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That Which Does Not Kill Us

Chapter 1

Once upon a time, there was a being without a name. We may call him Luq, for reasons which would take too long to explain.

Luq loved to travel from world to world, from universe to universe, and change their fates. Not openly, not bluntly, but carefully, delicately. And what he loved best to do was to ruin so-called "happy endings".

And so when he came across a world known to some as the Dangerverse, he was overjoyed. Such a rich tapestry to ruin!

He bided his time. He waited and watched. And finally, he struck.

But only a very few people, after the fact, knew that anything had happened at all...

Hermione Granger sighed, staring at the newly rebuilt façade of Florian Fortescue's without really seeing it. Ron would be back in a moment with their ice creams, but not all the blueberry-pistachio swirls in the world could erase the fact of the third person who ought to have been there.

At least he's alive. And he did what he needed to do. Voldemort will never hurt anyone, ever again. But that doesn't make me miss him any less.

Harry had duelled Voldemort there in the Great Hall until both of them had collapsed from exhaustion, at which unbelievably inopportune time the Ministry had got its act together and intervened. Voldemort was safely incarcerated somewhere, though no one was eager to make the location public, and Harry was being treated for severe magical exhaustion at St. Mungo's.

Or, if you believe Ginny, being kept out of the way so he can't tell anyone the Ministry is still under the control of the Death Eaters. Hermione sighed again. *The corruption was bad enough when it was actually happening; do we really need to see it where it isn't?* But she couldn't blame Ginny. Being separated from Harry all year, thinking it was finally going to be over and they could have a normal relationship, and suddenly having him yanked away again...

I might want to believe in conspiracies if something like that happened to me with Ron. She looked up and smiled as said red-haired exasperation arrived at last, two cones carefully balanced in his right hand. "Have you heard from Neville lately?" she asked.

"Got a letter yesterday." Ron handed her one of the cones. "Just a note, really. He's busy with that advanced program, and it sounds like his gran's started matchmaking for him."

"You don't think he and Luna..."

Ron shook his head. "They'd never have worked," he said with the maddening certainty of a boyfriend of three-months' standing. "Even if she hadn't..."

Hermione nodded, looking away quickly to get control of herself. One hand went to her cheek, rubbing at the small scar she must have acquired that night. She'd known people died in war. She'd even known it could happen to people she cared a lot about. But somehow she'd still been surprised to see Luna's name on a list of casualties from the Battle of Hogwarts.

Funny. You'd think I'd be more used to it. After Sirius, and Professor Dumbledore... and then Professor Lupin and Tonks...

Ron laid a hand on her arm. "You've still got me," he said.

"Yes." Hermione looked up at him and smiled. "I do."

"Ah, young love," said a familiar—and thoroughly unwelcome—voice. "How sweet. This seat taken?"

Hermione took a breath to answer, but it was too late. Draco Malfoy was already sitting across the table from them both.

"Since when are we on speaking terms?" Ron demanded.

"You're the one speaking at the moment. Or you were." Malfoy stopped, wrinkling his brow. "I think I'm confused."

"Yes, I think you are." Ron shoved his chair back. "Come on, Hermione. We've got nothing to say to *him*."

Hermione stood up slowly, her eyes still lingering on Malfoy's face. "When did you get that?" she asked.

"What?"

"Don't play stupid." Hermione pointed. "That."

"Oh, you mean this." Malfoy ran a finger down the short vertical scar on his left cheek. "I suppose I got it the same time as you got yours." Gray eyes caught and held her hazel ones. "When was that?"

"At the Battle of Hogwarts. I think." Hermione heard her voice quaver and summoned fury to cover it. Peevishness was all that answered, but it

would do. "If that's any of your business, which it isn't."

"You're quite right. It's not." Malfoy leaned his elbows on the table. "I wanted to say thank you for what you did that night, though. I do have some manners." He glanced at Ron. "Contrary to popular opinion."

"Wonderful." Ron pulled his chair over again, spun it around, and sat on it with his arms across the back. "Apparently you missed the lesson on 'not gate-crashing private parties'."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I must have missed the sign you put up to tell the world you didn't want to be approached while eating ice creams in public in broad daylight."

