for O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students, until I'm ready to take it up in the fall."

"Will you be?" The question had been on Sirius' mind for hours, but they'd been constantly with other people until just now. Even Aletha and Danger were absent at this moment, off inducting Hermione and Meghan into some feminine club to which mere males need not apply, and Sirius intended to get an answer. "I'll be honest, Moony—if I'd heard of someone in a situation like yours, had it described to me, I'd be skeptical they could readjust to normal life after even one year of that kind of treatment. You went through *twelve*. Don't try and pretend it didn't affect you."

"I'm not." Remus hadn't opened his eyes, and his voice was a monotone, but Sirius didn't doubt him. "But do remember, Padfoot, we had some advantages. Most important, I think, is that we could always talk to one another. Danger and I were able to speak mind-to-mind from the moment the spell hit us, and we could speak to Ray once he was born—we actually heard him first just before he came out. He didn't like it much, and I don't blame him, but with our contact we were able to persuade him not to cry about it, at least not aloud."

Sirius' mind provided a vivid picture of the tiny cellar room Harry had described, lit by flickering firelight. Danger's face was sweat-streaked and twisted in pain, blood trickling down her chin from where she'd bitten her lip to keep herself from screaming. Remus knelt between her legs to catch the emerging infant, his own face bearing the expression of quiet calm that the Marauders had known as Moony in the grip of some powerful emotion he didn't dare show.

Because with every breath they took, they were reminded of what they were. Slaves. Property. Malfoy would have been overjoyed to find out they could breed—probably would have auctioned off their kids to anyone who wanted a guardian for his own brat or his house...

"Ray was our second advantage," Remus went on, switching the way his feet were stacked on the desk. "Simply knowing he was safe, knowing he would grow up free, made our burden lighter. And once he got enough motor control to hold a quill..." He opened his eyes and grinned at Sirius. "Did I mention he'll sometimes let us use his body as though it were ours?"

"Those anonymous letters Dumbledore used to get," Sirius said, nodding. "Zelda—Hermione—she said you'd been the ones to tip him off about Frank and Alice..."

"That was the first one we ever sent. Dobby could take it from Ray where he couldn't from us, and he was more than happy to work against Lucius in secret, even with having to punish himself afterwards." Remus shut his eyes again. "It got easier and easier from there, until by the time Ray was four or so we were able to write entire letters. That was when we started sending Dumbledore details about the Horcruxes, and he started going after them. We wrote in code, of course—just in case Lucius happened to come in while Ray was working, he'd dismiss it as childish nonsense." He chuckled deep in his throat. "We always signed ourselves 'Your friends in low places.'"

Sirius snorted. "Classy. What was Dumbledore's code name, then?"

"Mithrandir. Which is another name for Gandalf..."

"Who's an old wizard with a long beard, I get it," Sirius interrupted.

Remus sat up straight. "Are you telling me Letha's finally got you to read *The Lord of the Rings*?"

"Call it self-defense. So I'd understand what she was always on about. But go on."

"Voldemort was 'the chicken-toed'—a pun on his being Heir of Slytherin and how you get a basilisk—and Harry was 'Arthur,' the little king being raised in hiding."

Sirius drew himself up in mock indignation. "Oy! That's no king, that's my godson!"

Remus laughed. "Save it for someone who doesn't know you like I do. The Philosopher's Stone, when it came up, was 'the apple,' because it's red and tempting, and Ray was 'Ralph,' for Ralph Rackstraw, the switched baby from *HMS Pinafore*—Danger picked that one out after Hermione came to us, because she considers herself as Ray's sister or his cousin but in actuality she's his aunt."

"Some aunt. Younger than him, isn't she?"

Remus nodded. "Three months. We'd never have known about her until she arrived if it weren't for your letters."

"Speaking of letters, I'm finding it just a little creepy how easy this is." Sirius shook his head. "We've been apart longer than we were ever friends to begin with. I thought you were dead and I was making those letters up until this morning. But now you're here, you're alive, and I feel like we can just pick up—not where we left off, we've both moved on from there, but where we are now, and go from there. Does that make sense?"

"We'll have to work at it, but yes, it does—" Remus broke off, his head turned as though he were listening to something. "That's odd... it almost sounds as if..."

The monster had him, and he couldn't break free.

He twisted against its hold, gasping for breath as fear drove the air from his lungs, wishing desperately that he dared to scream, but screaming would only bring more monsters to help this one. It laughed now at his efforts, pulling him closer to its face, frozen in a rictus of mad glee. "I will have you," it breathed. "You will never escape from me, never, never, never..."

