

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 1

Cold water falling onto his face awakened him. His head hurt, as did the rest of his body. The water actually felt good on his forehead, but it was making the rest of him more uncomfortable. After careful consideration, he decided that moving would be the most intelligent course of action.

He opened his eyes and rolled onto his side, in preparation for sitting up. To his amazement, he could see dimly, though one eye's vision was clouded and covered in cracks. *Broke my glasses. Not a surprise, after...*

After what? He didn't know, or rather didn't want to know. The knowledge had been pushed to the back of his mind, to be considered further after he attended to his more immediate needs. What he did remember at the moment suggested that he had better get himself as comfortable as possible before he examined what had happened to him in detail, because he was unlikely to be able to do much of anything for himself for some time afterwards.

*Comfortable. I remember that. Warm, dry, not hurting.*

Warm he couldn't do much about, likewise not hurting, but dry he might be able to manage, or at least not actively getting wetter. He sat up, carefully, so as not to make his headache worse, and looked around him, squinting through the one broken lens.

It was dark, but he could make out that he was sitting in the middle of what had once been a cozy living room. The fireplace listed obscenely to one side, toadstools grew on the blackened carpet, and no portion of the walls higher than his head survived. Beyond the walls, he could see an ankle-deep sea of dead grass, and beyond that a solid wooden fence, at least six or seven feet high.

*This was my house.* Memory supplied a picture of the living room as it had been, a fire crackling in the fireplace, chairs and sofa in their proper places, and in one of the chairs...

A scream and a crashing thud interrupted his memories. He was on his feet before he knew what was happening, running toward the source of the sound. He knew the voice that had screamed, and it had power to move him like nothing else. The rain no longer mattered. Neither did the destruction of the house. Nothing mattered except finding her.

It wasn't difficult. She lay over a heap of wooden rubble in what had been the parlor, grotesquely sprawled, eyes closed, hair splayed out like blood. He was beside her in an instant, snatching up her wrist, feeling at her neck, praying...

She moaned weakly and turned her head, and his heart beat again, speeding up, as it always did, when she opened her eyes and looked at him, and smiled. Her hand curved around and took the one of his that was still holding her wrist, and squeezed it lightly.

"Are you—?" He was interrupted by a painful bout of coughing, and he had to try again twice before he got the words out in recognizable fashion. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so." She shut her eyes again and flexed her feet and knees, shifted her hips and shoulders, opened and closed each hand. "What am I lying on?"

"Wood, I think. But it's old." He kicked at it, and it gave under his foot. "Rotten."

"That's what I thought. It gave when I landed on it. I'll have bruises, but I'll live." She smiled again. "Funny thing to say. 'I'll live.' I'm already dead."

"What?" Fear closed in around him again. "What do you mean, already dead?"

"He killed me. I jumped in front of the Killing Curse. I'm dead." She lifted an arm to block the water falling on her face. "I didn't think it rained when you were dead."

"I don't think we're dead." He looked around the ruined room. "But I do think we have to get out of here. Can you walk?"

"I don't know."

"Try?"

With his help, she sat up, then stood and took a few tentative steps. "Everything seems to be working." She looked around the room and frowned. "How did I get downstairs?"

"You fell."

She looked up and gasped. "The roof... the first floor..."

"Gone."

Her eyes met his, disbelief and sorrow warring for place. Silently, she mouthed their son's name.

He turned away from her to the pile of wreckage which had broken her fall and picked up one of the topmost pieces, holding it out to her. She took it from him, turning it over in her hands, staring at it and running her fingers up and down it. "No," she whispered. "It can't be..."

He closed his hand over hers, feeling the carvings beneath his fingers where his hand was larger and stronger. "We have to get out of here," he said. "We have to go."

She pulled away. "No. Not without my baby."

"He's gone." Saying the words didn't make them any easier to believe. "He's dead. He's been dead for years."

"Years, what do you mean, years? I held him in my arms not five minutes ago!"

"That was five years ago. We've been cursed. Thrown through time. Look at this place. There's no way all this could have happened in a few minutes. This is years of damage. Feel this." He picked up another piece of wood and squeezed it. It crumbled into splinters in his hand. "It's been exposed to wind and rain for years. Five years."

She stared down at the elaborately carved bar in her hand, and her face began to change, moving from disbelief, to anger, to grief. He couldn't be sure if the water running down her cheeks was raindrops or tears. He knew about his own.

"We have to go," he repeated. "*He* could come back any second. He knew when we'd show up here – he ought to, he did it himself – and that's the last thing we need, is to end up with him..."

"He took my ring." He could barely understand her. "He took it before he cursed me. He said he'd keep it as a souvenir..."

He looked down at his left hand, blinking hard to clear his eyes. His own ring was missing. "He took mine too," he said. "He must have done it when I wasn't paying attention."

Her head came up, and she drew a deep breath. "We'll need wands," she said. Her hand tucked the bar into an inside pocket of her robes. "We'll need wands, and a place to stay, and new clothes. But wands first. Do you have yours?"

He shook his head. "He disarmed me. But it might still be near where I was. I should check."

"Mine will be here if it's anywhere. Help me look?"

He nodded. "Once we have yours, we can Summon mine."

They set to work turning over the piles of debris, looking for one small wooden rod. Occasionally, she would murmur a word or two under her breath. Every second weighed on his heart and worried him – was their enemy waiting beyond that fence? Was he lurking in the darkness, watching them and laughing silently? Why did he not come?

She cried out in pleasure as a light arose near her hand. "Here it is!" Laughing like a girl, she spun in a circle, shining light on all their surroundings, then on him. "And there you are! *Reparo!*"

The cracks in his vision melded together and disappeared, making him only more aware of how smeared his glasses were. He took them off and rubbed them on his shirt, feeling a need to do something even though he knew from experience this would only smear them more.

"Here," she said, handing him something. "Try this."

Warmth hummed through his bones as his fingers closed around his own wand. Quickly, he tapped his lenses with it. "*Scourgify.*" Putting the glasses back on, he sighed with pleasure. "I can see again."

"Can you see it's stopped raining?" She peered up towards the rapidly clearing clouds. "We should go."

"Where?"

"Diagon Alley, I'd think. There's a night window at Gringotts, I know, so we can get enough out for a few nights at the Leaky Cauldron, and we can conjure dressing gowns and things for tonight and get new in the morning."

He shook his head. "How are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Thinking of all this. Being able to remember these things. I still can't believe this is happening."

"I still don't *know* what's happening, and I don't want to." She was walking around the room, touching things here and there, the corner of a shelf, the edge of a wall. "Don't tell me anything else until we're somewhere we can stop for at least twenty-four hours if we have to." She came to his side, laying her head on his shoulder for a moment. "I'll be fine as long as we keep moving," she said quietly. "Just don't let me stop yet."

"I won't," he promised, putting an arm around her waist. "Let's go."

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They had taken some money from their Gringotts vault at the magical all-night window and checked into the Leaky Cauldron under false names, wearing hooded cloaks so that Tom wouldn't see their faces too clearly – they'd work out proper disguises in the morning. Now, as she finished in the bathroom, he unfolded the copy of the *Daily Prophet* he'd picked up from a stand along the way.

*Might as well see what's going on in the Wizarding world.*

The headline that met his eyes nearly stopped his heart.

## **HARRY POTTER: WHERE IS HE NOW?**

### **A nation remembers its missing boy hero**

*Official search over, but some still hold out hope*

"What's wrong?" She had just come out of the bathroom, her hair loose around her shoulders. "What is it?"

Hands shaking, he turned the paper around so that she could see the headline.

She went parchment-white. A look of incredulous joy started in her eyes – those marvelous green eyes that she had given to their son – and spread quickly over her whole face. "He's alive," she whispered. "Our son is *alive*."

The words were sheer music. He closed his eyes the better to savor them, and their meaning. Their child – the boy with the most infectious giggle ever heard and the crawl that was somehow faster than his father's run – he was *alive*. He would be five years older, yes, but even that would only make him six. A six-year-old would be fun to have around. What would their boy be like, six years old? He probably never stopped talking, or sat down for more than a few seconds in the same place...

"Read it," she commanded, breaking his concentration.

"What?"

"Read it. The article. It said he was missing, that they were searching for him. I want to know everything they know." She came over and sat on the end of the bed. "Read it. Now."

Quickly, he folded the paper back and began. "*Five years ago tonight, Harry Potter became known as The Boy Who Lived, defeating He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and ending a war of eleven years' duration.*"

"Defeating?" Lily Potter repeated, her eyes widening again. "Harry *defeated* Voldemort? *How?*"

"I don't know." James Potter had his head in the newspaper. "It might be farther down... here. Next sentence. *Although no one knows how it was accomplished, the mere fact is self-evident, since the boy was found alive, and no sign of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has been seen since that day.*"

"Harry lived," Lily breathed, staring out the window at the rain, which had resumed. "Harry lived, and Voldemort died..."

"Listen to this. *However, the joy of the Wizarding world was to be short-lived. Not six months after Harry Potter's sudden rise to fame, his name was in the newspapers again, this time for a grimmer reason. The boy hero was missing, kidnapped from his Muggle relatives' home...*"

"*What?*"

"Ow!" James clapped his hands over his ears. "You don't have to shout!"

"Oh yes I *do!* What do you *mean*, his *Muggle relatives' home*? What was Harry doing with my sister? What happened to Sirius? Didn't he promise us – yes, he did, he promised us he'd take care of Harry if anything happened!"

"Lily, please." James put the newspaper aside and got up to calm his wife. "Lily..."

"Don't Lily me. I'm mad."

"No, I never would have guessed." James took her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Lily, listen to me. We both want to know what's been happening. This article's our best chance to find out. But we won't find out anything if you keep yelling after every sentence, so do you think you can settle down a little and just let me read it?"

Lily grumbled under her breath. "Fine," she said after a moment. "But don't leave anything out. Just read the whole thing as it comes."

"All right." James returned to the bed. Lily sank into a chair in the opposite corner of the room. "Let me see. *...kidnapped from his Muggle relatives' home, where many said he should never have gone in the first place.*"

"Many, including me," Lily muttered. James let it pass.

"*The vast majority of people assumed that recently escaped prisoner Sirius Black...*" James stopped reading. "Prisoner?" he said in a stunned tone. "*Prisoner?*"

"Now you're doing it," said Lily impatiently. "For heaven's sake, go on."

James didn't respond. Rolling her eyes, Lily stalked over to the bed and removed the newspaper from his hands. "*...recently escaped prisoner Sirius Black had kidnapped the boy, his godson, but for the first time, this reporter can confidently state that it was not so,*" she read aloud.

*Although the story of Harry Potter's kidnapping did not reach magical ears until after that of Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban...* ”

“Azkaban,” muttered James like a man in a dream.

“I’m starting to see what you mean,” said Lily, lowering the newspaper. “This could be really annoying. James?” She waved her hand in front of his eyes. “James? Hello?” There was no response. “Time for drastic measures, I think.” She drew her wand. “*Aguamenti !*”

James yelped as a blast of cold water hit him in the face. “Oi! What was that for?”

“Responding again. Good.” Lily dried him with another two waves of her wand. “Yes, it seems that for some as of yet unexplained reason, Sirius was in Azkaban. Operative word, *was*. He is apparently no longer there.”

“He’d better not be! Why would he be there anyway? What could he possibly have done—”

Lily rattled the newspaper.

“Oh. Right.” James settled back on the bed. “Yeah. Go on.”

Lily rolled her eyes again and cleared her throat. “...*Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban, where he had been sent for his vicious murders of thirteen people, including his childhood friend Peter Pettigrew..*”

“Ah-ha!” James exploded. “That’s *it!*”

Lily was right behind him. “For his betrayal,” she said. “That would have been like Sirius.” She frowned. “But he seems to have got a lot of other people mixed up in it as well.”

James shook his head. “That’s not like him,” he said. “That was never his way. He’d be careless and sloppy right up to the point where other people were depending on him, and then he was a perfectionist. He never played fast and loose with my life, or anyone else’s. Something’s not right here.”

“Let’s keep reading. Maybe we can figure it out. Let me see.” Lily ran her finger along lines of text. “...*childhood friend Peter Pettigrew, Harry Potter was in fact kidnapped before Sirius Black made his break for freedom. This reporter can therefore state with certainty that the kidnapping was performed by some third party. But why?*” Lily interrupted herself. “Why do they assume they’re related at all? I mean, it makes sense that if Sirius broke out of prison, he’d go to Harry right away. But if someone else kidnapped Harry before Sirius got out...”

James could see the fear rising in Lily’s eyes again. “Let me read for a little while,” he said, taking the newspaper back. “Hmm, third party, third party. There. *A logical choice for this position seems to be Black's other childhood friend, Remus Lupin.*”

Lily smiled. “Dear Remus. I wonder how he’s doing. We owe him an apology, for thinking he was the spy...”

James read to the end of the paragraph and felt his eyes bulge. “Er... Lily. *Lupin has not been seen or heard of in circles Wizarding or Muggle since a date a few weeks before Black's escape and Harry Potter's kidnapping. The house at his last known address is currently occupied by a family of Muggles who have never heard of him. Its close proximity to the home of Potter's Muggle relatives would have made Lupin an ideal cats-paw, and Black's demonstrated indifference to prior ties of affection makes Lupin's probable fate a grim one.*”

“That’s ridiculous!” Lily cried. “Sirius would never hurt Remus! He only killed Peter because Peter betrayed us! Why didn’t he *tell* people that?”

“Who would believe him?” The pattern of his friend’s fate had suddenly woven itself clear in front of James’ eyes. “Who knew about the change in Secret-Keepers, Lily? Only us. Only us four. You and me, and Sirius, and Peter. And with us dead, or whatever happened to us, and Peter dead as well – and especially if Sirius had made the kind of mess of it that he seems to have made – why would they listen to anything he said? In their minds, he was our Secret-Keeper. And we were obviously betrayed by our Secret-Keeper. Thus...”

Lily stared at the wall. “They saw a guilty man murdering an innocent,” she whispered. “A man with blood on his hands, our blood, shedding more of it, for no reason at all.”

“They probably think he was the spy right along.” James could have kicked himself. By trusting the wrong man, how many lives had he blighted, and how many ended altogether? “That he was just turning back to the way Blacks always are, pureblood and proud.”

“Read,” Lily said, looking back at him. “Read. We have to know more.”

James found his place. “Right. *Some readers may wonder why this reporter believes the kidnapping and the escape to be related, if the latter could not have caused the former.*”

“Nice to know we’re ‘some readers,’” Lily commented.

“*These readers are obviously unaware of what has come to be known as the ‘Diagon Alley sighting,’ which took place slightly over a year after the two events already mentioned. A man and a small boy eating ice cream at Florian Fortescue’s were suddenly revealed, by an event or person unknown, to be Sirius Black and Harry Potter. Upon realizing his disguise had been breached, Black snatched up the child and Disappeared. Aurors’ efforts to trace his Apparition were fruitless, leading only to a blank alleyway nearby.*”

James dropped the newspaper. A joyous refrain was beating in his mind.

*Sirius has Harry. Sirius has Harry. Sirius has Harry, and they’re living at least semi-normal lives.*

"You're thinking what I'm thinking, aren't you?" said Lily. James looked up to see the mischievous look on her face that he so loved.

"Well, I don't know. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that a cold-hearted murderer generally wouldn't take a little boy out to get ice cream."

"That is close to what I was thinking."

A few seconds later, they were holding each other, laughing, crying, and talking through both phenomena.

"He's all right – they're both all right..."

"Sirius would never have hurt Remus, it must be a mistake..."

"There has to be something we can do, some way to find them..."

"We can get back to the way things used to be..."

This one stopped them both. They pulled away and looked at each other soberly.

"No, we can't," said Lily finally. "We can't get back to the way things used to be. But we can make a new way things *are*, and make it the best we can."

"Sounds good." James picked up the newspaper again. "And the first step is getting informed."

They finished the article, reading turn and turn about, though the useful information was mostly finished, and what was left was guesswork. Afterwards, they went on to the other articles in the newspaper. It seemed the *Daily Prophet* had decided to do a retrospective on this special day. Every major piece of news from the last five years was included.

*Talk about luck.*

The news item that gave both Potters the most wicked pleasure was the article on the fall of the house of Malfoy. James had crossed wands with Lucius Malfoy once or twice on the field of battle, and met him occasionally at work – James' work, that was. Malfoy didn't work. Malfoy strolled about the Ministry, bothering people. That was James' view, at least.

Sirius, being Narcissa Black Malfoy's cousin, had provided most of the Potters' knowledge about her. "He didn't like her much," said James. "Thought she was perfectly named – self-centered and spoiled rotten, baby of the family and all. Strange how the middle sister there turned out all right, but the oldest and the youngest went bad."

Bad or not, it seemed Narcissa was dead, having poisoned herself with a time-delay potion shortly before she turned herself in to the Ministry, providing a full list of her own crimes and her husband's. He'd been arrested, convicted, and sentenced to Azkaban. "And that was two years ago," said James regretfully. "Wish I could have been there."

"But this is odd," said Lily. "About their son. He was about the same age as Harry, you remember."

"I remember how proud Malfoy was when the kid was born." James made a face. "'My line continues, my name will live another generation...'  
Gaahhh!"

"You're not listening. The boy wasn't at the house when the Aurors showed up to arrest Malfoy. No one could find him. And all his mother would say was that she'd 'provided for' him."

"What about the house-elf? Malfoys are bound to have had one..."

"Someone had freed it. It couldn't be found."

James winced. "Either someone freed it... or the line died out, and it had nothing to be bound to anymore." He had no real affection for the Malfoys' child, of course, but something in him rebelled at the thought of a child dead, especially one so close in age to his own son.

Lily shook her head. "That can't be it. Lucius isn't dead, he's just imprisoned. The elf would still be bound, even if Draco was dead."

"Draco? Is that the kid's name?" James looked up at the ceiling. "Thank you, Mum and Dad," he said fervently. "For giving me a *normal* name."

"A normal *first* name," said Lily, her eyes dancing. "They went pureblood on the middle one."

James moaned. "Don't remind me. And then that awful Muggle television program..."

Lily bristled. "*Star Trek* was not awful!"

"It was so. The captain had my name! Both of them!"

"Poor James," said Lily in a sing-song tone. "Poor James Tiberius..."

The clock on the wall caught James' eye, waving its hand around until he looked at it, then pointing steadily at *Past time for bed*. "The clock's right."

he said, directing Lily's eyes to it. "It is past time for bed. We can keep thinking tomorrow."

Lily nodded. "Harry's alive," she said, smiling all over her face. "Harry's *alive* ..."

"I know." James pulled her closer to him on the bed. "I know."

"I know where we can start," she murmured a few moments later.

"Me too. Right here." James pressed his lips to a part of her anatomy.

Lily squealed. "I didn't mean that!"

"What, don't you like it?"

"No, I like it... oh, I like that even more, do that again... no, I mean start looking for Harry. And Sirius..." She gasped as James changed tactics.

"What's your plan?" he asked when his mouth was free.

"Hmm?"

"Where were you thinking of starting to look for them?"

"You know, that's not fair." She looked up at him and pouted. "Bait and switch. You're mean."

"I'll make it up to you."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Tell."

"Aletha."

James hit himself on the forehead and nearly fell on top of Lily, since he needed that hand for leaning on. "Of course. Aletha. She'd know where they are if anyone would." Aletha Freeman, tall, broad-shouldered, and dark-skinned, a good friend of Lily's despite the year between them, Sirius' fellow Beater on the Quidditch team for five years – she would be a magnificent woman now, he reflected. "She would have been the first person Sirius contacted – well, maybe second, I don't know if he'd have gone to Remus first or not..."

"We can always find out." Lily licked her lips and began to retaliate for James' earlier tricks. "In the morning."

"Yes. In the morning."

And then all their attention went to rediscovering their lives, and each other, and it was very good.

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In a house somewhere else in England, a woman sat awake, wrapped in a soft, warm dressing gown, watching her family sleep. One hand held a parchment scroll loosely.

*If prize of life you wish to win,*

*Reach out and bring the strangers in,*

*For three long-gone have come once more,*

*And troublemakers now are four –*

*And if these numbers multiply,*

*You'll know your number by and by,*

*Although, if truth we still would seek,*

*The minimum is all we speak...*

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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 2

The next morning, over breakfast, James opened the newspaper.

**INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF WIZARDS CONVENES TODAY IN BRUSSELS**

***New Supreme Mugwump to be elected at this meeting***

*Britain's own Albus Dumbledore the odds-on favorite*

He groaned aloud. "I am an idiot."

"You say that like it's something new," said Lily, looking up from her eggs. "What is it?"

"Dumbledore." He handed her the paper. "We could have gone to him – he'd believe us if anyone would – but now he's in Brussels..."

"He'd probably already left last night," Lily pointed out, scanning the article. "And it says here he'll be there for a month or so. We'll just have to do this ourselves."

"But Dumbledore might have been able to help us..."

"If Harry were in trouble and Dumbledore knew something, he would have acted already," said Lily with a confidence James wished he could match. "So we can assume there's no danger threatening him at the moment."

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***"LAST ONE IN THIS KITCHEN GETS NO BREAKFAST!"***

There was a sound like a hundred disenchanted Bludgers falling down the stairs. The woman known to her family as Danger smiled. "Thought that'd get them."

"One of these days, they're going to figure out you're bluffing," said her husband, sipping his tea.

"I just poured that. Isn't it too hot?"

"I blew on it," said Remus Lupin dryly. "So you had another dream last night."

"Yes. You've seen the poem. Any ideas?"

"None that want to come where I can see them. Maybe after work."

"Troublemakers now are four' could always be referring to us, or to the cubs," suggested the woman at the other end of the table, folding the newspaper she was reading. "Except that there's been four of them for a good two years now, and us for even longer. This sounds like something that's just happened."

The four children she was referring to had swarmed into the kitchen while she was speaking, and were now sitting decorously at their places. The last inhabitant of the house stopped in the doorway, looking sad. "Do I not get anything, then?"

"I think I'll let you off today," said Danger, waving him to a chair. "But don't let it happen again."

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted her. "Is that today's paper, Letha?" he asked his wife.

"No, it's yesterday's. Remus has today's. I was just rereading the article about you. It's almost as good as what they came up with the day they found out you were gone..."

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"How did you know it had been five years?" Lily asked, buttering a piece of toast lavishly. "You knew before we'd seen the newspaper, before anything. How?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

James stared at his plate, at the homely remains of eggs and sausages. "Voldemort told me."

Lily dropped the toast onto her lap. "He *told* you?"

"He told me." The memory was entirely fresh in James' mind. Five years might have passed for the rest of the world, but for him, that night was yesterday. "He disarmed me and stuck me against the wall, and told me that when I next opened my eyes, it would be five years later, Harry would be dead, and he would be waiting for us. That no one would look for us or rescue us, because everyone would believe we were dead. That was if

he didn't control the world already. He let me go, I tried to tackle him, he hit me with the spell, and the next thing I remember is lying in what used to be our living room in the rain."

Lily shook her head. "It's hard to believe," she said, picking up the toast and wiping off her robes with her napkin. "Five years gone, in the blink of an eye. What will everyone look like now? What will they *be* like?"

"We'll find out," said James. "After breakfast."

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"Draco Regulus Black, get back here! You do *not* leave your dishes on the table for your sisters to clean up!"

"Why aren't you yelling at Harry?" asked Draco with a bit of a whine in his tone as he collected his plate and bowl and brought them to the sink.

"Because Harry brought me his dishes, that's why. Neenie should not be bringing me yours."

"She said she wanted to."

"I did not!" shouted Hermione Granger from the next room.

Danger chuckled. *That's my sister.* "No great harm done, fox," she said, ruffling Draco's hair as he passed. "Just do it yourself next time."

Draco stuck out his tongue at her, then hugged her hard around the waist before running out of the kitchen.

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After a quick visit to Madam Malkin's for some new robes, the Potters headed for the Ministry, Apparating to the street that held the visitor's entrance in the telephone box. The badges they pinned to their robes bore the names of Harold and Cecilia Clay.

*Not the most inventive I've ever been*, James thought, twiddling his wand between his fingers as Lily's was weighed, *but it'll do.*

After passing inspection, James made for the lift, but Lily caught his sleeve. "Over here," she said, and towed him to a small book on a stand. "I think I remember where she works, but she could have changed jobs since we've been away."

She flipped the book open, and James realized what it was – the Ministry's employee roster, kept carefully up to date, with employees' names listed both alphabetically and by department. Lily had gone straight to the F's, and was paging through them.

*Let's just hope she still works here.*

"Freeman, Freeman," Lily murmured. "Here she is. Aletha Freeman. Hogwarts/Ministry Liaison, Bureau of Magical Education. Seems she has changed jobs."

James frowned. "I didn't even know there was a Bureau of Magical Education."

"It must have been formed recently." Lily looked at the book again. "Her office is on level four."

James snorted. "So they bunged Education in with Magical Creatures, did they?"

"It makes about as much sense as having the Maternity Ward at St. Mungo's on the Creature-Induced Injuries floor." Lily snickered at James' blush as they headed for the lift.

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Aletha looked up at the sound of whispering outside her door. *Odd. Most people come right in.*

She considered calling out, but decided against it. *All that would do is embarrass them, whoever they are.* She returned instead to the document she'd been reading, which had to do with a gift to the fund at Hogwarts that helped the poorer students buy books and robes.

A few moments later, someone knocked on the doorframe.

"Come in."

A man and a woman entered the office. The man was fairly tall and thin, and his brown hair was rather messy, reminding Aletha a bit of Harry. The woman had long, blonde hair, and her blue eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses were large and expressive. Both of them wore plain, black robes, very crisp and new-looking, and visitor's badges pinned to them. "Madam Freeman?" the man said. "I'm Harold Clay. This is my wife, Cecilia."

"How do you do." Aletha shook hands with both of them.

"If you're busy, we can come back," Mrs. Clay said. "This isn't urgent, and I'm sure you have a lot to do."

*Your words say it's not urgent, but your body language says it is. Something's odd here.* "No, I'm not really busy. In fact, I'm almost never busy. You can shut the door if you like, Mr. Clay, I'd rather my co-workers not hear this."

Mr. Clay complied, then joined his wife in front of Aletha's desk, where she was already sitting in one of the chairs placed there for visitors. "You

don't have much to do?"

Aletha shook her head, smiling. "Hardly anything I do is really necessary. How much do you know about Albus Dumbledore?"

"Quite a bit."

"Then you know he could run Hogwarts without a wand and with one hand tied behind his back, with no help from anyone, certainly not me or the Ministry. Cornelius Fudge was hoping to get one of his sycophants in at Hogwarts with this position when he created it, but Dumbledore insisted on choosing the actual Liaison. I was just lucky that he chose me."

"Dumbledore chose you himself?" said Mrs. Clay.

"So he says. I was very flattered. Not to mention happy with the salary increase. I used to be a secretary for Amelia Bones, back when she was just second assistant Head of the Department up in Magical Law Enforcement. But this pays better, and I can always get some time off when I want to spend it at home."

"Yes, I'd noticed you had some pictures on your desk," said Mr. Clay. "And you wear a ring..."

"And you don't," Aletha said, smiling. "This isn't a wedding ring. I wear it to remember a dear friend." Casually, she twisted her ring to turn the sapphire inward. "But I do have a daughter. Adopted. Another perk of knowing Headmaster Dumbledore well – he was willing to keep an eye on the book of names for me, and let me know if any Muggleborn magical children were orphaned. I got lucky three years ago." She turned Meghan's picture around, and the little girl waved and smiled at the Clays. "This is Meghan. My little Pearl, I call her."