"Stop it!" Hermione snapped. Ron flushed and closed his mouth over whatever he'd been about to say. Malfoy leaned back in his chair slowly, looking from one of them to the other. Hermione caught his glance and held it. *You're not the only one who can play this game...*

"You wanted to say thank you," she said to him. "Now you've said it. You're welcome. Was there anything else?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Not really. Suppose I'll be going, then." He got to his feet in one fluid motion and held out his hand to Ron. "Be seeing you."

Ron gave the hand the same look he'd given the remains of the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. "Not if I can help it," he said, crossing his arms.

Malfoy sighed and turned to Hermione. "Pax?" he inquired, extending his hand towards her. "I don't expect friendship, but I'd rather not fight."

Hermione looked from the hand to Malfoy and back again. *He's up to something. Back at Hogwarts, he'd never even touch me. Too afraid of Mudblood slime...*

But as she opened her mouth to say that, she raised her eyes to his face again and saw his expression.

He wants this. To not be my enemy anymore. He's not making fun or trying anything horrible. He just wants to make peace.

I'm not about to let a Slytherin outdo me there. Least of all Malfoy.

"Pax," she agreed, and met his hand with her own. "Oh!"

"Sorry." Malfoy let go rapidly. "I must have gathered a charge coming over here. Didn't mean to shock you."

"Your existence shocks me," Ron said in a bored tone. "Why don't you go play with a hippogriff?"

"Thanks for the recommendation, Weasley, I think I will." Malfoy inclined his head to her. "Granger. Good to see you again."

Hermione sank slowly back into her chair, rubbing her hand. Ron rummaged in his pocket and brought out his wand. "Give me your hand. Let me see if he left anything on you."

"He didn't," Hermione said, letting her eyes follow the bright hair through the crowd in Diagon Alley. "He wants to be friends again, Ron."

"*Again?* Since when was he ever our friend?" Ron withdrew his wand's tip from her hand. "You're right, though. No magic that I can see. We might want to get someone else to take a look. Maybe Bill, if he can be spared from fixing up the nursery at Shell Cottage..."

The pale-blond young man rounded the corner into the narrow offshoot of Diagon Alley and leaned against the wall, turning his face and bringing up his arm to cover it. He'd been warned. It shouldn't be this painful.

Pain doesn't pay much attention to shoulds and shouldn'ts. And having one of your oldest friends and your twin look at you like dung on their shoes... that hurts. Warned or not.

He pressed finger and thumb against the inside corners of his eyes, then lifted his head and squared his shoulders. *I've done all I can there. Planted my seed. It'll grow in time.*

I only hope I have the time to give it.

He started for the Leaky Cauldron and the room he'd rented there. His list of objectives and possible entry vectors was there. Given Ron and Hermione's reactions to him, the latter had just got a lot shorter.

But I think that overbearing misget Luq may have made a big mistake.

Draco Black grinned to himself. *Next stop, Longbottom House.*

Neville Longbottom knelt beside a row of plants in his greenhouse, his hands buried to the wrists in the soil of a particularly large flowerpot. He almost had it... just another moment... there!

A swift yank, and his right hand emerged clutching a squirming bit of root. He changed his grip, squeezed a small portion of it between thumb and forefinger, and dropped it swiftly into the metal bowl beside him, then looked down at it and cursed mentally. He'd known even before he got his

hands into the dirt, but having his knowledge confirmed didn't make his mood any better.

"Rootworms," he said aloud. "I'll have to worm this whole row now..."

Why don't I quit lying to myself? Rootworms are bad, but that's not what I'm really worried about.

No, the thing—or rather, the person—with that distinction was still upstairs. In his bedroom, no less, which would have Gran frothing at the mouth if she ever found out about it. And to his consternation, more and more of the things that person had told and shown him were looking true.

But what can I do, even if they are? No one's going to listen to me.

Though the person upstairs insisted that at least a few people would, and that others could be convinced. Neville agreed with the first part, if with some reservations, but he'd never been good at convincing people. That had always been what Harry did best...

Before he could get any farther into introspection, the doorbell rang. Brushing dirt off his hands, Neville headed for the front of the house.

Left to his own devices, Neville would have picked the person on the doorstep as one of the least likely to ever be there. If he listened to the person in his bedroom, though, the odds of its happening (*which it is*) went up significantly.

I don't know if I like this.

"Morning, Longbottom," said Draco Malfoy non-committally, both hands carefully placed in plain view down the sides of his robes.