Its free hand came up, displaying the long strip of green leather, the rune symbols for control and compulsion cut deeply into it. He leaned away, keeping his neck as far from the collar as he could, and the monster laughed again. "There is nowhere to run," it murmured, shaking back its long white hair, "nowhere to hide, for you are mine, as these are mine..."

It put its hand on his head and turned him so that he had to see what lay around him in the wreckage of the garden—his dad, all his limbs twisted in the fatal agony of the collar's poison; his mum, her mouth gaping as though she were still trying to pull air through her pinched-off throat; lying at his feet, whimpering and shivering, his sister, his best friend, her eyes without sense or intelligence, her mind driven from her by pain—

His control flew to pieces, and he screamed, begging without words that someone, anyone, would come to him, save him, tell him it wasn't true—the monster grasped him by the shoulders and shook him violently—

Ray's eyes shot open. It was nighttime, the room almost totally dark. There was just enough light for him to make out the shape of a man sitting on his bed, hands still resting gently on his upper arms.

I'm not sure what was real and what was the dream... better stay safe...

"Father?" he said uncertainly.

"Yes," came the whispered reply.

Ray forced himself to nod, swallowing his bitter disappointment. He'd been so sure, so sure that freedom was reality at last, that the monster and the collars and the burden of being two people at once were finally only dreams—

The man snapped his fingers. A fireball burst into life above them, illuminating his face.

"I am your father," Remus Lupin finished, smiling at his son.

Ray punched his dad as hard as he could in the arm, then flung himself against the man, sobbing with relief.

It's true. It's all true. I never have to be Draco, not ever again...

Images slid into his mind as he started to calm down: Hermione's face alight as a length of vine wood in her hand sketched a curlicue of blue and red sparks through the air; Mum wringing out her hair after Hagrid had cried happy tears over her; Dad leafing through old issues of *The Best Defense Quarterly* and burning notes into the scroll sitting beside him on the desk; Harry and Ginny arguing fiercely over the fairness of the all-witch hiring policy of the Holyhead Harpies; Luna bending over a sleeping boy and touching his cheek with two fingers she'd kissed—

Ray felt a stab of jealousy. *Fine, then, be that way...*

Look again, Dad's voice murmured to him. **Look carefully.**

Ray looked. **Oh,** he said, feeling rather silly.

The boy had Dad's oval-triangular face, Mum's middling-small nose, and sandy brown wavy hair which was a mix between the two of them. Though his eyes were closed, Ray was certain they would be bright blue and lively when they were opened.

They are, Dad assured him.

Ray watched Luna bend down to kiss him once more, then let the montage continue. Ron and Hermione soared through the air above the Quidditch pitch on Harry's Nimbus, Ron grinning as he usually did when he flew, Hermione's face a mix of terrified and ecstatic; Padfoot and Letha took turns telling Mum something that made her grin in satisfaction when it was finished; Mother—*Narcissa*—and Professor Snape sat together on a bench in the depths of the garden at Malfoy Manor, talking in quiet voices...

One final image swam into focus. Professor McGonagall was hugging his mum and dad in turn, her eyes brighter than he'd thought they could get. "Welcome back," she said, her voice a bit wobbly, though she was getting it under better control by the second. "Welcome home."

"Home," Dad said aloud, musingly. "Hogwarts doesn't seem like too bad a place to make a home. And there'll be an opening at Potions next year,

as well as Defense... wonder if we know anyone who might be tempted?"

"You stay away from my wife," said Padfoot's voice from somewhere nearby. "She doesn't need to play with her cauldrons any more than she already does."

Ray smiled and let himself drift away again in his dad's arms.

He was safe now. He'd come home.

True Colors Epilogue

He couldn't decide if he hated waking or sleeping more.

Waking, he had to face reality—four stone walls, two meager meals a day, the constant chill striking into his bones, the screaming and sobbing all around, and the knowledge worse than any of it, that he deserved all this and more.

In his sleep, though, he had to face those he had wronged.

He'd admitted to them over and over what he had done, begged them to forgive him, but the familiar faces remained fixed in sneering distaste, as though he were too pitiful even to hate, and the once welcome voices gave answers sarcastic or serious that came to the same thing: none of his words would ever make a difference, for his actions had spoken too loudly. His life was over, his story already written, and its title was 'traitor.' That was the word by which he would be remembered.

