

Cross the Line Appearances Deceive

Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak and put it back on. He would try to extricate Hermione on his own while Ron was dealing with the raining office.... He still had a couple of Decoy Detonators, but perhaps it would be better to simply knock on the courtroom door, enter as Runcorn, and ask for a brief word with Mafalda? Of course, he did not know whether Runcorn was sufficiently important to get away with this....

And as he reached the foot of the stairs and turned to his right he saw a dreadful scene. The dark passage outside the courtrooms was packed with tall, black-hooded figures, their faces completely hidden, their ragged breathing the only sound in the place. The petrified Muggle-borns brought in for questioning sat huddled and shivering on hard wooden benches. Most of them were hiding their faces in their hands, perhaps in an instinctive attempt to shield themselves from the dementors' greedy mouths. Some were accompanied by families, others sat alone....

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter 13, "The Muggle-born Registration Commission"

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A boy on one of the benches turned his head, looking towards the stairs, as though he'd heard something, and Harry stared. Sleek silver-blond hair, pale skin, long and pointed face—

But no, this couldn't be Draco Malfoy. Besides the obvious impossibility of Malfoy being suspected of being Muggle-born, there was the fact that Malfoy had been involved in Dumbledore's murder last year, and even the Ministry under Pius Thicknesse and Dolores Umbridge couldn't let that pass uninvestigated. Besides, the look on this boy's face, the mingled worry and tenderness, was something Harry had never seen on Malfoy.

Who's that with him, though? Harry moved a few steps closer, trying to squint through the gloom. There was definitely a second person beside the boy, huddled against him. He made out a small brown hand clutching at the boy's robes, then caught a glimpse of braids like Angelina Johnson's as one of the dementors moved aside.

One of the doors on the left flew open, and all the Muggle-borns flinched back as a woman's desperate voice echoed out into the corridor. "No, please, you can't, my children, they need me, my husband, he can't take care of them alone—"

"Should have thought of that before he married a Mudblood, shouldn't he?" said a man from within the room with a coarse laugh.

"Not now, Yaxley," said the girlish voice of Dolores Umbridge. Harry's hands tightened into fists, and he saw the boy who wasn't Malfoy clench his jaw. The girl beside him lifted her head for a moment, and Harry blinked as her face came into view, tear-stained but determined.

I've seen her before—or someone who looks like her—

"If you continue to struggle, Mrs. Cattermole," Umbridge's voice went on, "you will be subject by law to the Dementor's Kiss. This is your final warning."

A quiet sob came from the courtroom, and a small woman with her dark hair in a bun appeared in the doorway, dementors on either side of her. Their gray-skinned hands held her upper arms firmly, and they glided away down the hall, half-pulling her with them, until the darkness shrouding them melded with the gloom beyond the torchlight.

"Next," called Umbridge from within. "Reginald Gray and Meghan Freeman."

The boy and girl Harry'd been watching got to their feet, hands entwined. Harry slipped between the dementors, trying to get a better look at the girl's face, trying to remember—the face in his memory was small, too small to be a living person, it must have been a photograph, and one he'd seen many times but without ever looking directly at that particular face or knowing a name for it—

Before he knew it, he was inside the courtroom, and the door was closing behind the pair. Umbridge, seated on a dais behind a high and imposing desk with Yaxley to one side of her and Hermione in her guise as Mafalda Hopkirk to the other, waved her wand towards the single chair in the center of the room, creating another one beside it, a bit smaller. "Sit," she said curtly.

Harry sidled around the edge of the room, avoiding the dementors which waited in the corners; it was irritating him immensely that he couldn't track down the girl's likeness, and to make it worse, he now had the feeling that she reminded him of not one person, but two, the one he had seen only in the photograph and someone else whom he had personally known...

Gray sat down a half-second after Freeman, and both of them looked up at Umbridge without making any attempt to hide their dislike. Neither flinched as the chains on the arms of the chairs slid around their own arms and tightened to hold them there.

"Why are these two being investigated together, Yaxley?" Umbridge said, turning to the man beside her. "I somehow doubt they are relations..."

Their rationalizations for being unable to prove magical blood are remarkably similar, Madam Undersecretary," Yaxley said, regarding Gray and Freeman as he might a pair of spiders he'd swatted with a shoe. "I felt it might save time to look into both together."

"Very well." Umbridge shuffled her parchments for a moment. "You are Reginald Raymond Gray?" she asked the boy.

Gray inclined his head, never taking his eyes from Umbridge.

"And you, Meghan Lily Freeman?"

"Yes—but it's not the name I *ought* to have had!" the girl burst out. "And I can prove it!"

"Wait your turn, Miss Freeman," Umbridge said with a little smile. "Mr. Gray, I believe we will start with you. His questionnaire, Mafalda?"

Hermione, who had been staring intently at the boy, jumped at being addressed, then began to dig furiously through a pile of parchment beside her. "Where are you," she muttered, "I know you're here, come on, come out, you know I'll find you..."

Freeman gave a little gasp. Gray's eyes swiveled towards Hermione and fixed on her.

"Here, here it is," Hermione said finally, shoving a small sheaf of parchment towards Umbridge. "And Miss Freeman's—I'll just hold onto that for the moment, shall I—"

"Yes, do." Umbridge flipped open the questionnaire Hermione had handed her and ran a stubby finger down the lines. "Ah, here it is—oh, I see. How very interesting. Tell me, Mr. Gray, do you have any evidence for this rather extraordinary claim?"

"None but my face," Gray said challengingly. "I'd be willing to take a blood test, but oh, that's right, that's a Muggle thing, and nothing Muggle can ever be good. Besides, you'd need some blood from my precious *father*, and he's nowhere to be found. Not that I'd even know that, if someone hadn't been kind enough to tell me who I looked like my first day here."