"Malfoy." *I can be polite if he can.* "Did you need something?"

"I was actually hoping to come in and talk. Make amends for... you know." Malfoy waved a hand vaguely. "All that. I'm working on a fresh start."

"Are you." Neville kept the door mostly between them, watching the other carefully. *If he were any tenser, I'd expect him to start changing colors.*

"Yes. And one other thing." Malfoy looked directly at Neville. "If there's someone here who... shouldn't be, someone who seems out of place... maybe I can help. If you'll let me. If I can see her."

All right, that does it. "Wait there." Neville shut the door and drew his wand. If he could remember how to do this... Hermione'd showed him, but sometimes he didn't remember spells properly...

Draco fidgeted on the doorstep, starting to wish he hadn't come. If he was wrong... if Neville was using this time to call the authorities, to report a nutter trying to get into his house...

The door creaked open again. Draco spun to face it.

A small, dark face, framed in the gap between door and frame, stared out at him with frightened eyes, almost the same silvery-gray as his own.

Neither of them would ever be able to say who moved first, and in the end it didn't matter. What mattered was a brother and sister, reunited against the world, clinging to one another and finding strength in the clasp of arms.

We could never have done this alone. But now... now we're not alone.

The time of reckoning is about to begin.

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Chapter 2

Meghan insisted on sitting in the same big chair as Draco, her legs curled under her and his arm around her shoulders. Said arm went numb after a while, but Draco shifted to get the blood flowing through it again without removing it. *She's all I have right now. I'm not about to let her go.*

He smiled to himself. *Wonder if that makes her the Pearl of great price...*

"So it's all true, then," Neville said from across the room where he was sitting cross-legged on his bed. "Everything you said."

Meghan bridled at this. "Of course it's true! Did you think I'd lie?"

"No. But people can make mistakes. Get confused."

"You didn't think I was confused. You thought I was crazy." Meghan hissed between her teeth. "Well, I'm *not*."

"I didn't know what to think," Neville said in his calming tone, and Draco felt Meghan relaxing against him at the sound. "You were saying things that did sound crazy. But you were real. And you knew things and showed me things that would have been very hard to fake."

"You mean like that one place on your—"

"Yes, like that," Neville interrupted hastily, going the same red as the Gryffindor pennant hanging above the bed.

Draco flicked Meghan on the shoulder, and she punched him back. "So now there is more proof that I'm telling the truth," she said. "If we could find Dadfoot or Danger, they know it too."

"They must have been stopped from telling somehow," Draco said. "That's how it was set up. The only people who know the truth either can't say it or won't be believed. You and I are the second category—you because you're not supposed to exist, and me because I'm..."

"A mama's boy Slytherin without the guts to stick to either side," Neville finished. "Supposedly."

"*Thank* you. So that leaves them not being able to speak for some reason. I think I can guess what happened to Padfoot, it could even be something that would happen by accident or by a nasty spell, but Danger's different. Even if she couldn't speak aloud..." Draco stopped, seeing Meghan's stricken eyes. "You know," he said. "Tell me."

"I can't," Meghan whispered. "I don't want to say it..."

"Then don't." Draco reached into his robes and drew out a fine gold chain. Four small medallions dangled from it. Meghan's eyes followed it hungrily as it grew in response to Draco's tug, and a little shudder ran through her body as he tossed it over her head as well as his own.

"I have a firecall I need to make," Neville said, standing up. "Send a Patronus if you need me."

Draco nodded, then closed his eyes and laid his head against the back of the chair. **You can tell me here**, he murmured silently to Meghan. **It doesn't count as saying it if you just think it to me.**

Does so.

And how does your garden grow, Mistress Mary? Draco dodged her half-hearted swipe and kissed her hand on the backswing, then put his seriousness into his tone. **Pearl, I need to know this or we don't have as good a chance of fixing things. Of getting back our Pack, our Pride, our lives. Please. Tell me.**

If you really want to know. But... Another shudder, and she burrowed close to him. **You won't like it.**

I haven't liked anything since I woke up with whatever-he-is that calls himself Luq looming over me and telling me how he'd destroyed my world, little sister. This won't be too different.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Three minutes later, he wasn't.

"And you really think it's true," the person on the other end of the firecall said for the third time.

"Yes." Neville wasn't tired of repeating himself. One more time and he might be, he thought, but this was important enough that he didn't plan to get tired quickly.