If he were remembered at all.

A new voice rose above the chorus, howling names he knew, calling down curses on their owners. He listened, huddled in a corner, and found to his astonishment a kernel of hope in the disjointed words, and in the identity of their speaker. Could it be—was it possible—

Wondering, he slipped into sleep, and fell into a dreamworld of endless foggy plains, grey nothing as far as the eye could see.

But even nothing is better than Azkaban...

"Hello, Peter," said a woman's voice from behind him.

Peter Pettigrew jumped and spun in the same movement. Danger Lupin stood a few feet from him, dressed in Muggle casual, one hand resting on an outthrust hip. The expression on her face might not quite be a smile, but it was still the friendliest thing he'd seen in months. "Danger," he acknowledged her. "I—I thought I'd heard—you and Remus—"

"That's right, you'd have been blessed with Lucius' ramblings by now." Danger chuckled. "Yes, we've finally won free. Just like Sirius."

Peter winced away. "I never wanted him to get hurt," he said quietly. "I never wanted anyone to get hurt."

"So you say." Danger's tone was beginning to take on shades of her nickname. "I want the truth, Peter. Did you tell Voldemort about Remus? Are you how he knew?"

"No!" Startled, Peter looked up. Danger was two paces closer, her eyes fixed on him, oddly swirled with her own brown and a blue he'd seen before—

Moony. He's here—with her—

"No," he repeated, standing his ground though his every instinct shrieked to back up or, better still, run away from the predator stalking closer every second. "No, that wasn't me. He knew before I ever said a word. All he wanted from me was the name of—" He broke off, shaking, but it was already too late.

"The name of the restaurant where we were having dinner," Danger finished for him, very softly. "And then he summoned you to watch what he did to us, and Marked you in front of us."

Peter dropped to one knee, clutching his head in his hands, overcome by the memory of the night he'd realized there could be no turning back. He heard again the sentences pronounced on his friends—agonizing death for one, a life of torture for the other—and stood silent, unable to move, as the Death Eaters howled and jeered at the two people in the silver-barred cage, who held their heads high and glared defiance at the snakelike figure carefully aiming his wand at one of them...

"We recognized you, you know," Danger went on, her voice quiet but inescapable as she paced around him. "After the spell took effect. Once we had our wolves' noses to help us. We caught your scent on the air, and we thought you might have come to help us." She looked down at him, eyes blazing blue fire. "How very wrong we were."

"Stop," Peter whimpered, leaning away from her. "Please, please stop, I hear it all day long, you howling and Remus screaming and *him* laughing, he loves how much the spell is hurting you, it's one of the worst I have, please don't make me hear it again..."

"All right."

Peter blinked. Acquiescence was not the usual response of his dream tormentors. "All right?" he repeated, looking for the catch.

"All right." Danger stepped into his field of view again. "In fact, I owe you an apology. Not much of one, but I do. Bringing up old grudges isn't why I came here tonight."

"It's—it's not?"

"No." Danger seated herself cross-legged on the ground. "I came to... well, first to tease you a little. Because really, it's your own fault that you were caught the way you were."

Peter tried to trace this line of thought and drew a blank. "How?"

"You were in and out of Malfoy Manor during the last year of the war," Danger said. "You saw us sometimes, Remus and me." Her smile turned sour. "You had the decency to hurry past most of the time, and never look us in the eye. But there was someone else you'd seek out, though never when you were human. No, you'd change into Wormtail's form and go to look for this person. And in those last few months, these people. Do you remember?"

Almost against his will, Peter nodded.

"You played with Ray, Peter. With Ray, and with Hermione—you knew who she was, even though Lucius had called her Griselda and locked her into wolf form. And you knew who Ray was." Danger's eyes caught Peter's and held them. "Who Ray *really* was. Rat noses are perfectly good. You'd have been able to tell that Ray's scent matched mine and Remus' far better than it ever could Lucius' or Narcissa's. And you sneaked in at night once or twice. You saw him transformed, saw a wolf cub sleeping in Draco Malfoy's cot. You knew whose child he truly was." Her eyes, with their swirls of brown and blue, seemed to pull him in, laying a spell on him to speak only the truth. "Why did you never tell?"

"Because..." Peter struggled to get enough air to say the words. "Because... it was..." His throat seemed impossibly tight, his eyes burned with tears he dared not shed. "The only thing..." He pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose, shuddering. *I can't say it, I can't, I don't deserve to...*

But Danger was waiting, and her expression seemed almost to be softening as she listened.