"Your attitude will not help your case, Mr. Gray," Umbridge said coolly. "Kindly restrain yourself."

Harry automatically dodged the Patronus cat which patrolled the entrance to the dais, his mind busy fitting pieces together. *He's about my age, but I've never seen him before—looks like Malfoy, but obviously he's not—it sounds like he's never known his father, and doesn't care for him much—*

The obvious answer certainly fit what Harry knew of Lucius Malfoy, and of Death Eater attitudes in general, but something still rang false about it. *If he's magical, why wouldn't he have come to Hogwarts? He'd have gotten a letter no matter his blood—*

"It says here that you've never attended Hogwarts, Mr. Gray," said Umbridge, still perusing Gray's questionnaire. "Can you tell us why that is?"

"My mum didn't want me to. She told me at the time she couldn't afford it, but when I got older, she told me the truth." Gray's eyes narrowed. "She thought it might make me turn out like my father. Arrogant. Treating other people like toys, like things, because I had power they didn't." He looked deliberately around the courtroom, then met Umbridge's eyes and sneered. "I guess she was right."

Umbridge sat up very straight with a little hiss, and Harry drew in a breath as the motion exposed something glittering against her chest—

The locket!

Hermione squeaked slightly as she saw it. Strangely enough, both Gray and Freeman also stared at it, their eyes going wide.

"Your distasteful slur on the proper wielding of power by those to whom it has been given," Umbridge said primly, "makes it obvious that whomever you may look like, you are no child of magic. Not that I would believe such a thing of a pure-blood in the first place... however, let us move on... Miss Freeman, you make a similar claim to that of Mr. Gray?"

Freeman shook herself slightly and focused on Umbridge again. "I can prove who I am," she said again, squaring her shoulders. "I have a letter, my father wrote it to my mother just before everything happened—"

"Mafalda?" Umbridge held out her hand, and Hermione passed her the old, tattered piece of parchment. Harry glanced at it out of habit and froze in place.

He knew that sprawling, untidy handwriting, knew it as well as he knew Ron's or Hermione's or Hagrid's. He could still remember the first time he'd seen it, on a letter delivered by the tiny owl Ginny would eventually name Pigwidgeon, on his way back to the Dursleys after his tempestuous third year—

"Sirius Black?" Yaxley's voice cut into Harry's half-stunned thoughts. "You claim to be his daughter?"

"I don't claim to be anything except what I am," Freeman said. "Read the letter. You'll see."

"Anyone can write a letter," said Umbridge coolly, looking up from it. "And even if it were real, there is no guarantee that you are the child mentioned, nor that Black was truly your father. Your mother is a Muggle?"

"Was," Freeman snapped. "She's dead."

"In that case, she could have been sleeping with any number of men during that time. This—" Umbridge held up the letter between thumb and

forefinger. “—proves nothing.” With a quick motion, she crumpled the parchment into a ball and tossed it aside.

Freeman cried out in protest, and Harry’s blood surged. His wand came up as if of its own accord. “*Stupefy!*” he shouted aloud. Red light flashed, and Umbridge slumped forward across the desk. A gust of cold air rushed over him as the Patronus cat vanished.

Hermione shrieked aloud. Yaxley turned to see where the threat had come from, spotted Harry’s hand emerging from under the Cloak, and fumbled for his own wand, but Harry’s was already out, and another “*Stupefy!*” threw Yaxley out of his chair to the ground beyond.

“Dear God, Harry—” Hermione began, clutching her chest, when a shriek from the floor made her and Harry both whirl. The dementors, no longer held off by Umbridge’s Patronus, were closing in on Gray and Freeman, who were struggling madly against their chains—

“*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*” Harry bellowed, and the silver stag leapt from his wand’s end and cantered around Gray and Freeman. The dementors shrank back from its light, and Harry pulled the Cloak off and ran down the stairs of the dais, scooping up the crumpled letter from the floor on the way. “Get the Horcrux,” he told Hermione over his shoulder.

“How many of them do you have?” Gray said softly.

Harry stopped dead, staring at the other boy. “What?”

“Fox, not now!” Freeman snapped. “Are you going to let us go or not?” she demanded of Harry. “If you don’t, we’ll both be Kissed. Besides, we can help you.”

“Give me a second.” Harry pointed his wand at the chain binding Gray’s right arm. “*Diffindo!*” Nothing happened. “Hermione, how—”

“Try *Relashio*,” Freeman suggested.

“*Relashio!*” Harry repeated, and the chains on Freeman’s chair clattered once and slid off her. She leapt up and darted for the dais as Harry repeated the spell on Gray.

“Thanks,” the other boy said shortly, standing up and stretching his arms. “Given any thought to getting out of here?”

“Patronuses ought to get us past the dementors,” Harry said as Hermione came running down the stairs of the dais, Freeman behind her clutching a pair of wands in her hand. “After that—” He broke off. “Why do you care?”

“Because I’m hardly going to be able to walk out of here on my own, Patronus or no Patronus,” Gray said, accepting one of the wands from Freeman. “I don’t even know if I can do one with a stolen wand. Besides, yours seems powerful enough to protect a load of people. It’s the Ministry workers up in the Atrium I’m more concerned about getting past. Won’t take them long to figure out I’m not one of them, nor Meghan. How long’ve you got left on your Polyjuice?”

Hermione gawked at Gray. “How did you know?”

Gray snorted. “You’re not acting like fat-arse Ministry officials, you both smell of cabbage, and you called each other different names than the rest called you. Very interesting names at that. How many Weasleys with you?”

“I don’t see why we should tell you anything,” Harry said coldly. “You seem to know it all already.”