"Do they know where..." The end of the sentence was unnecessary. It had been the only thought on the speaker's mind for months.

"I think Malfoy—Black—does. Meghan doesn't, but I think that's because this Luq knew she might come to me, so he only told her specifics about

people she couldn't possibly get to." Neville weighed his options and decided candor was the better part of discretion. "If what's happened is equally nasty all over, you won't like it."

A low laugh. "I already don't like it. I doubt I could like it less. But I'm sure I'm wrong. All right. I'm with you. Flame off and I'll come through right away."

"Right. See you in a moment." Neville pulled his head out of the fire and looked around at the sound of feet. Draco and Meghan had just come into the kitchen. Both were wearing murderous looks. He didn't blame them. The story Meghan had told him had him ready to train rosevines around Luq and leave them there, and it wasn't even his own parents involved.

My own parents. My Mum and Dad. If Meghan's telling the truth... if the world she told me about is real... maybe, just maybe...

He slid that hope back into the cubbyhole where it had lived for so long. If Meghan was right, he wouldn't need hope anymore. He'd have reality. And if she was wrong...

Hope's not so bad. Better than a lot of things.

The fire flared up green, and a figure only a bit bigger than Meghan shot out of it. Golden freckles and white teeth gleamed in the firelight.

"So," said Ginny Weasley, flicking a casual Cleaning Charm over herself. "How do we get to Harry?"

"So that's the best plan I can think of," Draco said, letting the scroll he'd been holding roll back up on itself. "It's completely insane and it will never work, but everything else I could imagine had even less chance."

"If this is sanity, insanity sounds better and better," Ginny said bluntly. "I've known there was something wrong for months. No one would listen. Not even Mum..."

"She's under a Memory Charm," said Meghan. "But Memory Charms can be broken."

"Mine was never very good to begin with," Ginny said, making a face.

"That was probably deliberate," said Neville. "To hurt you more."

Ginny bared her teeth. "Well, guess what? I'm about to hurt back. Hard." She stretched out a hand for the scroll. "Let's go over this one more time."

The plan had the dubious virtue of simplicity. They would sneak into St. Mungo's under cover of darkness and Disillusionment, then break into two groups. Neville and Ginny would go for the room where all the magical shields on the "dangerous prisoners" wards were controlled, and Draco and Meghan would head upstairs to wait until said shields went down. Then inside, find Harry, break him loose of whatever had been placed on him personally, and run for it.

"At least we know the shields are controlled from somewhere central," Neville said in a tone of *make-the-best-of-the-ridiculously-bad-situation*. "We won't waste time trying to take them down at the door."

"No, we can waste time inside the ward." Draco ran a hand through his hair, completely disarranging it and, judging by the looks on Ginny's and Neville's faces, adding another point to the *I-don't-know-who-he-is-but-he-can't-be-who-he-looks-like* column. "Look, I care as much about Harry as anyone here, I know this was my idea to begin with, but it really isn't going to work. All we'll do is get ourselves caught too, and there goes our best chance. Maybe we should try to find the adults first—they'll be able to help us..."

"But they're killing her," Meghan said, her voice barely audible.

"What?" said three people at once.

Meghan blinked at Draco. "Didn't you know?"

"I don't even know who you're talking about."

Meghan's hands went to her mouth. "Oh. Oh. Draco, I'm sorry, I thought you knew, I would have told you a lot sooner if I knew you didn't know..."

Something came loose around the bottom of Draco's stomach. "Luna?" he said, his voice coming out as a harsh whisper.

Meghan nodded mutely.

A chill calm filled Draco, sharpening his vision and hearing until the room glittered and hummed around him. He could feel the quiet strength of his muscles and his magic, lurking beneath a surface serene as a snowdrift. This state would have its price later, but just now it was beyond gold or silver, for it would let him hear what Meghan had to say without an immediate reaction.

"Tell me," he commanded.

Meghan licked her lips, trembling. Ginny put out a hand, and Meghan's found it. "They want her to See for them," the littler girl whispered. "But she won't. She didn't believe it when they lied to her, because she could See the truth. So now they're trying other ways. To make her do what they want. And they're getting angrier and angrier because she won't. They have to keep Harry alive, because without him Voldemort will die, but they don't need Luna..."

Draco nodded, slowly. "Tonight, then," he said.