"It was the only thing I could do for you," he finished, staring at the floor in front of him. "For any of you. Every time I came to that house was another betrayal, another step the wrong way, but I didn't know how to turn around and go back the way I'd come, or even if I could. Ray was... as long as he was there, as long as he was safe and happy, I hadn't *only* done bad things." He laughed a little, weakly. "I suppose that's typical of me, that the one person I could help is the one who wasn't supposed to exist."

"But he did exist, and he went on existing." Danger leaned back on her hands. "As did Hermione. And, despite a certain Dark wizard's best efforts, Harry and Neville. And, elsewhere in the country, Ronald Weasley. And then they all met up on the Hogwarts Express as first years—and lo and behold, a certain young lady in the shape of a wolf sees, sleeping on the knee of a red-haired young man, a most familiar-looking and peculiarly aura-surrounded rat..."

Peter gaped at her. *I never knew how I was caught—I went to sleep under Ron's bed, and woke up with Aurors staring down at me—but that would make sense, Hermione in her wolf shape would be able to see I wasn't just a rat—but she'd never have been on the train at all if it weren't for—*

"That's right," Danger said, her impish smile beginning to appear. "You dug your own grave on this one, Peter. If you'd exposed Ray as a fake way back when, you'd probably never have been caught. Not until Harry tried Animagus, at any rate... but I digress. The point is, you didn't, and now you're reaping the consequences."

Peter laughed once, bitterly. "So the one good thing I've done is the one that means I go to Azkaban?"

"No, you're in Azkaban for all the bad things you did. The good thing just happens to be the one that got you caught. And you're right, that isn't fair. Which is why I'm here." Danger leaned forward. "You protected my son once, Peter. I'm here to offer you as much of a reward as I think you deserve for that. Hear me out, then make a decision..."

The day after exams were over, Ron Weasley received an unexpected package at breakfast.

"What is it?" asked Harry, peering across the table at the breadbox-sized parcel which two owls had dropped on top of his friend's sausages.

"Dunno. I wasn't expecting anything..." Ron started untying the knots on the string holding the brown paper wrappings on the parcel.

"Want a hand?" Ray asked from one place down.

"Sure."

Ray wiggled a finger at the package. The strings flared up and were gone.

"I never get tired of watching you do that," said Neville as Ron ripped the paper away.

"You will," said Hermione in a tone of experience, but her words were drowned out as Ron gasped in delight.

"I don't believe it!"

"What don't you believe?" Harry pushed his glasses up his nose to get a better look at what appeared to be a lump of gray fur, slumped on the floor

of a glass cage with one corner frosted for privacy, a food dish and water bottle mounted in the opposite wall, and a running wheel in its center. “That someone sent you a mouse through the mail?”

“That’s no mouse! It’s Scabbers!”

“Scabbers?” Neville repeated, standing up to see. “Your rat? The one you lost our first day here?”

“Yeah!” Ron tapped a finger on the glass, and sure enough, a ratty head lifted from the pile of fur and fixed beady blue eyes on him. “Scabbers, where’ve you been? I was worried sick!”

“There’s a note,” said Hermione, examining the discarded paper. “Should I read it?”

“Please.” Ron sat back on the bench, holding the cage in his lap. “I don’t see a door anywhere...”

“Dear Ron,” Hermione read aloud. “I found the enclosure in my spare water jug a few days ago and took the liberty of running some tests on him to determine if he were in fact your missing rat. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, he is, but he seems to have fallen into bad company in his year away. He’s become a carrier for the Albanian rat flu, which is quite nasty and in many cases fatal. Fortunately, the flu is transferred only by touch, so I’ve sealed this cage shut to be sure no one contracts it by accident.”

“Aww, poor Scabbers,” Ron cooed to the rat. “No more sleeping on my pillow, no more chocolate after dark—wait, if the cage is sealed, how am I supposed to feed him?”

“Maybe it says.” Hermione went back to the note. “Yes, here it is. ‘As long as he stays in good physical condition, he won’t contract the flu himself, so I’ve set up the cage to monitor his level of activity. When he runs on the wheel or jumps and plays in his free space, he earns rewards of food from the hopper on the end of the cage, which you can fill by hand. Your parents or brothers should be able to refill the water bottle for you until you learn the spell yourself.’”

“That’s some pretty advanced magic,” said Neville. “Who did all this?”