“Just good guessing.”

“So how do we know you won’t sell us out?”

“Because as far as they’re concerned, I’m Muggle-born, so they’d give me a cell next door to yours in Azkaban,” Gray shot back. “That’s if we weren’t both Kissed for attacking Ministry officials.”

Harry drew breath for another retort, but—

“Stop it,” Hermione said sharply. “He’s right, Harry, we do have to get out of here. And our best chance is now, while you still look like Runcorn. People are afraid of him, so if you act high-handed and threaten them, we might have a chance. But we have to hurry.”

“Fine,” Harry said shortly. “Try for Patronuses, then, you three, even some mist would help...”

“*Expecto patronum*,” Freeman said clearly, and a great silver dog soared from the end of her wand. Harry stared at it for one instant, then turned away. *Later*, he told himself, *later*...

“*Ex-expecto patronum*,” Hermione stammered. Nothing happened.

“Here,” Gray said, holding out his hand to her. “Try it together. It’ll build confidence. Strength. That’s what a Patronus is all about.”

“You seem awfully up on magic for someone who never went to Hogwarts,” Harry said suspiciously.

“I read a lot.” Gray hadn’t lowered his hand. “It can’t hurt to try,” he said to Hermione coaxingly. “Just let me put my hand around yours and say it with you...”

The door of the dungeon opened, and a soaking-wet Ron shot inside just in time to see Gray wrapping his fingers around Hermione’s hand.

“Malfoy!” he bellowed, and charged at them.

“Shut up!” Harry snapped, catching Ron’s shoulders easily—Runcorn was a large and powerful man, and Reg Cattermole was small and weedy. “He’s not Malfoy, he’s on our side, what are you doing down here?”

“We’ve got to get going, Harry, they know someone’s here, I think they said there was a hole in Umbridge’s door, we’ve got five minutes if that—”

Harry swore, but the words vanished under the sound of two voices both shouting “*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*” at once.

Ron stared, open-mouthed, at the figure which emerged from Hermione’s wand tip. “I thought hers was an otter,” he whispered to Harry. “What is that thing, a wolf?”

“Looks like.” Harry shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Come on, we have to get moving.” He waved his wand towards the door, directing his stag out into the hall, where the Muggle-borns awaiting questioning cried out in surprise as the dementors surrounding them shrank away from the silver light.

Freeman ran out into the hall with her dog bounding at her heels. “Listen, everyone, the Ministry’s changed its mind,” Harry heard her say as he followed her out. “Mr. Runcorn says as long as we leave the country, they won’t bother us anymore. Everyone go home, get your families, and get to somewhere safe, if you have relatives in America or on the Continent, you can go to them...”

“Who’s that?” Ron muttered into Harry’s ear.

“Meghan Freeman, she said she’s—”

“Reg!” A woman separated herself from the crowd and hurried up to Ron. “Reg, I’m so sorry, it’s Mary, they’d already questioned her, they took her away, she’ll be...” She shuddered and glanced down the hall where the dementors had vanished earlier.

“Thanks,” Ron said awkwardly. “For telling me, I mean. What do I do now?” he hissed to Harry as the woman scurried back to her own family. “I didn’t know he was going to try to help her, and now because of me he never got the chance—”

“We’ll deal with it later, Ron, we have to get going,” Hermione said, appearing in the doorway behind him. “Harry?”

“Right.” Harry stepped forward. “Miss Freeman is right,” he said, waving to Meghan, who slipped out of the crowd to join him. “Take your families and leave the country, but do it secretly. Tell your friends, your neighbors, anyone you know who hasn’t been questioned yet. We...” He had a sudden brainstorm. “We don’t want to spend our valuable time and money chasing you down and locking you up, we just want you gone, and the sooner the better. Now let’s go. Who’s still got a wand?”

About half the crowd raised their hands.

“Okay, everyone without a wand stay with someone who has one, we’ll need to be quick. Everyone into the lifts, hurry up now...”

Gray and Freeman squeezed into the same lift as Harry, Ron, and Hermione. The three Patroni stood guard before the grilles as they clanged shut. Harry watched the silver shapes sink out of sight and wondered if they would stay around, or if they would disappear as their creators ascended. Stag, dog, and wolf...

He glanced over at Gray and Freeman again. Freeman had said something about being able to help them. Besides, if she truly was who she claimed to be, it was possible that number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and Kreacher belonged to her instead of to Harry. But there were things about both of them that didn’t add up, like how much they both knew about magic, and the way Gray had instantly connected his and Hermione’s presence with the Weasleys (almost as if, a traitorous portion of Harry’s mind whispered, Gray had expected Ginny to be along as well), and the question he’d asked just after Harry had told Hermione to get the Horcrux.

“How many of them do you have?”

He knew too much. Both of them knew too much, they were dangerous, he should leave them here to fend for themselves—

“Level eight, Atrium,” said the cool witch’s voice in the lift, and Harry felt his heart jump into his throat as he looked out through the grille. A team of wizards was hurrying from fireplace to fireplace, conjuring walls of bricks inside each one.

“STOP!” he bellowed in Runcorn’s voice, bringing all activity in the Atrium to an immediate halt. “Everyone come with me,” he said under his breath, and a few of the Muggle-borns trailed after him as he strode forward towards the unsealed fireplaces at the other end of the Atrium. Ron, Hermione, Gray, and Freeman shepherded the other ones out of the lifts and kept them together behind Harry.

“Albert?” said the balding wizard Harry’d seen earlier, frowning. “What’s going—”

“You’re to let this lot leave before you finish sealing the premises,” Harry said, waving to his group. “They’ve been officially cleared—oh, and the one who was sent on to Azkaban just a bit ago, Cattermole I think the name was, get her back here, would you? There was a mix-up somewhere, she shouldn’t have been questioned at all.”