"Yes." Ginny put her hand into the center of the table. "Tonight."

"Tonight," Neville echoed, laying his hand on top of Ginny's.

"Tonight," whispered Meghan, adding her own hand.

Draco placed his hand on top without a word. The pact had already been sworn.

Just a little longer. Just wait a little longer. An hour, two, three. We're coming, brother. I'm coming, my love.

Just a little longer.

Crazy plans are perhaps a bit less crazy when one has special skills.

Halfway up a wall in the lobby of St. Mungo's, Neville—*Captain, Meghan said I was called like this, and in case I was still wondering if she's right or not I think this clinches it*—waited for his cue.

A hideous shriek rang out from the entrance. *There it is.*

Ginny half-leapt, half-fell into the open space below him, writhing between her human and lynx forms, screaming as though the transformations were as painful as they looked. Patients craned their necks, Healers came rushing over, and no one had eyes to spare for a patch of air which slid down the wall and unfolded into an inconspicuous teenager.

Second door on the right and straight on till morning. Neville grinned to himself, sliding through the door and tapping his wand against it. If anyone followed him through, they would be amazed how squeaky the hinges were for such a well-used door.

Now to take down all the spells on the secret wards on the fourth and a half floor...

(Of course there's two Healers on duty at the door,) Meghan signed to Draco, rolling her eyes for emphasis. (We can't get it easy.)

(We have it easy enough,) Draco signed back, glancing over his shoulder at the door to the hall from the room where they crouched in wait. (There's two of us. If we get them at the same time, they won't have a chance to alert anyone.)

(Yes, but if we're even a tiny bit off...) Meghan drew a finger across her throat. (And I think the witch saw us already. This isn't going to work, I know it isn't...)

(Settle down.) Draco placed a hand on Meghan's head and pressed gently. Meghan eyed it balefully but refrained from doing anything else.

(Neville obviously got all the spells down,) Draco went on when he had both hands free again. (Otherwise we'd have been found out already. And that Healer can't have seen us, or she'd have said something. All we have to do is Stun them at exactly the same time, and—)

The small noises from the hall, and the sounds of a city night floating in the open window, ceased suddenly. Meghan's tiny squeak of dismay was perfectly audible.

Zoned Silencer. Draco lowered his hands slowly, trying not to let his anger and terror show. *They got us. It's over.*

Meghan hid her face in his shoulder, and he put an arm around her. "Love you," he whispered to her. "Don't ever forget it."

"Really, now," chided a female voice from behind them. "Not even setting a sentry? I thought we taught you better than that."

Draco's throat closed as the timbre of the voice caught at his memories. *It can't be...*

"And I also thought we taught you to recognize your allies when you see them," the voice went on, half-teasing, half-wistful. "But that requires looking at me."

Meghan lifted her head, blinked once or twice, and looked. An instant later, Draco understood the real reason for the Silencer.

"MAMA!"

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Chapter 3

Aletha Freeman-Black held her sobbing daughter on her lap with one arm. The other was around her kneeling son, who had his face pressed firmly against her robes in what Aletha suspected was an unsuccessful attempt to keep himself from bursting into tears.

"Hush, now," she whispered, kissing Meghan's head. "Hush, I'm here. Mama's here now. No need to cry."

Such a silly, normal thing to say. And howlong ago was it that I thought I'd never say it again?

Tears threatened to take her over as well. Firmly, she slid them away. *Not now. There's work. When this is over, or at least some part of it, then I can cry. Not in the middle of things.*

Meghan sniffled hard and found a tremulous smile. "It was a good disguise, Mama Letha," she said, nuzzling against the shoulder Draco wasn't currently using. "I never would have guessed it was you."

"Obviously not." Aletha tightened her hug around both children for a moment, then slid Meghan to the ground and patted Draco's back briskly. "I assume you have someone down in the control room?"

"Neville and Ginny," Draco said in a voice that would have sounded normal to anyone who hadn't raised him. "Or possibly just Neville, if Ginny hasn't got away from the Healers yet."

"How did you know?" Meghan asked.

"Because I had to stun my estimable colleague when he noticed that the magical shields on the door we're supposed to be guarding had all gone down," Aletha said dryly.

Draco swore under his breath. "We have to hurry. If he's been found, if they've put them back up again..."