“With best wishes for many happy years to come with your pet,” Hermione read rapidly, “Professor R.J. Lupin.”

Ray laughed. “That’s Dad all over,” he said. “He could have brought Scabbers up to the dorm, or even just handed him over in the hall, but no, he has to have the owls bring him in like some great big surprise...”

“Hang on, there’s a P.S.,” said Hermione, squinting at the paper. “I don’t know if you or Percy ever noticed, but Scabbers is fond of music. Play some around him and see what happens.”

“Didn’t I see Dean headed out to the courtyard with his portable wireless?” Harry asked, standing up.

In the general ruckus of getting up to go outside, Ray and Hermione found a moment to grin at each other.

I think this is more fitting than Azkaban, Ray said. He’s still stuck in a little box forever and ever, and now he has to work to get his meals.

And if what Mum was saying is right, he thinks over his worst memories plenty without the dementors to help. Hermione shivered a little. **Nobody really deserves what those things do, Ray. Nobody.**

Not at all? Ray shot her two images, one of a man standing by himself, the other of a family of three. **Not even for a little while?**

Well, for a little while, maybe, but not for months and years and decades, not the way he’s going to have them...

They bickered their way contentedly out into the courtyard, where Dean was readily persuaded to tune the wireless to one of the local Muggle stations, one that boasted in its adverts that it played absolutely everything, no matter how strange, how foreign, or how old. Shortly thereafter, bickering vanished under laughter, as Scabbers shimmied, shivered, and shook his tail to the beat of “Man! I Feel Like a Woman.”

So I suppose it’s all down to what you prefer, said Ray, applauding at the end of the song. **Misery in solitude, where no one can see you and laugh at you, or this.** A nod towards the cage, where Scabbers was sucking avidly at his water bottle. **Myself, I think I’d probably take this.**

Speaking from experience, it’s not so bad. Hermione sidled over to her brother, and he put his arm around her shoulders. **But it’s not so good either. I much prefer being free.**

Well, don’t betray your friends and randomly murder twelve people to cover your tracks, and you can probably keep it that way.

Thank you ever so.

A new song came on.

Severus was just crossing the courtyard when he saw the knot of laughing children. The song blaring forth from the wireless perched on the low wall, though mildly amusing, would not account for the level of merriment. Clearly there was more going on.

Do I truly want to know? They are no longer my concern; a week from now I need never see any of them again. Instead I shall enjoy the society of adults, and intelligent adults at that. He allowed himself a small smile, since no one was looking at him. *One in particular.*

But that was still a week away, and mysteries had always intrigued him.

He strode towards the children as the song, a piece of Muggle fluff he recalled dimly from his youth, rolled into its chorus.

It's fun to stay at the...

The rat he could now see within the glass cage sitting beside the wireless threw its front paws above its head, spreading them wide. A moment later, it brought them in to touch the top of its head, bending its furred elbows upwards. Curving to one side, it lowered its face towards its tail, then lifted its paws again, bringing them together in a peak above its pointed nose.

In perfect time with the music, of course.

The small smirks on the faces of Lupin, Granger, and Potter, and a piece of idle gossip he'd heard at the Ministry about an unexpected death in Azkaban, told Severus all he needed to know.

He turned and made his way inside.

It is, in the final analysis, none of my business.

And it is also quite amusing to watch.

He catalogued the story to tell his traveling companion when they met in London in a week's time as they had planned.

I do not doubt she will enjoy hearing news of her erstwhile son.

Padfoot the enormous black dog sprawled on the front steps of his house, panting to cool himself down in the warm summer night. Life was good. He had his wife and his daughter and godson, he had his freedom, he had his work—

And now I have the people without whom I wouldn't have had any of that. He shivered, thinking what a narrow escape he'd had. *If Danger hadn't been willing to risk both their lives on the chance that their collars wouldn't consider their dream with us harmful to Lucius—if Moony hadn't been willing to be ill for a couple weeks with the poisoning he got from Danger's using so much magic—*

He hadn't been back at the Auror Office long enough to pull duty out at Azkaban, but he was not looking forward to it. Even fortified by chocolate and the sure knowledge that he'd be leaving at the end of his shift, he didn't want to be around dementors.

Not many people do. And the ones who would... He shook his head until his ears flapped. *They're already mad, so the dementors can't hurt them much. Like Lucius. Hope he's having a fine old time.*

As for Wormtail...