Ron perked up. On Reg Cattermole’s face, it looked decidedly ridiculous.

“I don’t know, Albert,” said the balding wizard, glancing at the Muggle-borns behind Harry. “We’ve had strict orders—”

“Are you trying to tell me that I should look a bit more closely at *your* family tree?” Harry snapped. “No respectable pure-blood would dither like this!”

"No, no, of course not, I'm sorry, Albert—"

"Good. See to the Cattermole woman, then. Don't even bother bringing her back here, just send her straight home." Harry pointed to the lifts, and the balding wizard scurried away. "And you," he said to the Muggle-borns, "go on, get going."

By ones and twos, the men and women hurried into the fireplaces and vanished. Gray and Freeman hung back a bit, as did Ron and Hermione. Harry waved them in closer. "We'll have to move fast," he whispered, "straight out the fireplace and Apparate to you-know-where."

"Someone'll have to take me Side-Along," Freeman whispered, over Hermione's, "It's too small for all of us to go at once, we'll splinch," Ron's, "What if they try and follow," and Gray's, "No, actually I don't know where, maybe you could tell me."

"We'll just have to be careful about positioning, Hermione—they can't follow us, Ron, it's still under Fidelius—and who said you were coming?" Harry demanded of Gray and Freeman.

Gray flushed with anger. Freeman put a hand on his sleeve. "We can't make you let us come," she said quietly. "But we don't have anywhere else to go. Both our mums are gone." She swallowed before going on. "Besides, we can help you. We know things you don't know, and you might need to."

"We'll swear an Unbreakable Vow not to betray you if you want," Gray added. "You name the terms."

Harry opened his mouth, not even entirely sure himself what he was about to say—

"STOP THEM! THEY'RE HELPING MUGGLE-BORNS ESCAPE!"

All five of them whirled. Yaxley had just come charging out of a lift, headed straight for them.

"GO!" Harry yelled, shoving Ron and Freeman towards a fireplace. Gray grabbed Hermione's arm and charged for the one next to it, and Harry dived into the one beside that. He spun for a few seconds, then exploded up out of a toilet.

The door of his cubicle slammed open; it was Freeman, her face as pale as her brown-sugar skin would allow. "Hurry," she gasped, backing away to let him out. "You're the last—" Her eyes went very wide. "GET DOWN!"

Harry ducked, and a spell flew over his head to shatter on the wall beyond. Yaxley had materialized in the toilet behind him, and his wand was already coming down to cover Harry once more—

A snarl rippled over Harry's head, and Yaxley yelled in shock and pain. Harry threw himself upwards and around just in time to catch a cat-sized, brown-furred animal as it leapt away from Yaxley, who was clutching his throat, blood oozing around his fingers.

"Ron, go!" Hermione shouted. Ron spun in place and vanished. Hermione held out her hand to Freeman, who dashed to her side and clutched her arm. Harry took three steps back, his arm tightening around the animal he held. Yaxley was starting to get up, his hand was going into his robes, there was murder in his eyes—

A loud crack told him Hermione and Freeman were gone, and Harry turned on the spot, thinking only of the front step of Grimmauld Place, safely between Ron and Hermione, Freeman to one side, staring up at the house where her father had once lived—

Darkness, compression, the sense that he was working harder than he should have, and then he was there, panting for breath, slumped against the door with the serpent knocker above his head. Ron was sitting on the steps, wheezing. Hermione had a hand on her heart and another on Freeman's shoulder.

"Fox?" Freeman said, looking closely at Harry.

Harry was nonplussed for a second, then recalled her using that name for Gray. "I didn't see him," he began, but a fierce chitter from the area of his midsection cut him off.

"Fox!" Freeman cried gladly, holding out her arms.

Harry uncoiled his own arms to reveal a rather ruffled brown fox with large ears and a disgruntled expression. It sprang into Freeman's embrace, licked her cheek a few times, then leapt down onto the step and uncoiled itself upwards to become Gray. "Not the sort of spot you'd look for a hero," he remarked, looking at the door knocker. "Good place to hide."

"Look," Harry said, stepping between Gray and the door, "I want some answers from you. Who are you, really, and how do you know so much about me?"

"I'll tell you anything you want to know, but why don't we do it inside?" Gray pointed at the door. "I don't want to spend all night standing on the steps, and you've already taken us both inside the Fidelius, so it won't do you much good to keep us out here."

"I think that'll be my first question," Harry said, opening the door. "How do you know about the Fidelius?"

Gray chuckled dryly. "Once I'm done answering that one, I think you'll have a lot fewer questions for me. For both of us." He glanced back at Freeman. "Or a lot more. Could be either at this point."

"Great," Ron muttered. "Just what we needed. More questions."

Single-file, the five entered number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Cross the Line Might Have Been

"Nice place," Gray said appreciatively once they were inside.

"Not so *loud*," Hermione hissed, making shushing noises with both hands.

"Why?" asked Freeman, peering around the dark hall.

"Crazy portrait," Ron said. "She yells and shrieks if you wake her up. Plus there's a jinx halfway down the hall that ties your tongue up for a second—you just have to wait it out, then say, 'I didn't kill you,' and it'll go away."

"Right." Gray nodded. "Noisy portrait, jinx down the hall. Anything else?"

"Don't go upstairs without one of us," Harry said shortly. "Actually, don't go anywhere without one of us."

"We won't," Freeman said. Then she grinned. "But we probably could. We're very good at sneaking."

"Stop that." Gray rapped her on the top of the head. "We don't sneak around friends."

Freeman's eyes widened in mock astonishment. "We don't? What about that time when you—"

Gray covered her mouth firmly with a hand. "Which way are we going?" he asked Harry.