"My goodness, she's beautiful," said Mrs. Clay. "And she's adopted? She looks just like you..."

"I transfigured her," said Aletha airily. The Clays looked at her, and she chuckled. "No, not really. As I said, I was lucky."

"She has beautiful eyes," said Mr. Clay, picking up the picture to look at it more closely. "How much do you know about her birth parents?"

Aletha frowned, a little disturbed. "Not much. I don't think you've told me yet why you're here."

"Oh. Right." Mr. Clay set the picture back on the desk. "Well, I'm afraid we're a bit nervous about it. We've never done anything like this before."

"We were inspired by the retrospective in the *Daily Prophet* yesterday," said Mrs. Clay. "We were hoping you could tell us a little more about Sirius Black than was mentioned there."

Aletha's mind froze for an instant. "Why would you think I'd know about Sirius Black?" she said lightly when it started working again.

Mr. Clay looked nonplussed. "You were dating him," he said as if that fact were common knowledge. "He wanted to marry you."

The frozen feeling moved down to Aletha's gut. "I don't know who you've been talking to," she said quietly, "but I can't tell you anything more about Sirius Black."

"We don't want trouble," said Mrs. Clay quickly. "We won't tell anyone what you tell us."

"You're right, you won't. Because I won't tell you anything. Because there is nothing to tell. I don't know any more about Sirius Black than the average witch on the street."

"You're lying," said Mr. Clay angrily, standing up. "For Merlin's sake, you're wearing his ring! You must know something!"

Aletha shot to her feet. "Get out of my office," she said, pointing at the door. "Now. Before I call Ministry Security."

"Go ahead, call them. And I'll tell them a new place to look for Sirius Black."

"They've searched my house before, trust me. They won't find anything."

"Maybe that's because they're looking in the wrong places."

"Stop it!"

Aletha and Mr. Clay both looked around. Mrs. Clay had risen from her chair as well. "Stop it now, both of you," she said, her face very pale. "We're sorry to have bothered you, Madam Freeman. We'll be going now."

Mr. Clay opened his mouth to say something else, but Mrs. Clay quelled him with one freezing look, then took firm hold of his sleeve and towed him out the door.

Aletha frowned. The Clays reminded her of someone, but she couldn't think of who...

An owl fluttered in the door which Mrs. Clay left open behind her and landed on Aletha's desk. "Hello, Maya," she said, recognizing her own screech owl. She stroked Maya's head feathers for a moment, then tore open the note the owl had brought, which was addressed in Sirius' handwriting.

*Is there any way you can get away for the rest of the day? I feel terrible, and the cubs are running me ragged.*

Aletha looked at her in-tray and smiled. There wasn't much in it, and as she'd told the Clays, almost everything she did was unnecessary anyway.

She could finish this lot in about ten minutes, then write a quick note explaining where she'd gone and head home.

She loaded her quill and wrote an answer on the same sheet of parchment.

*Be there in fifteen minutes or less. Love you.*

"Return, please," she told Maya, who took her note and flapped away.

xXxXx

"It's just a cold," Aletha told Sirius at home. "I'll give you some Pepperup, and you'll be fine."

"I sure hope so." Sirius blew his nose. "I can't smell a thing. It feels really weird."

"Let me go get it for you right now. And then I'll deal with whatever's going on over there." There were indeed some interesting thumping and shrieking noises coming from the cubs' room.

"I can get the potion. As long as I know what to get."

"You could have figured it out for yourself. It's not like no one else in this house has ever had a cold before."

"I didn't want to have to think about it."

"You don't want to have to think about anything."

"Why should I, when you're so good at it?"

Aletha shook her head and went to check on the cubs. They had pulled the mattresses off their beds and made a fort out of them, and were playing Order of the Phoenix and Death Eaters, with Meghan and Hermione as the beleaguered Order and Harry and Draco as the evil invaders. Harry was killed twice as she watched, each time dying in agony, then jumping up immediately afterward to resume play as, she assumed, someone else. "Clean up when you're done," she told them, and went back to her own side of the house.

xXxXx

"Quick, get it!" hissed Draco. "Now's our chance!"

Hermione climbed nimbly up the bookshelf and tossed a small, sealed vial down to Harry, who caught it easily. "Pearl, it's all you," he told her, tucking the vial into his pocket.

Meghan grinned and nodded, then ran out the door.

xXxXx

Sirius was about to drink the potion when he was hit in the legs by a small cannonball. "Dadfoot!" Meghan crowed. "Dadfoot, Dadfoot, Dadfoot!"

Sirius put the potion down quickly so as not to spill it. "Hi, sweetie," he said, picking up his daughter. "What brought this on?"

"Hug." Meghan wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. "Mama Letha too."

"If I must, I must," said Aletha, chuckling. She joined the hug, sighing happily as Sirius got one arm around her. Meghan had an arm around each of their necks.

The light footsteps behind them went unheard.

When the hug was finally finished, Sirius picked up his potion again and downed it. He winced as it burned its way down, and shook his head against the strange feeling of having steam shoot from his ears.

*Strange. It's supposed to work right away, but I don't feel any better...*

Meghan squealed, jumping up and down. "Harry, it worked, it worked!"

"Why, you little sneak," said Aletha, hands on her hips. "That was a distraction, wasn't it?"

Meghan nodded gleefully as the other three cubs appeared in the doorway, took one look at Sirius, and started laughing.

"What'd they do to it?" asked Sirius unhappily. "What happened?"

Aletha pointed him to the mirror which hung on one wall of the room. Sirius turned and yelped. "I look like a Weasley!" He sniffed. "And the potion didn't work. I still feel nasty."

"Whatever Harry put in there probably altered it enough to stop it working." Aletha gave their Pack-son a searching glare. "I don't think he'll do that again. Will you?"

Harry sat up from where he'd been rolling on the ground laughing. "Am I in trouble?"

“Yes.”

“Then no.”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Letha,” Sirius put in. After the first shock had worn off, he rather liked himself with red hair. “It was well done. And I didn’t catch him, so I deserve it. How long does it take to wear off, Harry?”

“A week.” Harry frowned. “How do you know you look like a Weasley?”

“Weasleys are famous for red hair,” said Aletha, running her wand slowly up Sirius’ side. “And I hope you like that cold, Sirius. I can’t do anything else for it until this potion wears off, or I might make it worse. You’ll have to live with it, like Muggles do.”

Sirius scowled. “On second thought, I’ve changed my mind about punishments,” he said. “Throw the book at him.”

Harry led a general retreat.

xXxXx

“Brilliant work, James,” said Lily stormily back in their room at the Leaky Cauldron. “Bloody brilliant. You frightened her, antagonized her, and ended up with her ordering us out. Could you possibly have done any better?”

“I didn’t notice you coming up with any genius ploys to get her to tell us what she knows! And whose idea was it to go in there in disguise?”

“You think she would have responded better to our real faces? She would have thought it was some kind of practical joke and called Security!”

James sat on the bed and watched Lily striding around the room. “You know, I don’t see what the big deal is here with the disguises,” he said. “Why can’t we tell people who we are?”

“You think we should just go to the Ministry and say, ‘Hi, we’re the Potters, you thought we were dead but we’re not, and we’d like our lives back now’?”

“No...” But for all Lily’s biting sarcasm, she had a point, James had to admit. It was better to tread carefully until they were sure of the ground under their feet.

“And Sirius might hear about this, decide it’s some kind of trick, and take Harry and run. We have to talk to him in person before we do anything else.” Lily stood up. “I’m going to Letha’s house.”

“What?”

“I know where she lives, I’ve been there. It’s in London, not too far from here. I know the name of the nearest Underground station, and I have some Muggle money. Are you coming or not?”

James started to protest, then realized it was useless. Lily in this mood was difficult verging on impossible to stop from doing anything. “I’ll come,” he said. “But not like this. We’ll need Muggle clothes.”

Lily scowled, but acquiesced.

It took only about half an hour to reach a store, buy some decent-looking Muggle clothing, and change into it, but Lily fumed all the way there. Only when they were on the Underground again, headed for the station near Aletha’s house, did she relax.

“We’ll see him soon,” she whispered, resting her head on James’ shoulder.

“Yes, we will.” James carefully pushed his glasses up his nose, making it look like he was scratching there, since he’d charmed them invisible that morning. In truth, he wasn’t at all sure they’d see Harry soon. Would Aletha really have him living with her? It would be rather difficult to explain... unless she’d adopted him as she had her daughter...

*But that little girl can’t have been adopted. She looks too much like Letha. Except those eyes. Those look more like...*

James’ thoughts shattered as the name of the station they wanted blared through the train. Lily sat straight up. “This is it,” she said tautly. “Let’s go.”

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Finding the house proved fairly easy. Finding out that a little boy lived there, even easier. The unexpected snag came in the form of what might have been considered a bonus.

“Two,” said James in bemusement, staring across the street at the shaking branches of the tree in the front yard of the white semi-detached. “There’s two of them in there.”

“Yes, but which one is Harry?” Lily wasn’t sure she was getting through to James. He loved Harry, she knew that, but she didn’t know if he understood the pounding urge in her blood, the wish, the need to hold her child in her arms again and see for herself that yes, time had passed, but he was alive and unhurt and happy.

*He won’t remember me.* That hurt when she thought about it. *He won’t know who I am. Maybe he’ll recognize me from pictures, but he won’t run to*

*me and hold up his arms for a hug the way he used to.* She sniffled, feeling tears well up in her eyes.

"We have to keep moving," James murmured to her. "We're too conspicuous if we just stand here."

And so they moved, walking around the block and coming back to watch the two boys in the tree, again and again. One of them was standing under it instead on their third time around, and Lily noticed with a pang that he had black hair. But he wasn't her son. His face was the wrong shape, and his eyes too narrow, too suspicious. He wasn't Harry.

On their sixth or seventh time around (she'd lost count), the other boy was on the ground instead, and Lily's hand tightened on James' arm. He looked so like Harry, like Harry as she'd dreamed he'd look when he grew older. His hair was the wrong color, though, a sort of honey blond...

*But that could be from a charm. That would make sense. They couldn't possibly let him stay as he was, everyone must know what he looks like now, they'd all be looking for him. He'd be disguised. That must be him!*

Full of excitement, she pulled her hand away from James and started across the street at a run, dashing between the two cars parked at the curb. In a few seconds, she'd have her baby in her arms again...

Too late, she saw the blue truck coming down the street straight at her, saw the driver's terrified face as he tried to swerve to miss her, heard people screaming, the squeal of brakes, and above it all, James shrieking her name –

Then, nothing.

xXxXx

Remus turned off the truck and catapulted out of the driver's seat. Danger was already bending over the blonde woman, with two fingers on her neck – a brown-haired man stood nearby, shaking – Harry and Draco were venturing off the lawn to come see what had happened –

"Inside," he snapped at them. "Now. One of you get Letha. Move!" They took off running towards the Den.

"She's alive," Danger said without looking up. "But she's unconscious, and there could be other things wrong. Set up some kind of warning for other cars – we shouldn't move her yet, but my getting run over wouldn't help anything."

Remus glanced up and down the street. No one was in sight except the other man, and he'd probably put down anything unusual he saw right now to shock. Remus drew his wand and conjured warning triangles at each end of their little section of street.

Aletha came running out of the house, Sirius beside her in dog form, or at least Remus assumed it was Sirius.

*Either that, or we've somehow acquired a mutant Irish Setter.*

"Good Lord," said Aletha in what sounded like exasperation. "You again." She drew her wand and started running it over the woman's body.

"Letha – should you be doing that?" Remus asked, glancing at the man.

"They're magical. They were in my office today. Go firecall St. Mungo's, we're going to need an emergency Healer here. I don't think she'll die, but she's not in good shape."

"I'll go," said Danger, jumping up. "You help him." She indicated the man, who seemed about to collapse. "And you come inside and watch the cubs," she said over her shoulder to Sirius as she ran for the house.

*Good idea.* Yes. Remus took a deep breath, collecting himself, and walked over to the man. "Sir? Are you all right?"

"Is she going to die?" It was a hoarse whisper.

"I don't think so. Why don't you sit down?" Remus helped the man sit on the curb, then sat down himself. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I tried to stop, but she ran right out in front of me. What's your name?"

"Name?" The man rubbed at his eyes, bringing his hands close to his cheeks and moving them up instead of going straight in. "Name? I – my name is..."

"Clay," said Aletha from where she knelt. "Harold Clay. His wife is Cecilia."

"Yes. Clay." The man nodded. "That's right. Clay. Harold Clay."

"Harold," Remus repeated. "May I call you that?"

"Sure. Fine."

"I'm John, John White. My wife is Kelly, she's gone to get a Healer, and Aletha Freeman I think you already know."

Harold nodded again. "We went to talk to her today," he said, still staring at his wife. "I think I was rude. I probably shouldn't have been. Now she won't help us find what we lost."

Aletha glanced at Remus and shrugged quickly. Her face was baffled.

"What is it you lost?" Remus asked. "Maybe I can help you."

"You?" Harold looked at him, and Remus had the uncomfortable feeling the man was looking past the glamour charm and the glasses to see the real him. "Maybe you could... maybe you could help me..."

Danger burst out the door, closely followed by a woman in Healer green, whom Remus recognized with a small shock as Sirius' cousin Andromeda, and Harold's attention was immediately diverted to them.

Andy made a quick examination of the woman – Cecilia, Remus reminded himself – muttered two spells over her and got a potion into her, then pronounced that she would indeed live, and that it was safe to move her a short distance. "I'd like her at the hospital, but I wouldn't recommend Flooing with her," she said. "Or Apparition, or any other kind of magical transport. Or Muggle, for that matter. She's taken some damage to her internal organs, and the best thing for her would be to lie flat and move as little as possible for the next few days. Mr. Clay, where do you live?"

"Live?" Harold rubbed his eyes again, with that curious in-and-under-something motion. "We don't live anywhere... a room at the Leaky Cauldron is all... we were hoping to find a new place soon..."

"They can stay here," said Danger. Aletha and Remus both stared at her. *Trust me*, said her hands as she kept talking. "We have some guest bedrooms, or one of the downstairs rooms could be converted for a week or so. One of us is almost always home to watch the children. They can stay with us."

"It's the least we can do," said Remus. "I did hit her."

"Fine by me," said Aletha, although her tone suggested she had some serious reservations. "We can use my music room. The fewer stairs, the better, right, Andy?"

"Right." Andromeda had two potion bottles beside her, and was using her wand to transfer them into Cecilia. "Let me know when you're ready. I think she ought to be moved all in one go, so we won't bring her in until you're all set up."

Remus hurried inside. He knew there was a fold-out bed inside the sofa in the music room, and a camp bed in the attic for Harold until Cecilia healed enough that they could use the same bed. Danger was behind him, her mind full of bedlinens and towels.

**Why the music room, I wonder?** she asked as she made up the fold-out bed.

**So the cubs have somewhere to go that's definitely in-den, and somewhere that's not. Remus pulled the flat sheet on the camp bed tight. Our side for in-den, Letha's for out.**

**Ah-ha.** Danger sighed. **You know, I should have thought of that.**

**Yes, you should. Why in the name of all four Founders did you offer the Den?**

**"If prize of life you wish to win, reach out and bring the strangers in." They're strangers to me, and they seem to need a place to stay. And "prize of life" sounds pretty good.**

**It had better be.** Remus folded a blanket at the foot of the bed. **I think we're ready.**

**I think so too.**

Andy had already conjured a stretcher. Now, she carefully levitated Cecilia onto it and brought her indoors. Danger had turned down the sheets, so that Andy could simply lay the stretcher down on the bed and vanish it.

"And you're very lucky in one regard," she said to Harold. "Through some miracle, she didn't lose the baby."

Harold's eyes widened. "Baby? W-what baby?"

"You didn't know?"

Harold shook his head, sinking onto the camp bed.

"Well, then, congratulations." Andy smiled at him. "Your wife is about six weeks pregnant."

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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 3

Andromeda had headed back to St. Mungo's, promising to check back the next morning, and leaving an array of potions for Cecilia Clay to take, with written instructions entrusted to Aletha. Harold Clay had fallen asleep, or possibly passed out, shortly after Andy's announcement, which Andy said wasn't uncommon for people in shock. "He'll probably sleep a lot of tomorrow as well," she said. "He may be confused when he wakes up, but I doubt he'll have any serious side effects."

Remus and Sirius had undertaken to teach the cubs the new rules about the Den. Letha's side was now out-of-den territory, with the doors between the two sides locked and the archway between den and music rooms blocked up. The cubs would have to skip piano practice for as long as the Clays were here, unless someone could conjure a piano in another part of the house.

*And I get to explain to a rather annoyed woman why I just endangered us all for a pair of total strangers.*

"You think they're the strangers your dream was talking about?" asked Aletha, rearranging refrigerator magnets. "I'll buy that, but couldn't you have asked me? It is my side of the house they're using."

"You volunteered it, not me."

"Because it makes sense – the cubs' room is on your side, and we can't let them see the cubs unglamoured for obvious reasons, so of course they'd have to use my side, unless we move the cubs' room, and then we'd have to explain to them why *your* children sleep on *my* side of the house..."

Danger frowned. "Letha, what's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with *you*? Shouldn't you be a bit more worked up? You're the one who was just involved in a traffic accident. Your husband hit that woman, not mine." Aletha's fists were clenched, her eyes closed tightly. "He couldn't stop in time, could he? He tried to stop, or swerve and miss her, but he couldn't – the truck hit her and she went flying, with her husband watching..."

"Letha, stop it!" Danger was out of her chair and across the room, closing her hands around her friend's. "Stop it, you're making a fuss over nothing, she's going to be all right!"

"I am not making a fuss over nothing. She could have been killed! And then we would have had to deal with that, and everything would have come undone here..."

"It didn't happen." Danger put as much calm into her voice as she could.

Aletha seemed not even to notice. "And now we have strangers in the Den, and they're going to notice that something's not right in pretty short order, and this whole bloody web of lies we live in is going to come crashing down and destroy us all..."

"Stop," said Danger firmly. "Please. Before you set me off too."

Aletha shut her mouth abruptly, in mid-word, and leaned her head against the refrigerator.

Danger gently pulled her friend over to the table and helped her into a chair. "Letha, there's no reason for them to know anything unusual happens around here at all. The cubs and Sirius will stay on our side of the house. We'll even keep Meghan over there most of the time, so she's not underfoot. I'll help you with what needs to be done – I can get time off work easily..."

"So can I." Aletha rested her hands on the table, palms down. "Danger, I'm sorry. I don't know what set me off... well, yes, I do. It's them. The Clays. They make me feel so odd. When they walked into my office this morning, I almost felt like jumping up and hugging them. And when we started to talk, it was as if someone had switched my conversation meter to 'babble.' It was like talking to another member of the Pack. I was so comfortable with them. But then he started asking questions about Sirius, and that scared me..."

"He asked about Sirius?"

"They both acted like they knew something, or like they knew that I knew something. Him more than her. He brought up that we'd been dating in the later years of the war. And he..." Aletha stopped, staring down at her hand. "He recognized my ring," she said. "Mr. Clay. He specifically said, 'You're wearing his ring.' Meaning Sirius. But how could he know that?"

"He probably didn't," said Danger, squeezing Aletha's hand comfortingly. "He was bluffing, trying to get information out of you. It's a common tactic – assume one thing, and sometimes a person's denial tells you what you want to know. If you'd said, 'It's not Sirius Black's ring, it's my husband's, Fred Grinklesnitz,' for instance."

Aletha looked at Danger incredulously. "Fred Grinklesnitz?"

"Give me a break, I was coming up with a name on the fly here."

"Fred Grinklesnitz?"

"It doesn't mean anything."

Yes, it does! It means you think I'm so dumb..." Aletha was laughing now, taking mock-swipes at Danger, who dodged them. "... that I'd marry a man called Fred Grinklesnitz!"

xXxXx

On the other side of the house, the men of the Pack sat listening to their women laughing.

"Glad they're feeling good," said Remus, who was rather white. "I don't know how Danger's doing it..."

"She wasn't driving." Sirius had been rummaging in the coat closet, and had now emerged with a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey. "Here." He handed it to Remus, drew his wand, and conjured two glasses. "Trade."

"What, you don't trust me to pour?"

"With the way your hands are shaking, no."

"Good point." Remus surrendered the bottle and held out one glass, watching in dull fascination as its top described little circles in the air.

Sirius carefully closed his free hand around Remus', steadying the glass, before he poured a measure of the amber liquid into it. "Drink that," he said, pouring one for himself. "All of it."

Remus stared dubiously at the liquid before gulping it quickly down. A spasm crossed his face, and he exhaled rather noisily, gasped in air, and started to cough. "Wow," he said weakly when he could speak again. "It has been a while."

Sirius sipped at his drink. "Feeling better?"

"Apart from my throat and stomach... yes, actually."

"That'll pass. I'll get you a chaser in a second."

Remus lay back on the couch, closing his eyes. "She ran right out in front of me," he said, his voice already steadier. "I tried to stop, but she was too close for me to do anything."

"That's not true. If you hadn't braked, you might have killed her, or hit her so hard she lost her baby. As it is, you heard Andy – she's going to be all right as long as she stays fairly quiet for a few days." Sirius set his glass aside and got up.

"But that's the other thing, Sirius. I've brought danger to us all."

"Yes, you have, but that was years ago, and some of us are profoundly grateful for it," said Sirius, and went into the kitchen to give Remus a moment to sort it out.

"Har har," said Remus when Sirius returned with a glass of pumpkin juice. "Will you still be laughing if these people realize who you are?"

"Come on, Moony, how could they do that? Not only am I a dog, I'm a different color than I usually am." Sirius handed the glass to Remus and sniffed experimentally. "Maybe I should drink firewhiskey more often. I think it's clearing out my sinuses."

"One of them is bound to notice the dog has a cold. Dogs don't get colds."

"So I'll stay over here with the cubs. Not a big deal." Sirius folded his legs under him. "Remus, look, they can't figure us out if they never see us. As far as they know, this is a normal semi-detached, housing two normal families. I see no reason to let them know it's anything different. They stay their few days until she's better, then they go on their way, and we get back to our lives. Sound good?"

"Sure." Remus took a drink of his pumpkin juice. "Sounds good."

xXxXx

**Excuse me.**

Remus looked up from his book. **Yes?**

**I was wondering if you could give me a hand. I'm on the stairs, and my knees don't seem to want to cooperate.**

Remus was out the door before she had even finished the sentence.

Danger was sitting on the stairs, smiling shakily at him. "It's ridiculous," she said, lifting her hand and watching it tremble. "Delayed shock, I suppose. I can't even stand up properly..."

"Don't try." Remus lifted her into his arms and carried her up the rest of the stairs.

"You could have used your wand, you know."

"I know. But I like holding you."

**Well, what's a girl supposed to say to something like that?**

**I don't know what a girl is supposed to say, but you could always try saying something like this...** Remus made a detailed suggestion.

Danger gasped in astonishment. **I'd never say something like that! It's... it's...**

**Tempting?**

**Awful!** She smiled as he set her down on their bed. **But, yes, tempting too.**

**So...**

**So I think that sounds like it takes a while and we shouldn't do anything too crazy before dinner. Let's just cuddle. But later tonight...**

Remus lay down beside her, parted her hair, and kissed the back of her neck. **I'm holding you to your word, mind.**

**I'll remember that.**

xXxXx

James woke up with a start, completely confused. The bed under him was too hard and narrow to be his bed at home –

No, his home was gone, five years destroyed, he lived at the Leaky Cauldron now, but he wasn't there either –

*We went to Letha's house – we were looking for Harry – the truck coming down the street – Lily!*

Emitting a panicked noise, he sat up and looked wildly around. His eyes fell on a larger bed beside his own, with blonde hair spread over the pillows, and the form in the bed breathing slowly and regularly –

He breathed again himself. Of course, she was going to be all right. The Healer had said so. She'd need to stay where she was for a few days, but that nice woman with the frizzy brown hair had said that would be all right, and Letha had agreed. He recalled vaguely that Letha had rented a semi-detached in London. She must have bought it at some point over the intervening years and be renting out the half where she didn't live, to have the final word that way.

A noise behind him made him whirl around, hand going to his wand pocket. A girl of about six stared at him from the door. Her right thumb was in her mouth, and her eyes were wide and solemn. Her hair was as bushy as that of the woman who had suggested he and Lily stay. *Must be her daughter. Probably has the run of the house, her and those two boys we were watching – they must all belong to that family who live in the other half...*

"Hello," he said quietly. "My name is Mr. Clay. What's yours?"

The girl took her thumb out of her mouth and dried it on her blouse. "Jane," she said quietly. "But everybody except Daddy calls me Neenie."

"Why doesn't your daddy call you Neenie?"

The girl smiled shyly. "Cause he calls me Kitten instead."

"Well, can I call you Neenie?"

She nodded. "Is she going to be all right?" she asked, looking over towards Lily. "My daddy didn't mean to hit her with his truck. It was an accident."

"I know. And she knows. Or she will, when she wakes up. The Healer did say she was going to be all right."

"That's good."

"What are your brothers' names, Neenie?"

"They're not my brothers. Not both of them. Reggie is our cousin. He came to live with us two years ago after his parents died in a car accident." Neenie sounded as if she were reciting a lesson she'd been taught.

*Probably something her parents taught her to say when people asked, so no one got the wrong idea from half-answers or mistakes.* "Well, then, what's your brother's—"

"Neenie!" said a woman's voice from behind her. Neenie jumped and turned guiltily around. "What are you doing over here?"

"Sorry."

"Sorry's not an answer, Jane. Why are you here?"

"I just wanted to say hello and see if they were all right."

"That was naughty of you. You get home right away."

"Bye," Neenie said over her shoulder before she scurried away down the hall.

"I'm sorry about that," said the woman, stepping into the doorway in Neenie's place. "We'll try to keep them from bothering you."

"Oh, she wasn't bothering me. On the contrary. I love children."

"That's a dangerous thing to say to me," said the woman, laughing a little. "I have three of them to look after. You might find yourself saddled with a babysitting job." She held out her hand. "Kelly White."

"Harold Clay." James shook her hand. "Thank you for letting us stay here – it was you who suggested it, if my memory's not playing tricks on me?"

"That was me."

"Thank you." He looked at Lily, lying so still in the bed. "I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't offered. She's everything to me, more so than ever right now, and seeing her hurt like that, I just couldn't cope. I've always tried to keep her from getting hurt, put myself in the way instead, and there was just no time here..."

It flashed before his eyes again, half in real time, half in grotesque slow motion. Lily pulling away from him, starting to run across the street – the truck's brakes squealing as she stopped in horror, directly in its path – his own voice screaming her name as the bumper struck her, sending her flying – wanting to run to her side, but feeling his legs locked in place, unable to move –

"Sit down," said Kelly gently, coming into the room. "Please, before you fall."

James obeyed, sinking back down to the cot. "It's just, we've lost everything else," he said dully. "Our home, our friends, our son..."

"Your son?"

"Yes, our little boy. He'd be about your Neenie's age now."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"No, no, he's not dead. At least we don't think so. It's just that we don't know where to find him..." James stopped talking suddenly, aware of how close he'd been to blurring out his real name and purpose to this woman. *And she could be anyone. Magical, Muggle... but no, Letha used a wand openly in front of her, and she went to call the Healer, which means she can use the Floo, and Muggles can't...*

"I'm still very sorry to hear that," said Kelly. "I don't know what I'd do if any of our three were missing, or even Letha's Meghan. We've really come to think of them all as ours over the years, living in close quarters the way we do. If there's anything we can do to help, please tell me."