Somewhere in Sirius' heart, there was still a corner reserved for the painfully eager boy named Peter he'd met on the Hogwarts Express his first year. For all Wormtail's crimes since then, Sirius wasn't sure if he could honestly have looked at the face of the man he'd once called his friend and said that he wanted this person to spend the rest of his life trapped in his worst memories. Locked up, yes, but on the whole he much preferred the solution Danger had devised.

I might feel differently if I'd spent more than a day in Azkaban myself, but I didn't. And that's because of Moony and Danger too. They really were like our good angels, weren't they?

And now we're going back to Hogwarts together, quite possibly for good. The jinx on the DADA position died with Voldemort, and it'll suit Moony perfectly. He loves kids, loves learning, loves to show people things. Danger won't have much trouble staying busy either, not if the way she was chattering with Charity Burbage down in Muggle Studies means anything. As for us, there's nothing wrong with the Potions slot, so Letha's fixed as long as she wants to stay, and me...

He snorted. *Let's see. Will I object to moving into a comfortable suite in a beautiful castle with meal service, housekeeping, and laundry all provided? Not to mention, being able to work with the older kids on practical Defense skills in my spare time, get a feel for possible incoming apprentices? See Moony and Danger every day, never see Snape at all, and the only drawback is I can't Apparate around the place?*

Down the street, as though thinking of Apparating had caused it to happen, two wolves appeared out of thin air, chasing their tails.

Somehow I don't think I'll mind it too much. And that's enough of that. Time for pranks.

Padfoot loped down the street to meet his friends. It was time to pay off the last debt remaining before they moved into their new lives.

Time to let Harry's relatives know just what we think of them.

Vernon Dursley awoke the next morning to discover all his ties in a pile on the floor of his closet, soaked with a malodorous fluid (Padfoot and

Moony had taken turns, Danger roaring instead to tuck a dead mouse lovingly into one shoe out of every pair Vernon owned).

Petunia shrieked when she found the teethmarks on the corners of her cherished bedroom set, and again when she sank down onto the chair at her vanity and it collapsed beneath her (she later discovered that the pegs holding it together, along with those in every other chair in the house, had been burnt nearly all the way through).

Dudley was able to get out of the cupboard beneath the stairs (which Sirius had thoughtfully returned to its original dimensions after retrieving those of Harry's belongings he was likely to want again) without doing too much damage to the house, but the bright red face and sparkling gold hair with which he emerged persisted all day, as did his unsettling habit of roaring like a lion every time he tried to speak.

The Dursleys' only consolation was that this was the last time they'd ever have to deal with those freaks and their unnatural ways, as number seventeen's "For Sale" sign had been up since March and down for at least two weeks. Petunia had known vaguely that the milkman on their route was getting rather old, and it would be nice to have the new one so nearby, in case she had a complaint or needed to change her order in a hurry. And the couple had two sons, one a year younger than her Duddykins and one a year or two younger than that... rather excitable, they'd seemed when she'd met them, but nice boys for all of that... the mother had mentioned boarding school for the older one, perhaps she'd meant Smeltings...

Ray stared at the small, blonde figure walking unhurriedly towards him from the direction of the three-legged stool and the Sorting Hat. "But—but—"

"Would you rather she be somewhere else?" Harry asked.

"No, it's just—"

"Here I am," said Luna, sliding onto the bench beside Ray and smiling at her new Housemates. "Ginny should be along presently, and then we'll all be here. Except Meghan, but that's just because she's in the kitchens with the house-elves until the Sorting is over so she doesn't learn how it's done before it's her turn next year."

"But I thought you said Lovegoods were always Ravenclaws," Ray said. "I mean, not that I object, but—"

Luna turned the full force of her smile on him. "The Hat said it would be good for you to have me nearby," she said. "Or maybe the other way around. I can't recall."

"Don't think it matters," said Ron. "We're all together, that's what counts."

"Hear, hear," said Hermione.

"No, hear there," said Neville, nodding towards the Sorting. "Let's watch."

Luna leaned back against Ray, one hand absently stroking her Gryffindor crest. "Malfoy really should have known better than to try to keep your dad around," she murmured. "After all, it's not like he's a *tame* lion."

Ray felt his cheeks flush red.

That's my boy, Dad said approvingly in his mind. **Wear your true colors proudly.**

Oh, I do. Ray let his mental image of Draco Malfoy slowly blur into that of Reynard Lupin, replacing washed-out blond and grey with vibrant brown and blue. **I always do.**

And he always would.

The End