"Follow me." Harry led the way down the corridor towards the basement stairs, pausing as Moody's jinx rolled over him. "I didn't kill you," he said under his breath when his tongue was free again, and proceeded to the stairs. Gray and Freeman, behind him, caught the jinx a moment later and shivered in unison, whispering the necessary phrase as soon as they could.

"Who did that?" Freeman whispered to Harry as they descended the stairs. "The jinx?"

"A friend of ours," said Harry. He was beginning to regret bringing Gray and Freeman to Grimmauld Place. Even if their memories could be wiped, they had still been taken inside the secret of the house, which meant they could lead Death Eaters in, voluntarily or not.

They did help us, though. They're good with their wands. He glanced over his shoulder. *Much better than they should be, if they never went to Hogwarts...*

"I keep thinking I've seen you somewhere before," Hermione said to Freeman as they entered the kitchen. "I know I can't have, but I can't shake the feeling..."

"You might have seen a picture of my mum," Freeman said. "My father took her places, sometimes. She'd tell me stories, at nights. My favorite was the one about the wedding—" Her eyes widened suddenly, fixing on Harry. "That was your parents!"

"My parents' wedding?" Harry stared at the girl. "Your mum went to my parents' wedding?"

Freeman dropped her gaze. "She thought it was mostly a joke," she whispered. "Because he liked her, and didn't want to go alone, and because he knew his family would hate it if they knew he'd been out with a Muggle girl. So he asked her to go with him. But it didn't stay a joke. And then after two years, they made a mistake..." She pointed to the bag by Harry's side. "You've got the letter he wrote her. I saw you pick it up. You can read it if you want. It's not very long."

Harry reached into his bag, feeling suddenly absurd and awkward in Runcorn's huge body. The hour for the Polyjuice Potion must be nearly up, he thought.

His fingertips brushed crumpled parchment, and he pulled out the letter and smoothed it against his thigh. It was short, only four paragraphs long, but his own treasured first letter from his godfather hadn't been much longer.

October 19, 1981

Dear Aletha,

Could have knocked me over with a broom twig when I got your letter. Moony asked me if it'd been a Howler tuned only to me, and Wormtail wanted to check it for poison. I had to threaten to hex them before they'd back off.

You're sure then? You're really pregnant? I don't know how Muggle girls check those things—come to think, I don't know how witches do it either.

I didn't think I'd ever have to know. Disowned, disinherited, blasted off the family tapestry, what have you. It meant I didn't have to play perfect pureblood and provide the oh-so-noble-and-most-incredibly-ancient-house-of-Black with an heir, that was all I cared about.

But the more I think about it, the more I think I like it. I love playing with Harry, or I did before his mum and dad took him off into hiding. And I keep turning around expecting to hear your voice, or see you there laughing at me. My work used to be everything to me, and now all I want is to get away and see you again. So because you'll drive my mum and dad around the bend—because you're going to have my baby—and most of all, because I think I might love you—will you marry me?

I've enclosed some Muggle money, all I could spare from my vault. I hope it'll keep you, and the baby, until I can get away again. I'll probably be there within a couple weeks, so you'd better have an answer when I show up, and it'd better be the right one!

See you soon,

Padfoot

Harry's vision blurred. He tried to tell himself it was just the Polyjuice wearing off, he needed his glasses back, he'd get them on and he'd be fine again, but even as he dug into his bag, he felt the tears starting to come. Eyes shut, he found the small hard case and pulled it out, ducking his head and lifting his left arm, now awkward in its too-large sleeve, to shield his face.

Under cover of his makeshift shield, he scrubbed the tears away with the back of the hand holding the letter. Glasses restored to their rightful place, he looked up to see Ron in boxers and T-shirt, divesting himself of the tattered rags that had once been a set of Magical Maintenance robes, a pained expression on his face. Hermione, her hair patching back into brown, had a hand over her mouth. Freeman was giggling openly. Gray didn't seem terribly impressed one way or another.

At any other time, Harry knew, he'd have been covering laughter with Hermione, or even laughing aloud with Freeman, but not now. Now, his mind was busy conjuring up pictures. A young Sirius sitting at a desk somewhere, a flat in London or a room in whatever the Order of the Phoenix had used for Headquarters during the first war, chewing on his quill with a half-written letter in front of him... hesitating before writing down certain phrases, maybe reaching for his wand to erase them, then changing his mind...

"Your mum was at my parents' wedding?" he asked Freeman, who was calming herself down by the simple expedient of looking the other way. "With... with Sirius?"

Freeman nodded. "She loved to tell the story," she said softly. "It made her happy when nothing else did."

"Kreacher?" Harry called out.

With a loud snap, the house-elf appeared, looking mortified. "Master Harry, Kreacher did not hear you enter—Kreacher is a bad house-elf—"

His eyes fell on Freeman, and he stopped dead.

Gray muttered something and slid behind Hermione.

"If I wasn't your master, Kreacher," said Harry, "who would this girl be?"

"She—she—" Kreacher advanced on Freeman slowly. The girl swallowed but didn't move, except to kneel down and sit back on her folded legs. One small, wrinkled hand reached out to touch a smooth brown arm. "Yes," Kreacher breathed. "Yes, oh yes..."

"I asked you a question, Kreacher," Harry said harshly.

Kreacher's head snapped around so fast it would have been comical in any other circumstances. "Master Harry. Yes. Kreacher is sorry."

"Answer me, then."

The house-elf's shoulders drooped. "She would have been Kreacher's new mistress," he said in a tone so low it could barely be heard.

Harry kept his eyes away from Freeman, since he wasn't sure what he'd do if he saw her at this moment. "Am I that bad a master, Kreacher?" he said instead, aware of the banal sound of the words but not sure what else to say. "I thought we were getting along."