*Do you know where we can find a man called Sirius Black?* But James knew better than to ask that question. The newspaper article he'd read the night before had made it quite clear that Sirius was currently considered only slightly better than Voldemort in most respects. She'd want to know why he wanted to know, and he didn't want to lie, but he didn't dare tell the truth...

"I hate to ask, when you're already putting us up, but I'm awfully hungry. I think I must have missed at least one meal while I was asleep."

"Did you eat any lunch?"

"No, we were going to eat after we... were done with what we were doing," James finished rather lamely. "But it must be at least dinnertime by now."

Kelly smiled. "Better than that – it's tomorrow morning. Breakfast time."

James blinked, impressed. "I did sleep a long time."

"The Healer said shock often does that." Kelly looked at him oddly. "Did you sleep on your pillow wrong? There's a line on your face, right there." She pointed.

James lifted his hand and found the temple-piece of his invisible glasses under his fingers, pressing into his skin. "I must have," he said mendaciously, rubbing it. "It'll go away."

"And you do need something to eat. The Healer left nutrition potions for your wife, and Letha gave her one before she left for work – she had some Healing training during the war, so she knows how to do that."

"I know."

"You do?" Kelly seemed interested. "Do you know Letha from somewhere, then?"

"Only through stories," James said quickly. "We had... mutual friends. You?"

"Oh, she and I were best friends when we were little. But then she went off to a special school." Kelly chuckled, leading James out of the dark room and into a short hallway. "I never realized how special until we ran into each other again, when the twins were about two. She listened to my stories about them, insisted on coming home to meet them, let them play with her wand, and a few seconds later, John and I were being informed that magic actually exists." She turned right and went through a door where sun lay on the floor in long stripes. "The kitchen's just in here."

"Excuse me a moment," said James, spying porcelain fixtures on the other side of the hall from the kitchen. "I'll be right there."

When he finished and walked into the kitchen, Kelly had her head in the refrigerator. "Is there anything you don't eat? There's some cold sausage

from this morning, and peppers and onions, I can make you a fry-up with some eggs if you'd like."

"That sounds wonderful," James said sincerely, sitting down at the table. "What did you do after you found out your children were magical?"

"Well, we wanted to be near someone who could help them if they ever got really out of hand, and since I already knew Letha, it seemed like a good idea to move closer to her. It was just luck that the man who owned this place was willing to sell to her, and that she was willing to rent to us. John and I found work in this area, and we've been here ever since."

"And the other boy, Reggie, I think Neenie called him – she said he was a cousin, he'd come to live with you when his parents died in a car wreck..."

"That's right, my sister and her husband. Kind of funny, how we both married colors – John's a White, and her husband was a Gray." Kelly cracked two eggs into a bowl. "Like I said, Reggie's really become one of us now. It's hard for us to remember what life was like without him. But enough about me, I'm boring. What about you? Where did you come from?"

"A little town," said James, trying to think of ways to turn the conversation elsewhere. "Just a village like any other, not very interesting. L—" He yawned, and had a brainstorm. "If you don't mind, I'm very tired still."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Kelly sounded chagrined. "Me and my big mouth, chatter chatter all day, and never realize other people might get tired of it. I'll just finish this up and let you eat, and then you go right back to bed if you want. Or if you want a shower, it's right upstairs – this is Letha's side of the house, and she never uses her second bathroom, she's in the master bedroom and it has its own, so anything you find in there feel free to use..."

James let the flow of words wash over him, making appropriate noises at the right times and supporting his head with one hand. He actually was still tired, as silly as that seemed after sleeping half of yesterday and all last night.

*There are some things here that don't add up. She's talking like she's a Muggle, but she can't be, if I was right about her using the Floo to get a Healer for Lily. And she doesn't seem at all sad when she talks about her sister dying.*

"Where is your husband this morning?" he asked as Kelly set the plate on the table. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. He's at work, and so's Letha. 'Fraid you're stuck with me for most of today. And I'll have to be mostly over on my own side, keeping an eye on the children."

"That's all right," said James. "I was thinking of going back to bed, or sitting with... Cecilia, after I was done here."

He picked up the fork and poked at the eggs for a moment before slicing off a bite-sized piece. Something in the back of his head was insisting that he should talk to John White again, that all the little things that were bothering him would come clear if he could discuss them with another man.

*I wish I'd got a better look at him.* His memories of the man were blurred by shock and worry. All he could remember was blondish hair, glasses, and a polite voice, soothing and somehow familiar.

*But I never knew anyone named White. I knew Blacks, but no Whites.* He grinned at his own feeble joke, and ate another bite of Kelly's fry-up. "This is very good," he said around it.

"Men," said Kelly, shaking her head. "This is not one of the cultures where talking with your mouth full is considered a compliment to the chef!" But she was smiling. "Thank you. I've always enjoyed cooking. And now Jamie's starting to get interested in it, I'm so happy."

James nearly choked on his mouthful. "I'm sorry, who?" he said when he'd swallowed.

"Jamie. My son. The other half of the twins. I'm sorry, I must not have told you his name – there I go again, chattering away, and leaving out all the most important things. Yes, the twins are James and Jane – not the most original of names, but they'll wear better than Taylor or Rainbow or some of the things people are naming children these days... oh, I'm sorry, I hope I haven't offended you..."

James shook his head. "No. No, not at all."

*It's a coincidence,* he told himself firmly, starting to eat again. *I was just saying last night how happy I was to have a normal name. It doesn't mean anything, that her little boy is named James.*

*But he's Harry's age. He's living very near Aletha. And he looked enough like Harry to make Lily run across the road after him.*

His head was spinning. He didn't want to have to think about it any more right now.

*And I certainly don't want to get into a fight about it.* Which he would, if he brought up his suspicions to Kelly. Whether he was right or wrong, she would be angry and shocked at what he thought she was doing, and want to know what right he had to ask her about it, and he had no good answer for her, only the truth.

*Which is a little hard to believe, when you come right down to it.*

Twice he opened his mouth to ask Kelly if her family or Aletha owned a dog, but closed it again. He'd seen their dog himself, the day before, running outside after Aletha, then following Kelly back in. It was big enough to be Sirius, but it was a funny sort of orange-red, not properly black.

*So maybe he dyed his fur. Maybe that's part of his disguise too.*

But why would Sirius bother to dye his fur, since no one had known he was an Animagus anyway? The questions just kept piling up, and James

couldn't come to any proper conclusion, not with the way the room kept tilting around him...

Kelly turned around from the sink and got a good look at him. "Back to bed," she said peremptorily, "right now. You look like you're going to fall out of that chair."

James accepted her help back down the hall and dropped gratefully onto the cot. His eyes closed of their own accord, and his last thought was regret that once again, he hadn't thought to take his glasses off...

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Danger stood in the doorway, looking from man to woman.

*He had a strong reaction to Harry's false name. He wouldn't tell me anything about himself, or where he was from. And he said something about missing a little boy, about Neenie's age...*

*She shook her head. It can't be what I think it is. That's just impossible. James and Lily Potter are dead. They were buried. People saw their bodies, touched them. There is no way they can have come back to life.*

But she couldn't help remembering the scream she thought she'd heard as Remus braked frantically the day before. She might be mistaken, she might have conjured it up in the panic of the moment, but it had sounded a lot like the name "Lily"...

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"Missing a little boy about Neenie's age," repeated Remus. "And he had a strong reaction to hearing that our son was named James."

Sirius blew his nose. "Dammit," he said in deep disgust. "If I could just smell properly, we could get this settled tonight."

"But you can't," said Aletha. "And that would be invading their privacy in any case. If they are James and Lily, as insane as that seems, then they must have a reason for staying in disguise. And if they're not, then there's no reason to bother them."

"But what if their reason is that they just don't know what's going on?" suggested Danger. "Imagine they've been away somehow, incommunicado. They would have gone looking for Harry right away, as soon as they got back, wouldn't they? And gone to you first, Letha, since you're the only one of their old friends still available."

"And that would be why you felt like you knew them," said Sirius. "Because you did – you do. And why they were asking about me – they're looking for Harry."

"And he was out in the front yard with Draco when the accident happened." Aletha teased at a tangle in her hair. "Doesn't it sound just like Lily to run across the street towards Harry without noticing that there's a truck coming?"

"I hate to be the party pooper," said Remus, "but all of this is based on one rather improbable assumption. That Lily and James have somehow come back to life."

"It's not impossible," said Sirius. "Maybe they weren't ever really dead."

Remus shook his head. "I was at their funeral, Sirius. I saw their bodies. Someone asked me if I wanted their wedding rings, to remember them by, and I said yes." He stroked his own ring. "Maybe it was wrong of me, but I couldn't bear to think of symbols of a love that deep being buried. I suppose I was hoping I could someday give them to Harry."

"And you did," said Danger. "He has them now."

"And that's another thing to think about. Harry." Aletha looked towards the music room. "If those people in there really are James and Lily, Harry belongs to them, not to us. We'd miss him terribly, but he is theirs."

"They wouldn't take him away," said Sirius. "Not away, away. I don't think they'd want to live here with us, but they wouldn't go far. We'd still see him all the time. But it wouldn't be the same as living in the same house, would it?"

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Above, on the balcony, the cubs withdrew noiselessly.

"Do you think?" whispered Neenie, her eyes very big. "Could they really be your parents?"

"Would you go away with them?" Draco asked.

Meghan's face wrinkled, preparatory to crying. Both her brothers immediately clapped hands over her mouth and hustled her down the corridor with their other hands. Neenie ran ahead to open the door.

"I don't want Harry to go away!" was Meghan's cry when it finally escaped her, safely behind the closed door of their room.

"I know," said Harry, sitting down on the bed. "I don't want to go away. I like being Pack. But maybe my mum and dad could be Pack too."

"And we'll still be Pack even if we don't live in the same house," said Neenie. "Pack is forever."

"I just thought of something," said Draco. "Your mum and dad knew about Wormtail, right?"

Harry nodded. "Course they did. They were the ones under the Fidelius."

"So if they really are back, maybe they can go to the Ministry and tell them about Padfoot and Wormtail."

Meghan brightened up. "And then Dadfoot be free!"

"And then we could live anywhere we wanted," said Neenie. "Maybe there could be three houses close together."

"Three?" asked Draco.

"One for Harry's parents, one for Moony and Danger, one for Padfoot and Letha."

"But where would I live? I belong to all the Pack."

"Maybe you could switch," suggested Harry. "Sleep in one house one night, another house the other."

Neenie frowned. "But we still don't know if those people really are Harry's parents."

Harry shrugged. "So? I'll go ask them."

"They asleep," said Meghan.

"Not now, silly. Tomorrow. Tomorrow morning."

"How?" asked Draco.

Harry grinned. "Same way we got Neenie in this morning. The cabinets over the sinks."

"But I barely fit," protested Neenie. "You wouldn't at all."

"We can take all the shelves out," said Harry. "I'll manage."

None of the other cubs doubted that.

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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 4

The two halves of the Den were mirror images; each room had its twin on the other side, which had made placing secret doors and windows between the halves easier. It had been only a joke to make the mirror-fronted cabinets backless, both in the master bathrooms upstairs and in the washrooms on the ground floor, but it had turned out to be helpful, since no matter which side you were on, you could get at things in both sets of cabinets.

Of course, a small and enterprising person could also climb through said cabinets.

Hermione had been able to slither feet-first under the bottom shelf once all the junk that was in there had been removed. Harry wasn't going to manage that, no matter which way he turned. Fortunately, the shelves were merely sitting on two brackets per side. They lifted out without even any screws to undo.

"That was easy," said Draco dubiously, regarding the wide-open window between the halves of the Den. "Harry, are you sure about this?"

For answer, Harry climbed up onto the counter and peered through the cabinets. "All clear," he said. "See you later." He put one leg through the opening, ducked his head under, pulled his torso and other leg through after it, and closed the cabinet door behind him. A distinct thump sounded as he dropped to the floor. Then silence.

"He'll be fine," said Hermione firmly. "He's still glamoured. How could they tell who he is?"

"They could look real close," suggested Draco. "It doesn't cover up that scar."

"He be fine," repeated Meghan, folding her arms as if she would make it so. "Harry be fine."

The three remaining cubs sat down to wait.

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Harry knew the passage back to the music room as well as any other hallway in the Den, but it had never felt so big or so dark before. The music room itself seemed like a dragon's cave lurking ahead, and only a stupid person walked into a dragon's cave all alone.

His hand rose to his chest, pressing against it, but the familiar half-felt shapes failed to give him courage as they usually did. He was about to see the people those shapes meant, people who had always been just stories. He remembered how Draco had sometimes been funny around him, those first few months, because Harry Potter was someone out of a story, not a real person who would fight him for the last piece of toast or shake him if he was having a nightmare. Now Harry understood the feeling.

*My mum and dad. My real mum and dad.*

*I want them to like me. Will they like me?*

He had to smile a little. He was probably starting wrong if he wanted them to like him. Experience told him that adults didn't much care for children waking them up early in the morning.

*So I won't wake them up. I'll just go in and look.*

He stopped in the doorway and closed his eyes, listening. Two sets of breathing. Both had a little bit of snore in them, but one had more than the other. Both were the deep, regular, even sound of people who were either actually asleep or faking it well. All the older cubs could fake sleep convincingly, and Meghan was coming along nicely, though the Pack-parents were usually able to root them out by standing and looking at them for a while. Hermione, in particular, was prone to giggles if she sensed someone looking at her for too long.

But these people were probably asleep. He hadn't heard any catches or stops that would mean they were awake, faking, and had heard him come in.

*So they're either really asleep or really, really good fakers.*

For the moment, he'd go with "really asleep."

Harry stepped inside the room, opening his eyes. Closing them had not only let him concentrate on listening, it had given them time to dark-adjust, and he could see outlines and shapes in the gloom. Directly in front of him sat the camp bed they sometimes wheeled Padfoot into getting out of the attic so they could play tent under it. The louder snoring was coming from there, and the softer set from the pull-out bed to his left.

Man on the camp bed, woman on the pull-out, he decided. Which one should he look at first?

*"There'll never be a doubt whose boy you are,"* said Moony's voice in his memories. *"You look just like your dad, but you have your mum's eyes."*

*And people close their eyes when they sleep.*

Mind made up, Harry edged around the camp bed, only to discover that the man was currently lying on his back. Getting a good look at his face would require a higher angle than Harry's height could provide. He looked around for something to stand on and spotted the piano at the foot of the

bed, with its bench pushed under the keyboard.

*Perfect.*

Thankful for a carpeted floor, Harry padded over to the bench, pulled it clear of the piano, and climbed up on it. He spent a moment admiring how different the world looked from high up – was this how adults saw things? – then turned to look at the man sleeping on the camp bed.

His brain jammed. Involuntarily, he took a step back. The bench rocked threateningly. Harry dropped to all fours, stifling a yell, and leaned forward hard to keep the bench on its feet. Too hard, he realized an instant later, as the bench began to tilt forward instead. He couldn't correct this, there was no time, it was going to fall and make noise and they'd see him –

He leaped clear, landing beside the bed with a muffled thump that was entirely eclipsed by the crash of the bench falling over on its side, mingled with the bang of the top slamming shut. A pair of gasps alerted him that both occupants of the room had just woken up. He crawled under the bed and shut his eyes.

*If I can't see them, they can't see me.*

Besides, there was nothing interesting to look at under the bed, and a lot to think about.

The face of the man on the camp bed, except for being without glasses, was exactly the same as the face he'd seen in photographs all his life, and very like the face he saw in the mirror every morning.

"James?" said a woman's voice, quiet, breathy.

"Hush," said the man, and Harry heard him standing up. "I don't think we're alone."

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"What happened?" Lily looked around as best she could without sitting up, which she felt would be a bad idea at the moment. "Where are we?"

"This is Letha's house. You ran out in the street and got hit by a truck."

Lily resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I remember that."

"It was her neighbor driving it. He lives on the other side of this house, he's married with boy and girl twins, about six, and another boy they took in a few years back. At least that's what they say. Things keep not adding up around here." James was walking around the room, his wand in his hand, searching the shadows. "Why did you run out like that?"

"I saw him." The warning weighed on her mind, she was careful not to use any of their real names, but she had to tell him this. "I saw our son. It was him, it had to be. His hair was the wrong color, but we both know how easy that is to change."

James snorted a brief laugh. "You might be right," he said, opening a cabinet at the end of the room. "I was talking to his wife – Letha's neighbor's – and she said her son's name was James. Now I'm trying not to jump to conclusions, trying to keep an open mind, but doesn't that seem a little overly coincidental to you?"

"Maybe a little." Lily waited until James turned back around, then beckoned him closer. As he approached, she pointed downwards. *Check under the bed*, she mouthed.

"You're right." James circled around the bed, putting himself between it and the door. "I'm sorry, I'm off on tangents already, and I haven't even asked you how you feel." He took her hand and leaned over to kiss her.

"Awful," Lily said when they parted. "Like I fell from the first floor of a house onto a pile of rotten wood at ground level, then got hit by a truck the next day." She tried a smile and was delighted when it worked. "And a little queasy. I don't know why."

"I think I might..." Abruptly, James dropped to his knees, shining the wandlight under the bed. "Ah-ha!"

Directly below Lily, something made a frightened sound, and the bed shook a little.

"I'm sorry, did I scare you?" said James, suddenly sounding contrite. "I didn't mean to. You can come out. I won't hurt you." He backed up on all fours, putting out his wand and handing it to Lily. "Here, the nice lady has my wand now. She won't hurt you either."

"Thanks a lot," Lily muttered to him.

Wordlessly, James pointed past her.

Lily turned over and felt her heart speed up. On the other side of the bed, a small boy was getting to his feet. His hair was light-colored, but his face was the same one that had caught her eye, and her heart, and pulled her towards him with so nearly disastrous results. She wanted to leap from the bed and snatch him up, but even thinking about it made things ache and burn inside her, and she forced herself to relax.

"So, are you Reggie or Jamie?" asked James in a carefully light tone from behind her.

"Jamie," the boy said, looking at them both warily, edging along the wall. "Jamie White. I'm six. I live over there." He pointed towards the opposite wall. "I'm sorry I bothered you. Can I go home now?"

“Not quite yet,” James said. “Cecilia, love? Do you think you could stand a little more light in here?”

“Only my stomach hurts, not my eyes,” said Lily. “Go ahead.”

James walked over to the French window and pulled back the drapes. Early morning light spilled in. Jamie squinted against it, shielding his eyes with a hand. His hair was the honey blond Lily remembered.

*But look at it. Messy as a niffler's nest. Only Potters have hair like that.*

“So your dad is John, and your mum is Kelly,” said James, sitting down on the end of Lily’s bed. “And your sister is Jane, but they call her Neenie.”

Jamie nodded, his eyes fixed on the carpet.

“And your – cousin, was it? – is Reggie. What’s that short for?”

“I dunno,” said Jamie. “We don’t ever call him by the long name.”

“How old is your sister?” asked Lily.

“She’s six. We’re twins.” Jamie looked full at her for the first time. “Reggie’s six too. Meghan’s littler. She’s just three.”

Lily heard the words, but they meant nothing. Her mind was occupied by other things.

Her own eyes were looking back at her from the little boy’s face.

“You’re not twins,” she said quietly, certainly. “That’s just pretending. And those people aren’t your real mum and dad. Are they?”

The boy looked from one of them to the other, and Lily heard James’ sharp intake of breath as he, too, noticed the child’s eyes. “It’s all right,” he said unsteadily. “You’re safe with us.”

Slowly, the boy’s hand went beneath his shirt. He withdrew a fine gold chain, from which two small things hung, and lifted it over his head, taking it off. Two steps forward brought him to the bed, where he placed the chain in a neat pile, then scooted quickly away, putting his back against the wall.

James picked up the chain, lifting it slowly, until the objects at the bottom dangled free. The light from the door shone on them, and through them, and Lily reached her hand out to grasp them almost without meaning to. She knew what she saw, and what it meant, and there was no room left in her mind to wonder why, only a great shout of joy overwhelming everything.

The same joy shone from James’ face as he opened the clasp of the chain and slipped the two items off it. He moved up the side of the bed, leaning over to pull Lily gently toward him, until they were within easy reach of one another. She took his wedding ring from his hand with trembling fingers, kissed it once, and slid it onto his left ring finger, as he did the same for her.

The rings fit as if they’d never been away.

“Those were my mum and dad’s,” said a little voice.

“No, they *are* your mum and dad’s,” corrected James, turning towards the speaker. “Hello, Harry.”

“That is your name, isn’t it?” said Lily.

Very slowly, the boy nodded. “Are you wearing glamours?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Lily, wanting to scream the word at the top of her lungs, to shout and dance for joy, but keeping her tone mild and gentle. “Do you want us to take them off?”

Harry nodded. “You can do mine too,” he said. “Please.”

“You can do mine too please,” repeated James, taking his wand from Lily. “How polite.” Two quick waves changed his hair back to black and revealed his glasses, and two more in Lily’s direction returned her hair to red and (she assumed) her eyes to green.

Harry was smiling now, the same delighted smile Lily remembered from the baby she’d held in her arms, and she knew in that moment that she loved this as-yet unknown boy just as much as she’d loved that baby, and would soon learn to love him even more.

“And now you,” said James, bringing the wand around to point at Harry.

There was no warning, no incantation was spoken. Harry’s eyes widened and he dodged to one side as James suddenly fell forward off the bed, the wand flying from his hand. Lily wrenched herself over, gasping at the pain in her belly, to see Letha standing near the door of the room, wand pointed towards James.

“Get up,” she said. “Clay, or whatever your name is. Up.”

“Letha, please,” Lily said imploringly, reaching a hand toward her friend. “It’s us.”

“Don’t move too much. You’ll hurt yourself.” The tone was that of a Healer to an errant patient. “You. Man. On your feet.”

James stood up, rubbing his back. "I suppose 'Hello, James, hello, Lily, how are you' is too much to ask for," he said ironically.

"It's not what I generally say to people I've thought were dead for five years." The wand's tip never wavered. "Or people impersonating them. Fortunately, there's something you can do right now that could very easily convince me you are who you look like."

"And what might that be?"

"Don't play stupid with me. If you really are James Potter, there's one skill you have that you never told anyone about. Only the people you learned it with, and the person you learned it for, know about it. But secrets have a way of coming back and biting you. So start making up for a little of the biting this one did. Convince me. *Now*."

James' face mirrored Lily's inner confusion. "I don't underst—" he began.

And then his expression changed entirely. "Oh. You mean how we got our nicknames."

Aletha's lips twitched. "Among other things. You never even told Lily, did you?"

"No."

"Never told me what, for heaven's sake?"

"Er, why don't I just show you," said James, moving around to the bottom of the bed. He glanced upwards. "I think I'd better go outside. I'd rather not damage your ceiling."

"I'd rather you not either." Aletha was still covering James with her wand, Lily noticed, but her entire demeanor had changed. She had the smile on her lips Lily well remembered from her Quidditch-playing days, when she and Sirius had just pulled off some amazing stunt that devastated the other team's Chasers to let James score.

James pushed open the French door and stepped out into the back yard. He rolled his shoulders, arched his back once, then bent over forward —

And changed shape entirely.

Lily sat up in shock, disregarding a stab of pain through her stomach. James was gone. In his place stood a deer, a stag, tall and stately with at least an eight-point rack.

"Prongs!" shouted Harry gleefully, running out the door.

"Good God, Lily, lie down!" Aletha was at her side, pushing her gently down in the bed. "Yes, he was stupid not to tell you, but that's no reason to hurt yourself!"

"How long has he been able to do that?" Lily demanded, pointing a shaking finger at the stag, which was now kneeling down to allow Harry to climb onto its back.

"Since he was fifteen, if I understand correctly." Aletha Summoned a potion from the mantelpiece and handed it to Lily, conjuring a straw in the mouth of the bottle. "Here, drink this. They all of them did it. It was for Remus. Am I the only member of the Order who didn't know he was a werewolf?"

"No, most of the others didn't know either," Lily said between sips of the potion, which tasted surprisingly good for a medicinal brew. "Just Dumbledore and McGonagall, and Alastor Moody and a few of the older members, who could help him and wouldn't panic. James told me when we were married. I take it Sirius never told you."

"No, he never did. I heard it from Remus himself, a few years ago." Aletha was on her knees beside the bed, and Lily saw with a little shock that tears glistened in her friend's eyes. "Lily, it's so good to see you again..."

"Same to you." Lily reached over and squeezed Aletha's hand. "I hope Harry's been behaving himself."

"That depends entirely on your definition of behaving." Aletha sniffled several times and wiped her eyes. "No, I am not going to cry right now. I'll wait until we're all together and cry then."

"All together? Who else is there?"

A deafening volley of barks burst in upon the women, and Aletha turned to look out the door, then began to laugh. She moved aside so that Lily could see a huge reddish dog darting in and out through the legs of the stag, barking its head off. "My loutish husband," she said, waving towards the dog. "And before you ask, he's not usually that color. Harry played a prank on him recently that changed his hair color, and his fur changed as well."

The stag became the human James again, with Harry clinging to his back. The boy slid to the ground as James embraced the dog, a hug which rapidly became a wrestling match. Harry hovered by the sidelines, apparently unsure which side to cheer on.

"He looks well," said Lily, chuckling as James got Sirius into a headlock.

"He should. He eats like a horse and snores like a pig." But Aletha was smiling. "I shouldn't run him down too much. It's not easy for him. He can only go out in dog form, or with a glamour on, and we don't like to do that since he nearly got caught once. So he stays home a lot, and because of that,

he takes care of the children more often than not.”

“Yes, children. I understand where Meghan came from, and Harry of course, but who are the other two? And their parents – who is it that lives next door to you?”

A shout echoed in from the yard. Lily looked out again and saw James now chasing another man around – not Sirius, he was still in dog form, standing beside Harry and watching the chase. This man was smaller, lighter, built more like –

“Ickle Moony needs his knuckle rub!” James sang out.

“Remus,” said Lily in delight. “Of course, I should have guessed...”

Remus ducked in through the door. “Hello, Lily, sorry about the truck,” was all he had time to say before he had to dodge James again. Unfortunately, in the smaller confines of the room, he couldn’t stay out of the way for long.

“Now, now, ickle Moony, it’ll do you good,” said James in a mock-professorish tone, cornering Remus. “Hold still, now.”

A woman with a head full of frizzy brown curls popped in through the back door, wand in hand, and fired off a spell at the seat of James’ trousers, which immediately burst into flame. James yelped, and the flames went out, leaving Aletha, Remus, Harry, Sirius (in his dog shape still) and the mystery woman all laughing.

“I thought you were a Muggle!” James said to the woman, sounding very aggrieved.

“Sorry, just my cover story.” She didn’t seem in the least abashed by it. “And I was a Muggle until I was about twenty, so there you have it.”

“A Muggle until you were twenty?” James repeated.

“Remus, who is this?” Lily said over him. She had a decent idea, but it would be nice to have it confirmed.

Remus smiled proudly, moving past James to the woman’s side. “James, Lily,” he said. “I’d like you to meet my wife. This is Danger.”

“Pleased to meet you, again,” said James, shaking Danger’s hand.

“Danger?” asked Lily as the woman came to her bedside.

“It’s actually Gertrude, but I haven’t used that name since Letha came up with Danger when I was eight.”

“Oh, I’ve heard about you! Letha used to talk about you all the time – she was always so unhappy that she could never find out where you’d moved away to...” Lily felt strength and compassion in the other woman’s handclasp, and saw a wicked sense of humor lurking in the brown eyes. She had always hoped Remus could someday find someone to love, and it seemed he had.