"No, Master Harry, no!" Kreacher looked up in astonishment. "Master Harry is not a bad master! But... the bonds between a house-elf and his family run very deep, very strong, and Kreacher was very devoted to the House of Black... and he had thought they were all gone, all..."

"I'm not your mistress, Kreacher," Freeman said, her voice shaking. Despite himself, Harry looked up at her and saw her eyes lowered, one tear escaping to trail down her cheek. "I never knew my father. I think he did have a child, a child he loved very much, but that wasn't me." Gray eyes opened, red-rimmed and tear-blurred but managing a faint gleam through it. "So you went to the right person after all."

Harry's throat tightened to the point of pain, but he resisted the urge to break down. He couldn't start crying in front of his best friends and a pair of strangers. No one would have any idea what to do, and they might set each other off.

Freeman, at least, seemed to be exactly what she'd said she was. He wasn't yet certain about Gray. There was something in the other boy that he... *distrusted* wasn't the right word, but *recognized* seemed silly. How could he recognize something he didn't even understand?

"Kreacher, could you go get Ron some robes, please?" Harry said, pleased at how normal his voice sounded. "And find my photograph album while

you're upstairs, then lay two extra places. I don't know about anyone else, but I'm hungry."

"I could eat," said Ron.

"Of *course* you could," two voices chorused at once.

Hermione turned to look at Gray.

"Simple deduction," Gray said airily. "Anyone shaped like a lamppost is always hungry, and a lamppost topped with a ginger mog is hungrier than most."

Hermione succumbed to a small fit of coughing. Ron's ears were invisible beside his hair. Freeman blinked rapidly, her shoulders shaking suspiciously. Harry kept his lips clamped tight, but could feel his insides roiling... any second, the laughter would burst out...

"Of course, I don't mean it personally," Gray added. "Some of my best friends are ginger mogs."

Hermione sucked in air and choked on spit, and her coughs turned into real ones. Ron grabbed her and thumped her on the back, glaring at Gray.

Gray shrugged one shoulder. "Sorry," he said. "I was trying to lighten things up a bit."

"Lay off or I'll show you how light things get through a second-story window," said Ron in a monotone.

Gray's eyebrows went up. "Touchy."

"Stop it," Freeman snapped before Ron could retort. "Both of you stop right now."

"Yes," Hermione coughed out, catching her breath and patting at her eyes with her sleeve. "Enough."

Harry reached into his bag, found a handkerchief, and passed it over to Hermione. She gave him a watery smile in thanks, blew her nose, and dabbed at her eyes. "You're here now," she said to Gray and Freeman. "We can't change that. But we still don't know you, and we've known each other for a long time. We don't take kindly to people poking fun at our friends."

Freeman's head drooped. Gray nodded slowly. "I'm sorry," he said, with more meaning in the words this time. "I honestly only meant it in fun. It's how I..." He stopped.

"How you what?" Harry asked, careful not to tread on the hems of his enormous robes as he got to his feet.

"Back home, I had a friend who was shaped a bit like you," Gray said. "Tall, skinny, long legs... he even had freckles, but not the hair, not like yours..."

Harry got the impression the other boy was picking his words carefully, as though to avoid rousing some demon from the past. He sympathized—there were times even now when he turned a corner or opened a door and suddenly felt the pain of losing Sirius almost as clearly as if it had just happened.

"He could always eat, no matter when it was, no matter what we were doing. Do anything for food, and the more food there was, the wilder the things he'd do." Gray looked up at Ron. "He was one of the best friends I ever had. I miss him. I suppose some part of me thought if I teased you like I used to tease him, maybe it'd be like having him back again." The blond boy smiled sadly. "Like a piece of home."

Ron nodded slowly, as though against his will. Harry could almost see thoughts of the Burrow running through his friend's mind. *What would he do—what would any of us do—if we knew we'd never see it again?*

A loud *crack* broke the moment. Kreacher was standing between Ron and Harry, arms full of cloth. "Supper is ready," the house-elf said quellingly, handing the folded robes to Ron. "If Master and his guests would please to be seated."

"Excellent," Ron said, pulling his robes over his head. Then he glanced at Gray. "Not a word," he warned.

Gray covered his mouth ostentatiously with a hand and proceeded to the table as though led by his elbow. Freeman and Hermione caught each other's eye and giggled.

Harry took his seat at the head of the table and found Kreacher at his elbow again, Harry's red-leather photograph album in his hands. "Does Master Harry want this now, or would he like to wait until after supper?" the house-elf asked anxiously.

"Erm..." Harry looked down the table. "Now's fine." He accepted the album, flipped through it until he found the picture he wanted, and lowered it to the table. The quiet hum of the others talking faded into the background as he concentrated on the faces in the photograph. There were his parents, there was Sirius, and—

"Meghan," Harry said aloud, not taking his eyes from the album. "I think I see her."

"Oooh—" Light footsteps on the floorstones, and then a small warm presence at his elbow. "Where?"

"There." Harry pointed. "Beside Sirius." He looked up at the girl beside him, then back down at the photograph. "You really do look a lot like her."

Chairs scraped as Ron, Hermione, and Gray joined Meghan beside and behind Harry.

"That's her, all right," Gray said. "Ms. Freeman." He sighed. "Shame what happened to her."

"What happened?" Hermione asked.

"Mum died just a couple months ago," Meghan said quietly. "She'd been ill almost as long as I can remember, but she still let Fox come live with us when his mum threw him out."

"She threw you out?" said Ron, looking around at Gray. "What'd you do?"