“Wait a second,” said James. “That means that little girl, Neenie, she can’t be yours. Unless she’s yours and somebody else’s. Because first off, I know you didn’t have any kids when we... you know,” he said to Remus. “And you can’t, can you?”

“No, I can’t. But I’ve ended up with a fair houseful anyway, wouldn’t you say?” Remus grinned. “Harry you know about, Meghan likewise, and Neenie is actually Danger’s sister.”

“Scuse me,” said a high-pitched voice from the door. The adults all turned to look, obscuring Lily’s view for a moment. She tried to work herself around to where she could see, but Aletha’s hand held her still, which gave her a perfect view of a much smaller version of Aletha stopping directly in front of James and looking up at him. “Are you Harry’s daddy?”

“Yes, I am.” James knelt down, putting himself more on a level with this small and determined person. “You must be Meghan. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Thank you,” said Meghan, solemnly shaking his hand. “What I call you, please?”

“What she call me?” James repeated, looking around at the other adults.

“You can call him Prongs, sweetheart,” said Aletha quickly. “Prongs and... what do you want them calling you?” she asked Lily. “They use my name, and Danger’s. Do you want them just to use yours as well?”

“Why don’t they call her Tiger?” suggested James, grinning.

“No,” said Lily with a groan. “No, please, anything else...”

“Tiger!” cried Meghan happily. “Mrs. Tiger!”

Remus chuckled. “Looks like it’s been adopted,” he said. “Sirius, why don’t you come inside and actually say hello, rather than just sitting there panting?”

“I’ll be back in a moment,” said Danger quickly, slipping out the back door. “Harry, Meghan, come with me, please.”

“Aww,” protested both children.

“Go,” said Aletha firmly. “You’ll be allowed back in just a moment, but this is grown-up talk.”

"Okay," said Harry, taking Meghan's hand. "Bye, Prongs. Bye, Mrs. Tiger."

Danger shut the door behind them. James was staring. "Whatever happened to Dad and Mum?" he asked.

The dog reared onto its hind legs and became a human. "Give him some time," Sirius said. "Hello, Lily." He came over and pressed her hand. "I'd get closer, but I've got a nasty cold, and I don't want you to get it."

"Why didn't you take Pepperup Potion?"

"I did. But *your* son did *this* to it." Sirius pointed at his hair, then grinned. "Hey, I finally have someone I can say that to. This is going to be great."

"There is something we need to tell you about," said Remus, righting the piano bench and sitting down on it. "About our fourth child – because we do consider them all very much ours. We've had him for two years, and he's just as much a part of our family as Harry or Meghan or Neenie. But you might be a bit surprised when you see him, because he does look a little... unusual, I suppose you'd say..."

Something from the newspaper retrospective popped into Lily's head. "Hold on," she said, lifting her hand. "Two years, you said?"

"Yes, two years this past summer."

"And does anyone else know where this little boy is?"

"No." Remus had begun to smile. "He is officially missing, presumed dead."

James caught on. "No," he said. "No way. You did not... I mean... he's not... *blond*. Not like that. Is he?"

"Well, yes, actually, he is."

"I don't believe this!" James was on his feet. "You must be out of your mind!"

"No, I'm quite sane." Remus' smile was changing, Lily saw in fascination. It had become distinctly predatory.

James didn't seem to have noticed. "How *dare* you! How dare you raise *my* son in the same house as the son of Lucius Malfoy! How dare you let that stinking spawn even get *near* Harry! You're lucky he hasn't burned the house down with you in it, or poisoned you all! How *dare* you—"

"That's *enough*," said Remus sharply, standing up himself. James shut his mouth abruptly. "Draco is *not* his father. On the contrary. Lucius beat him for crying at his nightmares and neglected him to the point where Draco would go for weeks without seeing another human being. For the first few months that he lived here, he barely allowed us to touch him, because he had never learned that any adult would ever touch him with some other intent than that of hurting him. For the first year, we could not say his father's name in front of him without frightening him badly."

James' mouth had come open again and was hanging rather loosely. Lily could appreciate the feeling. This was a side of Remus she'd never seen before.

"How dare *you* imply that a six-year-old boy would, or could, do anything you mentioned? How dare you condemn a child you don't even *know*, purely on account of his blood? Draco is as much a part of this family as Harry, and you would do well to remember that."

"Well, Harry's not a part of this family any more," said James, staring down his nose at Remus. "As soon as Lily's well again, we're taking him and leaving. You can do what you like."

"Oh, we are, are we?" Lily sat up, ignoring Aletha's faint sound of alarm – it didn't hurt this time, she noticed, and she felt no need to lie down again. "I believe it takes two people to make a we, James Potter. And I don't plan on taking Harry anywhere."

"What?" James whirled to look at her.

"We'd scare him to death if we just snatched him away. He doesn't know us, and we don't know him. We don't know how to take care of him. We don't know what he will and won't eat, or what time he goes to bed, or what stories he likes to hear when he does. We need to get to know him without frightening him, and I see no better place to do that than here."

James' mouth was hanging open even wider than before.

"And another thing. I've always wanted more than one child. You knew that, agreed to it. Well, there are four children here. A ready-made family, if you will. I, for one, would like to get to know not only my son, but the other people he knows and loves, before I start talking about taking him away."

The sound of clapping startled her. Sirius was applauding. "I like that," he said. "And you always did say you wanted a big family. Letha, think we should tell her now?"

"I think now would be the perfect time to tell her." Aletha was grinning.

"Hey, wait a second!" James protested. "I'm supposed to get to tell her!"

"I don't think so," said Remus. "You forfeited your right to tell her things when you started being stupid. Am I right?" he asked over James' shoulder.

"Exactly right." Lily returned Remus' smile, feeling her soul warm within her. "So what do you have to tell me?"

"Well, let's just say it's a very good thing I didn't hit you any harder. You might have been able to take it, but..." Remus stopped. "Oh, let's let him tell her anyway," he said. "As long as he promises to be good from now on."

"Whose side are you people on?" James muttered.

"Our Pack's side," said Aletha firmly.

"And your Pack would be...?"

"The eight of us," said Sirius. "Plus you, I guess, if you want to be. But we can talk about that later. Tell Lily the big news."

James made a face at Sirius, then stepped over the cot and sat down on it. "You're supposed to be the one telling me this, you know," he said. "Lily, you're pregnant."

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All the cubs' heads jerked around at the shriek which came from the music room. "What's that?" asked Harry.

"Oh, just your mum being happy," said Danger. "Let's keep going." She found her place in the book she was reading to the cubs. "*It was getting dark. He could see mountains and forests under a deep purple sky...*"

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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 5

In the middle of a discussion about the lessons the children received, Aletha looked at the clock on the wall and swore under her breath. "I have to get ready for work," she said. "Are you working today, Remus?"

"Only this afternoon, and Danger not at all. We should be fine."

"Good." Aletha bent over to hug Lily. "It's wonderful to have you here," she said. "I still can't believe you're back."

"I still can't believe I'm pregnant." Lily yawned. "Good heavens, I just woke up, what's wrong with me?"

"You're recovering from being hit by a car," said Aletha with a trace of acidity in her voice. "And from having a number of shocks – pleasant ones, but still shocks. If you can sleep, do."

"I think I can." Lily yawned again. "But I shouldn't... I should be excited, awake..."

"It's just manifesting differently right now. You've worn yourself out for the moment. You'll be excited and awake in a little while. Go to sleep, Lily." Behind her back, Aletha crooked a beckoning finger at James.

"Love you, sweetheart," he said after he'd kissed her. "And the baby. We'll have to think about names..."

"We have months to do that, you silly." Lily smiled sleepily at him. "We don't even know boy or girl yet..."

James watched her eyes drift shut. "Is she really all right?" he asked Aletha worriedly.

"She's fine." Aletha smiled conspiratorially. "I spiked that potion I gave her with a slow-acting sleeping draught."

"Still thinks she knows what's best for the world," Sirius put in from his seat on the piano bench.

"I knew what was best for you, didn't I?"

"Do I have to answer that question?"

"We'll put it off until I get home. I won't be long." Aletha blew a kiss to Sirius, waved at Remus, and was out the door to the hall.

James sat down on the end of Lily's bed. "I think I need to apologize," he said. "For blowing up that way about the Malfoy boy, or whatever his name is now."

"Draco Black," said Remus. "Accepted."

"Oh, come on, at least let me finish." James stuck a mock-contrite look on his face. "I've been thinking about this ever since I got my foot out of my mouth."

"Go for it," said Sirius, leaning back. His fingers flickered towards Remus, but James caught the gist. *This should be good.* Choosing to ignore it with dignity, he went on.

"I had no right to judge Draco by his father like I did. I was being as stupid as all the purebloods who're so damn sure that Muggleborns are worthless just because of who their parents were. You're my friends, and you obviously care about this kid. So I should get to know him and see what he's like before I decide anything about him."

Sirius whistled. "Very impressive," he said. "Are you sure you're the same James Potter I used to know? That bloke would rather have eaten his own broomstick than admit he was wrong."

Remus gave Sirius a barely tolerant look. "There's no need to rub it in, Sirius," he said. "Thank you, James. But there's someone else's opinion of Draco I think you might trust even more than ours."

"Who's that?"

Remus stood up. "Come over here."

James followed his friend around the bottom of the cot he'd slept on and to the blank stretch of wall that separated the two halves of the house. Remus tapped his wand against the wall three times, then stroked a place along it and nodded in satisfaction.

James frowned. Nothing had changed that he could see. "What is this, Diagon Alley?"

"Something like that," said Sirius from behind him. "Go on." A hand in the middle of his back propelled James forward into the wall –

And through it.

The woman he'd called Kelly, who had reintroduced herself as Danger, looked up in surprise, as did the four children situated on and around her, apparently listening to a story she'd been reading. Meghan had her lap, Neenie was snuggled beside her, and entwined on the floor, in a pose that

suggested they'd been wrestling as much as listening, were two with dark hair, the other with silver-blond.

Harry wiggled around to where he could see James. "Hi!" he said enthusiastically. "You gonna listen too? Draco, come 'n meet my dad." He disentangled himself and helped the blond boy up. "This is Prongs. Prongs, this's Draco. He's my brother."

James quickly knelt down to put himself more nearly on the boys' level. "Hello, Draco," he said, holding out his hand.

"Hi." The boy's face and hair were reminiscent of Lucius Malfoy, but the expression and demeanor were worlds away. In fact, if he hadn't known who the boy was, James might have had a hard time placing him. The shy but friendly smile made the Malfoy features quite pleasant.

*And Harry likes him. Hell, Harry said right out the kid's his brother! Howcan I argue with that?*

"Actually, I think I would like to listen," he said, rearranging himself to sit cross-legged. "What are we reading?"

"It's a great book," said Neenie, her face alight with enthusiasm. "It's called *Long Journey Home*. It's about a man and a woman who get caught in a war and taken far, far away, and everyone at home thinks they're dead, but they're not, and it takes them a long time to get home and—"

"Ah, ah," said Danger warningly. "No giving away the ending."

"Dadfoot w'ote it," said Meghan, beaming. "Dadfoot a *good* w'iter."

James froze, ignoring the sudden extra weight on his legs. *What?*

Danger chuckled at the look on his face. "I suppose they feel that since you've been accepted as Pack, you should be inducted into *all* our secrets," she said. "Though I don't think Sirius really wanted you to know that quite yet."

James turned around. The back of a red head was just disappearing through the wall. Remus stood off to one side, looking rather amused. "He's been writing since Danger taught him how to type, back when we first came together," he said. "Several short stories and two novels, with a third one in the works. Under a pen name, of course. It gives him something to do, earns a little money – not that we're not freeloading off the Black fortune anyway, but he feels better bringing home some gold."

"Hang on," James said, shaking his head. "Back up the broom. Too much all at once. Sirius *writes?*"

"Yes, Sirius writes. And what's more, he writes well, and stuff we can read to this lot. Not children's books specifically, but they don't have anything graphic that we'd have to take out. And they adore hearing what Padfoot wrote, usually more than once. This is our second time through this one."

"Would you like a chair before I go on?" Danger offered. "It'll be easier on your back, especially with those hooligans on you."

James looked down. Harry and Draco looked up at him. "Hello," he said a bit bemusedly. "What are you doing?"

"Sitting," said Harry. "Read, Danger."

"Please," added Draco quickly.

"Just a second," said Remus, sitting down in one of the armchairs in the corner of the room. "Draco, come here. Two of you on the same lap is an embarrassment of riches."

James watched as Draco settled himself next to Remus, leaning comfortably on the man, who smiled and put an arm around him. *Ah-ha. So that's howthe wind blows there.*

He looked down at Harry and felt a slight stab of guilt. If Draco was Remus' boy, then Harry would have been Sirius', right up until today...

"Go on without us?" he said, gently nudging Harry off his lap as he stood up. "Harry, would you come with me?"

Harry nodded, and took James' hand as they walked back through the false wall – James reached up to find the contours of an archway, obviously masked by illusion – into the room where Lily lay sleeping.

"She's pretty," Harry said, looking at his mother.

"I'm glad you agree with me." James bent and scooped up his son, accustoming himself to this new size of boy. Harry tensed for a second, then relaxed. "I've always thought she was very beautiful myself. Harry, do you know where Padfoot went?"

Harry shrugged. "Might be up in his writing room."

"Can you show me where that is?"

"Upstairs." Harry directed James down the hall into the front room, up the stairs, and to the door of what looked like it had once been a guest bedroom. James shifted his son's weight to his left arm and knocked.

"What?" called Sirius' voice from within.

"I need to talk to you."

A moment of silence. "Fine. Come in."

An electric typewriter held pride of place in this room. The walls were lined with bookshelves and tables holding piles of paper, most of which had boxes under them, filled with envelopes and manila folders. Sirius sat behind the typewriter, a box of tissues to hand, looking rather sulky. "Go on," he said before James could speak. "Get it over with."

"What?"

"This." Sirius waved a hand around. "Just... tease me about it and be done with it, all right?"

"No." James set Harry down. "I'm not here to tease you."

"Great. That means you'll do it some other time."

"Probably. But I do need to talk to you."

"So talk."

"I owe you an apology," said James, shifting a pile of papers to the floor to sit in the chair they'd been occupying. Harry was riffling through the rubbish bin. "For going off like that downstairs."

"You already apologized, you don't need to do it again." Sirius shooed Harry away from the bin. "Get out of there, that's full of germs. Go get something from your room to play with."

"That's what I need to apologize for," said James, watching as Harry trotted out of the room. "For acting like being Harry's father gave me some God-given right to drag him away from you. Lily's right. That would be cruel, to him and to you. You've been taking care of him all these years – he's been yours in everything but name – and here I come and act like you haven't done a good enough job before I know anything about it at all. I really put my foot in it, Sirius. I'm sorry."

Sirius stared at him. "I am really getting suspicious here," he said. "You never used to apologize for anything."

"Maybe I should have more, then." James rubbed his legs, trying to think of how to say what he was thinking. It was clear in his mind, but getting it into words was another matter.

"You're in hiding," he said finally. "These kids have to wear glamours whenever they go out, lie about their names, they can't trust anyone except you. It would be so easy for you to turn that into making them miserable. But you haven't. They're happy. I can see that, anyone could see it. They were never really afraid of us, just careful, even when they didn't know us. And when they found out who we are, they started treating us just like they treat you. I had both boys on my lap downstairs, and they've never seen me before yesterday, at least not to remember it..."

Sirius was watching him silently.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is, you and Remus and Letha and Danger have done a bang-up job with these kids, and I... I want in. Me and Lily, and this baby. I want part of whatever it is you have here. But I don't want to cut you out of what you already have with Harry. That wouldn't be fair to anyone." James stopped. "That made no sense, did it."

"Made sense to me," said Sirius, a little hoarsely. "Prongs... God, I still can't believe you're really back – all you ever had to do was ask..."

James coughed into his hand, trying to keep his voice from fogging up. "Well, I'm asking."

Sirius cracked a smile. "No."

James scowled at him and told him what he thought of best friends who played stupid games with words. It wasn't until he was winding up his second paragraph that he noticed Harry standing in the doorway, looking very interested.

"Harry," said Sirius quickly, "you didn't hear any of that, all right?"

Harry nodded. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"Nothing," said James and Sirius in chorus.

"Oh. Can I go listen to Danger read again?"

"Sure, go on," said Sirius.

Harry took off running. "He's fast," James said, listening to the footsteps recede.

"And sneaky. He'll probably be telling Lily about what he caught you saying as soon as she wakes up. They play us off each other, you know. We have to have secret meetings when they're asleep to make sure we don't fall for anything." Sirius stood up and turned around, rummaging in a box under a table. "You may regret joining up with us."

"Doubt it. What're you after?"

Sirius straightened up with a manila folder in his hand. "This," he said. "Just put the latest installment in the other day." He presented the folder ceremoniously to James, though his eyes were oddly bright. "Never thought I'd actually be giving them to you, but it was something I needed to do."

James flipped open the folder and looked at the top sheet of paper. It was a letter in Sirius' handwriting, dated 31 July 1982, and addressed to...

*To me. Me and Lily.*

Quickly, he flipped to the next. It was dated Halloween of that year. The next was 14 February 1983, and the next 31 July...

*Like that retrospective in the Prophet, but better. That was just about plain old news. This is about people I love.*

"Enjoy," Sirius said roughly, and James looked up through blurry eyes to see him headed for the door.

"Hold it, you bastard," he said, hearing his own voice coming out croaky. "You can't leave yet."

Sirius turned back. "Why not?"

James grabbed his friend and pulled him into the tightest hug of his life.

*Because I need to know everything's going to be all right.*

"I was so scared, when I read that newspaper," he got out. "I thought I'd ruined your life."

"Don't worry about it. You can keep trying now you're back."

James punched Sirius in the back. Sirius scrubbed his hand along James' shoulder, causing carpet burns from his shirt.

*Now I know. Five years or not, some things never change.*

"Come on downstairs when you're done," Sirius said when they finally let go. "We'll be there."

James nodded, then sat down to catch up with what he'd missed.

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Lily awoke with the sensation that she was being watched. She opened her eyes to see four children neatly lined up on the cot beside her bed, all regarding her with great interest.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," the bigger girl said back.

Silence fell again. Lily looked at the children, and they looked at her.

*I suppose they don't know what to say. I wish I did.*

"Are you feeling better?" the blond boy asked.

"Yes, thank you."

More silence. Slowly, Lily began to smile. *I wonder if they know how adorable they are, sitting all in a row like that?*

Her smile began to be mirrored on the four small faces before her, and suddenly the entire situation struck her as unbelievably funny. She started to giggle, and so did they, and before long all five of them were helplessly laughing.

To her surprise and pleasure, her stomach didn't hurt when she finally managed to catch her breath. She assumed the potions and rest she'd been having were finally catching up to her.

"C'n I come on your bed, please?" said Meghan.

"I don't see why not."

"Me too?" said Harry.

"Of course. And you two," Lily added to the other children, deciding to cut things short. "Everybody up, come on."

The children tucked themselves around her as if they were quite used to sharing beds with adults. "You know any stories?" asked the bigger girl.

"Some. But I think you know ones I'd like to hear better. I'm not even sure I know all your names."

The children were more than happy to rectify that. In the process, Lily learned how each of them had come to live with the group they called the Pack. Meghan seemed very proud of being a born cub, and Draco's story was highly enlightening, since it meshed the account from the newspaper and the somewhat disjointed idea Lily had got from Remus' explanation earlier. Hermione, or Neenie as the others all called her, provided background about the earliest days of the Pack, and spoke with great affection about Moony.

*How lovely for Remus, to have found not only a woman who loves him, but the next best thing to a daughter as well... and a son, too, from the*

way he was defending Draco to James...

Then Harry took his turn, and Lily nearly undid all the Healer's work by jumping out of her bed, Apparating directly to wherever her sister was at the moment, and beating her about the head very hard indeed.

*A cupboard. A blasted cupboard. As if he were an unwanted present, that they could shove onto a shelf and forget...*

"Moony and Danger cursed them after they took me," Harry told her happily, diffusing her anger before it could reach a critical point. "They put a curse on them so nothing they do goes right ever again. Then they brought me home to the Den, except they didn't call it the Den yet, 'cause Padfoot named it and he wasn't here then. He didn't come until the day after I did."

"Do you want to hear about that?" Neenie asked.

"Yes, I do." Lily cautiously pushed herself up in the bed to a semi-sitting position, then to sitting upright. "I want to hear all your stories. But in a moment."

"You need something?" Draco asked.

Lily chuckled slightly. "I'm not sure if you can help me with it, but yes. I need to find a bathroom."

"It's right through there," said Neenie, pointing. "Are you all right to walk?"

"I don't know. Is anyone else home?"

Four heads nodded. "I get Dadfoot," said Meghan, climbing off the bed.

"No, sweetheart, don't bother your daddy – can you get Prongs for me instead?"

"P'ongs. Okay." Meghan scampered off.

"Do you like us to call you Mrs. Tiger?" Draco asked shyly. "Harry said you didn't like it."

Lily sighed, shaking her head. "I don't know, Draco. I suppose it's all right. Unless you can think of something better..."

"Tigermum?" Harry said hopefully.

Lily laughed aloud. "I think I do like that better. Why don't you all call me that, then. Tigermum."

"Tigermum," said Neenie experimentally.

"Tigermum," said Draco.

"Tigermum and Prongs," said Harry as Meghan led James into the room.

"Tigermum and Prongs?" James repeated.

"We've been experimenting with names. Now if you don't mind, I need some help to get to the smallest room in the house."

"All right. When you're done, I have something I want you to read." James helped her to her feet, his smile bright if a little shaky. "You'll love them."

Lily looked over her shoulder at the four children on the bed. "I already do," she said softly.

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As lunchtime approached, Lily's stomach began to growl, so she was quite happy to see the tray James carried in for her.

"It's pretty bland," he warned her, setting it down on her lap. "Just some soup and juice. But it's food, and Sirius and Remus both swear Danger's a great cook."

Lily sniffed the steam rising from the bowl appreciatively. "It certainly smells good. Are you eating?"

"Oh, I'll get something later..."

"You'll get something now. I know how you behave when you're hungry. Go and eat, I can handle myself alone for a while."

"Lily, I don't want to abandon you..."

"You'll be in the next room. That's hardly abandoning me. Shoo." Lily waved her spoon at her husband. "Go on."

He went. Lily applied herself to the food. Despite what James had claimed, it tasted delicious. She felt she could have eaten and drunk the same amount again and not had too much.

Someone knocked on the doorframe. "May I come in?" asked Danger's voice.

Of course.”

The woman stepped into the room. “You look like you could use a refill.”

“Is it that obvious?” Lily asked.

“Not terribly so, but I’ve learned a few tricks tending to hungry boys. And girls. I’ll be right back.” She collected the tray and headed for the kitchen, returning a moment later with bowl and cup both refilled. “How’s this?”

“Wonderful. Thank you.” But Lily hesitated before picking up her spoon. “Danger?”

“Yes?”

“What do you think of me?” The question sounded stilted and foolish to her even as she said it, but it was the only way she could think to open the conversation.

“I don’t quite understand.”

“Do you... dislike me?”

Danger looked worried. “Have I given you that impression somehow? I certainly hope I haven’t, it isn’t true...”

“No, no, it’s nothing you’ve done. It’s only...” Lily shook her head. “I’ve been thinking, ever since I realized what had happened to us. Ever since James told me. Five years gone, in the blink of an eye. And there’s really no way we can pick up where we left off. Harry’s not ours anymore. He’s yours. I almost feel as if the honest thing for us to do would be to leave, go away from here, make a new life somewhere else and not try to intrude on yours...”

“No.” Danger shook her head, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “Absolutely not. We’ve always known we were just a second-best for Harry, and now the best thing comes along all of a sudden, but it wants to disqualify itself? You may want to leave, but we’re not about to let you.” Her chuckle was as warm and rich as the soup. “The Pack doesn’t let go that easy.”

“But that’s part of the trouble. You’ve made this family of yourselves, this Pack, and we don’t know how to fit in. Or I don’t. James will have no trouble, he and Sirius and Remus never did, and I can’t think a few years passing will make much of a difference to them, but I don’t know if I can do the same with Letha. She’s a mother now herself, with more experience than I have. And I’ve only just met you, and the children...” Lily bunched her hand in the bedcovers. “They’re beautiful, I love them already, but I have no idea what to do with them.”

“No, you have a very good idea what to do with them. You said it yourself.” Danger stroked flat a lump in the afghan. “Love them. Love them all. To tell the truth, that’s my only worry with having you and James here, is that you might favor Harry without meaning to – and that’s perfectly understandable, he’s the only one actually related to you – but it’s not how we’ve come to do things.” She stopped, looking chagrined. “I’m so sorry, please forgive me for preaching at you...”

“No, please.” Lily stretched out an appealing hand. “I need the guidance. This is your home. Tell me how you do things.”

“All right.” Danger caught the hand in her own and squeezed it gently. “It’s just as I said. We love them all. I won’t say there aren’t divisions of sorts, the children have worked out among themselves who belongs specially to whom, but we make no distinctions among them. Did you know that one of Dumbledore’s reasons for sending Harry to your sister was so that he wouldn’t grow up a pampered little prince?”

Lily laughed aloud. “He had reason. I’m sure you’ve heard stories of how James used to behave in school.”

“Constantly.” Danger chuckled. “So we’ve done our best to make sure that Harry will grow up loved, but not spoiled. The other children help us tremendously with that.”

“I’d noticed they don’t seem to do anything alone. Or if they do, they come back to check on each other frequently. They’re always aware of one another.”

“They are, very much. And I think that has made it hard, if not impossible, for Harry to build up any inflated sense of self-importance. He thinks of himself primarily as Hermione and Draco and Meghan’s brother, not as The Boy Who Lived.” Danger boomed out the last four words in a mock-baritone, making Lily laugh. “He’s their ringleader, he orchestrates their pranks, but he doesn’t think of himself as different from them. So that would be the one thing I would ask of you. Don’t make him feel different. Don’t single him out too much.”

“Do you think it would make him unhappy if we did?”

Danger nodded. “These children only come as a package deal. Love one, love them all.”

“Then love them all it will be,” said Lily firmly.

“Including the new one? Congratulations, by the way.” Danger’s smile was tinged with sadness. “Harry will be over the moon. He thought Meghan was fascinating, and he was still almost a baby himself when she was born.”

An idea began to form in Lily’s mind. “You like children,” she said. “Don’t you?”

“I had to learn to like children,” said Danger dryly. “After I managed to get myself saddled with four of them, even with three other adults around to help. Yes.”

“Forgive me if this is prying, but do you ever wish you could have your own?”

“It’s not prying. We’ll get to know each other inside and out soon enough.” Danger’s eyes were far away. “Yes. I can’t tell Remus about it, obviously – he’d feel guilty, as if it were somehow his fault – well, it is, but it isn’t. I mean, it’s him, but it’s not anything he chose, anything he wants, he’d be rid of it if he could...”

“Do you know what I used to do for a living? What I probably will do again?”

Danger frowned. “I should. I think I do. You were – you are – a specialist Healer of some sort...”

“Midwife,” Lily supplied. “With a side specialty in potions dealing with problems relating to that facet of life. And seeing how much Remus adored Harry had me thinking along those lines already. Don’t set your heart on anything, but I did have one or two promising brews...”

She smiled at Danger’s look of dawning hope.

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 6

Severus Snape was browsing at the Apothecary when a voice caught his ear.

"...out of turtle toenails? Oh, thank you, that's excellent – no, only an ounce – yes, half an ounce of blue butterfly scales and fifteen fairy cocoons, and what I have here, and that's all."