Gray's eyes were still fixed on the photograph, watching the tiny figures laugh and toast one another. "Mum doesn't like magic," he said. "It's... how I happened. He used magic on her, to catch her, to hold her. She still loved me, but she thought if I turned out magic, it'd mean I'd turn out like him. So she never told me anything she knew. She said my Hogwarts letter was a prank when it came. When she found out I'd been training all these years..."

"Training?" Harry asked.

"A witch lived in our neighborhood." Gray turned his head to the left, as though looking down a street. "When she realized Meghan and I were both magical, and that our mums weren't going to send us away to school, she started offering to watch us when they were away..."

Harry snorted.

"What?" Gray frowned at him. "I didn't think it was that funny."

"Hard to explain," Harry said, thinking of Mrs. Figg and her myriad of cats. "Did you at least have a good time there?"

Meghan's eyes brightened. "She was *wonderful*."

"Speak for yourself, titch," Gray said, shoving Meghan lightly on the shoulder. "She was very tough," he added more generally, "and she wouldn't let us get away with anything. But she taught us a lot. Practical stuff, and not all magical, either. How to sneak around and hide, how to think like your enemy, survival and first aid..."

"That sounds like she thought you'd be in a war," said Hermione.

"She did," Meghan said. "She told us about... *him*. About the war, and how she was sure it wasn't over. That's where we first heard about you," she said to Harry. "When she told us how the first war ended. We had to study you, like you were somebody out of history... except you're not. You're real."

"People in history were real once," said Hermione out of reflex, but her eyes were on Gray. "Is that how you knew to ask about Weasleys at the Ministry?"

Gray nodded. "It seemed pretty obvious," he said. "Anywhere there's Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, there's at least one Weasley around. Usually more than one."

"Sorry, just me," said Ron. "Think I'll do?"

"Well..." Gray looked him up and down. "There's not quite enough of you to make twins, but I suppose we'll get by."

Hermione coughed a few times, and Meghan giggled. Ron rolled his eyes. "Very funny," he said.

"Did you think so? Really?" Gray tilted his head, as though thinking. "I thought it could have used a bit of work. Maybe another few words somewhere. Or I could have said something about your brothers—you do have twin brothers, don't you?—or maybe I could have—"

"Shut up, Fox," Meghan interjected calmly.

"Or that." Gray closed his mouth with a click.

Hermione laughed aloud this time. Ron was grinning openly. Meghan smiled, then looked back at the photograph. The happiness faded from her face, to be replaced by a longing expression Harry knew well. Almost without meaning to, he put out an arm, and Meghan fitted herself inside its curve without taking her eyes from the laughing figures on the page.

"Of all the words e'er read or seen," Hermione murmured, "the saddest are, *It might have been*."

Harry shook himself slightly at this. As usual, Hermione was right. It was nice, if sad, to think about might-have-beens, but somehow Harry thought Sirius wouldn't have approved of him, Harry, sitting around moping over photographs and dreaming up unlikely stories when there were more important things to do.

"Dinner," he said firmly, closing the album. "We need to eat. We won't be good for anything if we don't."

Meghan nodded, pressed her shoulder against his once, then slid out of the curve of his arm and went to sit down at her place. Gray inclined his head gravely and seated himself as well. Ron and Hermione went to their own seats, and Kreacher scurried out of nowhere to begin serving the meal, with a strong air of *well, finally* about him.

Ideas and problems niggled at Harry as he ate. They had the locket now, but where to begin searching for the other Horcruxes? They had no idea at

all what one of them might be, and of the two they did know, the cup would certainly be securely hidden and Nagini was never far from Voldemort. Different problems, but they came to the same thing: The remaining Horcruxes were in no more danger now than they had been before Harry Potter had ever known they existed.

And what about Dumbledore's mysterious gifts? A Snitch, a Deluminator, a book of tales—what did these have to do with the search for the Horcruxes? Were they supposed to send the Snitch to hover over the place where the cup was buried, or turn out the lights because the unknown Horcrux glowed in the dark, or lure Nagini to them by—

Harry nearly choked on a mouthful of steak-and-kidney pie. "I'm all right," he croaked as soon as he could speak again, waving off Ron and Gray, who were on their feet. "Just..." He caught his breath and swallowed. "Wondering what would happen if we tried to read Nagini a bedtime story out of your book, Hermione..."

"All right, mate, this time you have gone round the twist," said Ron. "We'll get you a nice padded room at St. Mungo's, don't you worry."

"That's not funny," Meghan said sharply. "Don't make fun of—"

"Pearl!" Gray snapped.

Meghan paled, as much as her complexion would allow it, and shut her mouth instantly.

Hermione looked between the two of them, finally settling on Gray. "So what do you know about people in St. Mungo's?" she asked, her voice cool.

"Our lessons weren't just about you three," Gray answered, his tone matching hers. "We had to learn about everyone we might be fighting with, or against, someday."

"So you know about our friends, then."

"Many of them. As many as we could get information on."

Looking down the table at them, Harry's earlier half-recognition of Gray suddenly crystallized. If Hermione had somehow been coerced into drinking Polyjuice Potion containing hair from Draco Malfoy's head, the resultant person would look and act rather like Gray. Of course, that was assuming Hermione would even consent to do such a thing, or that she would be in a position where she'd have to, and that was going places Harry really didn't want to think about right now...

"Did you have lessons on Horcruxes too?" he asked aloud, seizing on the topic to distract himself.

"Yes, actually," Gray said, turning to face Harry. "Our teacher—Mrs. B, we called her—thought that was the most likely reason Voldemort hadn't died when he was defeated at the end of the first war."

"She wasn't the only one who thought so," said Meghan. "I sneaked a look on her desk once last year. There was a letter there, about Horcruxes, all in tall loopy writing, but..." She grimaced. "I didn't get a chance to really *read* it."

Gray snickered. "I wondered what you did to make her set you ten repetitions of the obstacle course."

"Tall loopy writing..." Harry raised his wand. "*Accio Snitch!*"

A few small crashes sounded, Mrs. Black shrieked in the entranceway, and then the small golden ball zoomed through the door and landed in Harry's palm. Kreacher hurried up the stairs, glancing worriedly at Harry as he went, but Harry didn't have time to do more than notice the house-elf's departure.

"Meghan," he said, turning the Snitch to show her the words Dumbledore had written on it. "The writing on the letter—"

Meghan looked at the Snitch, and her eyes went very wide. "I think so... maybe... yes!" A slim brown finger traced the tall capital I. "That looks just the same as the one in the letter did!"

"Hold the Bludgers," said Ron. "Are you trying to say *Dumbledore* was writing to your teacher?"

"If he wrote on the Snitch there, then probably yes," Gray said. "Can I see it, Potter?"

Harry handed the Snitch to Gray, who ran a finger along one of its wings, hefted it in his palm, then peered at the writing. "'I open at the close'—the close of what?"

"We don't know," said Hermione. "We've been wondering about that ever since Harry got it."

"When was that?"

"The day my brother got married," said Ron. "Same day the Ministry fell... hell of a honeymoon they must be having, Bill and Fleur."

"Are they somewhere safe?" Gray asked. "I'm not asking where," he added hastily, "just are they safe, and together, and knowing that everyone they care about is more or less all right?"

"I think so." Ron frowned in thought. "They were talking about putting their cottage under Fidelius, I know, so they probably went through with that, and Dad's Patronus said everyone was all right..."

"Then they'll manage," Gray said confidently. "People in love are like that."

"And you'd know?" Harry asked.

Gray shrugged. "I've been there a time or two. Lovely girls, both of them, but it wouldn't have worked out with one of them and the other one's long gone. Always more where they came from, though. One's much like another."

"Nice attitude," Harry said coolly.

Gray fixed him with a stare. "Watch your tone, Potter."

Harry squelched his first response—*This is my house, I don't have to*—and settled for clenching a fist in the pocket of the too-large robes he was still wearing. "You need to be a little more polite while you're my guest," he said after a moment to try to find words, with a dismal awareness that the ones he'd found weren't very good.

"Your guest?" Gray snorted. "Is that a fancy way of saying 'prisoner'? Because I could take all three of you. Blindfolded. You're pathetic."

Harry gritted his teeth and reached slowly into the pocket of the robes.

"I was watching at the Ministry, you know," Gray went on, waving his hands in the air. "Did you have any idea what was going on there, any plan at all besides 'shoot people, get locket'?" He let his jaw hang loose and threw his voice down into a grunt for the last four words.

Harry's hand closed around what he'd been looking for, and he made himself relax, just listening to Gray's tirade.

"You have no training," the blond boy ranted. "You have no discipline. You have no—"

Harry's arm snapped up, his wand in his hand and pointed directly at Gray, who cut himself off in the middle of a word with a muffled squawk. Ron laughed aloud, and Hermione applauded, a smile touching her lips.

"Got anything to say?" Harry asked Meghan, who was sitting at her place at the table, looking disgusted.

"Just one thing." Meghan pushed her chair back so she was facing Gray. "You," she said loudly, "are *stupid*." She pulled her chair back in. "There, I'm done."

"She's right, you know," Ron told Gray conversationally. Hermione elbowed him.

"What I don't have at the moment," Harry said quietly, looking down the length of his wand at Gray, "is patience. Especially with people who know too much and talk too much. Let me see your arm."

Gray glared at him, but pulled back his left sleeve to display an unmarked forearm. "Going to claim I got it erased somewhere?" he asked.

"No." Harry lowered the wand slightly, so that it was pointing at Gray's chest. "But I think it's interesting that you knew exactly what I meant."

"Everyone knows about the Dark Mark now," Gray returned, his eyes flicking back and forth between Harry's face and the tip of the wand. "What was I supposed to do, play dumb?"

"I'll tell you what you're supposed to do!" Meghan burst out, jumping up and stamping her foot. "Apologize, Fox, you were wrong and you know it!"

"Pearl, shut *up*," Gray ground out through clenched teeth. "You don't know what you're asking—"

"Oh yes I do." Meghan folded her arms and matched Gray glare for glare. "I miss my mum too. And my friends. And I have about as much chance of getting to see them again as you do, so stop pretending you're a big martyr and nobody understands you."

"At least you know they didn't hate you," Gray muttered. "The stories my mum was telling..."

"And this is your only chance to try and fix it." Meghan turned to look at Harry, then at Ron and Hermione, on the other side of the table. "Please," she said. "We'll do anything—at least I will—if you'll just let us stay. We've been training for this our whole lives. The least we can do is help you."

"Anything?" Harry said, glancing at Hermione, who was mouthing a word at him. "Even swear an Unbreakable Vow not to do anything against us?" The slight nod of a bushy head told him he'd understood her correctly.

Meghan shut her eyes for a second, then opened them again. "If that's the only way you'll let us stay, then yes," she said. "At least I will. I don't know about *him*." She graced Gray with the sort of look Harry had only ever seen directed towards Severus Snape.

Gray had his arms wrapped around his chest; he seemed to be trying to contain an outburst by main force. "I don't know," he said in a tight voice. "I... I'm sorry for being rude, but..." His shoulders slumped. "Yes. I'll swear."

He looked back up at Harry. "This is all I've ever wanted to do," he said. "Find the bastard who raped my mum, and everyone who told him it was all right, and make sure they never do it again. If I have to swear a Vow to be able to help you do that, then I will."