Severus turned until he could see the woman at the counter. Her back was to him, so that all he could see was her cloak – not surprising for the beginning of December – and the ash blonde hair spilling down her back.

*A chance vocal resemblance, nothing more. I should not pry.* He returned to his browsing, thinking about the party planned for tonight, celebrating Dumbledore's return from Brussels and his appointment to the position of Supreme Mugwump. Still, the voice continued to find its way into his ears, and from there into his brain.

"Mid-June, but you know babies, they come when they want to come... I've seen quite a few, it's my business... yes, I know, I won't be doing the brewing myself, this is for a friend. No, thank you. I'll be sure to."

Severus watched the woman leave the shop. From the side, she was obviously pregnant, if only just showing. As she turned her head, their eyes met for a moment.

He jerked back and collided with the shelf of ingredients behind him, sending several jars of hog bristle extract crashing to the floor. She gasped, then whipped around and hurried out the door, vanishing in the thickly blowing snow.

Severus stared after her for a few moments, then automatically cleaned up the mess with his wand and started for the counter to pay for what he'd broken. His mind was revolving around two contradictory facts.

Lily Evans lying in her coffin over five years ago, her beautiful eyes closed forever in death.

Lily Evans standing in this shop not five minutes ago, alive and buying potions ingredients.

*And she saw me, and recognized me...*

It was not possible. It could not be. She was dead, dead in defense of her son. No spell could reawaken the dead.

But no other woman had ever had such eyes. The child Harry had them, but he was dead now himself, dead at the hands of Sirius Black, or alive but being taught to love the Dark Lord. What would Lily do if she knew that? Was it possible that a mother's love could reach so far, even from beyond the grave...?

*No. I am being foolish and sentimental. It is not possible, and neither is her presence here. I will forget her, and forget what I saw, and continue with my day.*

But his mind refused to forget her. How could another woman so perfectly counterfeit both Lily Evans' voice and face? And why would any woman do so? Perhaps she was some relation of Lily's – Severus recalled vaguely the existence of a sister – but no, Lily's sister was much older than she, and a Muggle as well. No Muggle would be buying potions ingredients.

He was still worrying at the problem when he left the Apothecary with his load and started for the Leaky Cauldron, from there to return to Hogwarts. Although he was levitating the bags, saving himself the trouble of carrying them, the footing was still uncertain, and he reached the Leaky Cauldron with relief. "Mulled mead, please," he said to Tom, sinking onto a bar stool. There was no need to hurry back to the school. He could rest for a few moments.

He looked around the room, but to his disappointment, the mysterious woman was nowhere to be seen.

"Mulled mead, Professor," said Tom, pushing it across the counter to him.

Severus cupped his hands around the drink and allowed it to warm him. "Has a blonde woman been through here today?" he asked casually. "Pregnant and just starting to show?"

"Hmm." Tom tipped his head to one side. "Well, now, one like that blew in about ten minutes ago, and ran straight for the fireplace." He gave Severus a toothless grin. "Looking for her?"

"I might be."

"I'm not allowed to say where she went, mind. Not legal. But I can tell you who else I've heard use that firecall, that's no real trouble at all..." Tom drummed his fingers lightly on the countertop.

Severus fished in his pocket, found a Galleon, and slid it across the bar.

Tom made it vanish adeptly. "She used the same call as Aletha Freeman always does – you'd know her, she's the Hogwarts/Ministry Liaison."

"Yes," Severus said, looking into his goblet. "Yes, I do know her."

*And I have been suspecting that she was not what she seemed for quite some time.*

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Meghan was tucked into her favorite corner in the front room of Mama Letha's side of the house, playing hide. She knew the normal form of the game was hide-and-seek, but no one wanted to seek, so she was playing by herself. When a grown-up came by, she would jump out and shout "Boo," and the grown-up would provide the obligatory shout of surprise.

The front door creaked. Meghan held her breath. This was her big chance. She drew her legs under her, stealthily moving into a crouch, and peered over the seat of the big chair Prongs liked to sit in, to see who had come in –

But nobody was there.

Meghan's eyes grew very round as the front door closed all by itself. She knew people could be invisible by magic, but nobody Pack would sneak into the Den invisible. This had to be a bad person, somebody who wasn't Pack, and that meant they shouldn't be here.

She took a deep breath, preparing to scream –

And the world wasn't there anymore.

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Severus exhaled in relief. He hadn't seen the child until almost too late.

*And not even a Gryffindor would leave a three-year-old home alone. Ergo, someone adult is here.*

*I must move cautiously.*

He paused only long enough to lift the girl onto the sofa and arrange her so that she appeared to be napping. He had used a mild (and therefore invisible) Stunning Spell, since the full-power form might have harmed her, and contrary to popular opinion, he did not enjoy hurting children. She would awaken in a few hours, and the only likely side effect would be a mild headache.

"Meghan?" called a man's voice from the back of the house. "Me-ghan!"

Severus moved quickly into the corner the girl had been occupying, in case the voice's owner decided to come into the room. He might be invisible, but intangible was a bit beyond even the capabilities of magic.

"Meghan Lily, where are you?"

The voice suddenly registered with Severus. *No. It cannot be. Not even he would be so audaciously stupid as to hide here...*

"Your Dadfoot's coming to find you!"

*Perhaps he would, at that.*

"And he's not alone," said another voice, also a man's. This one flirted with familiarity, but defied recognition. "He's got his helper, Mr. Prongsie..."

Severus lost the rest of this sentence in simple shock, which quickly burned into rage.

*They dare. They dare to be here – he dares to be alive –*

*The world cannot do this to me!*

It had been his great consolation, his great justification for doing as he did. He had beaten the odds and survived, finding himself on the right side at last, and his self-righteous enemies had fallen in their different ways, one a heroic martyr for his family, the other turning to the darkness from which he had escaped –

Severus pressed his teeth together so hard that his jaw muscles cramped. *There must be some way to destroy them. Or not destroy them, but cause them hardship. Unearth their perfect little lives* – for he had no doubt to whom the child on the couch belonged. He'd had no doubt from the moment he'd seen her wide gray eyes.

And then the perfect plan hit him. Simple, elegant, comprehensive. Black was still wanted, still a fugitive from justice. One anonymous tip and the Aurors would swarm this house. In a few seconds, he could be on his way to the Ministry –

A realization stopped him cold. Potter was here, alive, apparently friendly with Black. He must know what Black had done, what Black had been hoping –

*Unless – were the Potters in league with the Dark Lord as well?*

The thought was tempting. What if Black had managed to corrupt his friend, rather than Potter redeeming his? What if the act of the two great Auror-trainees was just that, an act?

*But Lily would never have stood for it. Unless she never knew.*

*Or is this Potter a fake, some farfetched attempt to clear Black's name?*

There were too many possibilities for Severus to comprehend all at once. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply for a few moments, clearing his mind and returning to the first impossible thing he had seen. Lily Evans – he refused to use her married name to himself – alive. Pregnant. Living in, or at least using, the home of Aletha Freeman.

*Who has obviously coupled at least once with the man who betrayed Lily and Potter. And then had the effrontery to name their offspring after Lily...*

Slowly, a puzzle was coming together in Severus' mind. He did his best not to look at the overall picture yet, simply placing the small pieces where they belonged.

*The plaque which was sent to me. Could it have been Black and Potter?*

*But who addressed it? Lily's handwriting I would have known...*

*And whatever is going on in this house, Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall know about it.*

That was the odd piece out in this puzzle, Severus thought, turning it over in his mind. Whatever his differences of opinion with the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress, imagining them as Dark was beyond his power. While for them to condone what seemed to be going on here...

*There is, there must be, something I do not yet know*

But it would have to wait. Footsteps in the hall alerted him to people entering. Potter and Black, it must be –

Black was ahead, Potter behind, as they entered the room. Severus took careful aim. If he could get Potter without alerting Black –

Black half-turned just as the spell struck Potter, and Severus cursed under his breath and dived out of the way of a far too carefully aimed return spell. Children's screams from overhead and a loud slam from the back of the house registered in his ears but did not interfere with his dropping Black with another Stunner. *There. Now to the Ministry, and let them sort this out.*

"Take that!" shouted a boy's voice, and a small object fell from the balcony overlooking the room, to burst with a powerful stench at Severus' feet. Two more followed the first, with shrill shouts speeding them on, and three after that, until Dungbombs were raining down all around. Severus covered his nose and mouth, coughing from the smell, and tried through streaming eyes to locate the door –

His wand flew from his hand, and the Disillusionment he'd used to mask himself ended.

"Stand still," said the voice he'd heard in Diagon Alley, the voice which had started all of this. "*Evanesco* ." The air in the room cleared, and Severus drew a grateful breath.

"Tigermum, it's Professor Grumpy," said a small voice from above him.

Severus turned to fix the speaker with a glare. *I beg your pardon?*

"What?" the dark-haired boy demanded, hoisting himself up on the balcony railing to fix disconcertingly green eyes on Severus. "Padfoot says it all the time."

"Prongs thought it was really funny too," put in the girl, tossing her curly hair.

"And Moony," said the other boy, at the sight of whom Severus' eyes widened. He couldn't be...

"That's enough," Lily said quietly. "Back to your room, all of you."

"Awww," said the three children in unison.

"Now."

Grudgingly, Harry Potter let his feet fall to the floor and started back along the hallway. The girl followed him, and Draco Malfoy took three steps away from the balcony, then darted back and blew a loud raspberry at Severus before disappearing down the hall.

"Hello, Severus," said Lily, drawing all his attention to her. Her hair was properly red again, spilling freely over her shoulders. Her face was unchanged from the last time he'd seen her –

*Dead in her coffin.*

"How?" he whispered, surprising himself – he had thought he was using his normal voice until the word emerged.

"I was never dead, Severus. Neither of us were." Lily stepped over her husband, her wand still trained on Severus' chest. "Voldemort didn't kill us. He threw us forward in time by five years."

"But your body... I saw it..."

Transfigured rubbish, we assume. We can't know for sure without opening the graves, and we were waiting until Dumbledore came back from Brussels to do anything. Any more questions?"

"Yes." *Millions*. "Why Black?" He looked at the man with loathing. "Why are you here with him, when he betrayed you?"

"He betrayed no one, Severus." Lily eyed him carefully. "If I have your promise not to try anything else rash, I think we can take this to a more casual setting. I was in an accident a month or so ago, and with that and my condition, I'm still not comfortable standing for long periods of time."

"You have my word. As long as you can answer a question."

"Prudent as ever."

Severus ignored her light sarcasm. "What did I write in my regrets note when you invited me to your wedding?"

Lily smiled. "You said that you sincerely hoped I would be happy, and that I was more than James, or any man, deserved."

Severus nodded, a strange feeling creeping onto his face. It was as if – no, not as if. He was.

"I see you haven't forgotten how to smile," Lily said, her own widening. "It was one of the things I always liked about you."

*One of the things? There were multiple things you liked about me?* "I'm flattered," he said in his driest tone. "Though I don't suggest telling your husband."

"Don't worry about James. He knows what I think of you, and I know what he thinks of you, and neither of us has ever managed to convince the other at all." One hand on her hip, she beckoned him to follow her. "Though I don't think breaking into Aletha's house and Stunning him and Sirius will raise his opinion of you any."

Severus stepped carefully over the two men, resisting the urge to kick them. "May I inquire about the children?" he asked as he entered the kitchen.

"You probably mean Draco."

"Yes. Harry I can understand, Freeman's daughter likewise – especially if her eyes are a true indication of her parentage – and I am sure there is a perfectly good explanation for the other girl..."

"Remus' wife's sister."

"Lupin as well?" Severus pulled out a chair for Lily, then sat down himself. "I suppose I should have known. But none of that explains the presence of Lucius Malfoy's son."

"Short form, they were kidnapped by Lucius and released by Narcissa, with the proviso that they take Draco with them and bring him up with the other children. He's a darling, Severus. If it weren't for his face, you'd never guess who his father was. Oh, and watch me forget my manners. Something to drink?"

"Just water, thank you, and I can get it myself if you will tell me where the glasses are kept."

"To the left of the sink, second shelf – yes, there."

Severus filled a glass at the tap, watching Lily from the corner of his eye. There was no good way to broach the subject he was most interested in... or was there?

"Do you happen to know exactly why Narcissa asked that..." He waved his hand vaguely around the house. "...these people take her son?"

"Because she'd had enough of him being near his father. She wanted him to have choices about his life, not to be trapped on a one-way carpet to Dark magic."

"But to entrust him to Sirius Black..."

"Ah, that's why you're here, isn't it?"

"No." Severus examined his water as if it were a first year's potion. "I came... because of you."

"Me?" Lily's voice changed subtly. "Severus, I hope you're not getting ideas – we've missed some years, but James and I are still very much together..."

"No." He heard his voice come out harsh, and repeated the word more gently. "No. I merely wanted to know if the woman I had seen was you. To know if by some impossibility, some miracle, you lived. I will interfere in your life no more than I did before." *Even seeing you at a distance is seeing you. Seeing you alive, and happy, even with him...*

He looked up. "Are you familiar with the story of the lady and the tiger?"

"I don't know... wait, yes. The princess whose lover was condemned to the trial in the arena." Green eyes lit with understanding. "So you're saying..."

"For me, the question was answered the day you died. Or seemed to die. I would have chosen the lady. The gentleman, in your case." Severus

looked back down at the tabletop. "No man who truly loves would choose otherwise."

A small hand laid itself on top of his, still clenched around his water glass. "Then I know you are my true friend," Lily said. "And I value my friends higher than I value anything."

"Thank you."

A moment of silence ensued, stretched, threatened to become overpowering –

"I ought to explain about Sirius," Lily said, taking her hand away.

Severus met her eyes and smiled wryly. "Yes, this I simply must hear. What has happened to restore your trust in him? Are you unaware of what he did?"

"No, you're unaware of what he didn't do. And James and I have been kicking ourselves ever since we got here. We thought we were making everyone safer, and in fact we played directly into Voldemort's hands..."

Severus suppressed a shudder and kept listening.

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Some time later, a chiming noise rang out through the house. "That's the Floo," Lily said. "They have it charmed to alert them if someone firecalls or comes in..."

"Hello?" called the voice of Albus Dumbledore.

"Perhaps I should meet him," Severus said.

Lily frowned. "I don't know. He doesn't expect to see you here."

"He doesn't expect to see you at all."

"Point taken." Lily gestured gracefully to the doorway. "To your left."

Severus stepped into the hallway just in time to intercept Dumbledore. "Headmaster," he said, suddenly very aware of the two Stunned men lying behind him in the front room.

Dumbledore did not quite jump, but his eyes widened, taking in the details of the scene. "Severus. I must confess I was not expecting you."

"Were you expecting Sirius Black?"

"To be quite honest, yes."

"I acted without knowing the circumstances." Severus nodded over his shoulder. "He is unhurt."

"And do you now know the circumstances?"

"I believe that I do. Perhaps more fully than you..."

"Professor Dumbledore!" shouted three small voices, and a small whirlwind passed by Severus, coalescing into three child shapes in front of Dumbledore, who smiled and bent down to listen to what the children were saying.

"–my mum and dad, they're here–"

"–we're going to have a new cub in the Pack–"

"–we threw Dungbombs at Professor Grumpy–"

"Just a moment," said Dumbledore, raising a hand. "One at a time. Draco, you first."

"We threw Dungbombs at Professor Grumpy!" said the blond boy, bouncing up and down. "And we're not even in trouble!"

"Not yet," Severus heard Lily murmur from the kitchen.

"I doubt your parents would like you to use such a name for Professor Snape," said Dumbledore, his tone serious but the twinkle in his eyes going full-force. "It is very impolite."

"Oh." Draco turned and looked up at Severus. "Sorry."

"Sorry," echoed the other children.

"Neenie, what were you saying?" Dumbledore asked.

"There's going to be a new cub in the Pack! Tigermum's pregnant, and this time she hopes it's a little girl with her hair and Prongs' eyes!"

Dumbledore became very still. Severus knew this meant either great shock or very deep thought, possibly both. "Repeat those names?" he said quietly.

"Tigermum and Prongs," said the little girl. "Harry's mum and dad."

"They're alive, Professor!" Harry burst out. "They weren't ever really dead, Voldemort didn't kill them, he just pushed them forward in time, they're alive, and they're here! Tigermum's in the kitchen right now!"

Like a man in a dream, Dumbledore rose and started for the kitchen door. Severus stepped out of his way, then looked at the children, who seemed likely to follow. He cleared his throat, getting their attention. "Perhaps you should take yourselves elsewhere," he suggested.

Three sets of skeptical eyes bored into his forehead.

Severus dredged up a memory of his own childhood, and one of his mother's tactics. "Please?"

The girl – Neenie, Hermione, whatever her name was – looked up the hall to the front room. "Will you wake up Padfoot and Prongs?" she asked.

"I doubt they would take kindly to it."

"You can stand in here and do the spell," said Harry. "We'll keep them busy so they don't see you."

"We'll tell them we took one of their wands to try it," Draco said.

Severus felt another smile coming to his face. *Are they... I believe they are... yes, they are covering for me. Me, of all people...*

"Sorry about the Dungbombs," Draco added. "We were sort of scared."

"How'd you get invisible?" Neenie wanted to know. "Was it Disillusionment, or a potion, or do you have an Invisibility Cloak?"

"Course he doesn't," said Harry scornfully. "It has to've been a spell or a potion, you saw Tigermum cancel it. If it was a Cloak, she'd've had to Summon it."

"Well, how do you know she didn't?"

"Because we would have seen it flying if she did?"

"Not if it was *invisible*."

"The Cloaks aren't invisible when they're not on a person," Draco interjected smoothly, sliding between the other children and looking at Severus. "Professor?"

"I was using a Disillusionment Charm," Snape admitted, impressed in spite of himself. "Now, do you want... *Padfoot* and *Prongs* awakened or not?"

"Yes, please," said Neenie, running into the front room. Both boys nodded before following her.

Severus cast two careful *Ennervate* s, then retreated into the back room, whose two main features were a piano and a fireplace.

*I should go. I am neither useful nor ornamental here.*

But something about the house seemed friendly, welcoming. It was not a feeling Severus was used to. His quarters at Hogwarts were comfortable to him, but very few other places were. In fact, he had trouble thinking of anywhere, other than Hogwarts, where he had ever felt at home.

*I have no reason to feel at home here. The people who live here are my enemies, rivals from of old. They have no reason to offer me hospitality, nor should I accept it. I should be on my way.*

And yet... and yet...

The children of the house bore no malice toward him. What they had done, they had been taught to do. And when that was over, they had treated him as Severus suspected they treated any adult they could trust. The reasons behind Aletha Freeman's companions on her frequent visits to Hogwarts were becoming clear, as were vague smiles on Dumbledore's face after holidays, guffaws from Hagrid at post time in the morning, and a piece of childish artwork he had once seen on Minerva McGonagall's desk and disregarded as a present from a nephew or niece.

*And they are intelligent, each in his or her own way. The girl is obviously very knowledgeable – if she knows this much at the age of six, what will she be like when she arrives at Hogwarts? Harry has a quick eye, and a quick mind to match. And Draco, as strange as it seems for the son of Lucius Malfoy, obviously dislikes fighting, and has gained skill in preventing it...*

*And even Black's daughter noticed my entrance very quickly, and might have alerted everyone sooner if I had not seen her.*

But he still had no right here. No right to be in this house.

*This house has no right to exist*, insisted one part of his mind, the part that had not yet fully assimilated Lily's story, or rather the part that did not want to assimilate it. His earlier thoughts had been closer to the truth than he had known. *Black has no right to happiness...*

*Then how much less of a right have you? sneered another portion of his mind. Black was a bully and a fool, but his crimes pale next to yours, now that you know who truly betrayed the Potters. You liked that, didn't you? You liked that James Potter's best friend handed him over to death. It took some of the burden off you, for telling the Dark Lord that prophecy...*

He rose and crossed swiftly to the fireplace, lit a fire with a flick of his wand, and threw in a pinch of Floo Powder from the vase on the mantelpiece. "Severus Snape's office, Hogwarts," he said quietly, and stepped into the green flames.

The last thing he heard as he disappeared from the house was a child's delighted laughter from the hallway.

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"So a grand reappearance, do you think?" said James, holding onto Harry's knees as the boy dangled head-down from his father's lap. "Walk into the Ministry and demand to be recognized?"

"Something like this must have happened before," Lily put in. "Someone missing for many years, who was declared dead, perhaps. How are these things handled?"

"The fact that Harry was your only heir will make your affairs much simpler," said Dumbledore, "especially because his money has not, to my knowledge, been touched in these five years."

"Why bother?" Sirius said. "More fun spending mine, especially when Mum was still alive. I'm sure she had right royal fits over my daring to take money from the sacred Black family vault, but it was my signature on the forms, so the goblins didn't care."

"As they did not care when you signed for gold from your vault, I assume?" Dumbledore asked James and Lily.

"We haven't been bothered," said James, flipping Harry upright and setting him on his feet. "So I assume it's all right."

"Things seem easier for people coming back from the dead in the magical world," Danger observed, leaning out of the way of Draco as he chased Neenie through the room. Harry joined in the chase gleefully. "In the Muggle world, your access to the account would have been closed down long ago, and you'd have to go through probably twenty levels of paperwork before you could prove who you are."

"While in the magical world, there are only nineteen levels of paperwork to go through," Dumbledore quipped. "But things will be easier when the graves are opened and the bodies revealed to be false. Do you plan to continue living here for the near future?"

"It's not as if we have anywhere else to go," Lily said sadly. "Our house in Godric's Hollow is ruined. And your parents' house was sold, wasn't it, James?"

James nodded. "Dad always said I could live there if I wanted, but I didn't want to. Too far out from everything, too big and drafty..."

*Too many memories,* went unsaid.

"But we'll get out from underfoot as soon as we have things under control," James finished.

"And what if we like having you underfoot?" Aletha said. "Or perhaps not underfoot, but nearby?"

"Well, then, I suppose we'll just all have to move." James leaned back in his chair. "Doubt we could find a house big enough for all of us..."

"Are you sure?" Remus said, intercepting Draco as he ran through again. "Hold on a second, fox, there's something on your shirt."

"It's called a button."

"I mean beside it." Remus tapped the stain with his wand. "There. Go on."

Draco rolled his eyes at parental concerns and nearly ran Meghan over in the doorway. "Sorry, Pearl," he said, steadying her. "Want a piggyback?"

"Yeah! Piggyback!" Meghan clambered eagerly onto Draco's back. "Giddyup, horsy! Go, go, faster, faster!"

The adults all broke into laughter as Draco galloped out of sight. "What were we talking about again?" said Sirius when they had settled down.

"Housing," said Aletha. "Remus was telling James not to be sure about something... about a house big enough for all of us? Not going to find one around here."

"I know that look," said Danger, surveying Remus. "You have something up your sleeve, and we're all going to be angry with ourselves for not thinking of it, aren't we?"

"Perhaps." Remus allowed himself a small smile at the exasperated look Sirius and James shared. "I suppose in some ways it might be unethical, but we are the legal guardians of the house's owner, and it's hardly an improper use of the house to live in it."

Lily's eyes widened, and she laughed aloud. "You cannot possibly mean what I think you mean," she said.

"No, I think I can." Remus looked smug. "Cleaning and redecorating may take a while, but I'm sure we'll manage."

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 7

James slumped over the table, fighting the urge to squirm on the wooden chair. He'd worn robes for most of his life, but never before today had he gone commando, and the coarse fabric was chafing him in places he didn't want to think about.

*Couldn't we just have stayed hidden?* he wondered. *It seemed to be working for Padfoot and Moony...*

But as the episode with Malfoy showed, the safety of the Pack was precarious. Better to come out into the public eye, live with their nine-days'-wonder status, and then get back to life when it was over.

*Though they are suspicious little twits around here. Trying to start the New Year off properly, I suppose.* The officials in charge of determining James and Lily's real identities had insisted they surrender all their possessions, including their clothes, to be examined while they themselves were questioned. James had had to do some fast talking so they'd let him keep his glasses.

*And this is with Dumbledore's help behind the scenes. I don't even want to think about what they'd be doing to us otherwise.*

He hadn't seen Lily since she'd waved at him over her shoulder, her hair vivid against the off-white robe, as they led her away down a corridor. He wondered if her day had been like his, confined in a small room with nothing to look at and nothing to do except listen to nasal-voiced bureaucrats ask skeptical questions.

*When this is over, I'm taking her out to a nice restaurant, and then we're going home, locking everyone out of our bedroom, and sleeping for twelve hours... eventually.*

A discreet knock at the door startled him out of his thoughts. "Come in!"

A brunette witch in lime-green Healer's robes stepped through the door, a warm smile lighting her face. "Hello, James," she said.

"Andy!" James got to his feet quickly to take her hand. "How are you?"

"Fine, thank you. It's good to see you as yourself. How have they been treating you?"

"I've had better," James admitted, flushing a little as he noticed where Andy was looking.

"I can imagine. I have some good news for you – as long as my examination checks you out, you and Lily will both be officially alive and free to go."

James raised his hands towards the ceiling in celebration. "Finally!"

"Don't be too hard on them," Andy said, taking out her wand. "It's not every day that people come back from the dead. Especially not famous people."

"That I'm still having trouble with. The famous part." James held still as Andy's wand tip traced over his body. "I always dreamed about being famous, but I thought it would be for something amazing I did. Not because of Harry."

"Are you jealous?" Andy asked, a hint of laughter in her voice.

"Not really. But I think I'd rather skip the fame and have those five years back." James stared at the wall. "I wake up sometimes in the night, wondering if there was anything else I could have done, anything I could have changed, to make it come out differently. I know that sounds terrible, like I'm not grateful for what I have, and I am. I am grateful. But I still wish..."

"You wish for the moon, just like all human beings always have." Andy's tone was matter-of-fact. "Well, for being dead five years – or suspended in time, what have you – you're surprisingly healthy. Lily as well, and the baby's developing normally."

"Good. If he'd done anything to her... to either of them..." James wasn't surprised to hear his voice falling into a growl.

"I know," Andy said quietly, taking a potion out of her bag. "I feel the same way about Ted and Dora. Drink this for me? It doesn't taste too horrible."

James looked at the red-brown mixture dubiously, but gulped it down, then went into a fit of coughing. "Not... bad," he wheezed after a moment. "Has a kick... sort of like firewhiskey..."

"That's one of the ingredients, actually." Andy swirled her wand around his head twice, then tapped him with it.

James caught his breath and swallowed the last of the aftertaste with a grimace. "What're the others?"

"You don't want to know." Andy flicked her wand, dismissing the image she'd been looking at, and smiled. "James Potter, you are officially alive. Allow me to be the first to officially congratulate you."

She held out her hand again, and James shook it. "Thanks," he said. "It's good to be back."

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"Why're we cleaning out closets and under beds?" Neenie asked, dumping an armload of books into a box.

"Because we might be moving," Danger said patiently, straightening the books. "This house was all right for a Pack of just eight, but now we have ten, and next summer we'll have eleven, and maybe more. We'd be too crowded if we stayed here."

"Where're we moving to?" Harry asked from the top shelf in the closet, which he was cleaning off by the simple expedient of throwing everything down onto the beds.

"We'll talk about that later."

"Why not now?"

"Because I say not now."

Harry jumped down himself, just missing a pile of artwork. "But I want to know!"

"Me too!" added Neenie.

Danger crossed her arms. "You get nothing for making a fuss," she said firmly. "You can find out at the same time everyone else does, or you can let Draco and Meghan find out early and you two have to wait."

Neenie pouted. "Not fair."

"No, it isn't. More books, please."

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Remus found Draco in the den room, lying on the floor, doodling on a pad. "Hello, fox," he said. "Do you want to hear a story?"

Draco was on the couch looking expectant within seconds. Remus smiled and sat down beside him. "That looks like a yes to me." He slid an arm around Draco, and the little boy snuggled close to him. "This will be like a den-night story, but different. Den-night stories are just about the past. This is about the past, and the present, and what we hope for the future. Once upon a time there was a little boy named Draco who lived in a bad place."

"The manor."

"That's right, the manor. And one day, everything changed for him. His mother gave him to another family, a family who loved him."

"Pack," Draco corrected.

"You're quite right. A Pack who loved him. And the Pack took that little boy away from the manor, and promised him that he would never have to go back again. But one day, things changed for the Pack. No one left them, or was taken away," Remus said quickly, feeling Draco begin to stiffen beside him. "The opposite – they got more people to care about."

Draco relaxed. "Prongs and Tigermum, and the baby."

"That's right. But now that the Pack had so many people in it, they needed a bigger place to live. A bigger Den. So they started to think. Where could they find a big house to make into a Den?"

Draco's eyes grew very big as he put the clues together. "Will the manor be our new Den?" he blurted.

"Only if you say it can be," Remus told his Pack-son. "Did you know it belonged to you now?"

Draco shook his head. "What about him?" he asked timidly. "Lucius?"

"He's nothing to do with it," Remus said firmly. "He hasn't been there since the night we brought you home. He has no right to be there anymore. The manor belongs to you, and you can do what you like with it."

Draco looked up at him. "Anything I like?"

"Within reason," Remus said quickly. "But yes. If you say no, if you don't want us to make the manor our new Den, then we won't. But if you say yes, we will take that manor and we will clean it up and make it just as nice as this Den here. You and Harry and Neenie and Meghan can pick any room you like to be yours. And if I remember right, there's a big open hall with plenty of space for indoor flying..."

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Aletha wobbled out of the fireplace, grabbed for the handgrip, missed, and would have fallen had Lily not held out a quick hand. "Letha, are you all right?"

"Fine." Aletha shut her eyes and concentrated on breathing. "I'm fine. I was just in wait mode for a little too long. Did you just get in?"

"Yes, we must have shunted you off, I'm so sorry." Lily guided Aletha to a chair. "Well. We are now officially alive, Harry's legal guardians once again, and Sirius has his good name restored."

"What there is of it," James said from across the room.

"He does stupid things, not evil ones," Aletha said, opening her eyes. "Even sending Snape to the Whomping Willow was stupid, but not evil. He claims he was half-drunk when he did that."

"More than likely." James had his feet up on the couch. "We spent most of sixth and seventh years inside a bottle. You remember."

"Don't I just," said Lily. "I think the only nights you were sober were the ones we spent together, because I told you I wouldn't go out with a sot."

"Hey, I can't help it if I learn best with a little booze in me. Speaking of which, where do you keep it?"

"Second cabinet to the left of the refrigerator in Remus and Danger's kitchen. Tap your wand against the back and say, '*In vino veritas.*'"

James disappeared through the wall.

"Bring two glasses," Aletha called after him.

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Sirius bounded through Aletha's front room, barking and scattering cubs every which way, then screeched to a halt as something on the bookshelf caught his eye. Changing back to human, he stood up, casually arching his back and peering towards the shelf out of the corner of his eye.

"Padfoot, what're you looking at?" Neenie asked, running back into the room from the hall.

Sirius put a finger to his lips, then beckoned Neenie closer. "It's a secret," he whispered. "But I'll tell you if you'll run to the kitchen and get me a jar with a lid."

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The Pack enjoyed a rousing game of monkey in the middle that night.

Rita Skeeter arrived at St. Mungo's Hospital the next morning with a severe case of motion sickness.

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James Scriven, a staff reporter for the *Daily Prophet*, got the first interviews with the resurrected Potters and the exonerated Sirius Black by the simple means of owling them and asking politely if he might interview them. His questions were polite and direct, and everyone was pleased with the results.

Draco's adoption contract was found to be magically binding, and thus legally valid, and it was confirmed that he was the current legal owner of Malfoy Manor. On the 10th of January, he sought out Remus. "Will the whole Pack stay together if we change our Den?" he asked, swinging his legs under the kitchen chair he was perched on.

"That's our plan for right now, fox. We might do something different in a few years, when you and Harry and Neenie are off to Hogwarts. But for the moment, we're happy together."

"What about you and Prongs?"

Remus sighed internally. *Trust Draco to notice we're not entirely easy around each other yet...* "We're happy too, Draco. It's just that I've changed a lot since Prongs last knew me. He's not used to the new me yet. It would be like if you went to sleep when Meghan was a little baby, the way she was when you first came, and when you woke up she was the young lady she is now."

"How were you different?"

Remus sat down beside Draco. "We had something very like a Pack when we were at Hogwarts," he said. "We didn't call it that, but that's what it was, and Prongs was our alpha. He was always the leader, in everything we did, so it's hard for him to see me as a leader now."

"Does he still want to be the alpha?"

Remus sighed. "Truthfully, fox, I don't know."

"Nor do I," said James from the door.

Draco yipped in surprise. Remus put a hand on the boy's shoulder to calm him. "How long have you been standing there?" he asked without looking at James.

"Long enough."

Draco pushed back from the table and ran out of the kitchen. James watched him go, then came in and took Draco's chair. "Have I been trying to take over?" he asked, leaning down and craning his neck outrageously until he was looking Remus in the eye. "Come on, Moony, fess up. I've been trying to be the big boss again, haven't I?"

"Sometimes," Remus admitted, sitting up. "Prongs, it's great to have you back, but..."

"But I'm still twenty-two, and you're not." James planted his elbows on the table and set his chin in his hands. "Lily and I had this conversation already, or one enough like it to make no difference. You went and grew up on me, Remus. You used to be all about the background, about not making waves, and now you're the head of the family, and you're good at it. What changed?"

Remus rubbed his wedding ring. "I was always afraid in school," he said instead of answering. "Afraid that you'd stop being my friend if I told you what I really thought of some of the things you did. You and Sirius and Peter were the first friends I'd ever had. I couldn't risk losing you. So I kept my mouth shut."

James stared at him. "I never knew that."

"I know. It doesn't matter now." Mentally, Remus leaned back into the other mind within his own, and felt a warm pulse answer his touch. "Now I have someone who I know will care about me, no matter what happens. I don't want to lose my friends, but now I can take that risk, because I know Danger will still be there for me." He smiled suddenly. "Besides, I wasn't about to let Sirius lead. Can you imagine?"

"I don't even want to." James shook his head. "Merlin, Moony, I'm sorry you thought that about me. I wouldn't have, you know. I don't walk out on my friends."

"I know that. I knew it then, rationally. But it wasn't the sort of thing it's easy to be rational about." Remus stretched out his left hand and regarded it. "I'm the alpha because I was the best man for the job available at the time. If you're the best for the job now, I'll give it to you."

*There.* It had hurt to say, and Remus wasn't even entirely sure he was sincere, but he had to make the offer.

"What are you, nuts?" James reached over and slapped him on the arm. "I took a five-year nap, remember? I'm more than a little behind the times, and there's a lot to catch up on. Ask me again in a year, maybe I'll say something different, but not today, thanks. It's all yours."

Remus exhaled silently, then looked up at his friend. "Lily told you what to say, didn't she?"

James scowled. "Why does everyone assume Lily tells me everything?"

"Because she does?"

James made a rude suggestion.

"You first," Remus said, and leapt out of his chair as James tried to tackle him.

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"It's official," Aletha announced to the cubs on 13 January. "As soon as Tigermum's potion is done, we're moving."

"Why do we have to wait for that?" asked Harry.

"Because now that she's started it, she can't move it, or it will be no good."

"When it be done?" Meghan asked.

"The middle of February. Which will probably not even be enough time for us to pack up all our things and get ready to go."

"But where are we going?" Hermione wanted to know. "Where are we moving to?"

Aletha nodded to Draco, who lifted his head proudly. "We're going to the manor," he said. "We're going to clean it out and turn it into a good place to be our new Den. And go flying in the house."

Harry grinned. "I like flying in the house."

"I know you do," said Aletha. "At the manor, you'll be able to do it without smashing into the walls."

"I only did that once!"

"Twice," said Hermione.

"One and a half. That little one on the stairs doesn't count all the way."

"Yes, it does," said Draco. "You ran into the wall. How much doesn't matter."

Aletha chuckled to herself and slipped away as the cubs continued to bicker.

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The Pack took out an advert in the *Daily Prophet* and got several replies, eventually selling the Den to an older couple whose son had just married a Muggle woman. "She's still a little uneasy with magic, but she doesn't want him to know about it," the older witch told Aletha and Lily. "This way, I'm nearby when she needs me, but I'm not breathing down her neck if she wants to give it a go on her own."

"Not to mention, you'll be close by when grandchildren start coming," said Lily.

The witch smiled. "Don't think I haven't thought of that."

Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror Office since Alastor Moody's recent retirement, sent James and Sirius both an invitation to return. Sirius sent back his polite regrets. James asked when he could retake his qualifying tests.

And on the 15th of February, the day after Sirius' birthday, Lily ceremoniously presented Remus with a goblet half full of thick, grey potion. "It won't kill you or make you horrendously sick," she said. "More than that, I can't promise."

Remus took a drink and nearly gagged. "No, it just tastes like it will," he said. "What did you use in here, Sirius' toenail clippings?"

"All right, now *I'm* going to be sick," said Danger. "Thank you for that marvelous image."

Remus made a face at her and took another drink.

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The augmented Pack took possession of their new Den on 20 February, a cold and overcast Saturday. Draco stared up at the ceiling as he walked into the main hall. "It's not as big as I remember," he said.

"You're bigger than you were when you were here last," Lily told him, bending a little awkwardly to kiss the top of his head. "Go on, Harry's beating you."

Draco raced away, headed for the top of the stairs, where Harry was just pushing off on the banister, whooping aloud. The noise echoed around the hall, along with Hermione's laughter and Meghan's loud insistence that she go next, and made the place suddenly alive.

Sirius looked around. "Not too bad," he said. "Reminds me a little of Grimmauld Place. Do all pureblood families decorate alike?"

"Maybe the Slytherin-devoted ones do," James said, starting to unload his pockets, which were full of shrunken boxes. "But we can do what we like with the place now."

Lily laughed. "What would Lucius Malfoy say if he could see us now? Three Muggleborns, a half-blood werewolf, and two blood traitors in his precious house."

"Four Muggleborns," Danger corrected, pointing at Neenie as the girl dropped neatly on her feet at the end of the banister. "And three blood traitors, and wouldn't he be livid to see the third one?"

"Oh, yes," said Aletha, waving her wand at the floor near the bottom of the banister to soften it some. "And a pair of half-blood brats, no real breeding at all, should never have been born."

"Three half-blood brats," Lily corrected in her turn, patting her belly. "And possibly more to come."

"So we hope," said Remus.

"So we do," said Aletha, wiggling her eyebrows at Sirius.

"We do? I mean, we do. Of course we do."

"Of course we do," said Danger, spreading her arms wide and spinning in a circle. "The more, the merrier, in our big beautiful new Den!"

"Well, big and new I'll give you," said James. "Beautiful... not yet. The snakes have got to go, for one thing. And all the black and green."

"We're not redoing the whole place in red and gold lions," Lily warned.

"Of course not, but a couple here and there..." James looked around. "Say, I only see Neenie and Meghan."

"Great," said Sirius, putting down a re-enlarged box with a thump. "Five minutes in the house, and they're lost."

"They not lost," Meghan said, holding tightly to the banister as she descended. "They go to find something."

"What did they go to find, Pearl?" Aletha asked.

Draco dashed into view at the top of the staircase, his hands up in a catching position. Something small flew at him, and he caught it and threw it to Hermione, who squealed happily. "Moony, catch!" she cried.

Remus snagged the small item she tossed over the balcony to him and looked at it. Four little socks all knotted together, dusty enough to make his eyes water. He smiled and held it up for the other adults to see.

"We should have known we'd come back," he said. "If only to get these."

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The redecoration of the Manor Den (as it was soon christened) took months, even with every adult of the Pack working on it. James' spare time was limited, since he'd taken his tests at the beginning of March and was back on the force three days later; Sirius had been hit by a storm of creativity and was holed up with his typewriter seven hours a day; Aletha still had her work to do, though she took full advantage of her flexible

schedule; Lily was starting to have a hard time staying on her feet for long periods; and Danger fell in love with the kitchen and its magically adjustable equipment, able to be used by either humans or house-elves.

"And I get left holding the baby," Remus sighed one day in April, waving his wand to remove the chipping green paint from the wall of one room. "As usual."

His mind wandered. *Holding the baby. I remember holding Meghan. God, she was so cute, so tiny, so helpless. And Harry was just the same. Sirius fell in love the instant he saw them, both of them, you could see it in his eyes. Probably see it in my eyes too.*

*Draco was born in this house. Maybe we could find Narcissa's old room, that's probably where it happened, but it doesn't really matter. Where was Hermione born? Remus touched Danger's memories gently. That's right, in Scotland. Her mum refused to stay home from the family vacation, even though she was out to here. Wouldn't you knowit, she went into labor on a ferryboat, and the captain had to turn around to get her to hospital...*

*I wish I could have held them too, but it doesn't matter. They're just as much mine now*

*And maybe someday soon I'll be holding a baby of my own. A daughter, or a son, of mine and of Danger's.*

He had always kept it quiet that he wished he could have children of his own. He hated people who whinged endlessly about things that couldn't be changed and refused to become one; thus, none of the other Marauders, nor Lily or Aletha, had ever known that what Remus hated most about his lycanthropy was not the physical pain it caused him, nor his outcast status, but the fact that he would never be a father.

*Biological father, that is. I seem to have the instincts for it, if I say so myself... well, James said so himself, and he's not one to praise where praise isn't due. I love the cubs all dearly, there's nothing wrong with them, but I can't help wishing...*

*And now, nowthere's a chance. Just a chance, but a real chance.*

He lost himself in imagining the baby that Lily's grey potion, which he'd taken two more doses of, might make possible. A little girl, he decided, a daughter, born with a head full of hair which would frizz out and turn brown as it dried, and eyes which would never change from their baby blue, except maybe to deepen and become more intelligent...

*Intelligent, Merlin, she won't be able to help it, not with Danger for a mother and me for a father. And Hermione and Draco for big sister and brother, come to that. And she'll be into mischief as soon as she can crawl... count on Harry and James and Meghan and Sirius to help her with that... and Aletha and Lily will teach her howto manage forty things at once... she'll be running the house before she's two, won't she? Have us all trained, to hop when she says frog...*

"Frog," said a voice behind him.

Remus couldn't help it. He hopped.

Danger came into the room, chuckling. "I didn't know that would actually work."

"You're spying on my thoughts," Remus accused half-heartedly.

"You're thinking so loud I can hear you halfway across the house," Danger shot back. "And it's not a small house."

"No, it really isn't." Remus swept the paint shavings into a pile with his wand. "We have a wing for each of us, and the cubs have one all to themselves... we could live in this place for years and never run into each other."

"I think it was built that way on purpose," Danger said thoughtfully. "So that the man of the house, the lady, the heir, and the spare could all have their private space."

"Heir and a spare." Remus scoffed. "The Blacks went that route, and look what happened to them."

"Their heir ran off, and their spare got himself killed. I like our way much better." Danger sneezed.

"What's our way?" Remus asked, handing her a tissue.

Danger blew her nose. "Get together a load of children with practically no relationship to one another, give them a reason to become close, then loose them on the world and watch the fireworks."

"You know, speaking of the world, now that we're not hiding any more, we might want to think about getting them some playmates other than themselves," Remus said, Vanishing the shavings. "We can ask Dumbledore to give us some of the names for their future yearmates. None of the snobby purebloods, and there's no way we can unleash them on a Muggle household, but there have to be some half-bloods out there, or some purebloods who don't make such a big deal of it."

"We can only hope." Danger blotted her eyes. "And what I actually came in here to tell you, since you were thinking so loud that you couldn't hear me, is that dinner is ready."

"Hmm, dinner." Remus put his wand away. "I think I'll just have the cook." He swept Danger into his arms and nibbled lightly on her neck. "Delicious."

"Eeewwww," moaned a four-part chorus, from down the hall.

Remus lifted his head and sighed. "I thought they'd stop doing that once they had enough room that they didn't have to watch us anymore."

"No, you've missed the point." Danger nestled into Remus' arms.

"Enlighten me."

"It's fun to spy on us and make noises, you see. We do things when they make noises. That way, they can laugh at us."

"So you're saying we should ignore them."

"Basically."

Remus smiled. "I can do that."

The cubs decided after a few moments that dinner took precedence over watching Moony and Danger snog.

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A rare quiet moment fell during the meal, and everyone looked at everyone else, until Sirius broke the silence with a sigh. "This is almost too good," he said. "I keep wondering what's going to go wrong."

"Oh, don't!" Danger threw a small piece of roll at him, prompting a similar barrage from James and the cubs. "Don't, Sirius, please! Don't tempt fate like that!"

"I'm not tempting fate," Sirius protested, holding up a hand to shield himself from bread-balls. "It's just that, I feel like we're missing something. Something that should have happened and didn't, something we ought to be able to figure out..."

xXxXx

Over a ruined and abandoned house in Godric's Hollow, something happened.

The air rippled and wavered, making patterns that would have made a watcher ill, if anyone had been there to watch. A hole opened in the middle of it, and a hand emerged, a long-fingered hand that waved feebly about for a moment before being sucked back in as the hole closed.

On some occasions, fate needs no temptation.

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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 8

Distant shrieks awakened Lily from her nap. She sighed and prepared to sit up, a larger undertaking these days than it used to be. "They say children are gifts," she muttered as she swung her legs off the couch. "Too bad you can't give them back."

The shrieking stopped before she was more than halfway upright.

With a sigh of relief, Lily sank back to the couch. Danger must have stopped the fight, for it was her voice that echoed down the hall now, chiding and soothing within the same breath.

*The Pack. Such a little word for such a marvelous invention – a family that's large enough to let everyone do some of what they want, and still have people left over to take care of all the little things...*

Two small thumps somewhere south of her navel made her laugh. "You're awake too, are you, little thing?" she said to her belly. "Not so much longer now, little one. About six weeks, or maybe a bit more."

Someone tapped at the door to the living room.

"Come in," Lily called.

The door opened a crack, and Draco squeezed himself around it. "Can I be in here a little while?" he asked. "Meghan's mad at me."

"Yes, you can stay. Why is Meghan mad at you?"

Draco shrugged one shoulder and appropriated the end of Lily's couch. Playfully, Lily slid her feet around him and squeezed. A half-chuckle rewarded her.

"Are you feeling all right, Draco?" she asked, pulling herself a little higher so that she could see him over what used to be her stomach. "Still having dreams?"

The other shoulder shrugged this time. "Sometimes. Not as much anymore."

"Yes, you used to be in someone's bed every other night." She'd been flattered, but also obliquely annoyed, the first time one of the cubs (Neenie, as it happened) decided that Prongs and Tigermum's bed was just as good to climb into after a nightmare as any other. Still, it wasn't as if anything had been interrupted, and it really wasn't that different from denning.

*And wasn't that an interesting concept to get used to. A slumber party for the whole family. A time to be who you are, and be with the people who made you that way...*

But on ordinary nights, she still preferred waking up with only James in the bed beside her.

"I still remember things," Draco volunteered. "Sometimes when I walk down a hall, 'specially if it's dark. Or if it's a part that hasn't been changed yet. Or if I'm hiding."

*Ah, I think I may have part of it.* "Were you hiding from Meghan?"

"Sort of."

"Were you hiding to scare Meghan?"

Draco grimaced. "Yeah."

"And you scared yourself instead."

A nod and a fleeting smile. "Scared her too."

"What happened?" Lily turned herself so that she was sitting on the couch more normally, giving Draco some more room, which he immediately disposed of by flopping full-length along the cushions. She hid a smile. *Funny boy.*

"I hid in the closet, and it smelled weird," Draco said, squirming so that he was looking up into Lily's eyes. "It made me think of when I used to hide there from *him*. I yelled and jumped out, and Meghan was there, and she yelled too and got mad at me, and I got mad back at her." He frowned. "Why did I do that?"

"Do what? Jump out of the closet, or get mad at Meghan?"

"Mad at Meghan."

"You were mad at her for being mad at you," Lily suggested.

Draco's frown deepened. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Feelings sometimes don't, fox." Lily leaned down and tickled Draco's nose with a tendril of her hair. He snapped at it, making them both laugh. "There, you feel better now, don't you?" she asked. "And all I did was be a little silly."

Draco hugged her arm. "You're a good Pack-mum," he said. "Can I get a snack now?"

Lily checked her watch. Four o'clock in the afternoon. "Go ask Danger, but yes, I think so. And be polite."

Draco dashed out of the room, and Lily relaxed against the cushions of the couch, a fond smile on her face.

*They are all so, so sweet.*

But Draco's mention of a snack had started her mouth watering, and she decided to try to get up. *Little by little. Easy does it. Feet on the floor, start to shift the weight forward, then go with it..*

She was up. Feeling rather ponderous, but up.

*Time to lumber down to the kitchen for some grazing.*

"Moo," she said aloud, smiling.

Something flickered through the crack of the door. Lily turned to regard it.

It flickered again. Red, it was a red cloth of some kind...

"Wrong sex," she said. "It's bulls that charge."

"Well, I can't wave it for myself," said a voice from the other side of the door. "Not without taking it off."

Lily chortled. "What a lovely image."

"You would think so. But we happen to have a small observer here, so let's please at least try for propriety."

"Do you even know the meaning of that word?"

"Propriety. Noun. Proper or decorous behavior."

Lily mock-gasped. "Who are you and what have you done with my husband?"

"All right, you caught me." James stepped into the room, still in his red work robes, one arm behind him supporting Harry piggyback. "I'm actually your son all grown up. I traveled back in time because I just had to see if my mother really was as beautiful as everyone said she was."

"Very inspiring, Oedipus. Come here and kiss me if you mean that."

He meant it.

Harry made gagging noises.

"Like it or not, midget, this is how you got started," said James, letting go of Lily to tickle his son.

Harry dropped to the floor. "With a kiss?" he said. "Is that how babies get made?"

"I don't think we should go there just right now," James said swiftly. "Why don't you ask Padfoot or Moony about that later? They're much better at explaining it than I am."

"Coward," said Lily, elbowing James. "And you call yourself an Auror."

"Hey, Dark wizards I can handle, no problem. This?" James indicated Harry, now watching his parents in mild confusion. "Scares the daylights out of me."

"I'm scary?" Harry asked, still more confused.

"No, you're not scary," Lily told him, coming forward to hug him against her side. "Your father is just being silly."

Harry turned in her grasp to regard James. "He's good at it," he said with the air of an expert.

"That's right." James leaned down and got an arm around Harry's waist, hoisting him out of Lily's hug and aloft. "Thanks for holding him still for me, love. Off to the kitchen with him – we're having baked kid for dinner!"

Harry screeched happily and fought as James carried him out the door. A few seconds later, James yelped theatrically, and small feet pounded a running tempo down the hall. James stepped back into the room, rubbing his hand. "He bites," he said ruefully.

"You're surprised?" Lily accepted her husband's arm. "Consider who raised him after we started taking our little nap."

"Good point."

xXxXx

Sirius drummed his fingers on the typewriter keys, frowning. This scene had to go just right, with all three parts coming to a head at exactly the same moment, so that they would all be cut off by the same event. He had one of them in shape, but the other two didn't want to behave.

"Are you still telling that same old story?" he muttered aloud in a deep voice, staring at those words on the page. "Haven't you realized yet we don't believe you?" He threw his voice up high. "I can't tell any other story when I'm already telling the truth." Back to the deep tones. "You expect me to believe that's the truth?"

He stopped, frowning. "And then what?" he asked in his normal voice.

"If it wasn't the truth, why would I keep saying it?" suggested a high-pitched voice.

"That's it." Sirius pounded out the sentence. "And then he'll say, 'If you were lying, you wouldn't dare change your story at this point,' and she'll say, 'If I were lying, I would have started with something easier to believe,' and he'll say... yes, that'll do just fine."

His fingers kept moving for a few moments, then slowed and stopped. "Wait a minute..." he said slowly.

A giggle came from under his desk.

Sirius pushed back his chair and looked down.

Neenie smiled at him. "Hi, Padfoot."

"Hello. What are you doing under there?"

"Helping you?"

"Well, yes. But I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me you're there next time."

Neenie pouted. "That's no fun."

"Just call me the fun-destroyer, then. Up and out." Sirius pointed at the door.

"But I want to help!" Neenie's pout grew larger. "You never let me help with anything! Nobody lets me help!"

Sirius checked his watch. "Go get a snack," he said.

"I don't want a snack. You don't love me."

"I'm not arguing with you. Go get a snack, and then you can come back and help me write."

"Don't want to."

"All right, you don't have to. Come back," Sirius added quickly. "But you do have to go get something to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"I don't care. Go down to the kitchen and remind Danger what time it is." Hermione was less than rational when she hadn't eaten in a few hours. "Go on, right now."

Glaring at him every step of the way, Neenie stalked out of the room and slammed the door.

Sirius returned to his typing. *She'll be back. Probably all smiles and oh-can-I-really-help-you-do-real-writing. And the answer is, as long as she doesn't kick up a huge fuss, yes.*

Neenie was back within a minute and a half, apple in her hand and an important look on her face. "Danger says please come down to the kitchen unless you're in the middle of something you can't stop because we have guests," she recited breathlessly, and darted away again.

"Guests?" Sirius said to an empty hallway.

A small head popped around the corner. "Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape."

"Oh."

Sirius considered staying where he was, but Danger did his editing, and she was canny enough to do a time-spell on his work to find out when it had been created. If he claimed he was in the middle of a scene, then didn't produce anything in that time period, she'd eventually know about it, and then he would hear about it. Probably at length, and loudly.

*Besides, Snivellus is allowed to visit us. Sirius chuckled. He can see how nice we have it, and get all jealous because he's too nasty even to get a girlfriend.*

Pushing back his chair, he stood up.

*Time to go downstairs and rub it in. But gently.*

xXxXx

Severus Snape wasn't sure whether or not to be displeased.

He was currently in the presence of three of the people he'd spent ten years hating. The hatred, however, was oddly slow to respond even for them, and seemed unwilling to project itself outward onto the other people in the room.

*I do not like them, he had to remind himself. I do not want to be here.*

He didn't know what would happen if he forgot this, but he was sure it would be bad.

*Facts. Facts are my friends. Make a simple catalogue of facts, and emotions will keep their place.*

He began with the room. The kitchen of the former Malfoy Manor had originally been designed as a place only servants would ever have to see. The new owners of the house had other ideas.

*As little as I know about Lupin's wife, I doubt she would take kindly to being designated a servant.*

The stone walls were now whitewashed, making the room seem much larger and more cheerful. The appurtenances had the look of an older time, but Severus had no doubt that the stove burned gas instead of wood or coal, that the icebox was every bit as efficient as a Muggle refrigerator (of course, magical iceboxes had held that distinction long before refrigerators were dreamed of), and despite its whimsical brick exterior, that was still a toaster on the counter. A large table took up the center of the room, ringed with ten chairs, and several others sat against spare patches of wall.

*So much for the room. Now for the people.*

Most of those chairs were currently occupied. Dumbledore sat across from Severus, facing the little Granger girl, who was chattering away at a high rate of speed in between bites of apple, relating some tale of exploring parts of the "Manor Den." Lupin sat beside the girl, listening and occasionally chuckling.

*That child has a larger vocabulary than some of my seventh years.*

Draco – Black, Severus reminded himself – was watching James Potter doing something with a knife and a slice of orange peel. As Severus watched, the man turned the peel inside out and popped it into his mouth. The slit he had cut in it lengthwise, crossed by several smaller slits widthwise, created a bizarre illusion of teeth. The boy shrieked with laughter and demanded a set of his own.

Unbidden, the image came to Severus' mind of the silent and withdrawn child he recalled from occasional trips to Malfoy Manor in the past, when Lucius would hire him to brew some particularly esoteric potion or to pass judgment on an ingredient bought on the black market.

*I cannot deny they have done much good in that regard.*

Lily Potter and Aletha Freeman-Black sat together talking quietly off to one side, one of Lily's hands resting on her pregnant belly. From the gestures, Severus guessed they were discussing something to do with potion making. *Perhaps I will join them, in a few minutes, if they will have me...*

The final group stood together at the stove, Black slowly stirring a deep pot – *I must admit I like seeing him domesticated at last* – while Lupin's wife – *I wonder why they call her Danger?* – whisked something more briskly in a saucepan, showing it every so often to Harry Potter, perched on a chair by her side.

*I wonder what James Potter thinks of that? His only son, and one of the boy's great interests, or so I'm told, is cooking.*

It was almost criminal how much material he was gathering here. If his old hatred had still been at full strength, he could have sniped at the men for weeks to come, taunting Potter about his son's prowess in the kitchen, Black about the way another man's wife ordered him around, Lupin about his devotion to a little Mudblood girl...

*Not that he's ever cared about blood. Unless it was another's, and shed by him... he was certainly horrified enough by nearly mauling me in school, and it took him nearly three months to forgive Black for it...*

Severus shook himself in irritation. Something was very wrong with him, if he was finding the good in these men. He should be looking for their flaws, their weaknesses, not their strengths...

*I am acting as if I like them!*

At this opportune moment, something pulled at the hem of Severus' robes. Teeth clenched, he looked down.

Meghan Black looked up. "Oops," she chirruped, scooting back so that she was no longer sitting on the cloth. "Sorry."

And with that, she rested her back against one of Severus' chair legs and returned to her work, looping strands of blue yarn around her small brown fingers with a gleaming copper hook.

Severus stared down at her for several seconds before realizing his mouth was hanging open. Quickly, he shut it and sat up. No one seemed to

have noticed.

*Not even Black.*

*I cannot believe this.*

He turned his eyes to Dumbledore, who was still listening to the older girl's monologue. *You insisted I come here tonight, old man. Did you expect something like this? Did you think the time was ripe for reconciliation, for us to all become one big happy family?*

But Severus had never been one to fight facts, and the hatred that had sustained him through so many years was beginning to waver.

He recalled how the older children had treated him upon his invasion of their home. *Until my presence was officially accepted, they fought me. Once Lily established that I was welcome, they treated me as they might any adult of their acquaintance.*

Reconciliation was still too much for him to accept. The hatred had not receded that far, and Severus was unsure he wanted it to. But something less might not be out of consideration. *Perhaps... a truce?*

Harry Potter laughed aloud at something Lupin's wife had told him. Draco had his own orange peel teeth now, and James Potter was holding the boy's hand around the knife to help him cut a third set. Lily was turning her head, looking for something. Her eyes brightened as they fell on Severus, and she raised her hand and beckoned him closer.

He looked down again. "I am moving," he said awkwardly to the child sitting beside his chair.

"Okay," said the girl unconcernedly. The yarn came off her fingers, and she tied a quick knot in the end before rewinding the rest onto the ball. "Where to?"

"Just over to your mother and... Mrs. Potter."

"Mama Letha and Tigermum," the girl corrected. "I can go there."

"Good." Severus repressed an urge to laugh inane and started across the kitchen, praying that Black would not choose this moment to turn around, nor Potter to look up. Neither was likely to have a good reaction to Black's daughter trotting tamely at his heels.

Dumbledore glanced up, his eyes twinkling brightly, as Severus passed him. One lid dropped in an unmistakable wink. Severus paused just long enough to hold the eye contact and think two or three obscene thoughts before he went to take the chair Aletha had drawn up for him.

*And may you have those in your head all night, old man, instead of whatever pristine images you usually entertain.*

xXxXx

In Godric's Hollow, the strange hole in the air opened once more, as it had been doing with increasing frequency since that first night. Each vortex was a bit larger than its brother before, until this one was large enough to admit a man.

But the figure that stumbled out of it was manlike only in general shape. Its body was ridiculously thin, making the rich black robes seem a travesty. No hair grew on its head, and its face would have been rejected by any horror house in the world as too much – the noseless, bone-white expanse, now with the bones of the skull visible in relief through the papery skin, the hungry, deep-set red eyes with their slit pupils...

It looked out over the night, as the vortex closed behind it. It inhaled through its two slit nostrils. And a voice, dry and painful as from overuse, issued from it.

*"Potter."*

xXxXx

Far away, two wizards jerked in their chairs. Snape hissed between his teeth, right hand wrapped around his left forearm. Harry cried out, both hands pressed to his forehead.

Sirius ducked around Danger and caught his godson before he could fall. "Easy there, Greeneyes," he said, sitting down on Harry's chair with the boy in his lap. "What's wrong?"

"It hurts. Right here." Harry rubbed a finger across his lightning-bolt scar, then pressed his face into Sirius' robes. "Padfoot, make it go away," he said muffledly.

"As soon as I can," Sirius promised. He looked across the room. "Snape, what's wrong with you?"

Wordlessly, Snape peeled back the sleeve from his left arm and held it up.

"Shite," Aletha breathed at the sight of the bright red skull-and-serpent marking.

"I think that sums up the situation accurately," said Dumbledore, standing. "Whatever spell brought you here through time, James, Lily, it seems to have worked on Lord Voldemort as well. I suspect I know where he will be, and it is possible I may find him there..."

"And if you don't?" Remus asked. The cubs were silent, moving closer to whichever adult was handy.

"Then I will continue to search until I do." Dumbledore's voice was calm and certain, two feelings Sirius wished he could share. "You will forgive me for hurrying away, I am sure."

"Go, for heaven's sake, go," Lily said. "Severus, what about you?"

"I doubt I will be of much practical assistance," said Snape, pulling his sleeve down again. "But if you wish me to come along, Headmaster..."

"No, Severus, I think you would do better to remain here. I will be able to contact you just as quickly here should I need you, and you will be able to join me faster than you could if you returned to the castle. I bid you all good night, then."

"Good hunting," James said, tossing Dumbledore a salute. "What is it with that b...bloke, that he just won't die?"

"That is part of what I hope to find out." Dumbledore nodded to the company and hurried from the room.

"Is that why my scar hurts?" Harry asked, as Lily and Aletha crossed the kitchen to join Sirius and Danger by the stove. "Because Voldemort's back?"

"Probably," Aletha said, Summoning extra chairs. James and Remus pulled over their own. "But he won't touch you. We won't let him."

Her lips moved silently. Sirius, long-practiced at the husbandly art, interpreted.

*Please, God, don't turn me into a liar.*

Harry nodded, accepting what Aletha had said as the simple truth, and closed his eyes, leaning against Sirius again. Sirius looked up and met James' eyes. "You want him?" he asked quietly.

"He's happy where he is," James said as Meghan found space on Lily's seemingly nonexistent lap. "Let him be."

xXxXx

Danger slipped out of the group and crossed to Snape. "May I ask you something?"

"You may ask," Snape said through his teeth. "I may not answer."

Danger's eyes strayed to Snape's forearm, now covered but still resting on his thigh. "That thing hurts you," she said. "Do you want something for it? That's not my question," she added hastily.

"Potions will not help this. But... thank you for offering."

Danger did her best to ignore the half-sarcastic tone in which the thanks were given. "Does that do anything besides hurt?" she asked, indicating what she meant with her eyes rather than a finger or hand. "If the stories I've heard are true, you're good with a wand, and I don't think you'd be able to convince Voldemort you were still on his side, not after coming out publicly for ours."

Snape gave her a long, skeptical glance which seemed to sum up everything he could have said about her assumption of sides in a war she'd had no part in. Danger glared right back. *Maybe I wasn't there then, but I'm here now, and good luck getting rid of me.*

After a long moment, Snape looked away. Danger suppressed her childish desire to hoot over the victory and kept quiet.

"There were rumors," Snape admitted under his breath. "Stories of those who had displeased the Dark Lord, who bore his Mark. The stories claimed that the Mark existed not only on the body, but on the soul. The home of magic. Supposedly, a Marked man could be drained of his magic, temporarily..." A slight movement in the throat which might, in another man, have been a nervous swallow. "Or permanently."

"And Voldemort would grow stronger."

Snape looked up and met her eyes once more, locking on. "You have no idea the risks you flirt with when you say his name so openly," he hissed. "He could annihilate you with no more thought than he gives to breathing..."

"If he were here. Which he's not."

"Speaking his name," Snape said slowly and distinctly, "may attract his attention. Which would bring him here. And if he found a herd of Muggleborns, half-bloods, and blood traitors inhabiting the former home of Lucius Malfoy..."

He stopped. By the look of horror creeping onto his face, he had just had the same thought currently inhabiting most of Danger's mind.

**What?** Remus demanded, picking up her mood.

Danger opened her mind and let him see it.

**Oh.**

"Moony, what's wrong?" James said from across the room. "You just went dead white."

"Do you realize where we are?" Remus demanded. "We're in Malfoy Manor. Home of one of Voldemort's favorite Death Eaters. One of the

places he liked best to come – or am I wrong?” he asked Snape over Lily’s and Aletha’s shoulders.

“You are not wrong,” Snape said darkly. “Though I wish you were.”

“I wish I was too.”

Hermione whimpered aloud and clung tighter to Remus than she was already doing. Lily swallowed hard, but her hand on Meghan’s back was steady. Aletha slid her hands into the tight ball that was Draco on the chair next to her and uncurled him enough to get him onto her lap. “So what you’re saying, Severus, Remus,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone, “is that Voldemort might at any moment show up on our doorstep.”

“Yes,” both men said together. Danger stifled a hysterical giggle.

“Well,” said Lily, her voice shaking only a little. “In that case, I think we ought to get ready for him.”

“Get ready?” James said. “Get ready how?”

Lily’s lips curved up in a smile that wouldn’t have looked out of place on Dumbledore himself.

“I have an idea,” she said.

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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 9

Aletha looked at herself in the mirror and made a face. "I don't believe we're doing this," she muttered. "Why don't we just get out? Run and let him show up at an empty house?"

"Because, as strange as it sounds, this is actually safer," Lily said from behind her. "If we run, he'll have free range of the house. He'll learn who lives here now, and he might be able to find us magically, or even call us to him, using our possessions and the pieces of ourselves we've left behind."

"So instead we're staying and letting him do what he wants with us?" Aletha retorted, turning to face Lily.

"You know exactly why you're staying. You listened to me. Why didn't you say something then if you're so worried?"

"Because I know perfectly well that you have a good point, but I'm also terrified. If someone makes a mistake—if I make a mistake—"

"You won't make a mistake," Lily said, coming into the room to hug Aletha. "How could you? You'll barely be visible to him. You're just like the furniture, there but not important. Remember that."

"Thanks." Aletha allowed herself a tiny smile. "I'd feel so much better if Severus hadn't told us that Voldemort likes hexing chairs."

"Oh, do stop it. I'd trade with you if I could, if that's any consolation."

"Some. And thank you." Aletha tightened her arms once more around Lily, then let go. "Take good care of them all."

"Don't worry, I will." Lily stepped back and straightened Aletha's neat maid's uniform. "There," she said. "Just right."

"I hope everyone else agrees with you." Aletha laughed once, nervously. "Including Voldemort."

xXxXx

He approached the house, observing the darkness in most of it. Only one or two lights were kindled. Perhaps Lucius was not home.

*If not, I shall remove one of his feet, to remind him not to wander when it is possible his Master might need him.*

His stepping onto the front walk should have announced his presence to those within the house. Even now, a servant should be running to the door, to open it and welcome back the future ruler of all the world...

The door opened, and a light above it ignited. A woman stood in the doorway, a servant by her dress and bearing. "Who is it?" she called fearfully.

He stepped into the light, to let her see him.

Her hand flew to her chest. She gasped for air twice, then screamed and fled inside, not bothering to close the door.

He smiled, the first smile he'd felt on his face in years.

*Perhaps there are compensations to this weakness.*

"What in Merlin's name are you howling about, woman?" demanded a well-known voice from within the house.

*And my luck is most assuredly turning, with Severus here.* He advanced towards the open door.

"My lord, a monster—a beast like a great snake on two legs—it's come here, it's followed me, it—" The woman's hysterical babble broke off short as she turned to see him again. He savored the naked fear on her faintly familiar face for a moment before turning his eyes to Severus, who seemed surprised but was quickly regaining his aplomb.

*As he always does.*

"What's happening out there, Severus?" called Lucius Malfoy's drawl from farther up the hall. "A visitor?"

"Master," Severus said, hurrying forward to him. "Go back to your kitchen," he told the woman over his shoulder. "This is none of your concern."

The woman fled, casting one final look of terror back at him as she ran.

"Yes, a visitor," Severus called out, raising his voice even as he drew his wand to shut the door. "One I think you should greet yourself."

"Very well." Lucius emerged from a door halfway up the hall and stopped in his tracks. "My lord," he said, a trace of disbelief in his voice. "My lord—it is you?"

"Who else?" Lord Voldemort inquired dryly in the hoarse tones which were all that was left of his once-persuasive voice.

*Five years and more wasted. My body and mind tortured, pushed nearly to madness. Someone will pay dearly for this.*

My house is at your disposal, my lord," Lucius said, bending his knee. "As always. What do you require?"

"Food and drink. And information."

Lucius and Severus exchanged a look. "Pardon me for a moment, then, my lord," said Lucius. "I will send for the first two, while Severus provides the third."

"As you like." Lord Voldemort let his eyes follow Lucius through the door by which the woman had fled. "He had a house-elf..." he said slowly.

"Freed by an accidental action of his son," Severus said. "He was most displeased. But rather than pay for another, or become indebted to some other family for giving him one, he took what he had and made the most of it." A small smile. "I have no doubt you will find his acts of two years past most satisfying, my lord. And the woman is a part of that."

xXxXx

Remus slumped against the wall, panting. **Can you hear my heart?** he asked silently.

**I can feel your heart. From here. Are you going to be all right?**

**Do I have a choice?** Remus looked up and smiled wanly as James, Invisibility Cloak in his hands, and Aletha, in her uniform, appeared at the end of the passage. **We'll make it. He looks terrible, there's no way he can stay awake for long.**

**Especially not once he hears the story we came up with.** Danger chuckled nervously. **He'll be so busy gloating that he'll never even notice what Aletha slips into his drink...**

Remus swallowed. **We hope.**

"Good work," Aletha whispered, hugging him quickly. "Don't stay away too long, though, he'll get suspicious."

"I'll be right there with you," said James, shaking out the Cloak and draping it around himself. "Have I mentioned you look *strange* with that hair?"

"And the rest of it doesn't make any difference?" Remus asked. "I know what I look like. And it's nothing I wanted."

"And you're both wasting time." Aletha turned Remus with a hand on his shoulder, then pushed him a little. "Get back out there. Make sure your story and Severus' stay straight. One inconsistency and we're all dead."

"Nice pep talk," said a patch of empty air.

"Both of you, be quiet," Remus snapped, falling back into character and raising his voice for the last words. "Go on, woman, bring it. You won't have to look at him."

Aletha let a whimper escape her as she raced away towards the kitchens.

"My apologies for the wait, my lord," Remus said smoothly as he stepped back into the hall. "My serving girl occasionally needs some...attention to keep her from becoming either lazy or too smart for her own good. I believe Severus has been telling you from whence she came?"

Voldemort smiled. "Yes, he told me of your coup," he said raspily. "I thought I had recognized her. Black's woman."

"She was," Remus said, letting his eyelids half-drop. "When Black was in any state to have a woman."

A painful but still chilling laugh. "A most fitting fate for him. Is he here, perhaps?"

"He is, my lord. Would you care to see him?"

"I would. And I understand Narcissa is well."

"She is, and will be as pleased as I am to see you again, my lord."

**Very nice. You're not even lying.**

**Are you sure you can do this?** Remus asked, stepping forward to offer Voldemort his arm, allowing Danger to gulp and shudder for him so that his body remained perfectly indifferent. **You can plead a headache and go to bed if you want.**

**No.** He'd seldom heard so flat a negative from anyone. **If Voldemort's in my house, I want him where I can see him. End of story.**

**Your house?**

**Our house. All of ours. Not his, not anymore.** He felt her shake her head. **What are they going to do with him? He can't stand trial, not with the entire country still terrified of his name...**

**Why don't we deal with that after we're sure it'll actually happen?** Remus suggested, starting down the hall and trying hard not to think about the person he was supporting on one side and Severus on the other.

*And since when have I used that name for him?*

*I suppose I'm just thinking in character.*

Danger sent an image of one brown eyebrow arching high but declined other comment.

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Narcissa rose from the low chair by the hearth as Lord Voldemort entered the room. "My lord," she said, sweeping a curtsey. "My heart breaks to see you in ill health."

"I have no doubt I shall soon be restored by your generous hospitality," Lord Voldemort said, looking with interest at the great black dog Narcissa had been stroking. "So this is your new plaything..."

Narcissa laughed softly. "My cousin makes a better figure of a beast than he did a man, my lord."

The dog, anger in its gray eyes, growled as Severus and Lucius helped Lord Voldemort to a chair. "Hush," Narcissa scolded, striking the dog on the head with her open hand. "Learn to know your master."

The dog remained tense for another moment, until Narcissa raised her hand again, and Lord Voldemort saw the bracelet of a controlling collar around her wrist, and the collar itself around the dog's neck. The animal abased itself before her, whining.

"Better." Narcissa lifted one dainty foot and pushed the dog gently away. "I shall see what is keeping the maid—likely she has what was required but is lingering in the hall from fear..."

*Nothing has changed here but for the better.* Lord Voldemort sighed in content as the warmth from the fire began to reach him. "You may sit down," he told Severus and Lucius. "There is no need for formality as yet."

"As my lord wishes," Lucius murmured, pulling up a chair for himself. Severus sat without comment.

"One particular of Severus' story I was most happy to hear," Lord Voldemort said as Narcissa reentered the room with a small tray, which she set beside him on a carved table. "You have Harry Potter, Lucius?"

"I do, my lord." Lucius smiled triumphantly. "And though it required some time to accomplish, I have remade him in the image I like best. He thinks of me as a father and obeys me in all things. I have no doubt that he will obey you as I would."

"Then bring him, so that I may see it." Lord Voldemort reached out to the tray and picked up the goblet of wine he had noticed there. "Let me see the spawn of the Potters bow before me and call me lord." His hand tightened about the glass. "Before I kill him."

Severus stiffened slightly, and Narcissa drew in a breath.

"My lord, I beg of you, wait only until the morning," Lucius said coolly. "As he has come to call me father, so he calls my Draco brother, and they share a bedroom, so that I could not easily take one of them without waking the other, unless I used magic, which I am loathe to do—I am out of practice with such spells, and a child is so easily scarred. Harry Potter will not disappear in the night. And you, my lord, will enjoy your triumph much better when you are rested and somewhat recovered."

Lord Voldemort hissed between his teeth and hurled his wine into the fireplace, startling Narcissa. "Very well," he said, watching the momentary flare of the fire as the alcohol in the wine caught the flames. "I shall wait."

"I will bring more wine," Narcissa said, rising to her feet. "It shall only be a moment, my lord."

"Bring the bottle," Lord Voldemort told her.

Narcissa inclined her head and hurried out. The dog followed her.

"The bottle, my lord?" Severus asked delicately.

*"However cowed Lucius' serving woman may be, she has a daily reminder of what she once was before her eyes. I will take no chances." Not even with my life protected as it is—I have suffered enough pain over these last years, and though that pain might have ended long since if I were not protected, it would have ended only in death...*

The thought of death overwhelmed him suddenly, the darkness and silence of the grave, the chill and the stink of rot and the stillness. Warring with it was the insanity with which he had been bombarded the last five years, an endless journey by Portkey, no part of the chaotic turmoil of sound and color ever holding still long enough to make rational sense. *Which is worse*, his mind bleated, *which is worse, which is the worse punishment...*

His hands gripped the ends of the armrests, his breath came in short gasps. "My lord," Severus' voice rang out from far away, "my lord, are you ill? May we help you?"

"Remain here," Lord Voldemort ordered in a hoarse whisper of a voice. "Do not leave me."

"We will not go," said Lucius calmly, as though he were soothing one of his sons after a nightmare. "Narcissa is coming, my lord. She will bring wine."

Narcissa herself stepped through the door on the heels of Lucius' words, her face tense and strained, bearing a bottle in her arm and a glass in her free hand. The dog was close behind her, its tail held low and its human eyes full of impotent hatred as it slunk to its place by the fire.

*I have power*, Lord Voldemort reminded himself as Narcissa poured wine into the glass Lucius held for her, *and power will hold me safe*. His eyes returned to the dog. *You have no power now. Your power was in your friends, and they turned against you. All except your woman, and your love could not save you from Lucius.*

He accepted the wine and drank deeply, letting its warmth clear his mind.

*Your day is over. And mine begins anew*

"What of Potter's parents?" he said aloud, setting the wine aside and turning to the tray of food.

Severus drew his wand and levitated the tray to hover over his master's lap. "Potter's parents, my lord?" he asked. "They are dead, are they not?"

"Has there been any news of them?" Lord Voldemort countered.

"Some nearly a year old," Severus said indifferently, "but not of them, precisely. Of a mad couple, claiming to be James and Lily Potter, who invaded the Ministry and harassed several officials before they were taken into custody. They were a nine days' wonder, since they or some other had taken considerable time and trouble to recreate them in the look of the Potters, but it was easily proven that they were nothing of the sort. I would assume they are still being treated, or cared for if their insanity proved incurable, at St. Mungo's."

Lord Voldemort laughed aloud.

*This world, it seems to me, is no bad place.*

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Aletha slipped through the door into the hall. "How's it going?" she said in a low voice.

A hand touched her shoulder gently, to tell her James was right beside her. "Not so well," his voice answered in the same tones. "He smashed the wine into the fire for some reason—I think he was pissed when Remus told him he couldn't have Harry until morning—so he didn't get the sleeping potion you put in there."

"Danger told me as much when she came to get the bottle. We'll have to improvise. Anything since then?"

"Not really. Snape just fed him the story that everyone thought Lily and I were mad, and he liked it. He's eating, they're sitting...not a lot happening."

"If we're lucky, he'll keep drinking," Aletha said. "He's weak, he's thin, it shouldn't take much to put him out."

"He's not entirely human. Maybe he doesn't get drunk like everyone else."

Aletha squeezed James' invisible hand reassuringly. "Alcohol has the same effect on animals it does on us."

"What about on demons?" James muttered.

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In a hastily rented room at the Leaky Cauldron, Harry twisted at the carpet. "Why can't we be there?" he said for the twenty-fourth time. "We can fight."

"I know you can." Tigermum was lying on the bed, and her voice was quiet, as though it hurt her to talk. "But fighting isn't what they're doing there right now. They're acting. Pretending."

"We can pretend," said Neenie. "We could pretend we belong there, like Letha and Moony and Danger are doing."

"It's too dangerous."

"But we should be there!" Harry argued. "The Pack always stays together!"

"Except when it's safer to be apart," said Tigermum in a tone that brooked no disagreement. "We are not going anywhere, and that is final."

Meghan scowled at the bed. "Tigermum mean," she said under her breath.

"Tigermum doesn't care," that lady answered. "Tigermum would rather have you calling her mean than see you get hurt."

"He wouldn't hurt me," Draco said quietly. "He doesn't want me hurt."

"I've already said the subject is closed. Now, hush." Tigermum closed her eyes.

The cubs looked at each other, then scooted closer in so they could still talk. "Why not?" Meghan asked Draco in a small voice.

"He thinks I belong there. He thinks I'll grow up and be like my father, follow him and do what he says." Draco made a face indicating how likely that was. "But as long as he thinks Moony really is my father, he wouldn't hurt me."

"And he thinks we lived at the manor together, not with the Pack," Harry said. "So maybe he wouldn't hurt me at first either. And if he tried, the Pack-parents would stop him."

"Meghan and I could pretend we're servants," said Neenie, glancing quickly at Tigermum. "Like Letha is. And we know all the places to run and hide in now, so if he did try to hurt us, we could run away."

"But how can we get there?" Draco asked. "Tigermum'll hear us if we try to go out."

"I do it," Meghan said, and stood up.

"Meghan, no!" Neenie whispered.

Ignoring this, Meghan marched to the bed and laid a hand on Tigermum's. "You hurt?" she asked. "Where?"

"It's nothing you should worry about, little one," Tigermum said, opening her eyes to smile at Meghan. "I'm just worried about Prongs, and about all the Pack."

"They be all right," Meghan said firmly.

"From your mouth to heaven's ears," Tigermum murmured, pausing in the middle of the phrase for a yawn and closing her eyes again. "Suddenly I'm so sleepy..."

Meghan put her other hand on Tigermum's cheek. "You go sleep," she said. "We be good." Over her shoulder, she grinned at the other cubs and nodded towards the door. "We be very good."

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His meal finished and the tray removed by the servant woman, Lord Voldemort had pulled his chair closer to the fire. One hand held a half-finished glass of wine, his third. Narcissa had commanded her dog to lie at his feet, and Severus and Lucius sat nearby waiting on his pleasure.

*These three deserve some reward for being so ready and so eager to serve me in my time of need. I believe I shall remit them some of the pain they deserve. Some, but not all—they obviously denied me, or they would not be here...*

*But by that same token, had they not denied me, I would have had a cold welcome here, and my recovery would have been slower and far more painful.* He sipped at his wine. *I must consider it carefully.*

At his feet, the dog which had once been Sirius Black shifted. Lord Voldemort looked down and smiled. *One of the thorns in my side, plucked out and ground underfoot. Another, Potter, first torn from his child and his friends, then with his wife condemned and treated as mad.*

"Tell me of the Order of the Phoenix," he commanded. "What became of the fools who stood against me?"

"Dumbledore lives and remains Headmaster," Severus said. "He spoke for me after your disappearance, my lord, believing me his faithful spy rather than yours." There was satisfaction in his tone. "He gave me work. I teach Potions at Hogwarts, and live there. And he trusts me with information such as the password to his office."

"How useful," Lord Voldemort said. "What of Alastor Moody?"

"He lives as well, though less whole than before, thanks to a few of our colleagues," said Lucius. "He is no longer active in the Auror Office, though, and lives at home."

"That is well. And Potter and Black's lupine friend, with his singularly apt name?"

"Dead, my lord," said Lucius, a sardonic smile on his lips. "Dead in the same coup that brought me this." He nodded at the dog. "I am only sorry you were not present to witness his end. It was so terribly touching."

The dog whined in its throat.

"Touching? How so?"

"He met a Muggle woman," Lucius said, "one who was unaware of the existence of magic or of werewolves, and found a way to explain his periodic disappearances and his subsequent ravaging. She felt sorry for him. Apparently, sorry enough to marry him."

"I see." Lord Voldemort sipped his wine again, savoring the taste. "So you simply allowed them to be together, as they obviously desired to be."

"I sometimes have trouble deciding which I enjoyed more," Lucius said, looking into the fire. "His halting explanations of what he was before the moon rose, her screaming as he changed before her eyes and tore her to pieces, or his wailing in the morning when he saw what he had done."

Lord Voldemort spent a few moments savoring the images Lucius had given him. "How did he die?" he asked.

"At his own hands, or rather claws, during the next full moon, after a month of weeping and raving." Lucius sniffed. "It grew rather tiresome near the end. If he had not killed himself, I would have done it."

The dog moaned aloud. "Hush," snapped Narcissa, fingers on her bracelet. "Keep quiet."

*We could almost be a family*, Lord Voldemort mused, smiling to himself. *Here together in the night, eating and drinking and discussing old acquaintances, bound together by ties that go beyond anything outsiders understand...*

The door creaked. Severus, Lucius, Narcissa, and the dog turned to see who was there.

"Father?" said a small voice. "We heard noises."

*Ahhh*. Lord Voldemort lifted his wine in a silent toast and drank it off. *A family indeed, with the arrival of the most important parts of any family.*

*I need not wait until morning after all.*

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"You should not be here," said the blond man angrily, rising from his seat. "What are you doing out of bed?"

Draco's stomach churned. He knew this man was Moony, but he looked and sounded just like Draco's father, and all the instincts that had almost disappeared over two years with the Pack were back in full force, telling him to run, to hide, to apologize—

*Apologize*. He seized on that, and on Harry's straight back next to him and the sound of Neenie and Meghan breathing behind him. "We're sorry, Father," he said quietly, bowing as Padfoot had taught them, then straightening. Harry copied him a beat behind. "But we wanted to know what was going on."

"You are never to leave your room alone at night, Draco. Nor you, Harry. Have you not learned that yet?" Moony was moving closer to them step by step, scowling down at them. Mother—no, Danger—was still staring at them, looking more frightened by the second. "And being with one another does not mean you are not alone. Nor does bringing your girls with you."

"Their girls?" asked a cold, high-pitched voice from a chair facing the fire. Harry stiffened, and it was Draco's turn to hold himself erect and hope his brother caught on. *It scares me too, but we have to be warriors... we have to be brave...*

"Black and his woman had a daughter before I caught up with them, my lord," Moony said, looking back towards the fire. "And Lupin's wife had a child she claimed was her sister. Harry was attached to them, and with my house-elf gone, it was easier simply to keep them and bind them into service to my sons. One is Muggle-born, the other half-blood. Neither has significant magic."

"Obviously," said the voice, sounding bored.

Neenie hissed under her breath, and Draco reached back towards her to shush her. She grabbed his hand and held it, and he didn't try to pull away. Beside him, Meghan had her hand in Harry's, and his shoulders had gone down and his head come up.

"But now that your sons have wakened on their own, Lucius," the voice went on, "your earlier objection no longer holds, and I can be about my work with no further delay."

"Your work, my lord?" asked Professor Snape, his tone cool and level.

"The work I was unable to finish nearly six years ago. The removal of the last credible threat to my greatness."

The two sets of clasped hands met in the center of the space between the four cubs and clung together.

"Bring me Harry Potter."

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# Truth Amid the Lies

## Chapter 10

Harry squeezed Meghan's hand once more, then drew her up beside him. She wrapped her arms around him and put her face against his side, requiring him to walk slowly so as not to step on her or make her trip. Draco and Hermione, still holding hands tightly, followed them.

The *thing* sitting in the chair by the fire leaned forward to look at them, and Harry put an arm quickly around Meghan's head to hold her face where it was. Hermione, behind him, was shivering so hard he could hear it in her breath. Draco didn't seem to be breathing at all.

"Harry Potter," breathed a soft, whispery voice, coming from the slit in the skull-looking face that was in the place a normal person's mouth would be. "How you have grown." Red eyes in sunken sockets glowed sullenly, like a fire about to die. "Six years old, now. Old enough to understand who I am. So tell me, boy. Who am I?"

"My lord, is this necessary?" asked Danger in the unfamiliar voice that Harry knew made her sound like Draco's mum. "Harry knows his lessons. He has been taught well."

"Better, it seems, than you have been, Narcissa," said Lord Voldemort, turning slightly so that his red gaze fell on Danger. "I was not speaking to you."

Danger paled. "Forgive me, my lord," she said, bowing her head so that her pale blonde, straight hair fell about her face. "I thought only of the child..."

"You need no longer think of him. I will do it for you." Voldemort turned back to look at Harry. "My question stands, Harry. Who am I?"

Harry loosened Meghan's grip on him a little bit and bowed low. "My lord," he said as Danger had.

The words made him feel a little sick, but he knew he was only playing a part, the same way Danger and Moony were. *He has to think I want to be on his side. Then he won't want to hurt me anymore. He'll think he's safe.*

Lord Voldemort began to laugh, a thin, wheezing cackle that seemed to hurt him, but he did not stop. "You hear this, Severus? The son of the Potters, calling me..." He leaned back in the chair, still laughing.

"The world is indeed a wondrous place, my lord," said Snape's dark voice from the corner of the room. "I would not have thought it possible, had I not been present to observe it myself."

"Ahhhh." Voldemort sighed, bringing himself back under control. "But this, of course, leaves me with a dilemma. What to do with this so-trusting child?"

"My lord." Moony stepped forward, giving Voldemort a shallow bow. "Do you trust me?"

"Perhaps as much as I trust anyone, Lucius." Voldemort sat up with a small grunt of effort. "Do you still have the book I gave you? The diary of my days at Hogwarts?"

"I have not moved it, my lord," Moony said easily. Harry glanced at Danger and saw the momentary panic on her face, but Moony's unfamiliar features remained calm. "And I do not recall whether I ever thanked you properly for such a sign of your trust in me."

Voldemort smiled. "You did. And in the morning, perhaps, I shall wish to see it, but for the time being I trust you that it is safe. The issue at hand, though, is Harry Potter. Even with his new loyalty, can I allow such a dangerous creature to live? Would it not be gambling with my own life, my own sanity, to keep him alive?"

"My lord, forgive the presumption, but I believe I may have something to add," said Snape, standing up. Harry drew back a little, bumping his shoulder into Hermione, who took the hint and scooted backwards as well, pulling Draco with her. "You recall, of course, that it was I who first brought you the news of the prophecy about the child to be marked, the child who would hold power you knew not."

"Of course."

"My lord, the prophecy was yet unfinished when I was discovered. If this is the case, then perhaps we should endeavor to discover the rest of it before taking any action which cannot be reversed. There might be... repercussions to killing the boy."

Voldemort frowned. "Repercussions?"

"If his life and yours, perhaps, are linked," Snape said, every word said delicately, as though he were stepping through a swamp of words and must find only the ones which would hold his weight. "Any power which could defeat you, my lord, would be a weighty power indeed. Does it not seem prudent to ensure that such power does not survive the need for it?"

The frown deepened, then lightened. "I see. I think I see. You are suggesting that should Potter live to manhood and by some fluke defeat me, that the power within him would then destroy him, as he would be no further use."

"It seems only logical. He might actually grow to be dangerous to any organized regime, as such great strength would necessarily make him a free agent. The general reciprocity of magic, if nothing else, leads me to believe it might be so."



“What are they talking about?” Harry breathed over his shoulder.

Hermione rested her face against his back. “Snape’s trying to make Voldemort think he shouldn’t kill you,” she whispered into the cloth of his shirt. “He’s saying maybe there was something in a prophecy, in the part he didn’t hear, about you and Voldemort being linked together.”

“He heard a prophecy about me?” Harry studied Snape, or rather Snape’s back, more carefully. He could see tension in the set of Snape’s shoulders, but the deep voice had been completely calm. *Maybe I can ask him what the prophecy said... what it was about...*

“But I fail to see the point in your little peroration, Severus.” Voldemort’s voice cut across Harry’s thoughts. “Even if Potter’s own power would destroy him after he had defeated me, what difference does that make to me? My power has never threatened me, and I have had fifty years to allow it to try.”

“But you have never matched it against a power of which it was specifically said that you had no knowledge,” Snape countered. “I do not pretend to understand the prophecy better than you do, my lord, but I would be far less than happy, now that you have returned to us so unexpectedly, if you were harmed, especially if that harm were avoidable.”

“Do you doubt me, Severus?” Voldemort asked, and his voice lost the half-joking edge it had held a moment before to become very cold and quiet. “Do you doubt what I can do?”

“No, my lord. Never for a moment.”

“Come, come, Severus, you should know by now I do not appreciate being lied to. You wish to spare my feelings. Speak the truth.”

“If you wish it of me, my lord, I will do so.” Snape bowed before speaking again, his voice slower than before. “My lord, you appear weak and ill. Wherever you have been these last years, it has taken a toll on you. Magic which you might have no trouble in countering under normal circumstances might now destroy you, and I would not have that happen. I beg of you, rest for just this one night.”

“Odd, how you seem so eager to keep me from the boy,” said Voldemort musingly. “You and Lucius both, and Narcissa as well. Almost as though you had something else in mind.”

“My lord, the only thought in my mind is your welfare,” said Danger from her place on the hearth, but Harry could see her knuckles going white where she had her fist clenched around a handful of her robe. “I would not have you hurt for the world.”

“Indeed?” Voldemort lifted where an eyebrow would usually have been. “Then why do you seem so intent on denying me that which will bring me the most pleasure and relief?”

“M-my lord?”

“I thrive, my dear Narcissa, on the destruction of my enemies. Something that you should have known long since. Killing Harry Potter, far from harming me, will give me the strength I need to fully recover myself, and to begin bringing this land under my control, as it should have been done five years ago.”

“My lord, what if you are wrong?” Moony said.

Voldemort turned sharply. “What was that, Lucius?”

“I said, what if you are wrong?” Moony stood very still, meeting Voldemort’s eyes. “As Severus said, you are weakened. It is possible that not only your body, but your mind, were affected by whatever horrors you have passed through. Your judgment may not be perfectly sound at the moment. Will you not allow us, who have been faithful for so long, to help and guide you through this time of difficulty?”

Voldemort’s eyes blazed. “There are few who would dare speak to me so,” he hissed. “*Very few.*”

Danger’s hands were buried once more in Padfoot’s fur, her face was openly terrified, but Moony did not flinch. “I dare, my lord, for the sake of my wife’s dear sister, for my son and his future, for all those who have so long harbored hopes about your return. Fault me for that if you will.”

The moment stretched, growing endless. The firelight flickered, casting shifting shadows about the room, but there was no other movement.

“I... cannot,” Voldemort said at last. “Still, Lucius, you would do well to amend your manner once I am fully myself again.”

“My lord, when you are fully yourself again, you will find me as obedient a servant as ever I was.” Moony bowed deeply. “I thank you for listening to me.”

“You spoke only the truth.” Voldemort sat back in his chair, looking idly around the room, at Snape, at Danger, at Padfoot. “Still, I—”

He froze, red eyes fixed on Padfoot’s gray, and Harry yelled as his scar exploded with pain.

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Sirius fought, shoving mentally at Voldemort’s intrusions into his mind, but it was like trying to fight off the dementors without a wand, the cold fingers drove deeper into his mind every second, touching and tainting his dearest memories, and pain and fear drove a whimper from him—

Voldemort wheeled, breaking the contact, and Sirius slumped, gasping for breath. Danger’s arms were around his canine form, holding him together, he thought muzzily, if she let go he’d break...

"Traitor," Voldemort breathed, and Sirius lifted his head enough to see the Dark wizard glaring at Snape, who seemed unable to move—*no wonder, if he's getting what I got, but I thought he could fight it off—maybe he's just out of practice—*

Voldemort stood. His left hand rose in a circular motion, and a shell of magic sprang into place around him and Snape, translucent but gleaming fitfully. His right hand shot out and caught in Snape's robes, dragging the Potions Master towards him.

"A well-designed trap," Voldemort said, almost playfully, still staring into Snape's eyes. "You almost had me fooled. I would have trusted in you, would have fallen asleep here among you, and I would never have awakened, would I? But now you can do nothing."

He gestured again with the left hand, and the door, which had crept open, slammed shut. Danger leapt up as a second shell of magic appeared behind her, behind Remus and the cubs, all around them, between them and the walls of the room—

*He's sealed us in. We're dead. As soon as he does whatever he's going to do to Snivellus, we're dead, and it's my fault, all my fault—*

"Stop it," hissed a voice in his ear, and an invisible hand squeezed his canine shoulder roughly. "Now."

Sirius swallowed his yelp and nodded his head very slightly.

"So Lucius is in Azkaban, and Narcissa is dead," Voldemort said to Snape. "These—" His careless wave indicated Remus and Danger, now standing side by side with the cubs huddled behind them. "—are impostors." His voice grew icy. "And you have never truly been mine at all."

*Come on, Sirius, think. There's got to be something you can do.* Silently, Sirius shifted his form back to human, and eased his feet underneath him. *Letha's here, Prongs and Lily are here, and they're hidden, he doesn't know about them. They need an opening. Maybe while he's distracted with Snape—*

"But I will still have you," said Voldemort. His gaze still held Snape pinioned, and Sirius stared as he saw the glistening in Snape's black eyes. "You may never have been mine in your heart, but you were mine in your soul, and soon your soul will be mine in truth..."

He reached out and seized Snape's left arm, and pulled up the sleeve of the other wizard's robe. The Dark Mark gleamed red on the pale skin beneath, and Voldemort hissed between his teeth and laid his hand on it.

Snape convulsed, a half-choked cry tearing its way out of him. Sirius winced despite himself.

A small rustle beside Sirius, and then James and Lily stood there, Aletha between them, their wands in their hands. As one, the wands came up, as one they came down, and three spells shot straight and true for Voldemort's back.

Two of them struck the shield and disintegrated into showers of sparks. The third seemed to shrink as it passed through the coruscating field of light, but pass through it did, and Voldemort froze as it struck him. His hands opened, and Snape collapsed to the floor, gasping, his face twisted in pain.

"Whose spell got through?" Lily demanded urgently.

"I don't know!" James shook his head. "Let's all try again, everybody, we might even be able to collapse it—throw anything you think could get him out of there, on three, one, two—"

Voldemort shook himself and turned to face them. James dodged to one side, taking Lily with him, and Aletha dived out of the way behind Sirius.

"Three!" Sirius shouted, and threw his own spell. It sparked off the shield, turning it briefly opaque. Two or three others struck a second later, and then two passed within, and an instant later Snape skidded out of the far side of the shield. Lily dashed to him, James an instant behind her, Harry an instant behind him, and within a few moments the entire Pack had recongregated around Snape.

*Strange thought. But considering who we're facing...*

The shield's opacity died down, revealing Voldemort with his wand in his hand.

*I was sort of hoping he didn't have one, since he'd put up the shield without it. Guess he does.*

*Damn.*

"Odd," Voldemort said conversationally. "I had thought that spell impregnable to all but myself."

"Obviously you were wrong," Remus said.

"Indeed." Voldemort looked from Remus to Harry, then at Sirius and Aletha. "Could it be... but no. Speculation does nothing. A pity that I could not have taken more from Severus, but this pittance will have to do."

"Don't be a fool," Aletha said. "It's six to one. You might be able to kill one of us, but you can't kill us all."

Voldemort chuckled low in his throat. "Are you so very sure of that?"

Faster than Sirius' eye could follow, he flicked his wand upwards. "*Venti inferii!*"

xXxXx

Albus Dumbledore skidded to a halt outside the door of the room just in time to hear shouts of surprise and fear rising over a shrieking wind.

*I should have expected this. But I did not.*

*Still, if they are all present...*

He traced the tip of his wand along the door, making a square, and that portion of the wood vanished, allowing him to see the room within.

*Yes. All of them.* Lily was huddled beside Danger, both women's arms wrapped around the children, though one of Lily's hands lay protectively on Meghan's back where the child clung to a dazed-looking Severus. Remus and James braced themselves against the mass of people, straining to remain upright against the furious gusts which buffeted them. Aletha knelt beside them, her arms around Sirius, holding him up against the wind. Voldemort stood before them, his robes unmoved by the air swirling all around, his vicious smile beginning on his ravaged face.

*I cannot battle you directly, Tom, not this time. But I can make it easier for those within to defeat you.*

Dumbledore began to intone the spell that would be needed, after pausing for an instant to look upwards.

*They have not yet come to the full understanding of themselves, but I cannot believe that you will fail to help them for lack of a few words...*

xXxXx

Harry hid his face against Tigermum's robes, coughing. The magic wind Voldemort had made smelled like rotten meat and smoke, and it was strong. It had nearly blown him and Neenie out of Danger's grasp before Tigermum had grabbed them. Now the grownups were holding tight to the cubs and to each other, either that or trying to stay standing long enough to hit Voldemort with a spell. But even if they could get a spell out, Harry thought, the wind would blow it away...

*I'm supposed to be able to beat Voldemort. But I'm too little. I can't even stand up against this wind, and he made it with only a little bit of magic he stole. What could he do with all his magic?*

*I'd need lots more magic than I have to fight him. More magic than I'll ever have.*

So get more, suggested a voice at the back of his head.

*How? Steal it like he does?*

*No, silly. Ask to borrow it, and give it back when you're done. Like you do with Draco's models or Neenie's books.*

*Borrow. I can do that.* Harry closed his eyes, imagining it. The magic of the Pack, flowing into him, making him strong. Stronger than any of them were alone, stronger than anyone could ever be alone.

*Pack means never having to be alone. Not ever.*

He hugged Tigermum a little tighter and felt her answering squeeze. Something thumped against his chest, and he grinned. Even the baby wanted to help.

*Now I just need to know how to ask...*

The knowledge flowed into his mind easily, as though it were part of a den-night story he'd heard all his life.

*Oh. That's how*

He lifted his head, closed his eyes, and thought about his magic, burning inside him like a red fire. *Go to Tigermum, he told it. Touch her magic and ask if it will help me. Then go to the baby. Then Prongs, and then everybody else.*

*But hurry. There isn't much time.*

xXxXx

Lord Voldemort laughed aloud. The winds of hell were shredding his enemies' strength, dragging their power out of them and bringing it to him. Already he could sustain the spell. A little longer and he would be able to increase it, to make it so strong that they would never be able to stand against him.

*Perhaps I can do that sooner, though... touch is helpful for draining one bound by the Mark, but not necessary...*

He reached mentally towards Severus again, feeling the magic surging sullenly within the other man's soul to answer his call. *Come to me, he murmured, come as I bid you, leave your master and come to me... you are mine, after all, for he is mine...*

"NO!" shouted a tiny, furious voice, audible even over the sound of the wind. "NO NO NO!"

Voldemort blinked, startled. Who dared tell him no?

The huddle of people before him parted slightly to reveal the shouter—Black's child, her myriad of braids whipping in the wind, her lips drawn back

In a feral snarl, her hands buried in Severus' robes.

"*Mine!*" she screamed at him. "*Mine!*"

Voldemort stared at her for a second, then slowly began to laugh.

*This infant, this insignificant half-blood brat, thinks she can challenge me? The greatest Dark wizard ever born?*

Once more, he reached for Severus' power.

"*MINE!*" shrieked the girl again, and Lord Voldemort reeled backwards as a torrent of raging, raw magic struck him in the face.

It wasn't possible. It shouldn't have been possible. But somehow, the girl's power had penetrated his shield, just as the spells of the adults had earlier.

*I wonder... I knew about one of them, at least, and it seems my moves to disable him were not entirely successful...*

*No. I will wonder later. Now, I must conquer.*

He caught himself on the chair, stood upright once more, and allowed the winds to replenish his magic.

*Time for you to learn your place, child.*

*Time for all of you to learn.*

*I am Lord Voldemort, and I cannot be defeated.*

One of the other children lifted his head. Green eyes blazed, and black hair tangled into ever more complicated knots as the winds rushed over him.

*Not even by you, Harry Potter.*

*Goodbye.*

Voldemort lifted his wand high and sent a spell directly at the boy.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

xXxXx

Everything was going just a little bit slower than it should. Harry saw Voldemort's wand coming up, watched the spell forming at its tip, and had plenty of time to lift up his hand and summon the magic of the Pack. It blazed inside him, feeling like the biggest bonfire there had ever been, filling him to the very tips of his fingers and toes. He could do anything with it. Even things that you weren't supposed to be able to do.

"Go away," he said, pointing at the green spell rushing at him.

A surge of red power shot from his finger and rammed into the green spell. They both bounced off at crazy angles, the red stuff shooting into the ceiling, the green into the floor. Voldemort's eyes went wide.

*I wonder if that would work on him?*

"Go away," Harry said again, this time pointing straight at Voldemort. "Go away, we don't want you..."

The magic flowed out of him and pushed, but Voldemort's magic pushed back. It was ugly green and black, and it hurt where it touched the Pack's magic. Harry lowered his hand, shivering. He didn't like the place where it hurt—it was so deep inside him he hadn't really even known it was there

—

And then a shield, a shield made of magic so dark green it was almost black itself, rolled around Harry, protecting him, holding back Voldemort's magic. Voldemort recoiled in surprise, and Harry knew he'd never get a better chance—

*But what do I say?*

The voice in the back of his head spoke up again. *He doesn't look too good. Wherever he's been for the last five years, it wasn't a nice place. But he doesn't really deserve a nice place, does he?*

Harry growled deep in his throat. *No. No, he doesn't.*

He took a step forward and pointed at Voldemort. "We don't want you!" he shouted. "Leave us alone! *Go back where you came from—and stay there, this time!*"

The twelve different feelings of the Pack's magic surged forward, rushing through the dark green shield, engulfing Voldemort, whose mouth had opened in a silent scream. The winds stopped blowing—for one second, everything was still—

And then all the air in the room exploded inwards, and the skeletal figure of Lord Voldemort vanished like a candle flame blown out by the wind.



## Truth Amid the Lies Epilogue

*Fifty-one months later:*

**It strikes me,** Remus Lupin mused ‘aloud’ as he pushed a luggage trolley through King’s Cross Station, **that none of us have the proper attitude for returning to school except those of us not actually going.**

**Ah, but several of us are not returning to school, but rather going there for the first time.** Danger cast a tolerant glance towards the jubilant trio of eleven-year-olds in front of them, chattering rapidly together about the marvelous times they’d have at Hogwarts. **And it makes a difference to be on the other side of the desk, I think. Although you never minded school, did you?**

**No, I never did. I suppose I’m unnatural that way.**

Danger chuckled. **Learning magic is a little different than memorizing facts and figures one will never use in the real world. Which would explain the attitude of certain members of our party. If Meghan sticks her lip out any further, I think she’ll trip on it.**

“Come on, Pearl, it isn’t that long to wait,” Sirius coaxed. “Just three years. Think about poor Marcus—he’s got to wait eight whole years. He won’t ever be at school the same time Harry is!”

“Yeah!” Marcus added from atop his father’s shoulders. “It not fair!”

“Three years is so a long time to wait,” Meghan said, her arms crossed. “It’s almost as long as Rosie’s or Marcus’s whole life! And Abbey gets to go even though she’s just a baby!”

“That is true,” Lily said, dropping back with her daughter by the hand, “but think about this, Meghan. Once you get to school, you have to learn to do magic their way, not your way. While you’re still at home, you can still learn all the secrets. Especially if you have a special friend who’s very good at magic and enjoys teaching a student who really wants to learn.”

“Ohhhhh.” Meghan nodded hard. “I understand.”

“Besides,” Aletha added, “a little bird told me that there might be an opening on the staff of Hogwarts next year. For a Potions professor. You don’t know anyone who’s good with potions, do you, now, girls?”

Rosie Potter giggled. “You silly, Letha,” she said with all the assurance of four years of experience. “You gonna be professor? Like Moony?”

“Yes, I think I might be a professor like Moony. And that would mean I’d need quarters at the school. And if certain people *behave themselves* between now and then...” Aletha bestowed withering glares upon Marcus and Meghan. “...they might even be allowed to come along.”

“Leaves Padfoot right out,” James said from behind them, where he was maneuvering another trolley. “I don’t think he’s ever behaved himself in his life.”

“Oy!”

Remus tuned out the squabble and smiled at the small person perched atop the trunks on his trolley. “Ready for another train ride, sweetheart?” he said.

“Yes!” Abigail Lupin, age three and a half, bounced up and down, her grin altering not a whit. “I wanna ride on the train, and pet the avisible horsies, and go to the feast! And then play with the house-elves and help Mummy and Daddy make lessons!”

“That’s right,” Danger said, snatching at her daughter’s collar as one of the trunks shifted. “And somewhere in there—oof—” She released Abbey, put her hands on her back, and stretched. “Somewhere in there, you’re getting a baby brother. Or sister.”

“Yay baby!” Abbey bounced once more, then slid down from the trunks and trotted back to Remus. “I love you, Daddy,” she said with little-girl seriousness. “You love me?”

“Oh, yes,” Remus said, freeing one hand from the trolley to stroke the cheek of his miracle. “I loved you before you were born.” *And not just because you were the twelfth in our Pack magic, the tipping point that let Harry beat Voldemort... but that certainly didn’t hurt...*

“You still love me when baby gets born?” Abbey asked worriedly.

“I will always love you, my little joy.” Remus tugged one small brown ringle. “More than you can possibly know.”

Nuh-uh." Abbey shook her head. "I know lots. I know this much." She spread her arms wide.

"Well, there's a lot more to learn," Remus said, chuckling. "There's always more to learn. Now go say good-bye to Rosie. You're not going to see her again until the first Quidditch match in November."

Abbey ran back towards the other adults, Danger following at a more sedate pace. Remus watched them go, his trolley slowing almost to a stop.

"Knut for your thoughts," said James from his other side.

"I was just thinking about how beautiful they are," Remus said softly.

"Know the feeling." James rested his arms on the handle of the trolley. "Of course, there was a time I didn't think I'd ever see them again. Or at all."

"And I know that one." Remus grinned. "I'd say we're even."

"Pretty much." James held out his hand. "Shake on it?"

"Gladly." Remus reached for his friend's hand, then paused. "What have you got on there?"

"Moony!" James assumed a highly indignant expression. "How dare you insinuate that I would prank a simple, friendly handshake? I'm hurt. Hurt, I tell you."

"What is it?" Remus repeated, fixing James with a glare.

James snorted. "Bulbadox powder. And Padfoot owes me a Galleon. I told you it wouldn't work," he called over his shoulder.

"Bollocks," Sirius said, snapping his fingers.

Six hands smacked him as high as their respective owners could reach.

"Ow!" Sirius glared upwards at his son. "Et tu, Marce?"

"Tigermum and Mama Letha and Danger say I whack you if you say words like that in front of me," Marcus said righteously.

Sirius pouted. "Everybody picks on me."

"Come on!" Harry shouted over his shoulder from just in front of the wall between platforms nine and ten; Draco and Hermione must have already gone through, as they were nowhere to be seen. "We're going to miss the train!"

"All right, here we come," Lily called back. "Come on, girls, let's run!"

Remus smiled, watching from his trolley as Lily and the girls vanished through the wall, Aletha, Danger, and Sirius with Marcus close behind. He had never been able to decide which he liked better: summers, when the entire Pack could gather at the Manor Den and luxuriate in their time together, or the school year, when he could pass along to hungry young minds the knowledge he so enjoyed gathering.

*And if that's the worst problem in my life—that I can't decide which part of it is better—*

"Moony?" James snapped his fingers under Remus' nose. "You awake?"

"Coming." Remus shook his head and started for the wall masking platform nine and three-quarters.

*I have it good. Very, very good.*

*And that is, without a doubt, the truth.*

xXxXx

Nearby, and yet impossibly far away, a being who no longer even knew his own name howled in unceasing rage.

*I can still escape... still escape... it is not impossible, not for me... I will escape, and have my revenge...*

But deep down, he knew it was a lie.

xXxXx

The End