"They haven't." Aletha got to her feet and stretched her back. "I put up my own shield. Set specifically to block theirs, and to warn me if someone tried to reestablish it. And I have not been warned. So unless someone was powerful and skilled enough to get through my shield without tripping any of my guards, we haven't been found out yet."

"But we should still hurry." Meghan started for the door, then stopped. "Mama Letha?"

"Yes, love?"

"How come you remember?" Meghan came back and took her mother's hand, as if reassuring herself of its reality. "I thought everybody but me forgot about the Pack."

Draco cleared his throat. "Er, over here? Tall blond thing?"

"I didn't *know* about you." Meghan made a face at her brother. "All Luq told me was that the only people who remembered were the ones who couldn't do anything about it."

"Well, strictly speaking, I'd fit the category." Aletha cast a Supersensory Charm out the door, found the hall clear, and waved the cubs past her towards the lounge. Once outside the room, she transferred the Zoned Silencer and followed them.

Draco had already pushed aside the unconscious figure of her fellow Healer by the time she arrived, and he and Meghan were investigating the various locks on the door. "How's that?" he asked over his shoulder. "You're adult, you're a Healer, respectable..."

Aletha chuckled. "Draco, I'm supposed to be *dead*."

"Oh." Draco regarded a bolt for a moment, tapped it with his wand, then slid it slowly back. "Yes, that would make it harder."

"But Luq wasn't taking any chances." Aletha took up a place beside the door, watching with half her attention lest one of the cubs start to make a grave mistake. "He tried to alter my memories. To make me think I'd faked my own death, given up my daughter for adoption, and spent my life wandering."

Meghan humphed indignantly. "It better not have worked!"

Draco snickered, and she swatted him with the back of her hand. "Stop it. It isn't funny." She turned away to look at Aletha, her silver eyes bright and wondering. "Why didn't it work, Mama Letha?"

"I don't know." Aletha touched the spot on her breastbone where pendants usually hung. "I think... maybe because I've had experience. But I can't be sure." She shook her head, driving the memory away. "I woke up afterwards with the two lives in my mind, but where the one he'd given me was supposed to be strong and our Pack-life like a dream, unreal and faded, they were reversed. I knew something wasn't right. And then I found out what had happened to Harry, and I knew I had to get into St. Mungo's if I possibly could."

"So you disguised yourself?" Draco said, setting aside another padlock. "How did you get assigned to this floor?"

"I'm not, usually." Aletha touched Meghan's arm, halting a poorly performed spell. "But someone Flooded off tonight, and they brought me in. A touch of good fortune, to offset all this bad. Slower on the back-and-forth, love, then quickly around once... yes, that's it."

"Good fortune." Draco sat back on his heels. "I wonder."

"Wonder what?" Meghan asked.

"If we have an enemy in high places... do we also have a friend?"

Draco hurried down the hall, the chill calm which had shattered in Letha's arms sliding back around him now that he was so close. Meghan hadn't known much about what the so-called researchers had done to Luna, but what she had known, and what Letha had been able to learn in her surreptitious searches, did not fill him with confidence.

Just let her be alive, he prayed to whoever might be listening. *Let her be alive, and still sane—as sane as she ever was—and I can deal with anything else.*

A left turn, then a right, and he was there. Three raps on the top and bottom of the doorknob with his wand's edge, five quick swirls around it, and it turned in his hand. He stepped into the room, keeping his eyes on the far wall, and shut the door behind himself deliberately before looking back around.

A small table, a wooden chair, and a hospital bed constituted the only furniture in sight. The bed's occupant was sitting up, her dark blonde hair spilling over her nightgowned shoulders and the white sheet covering her from the waist down. Wide gray eyes examined him from top to toe, then the other way around.

"It won't work," Luna said, her voice soft but penetrating. "You've tried this once already."

"Tried what? Luna, it's me, I'm here to get you out—"

"Don't come any closer." Luna's tone rocked Draco back on his heels. Her eyes had gone in an instant from wondering to the icy anger he knew so well himself. "You touch me enough during the day. Leave me alone at night. And looking like *him*? How dare you."

Draco lifted one eyebrow. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell me what this person you've mistaken me for usually looks like," he said calmly. "Once I've located him, we can spend some time finding the portions of himself he values most and removing them. Slowly. One at a time. Perhaps we'll ask Meghan to heal him in between, to make sure he doesn't die too soon."

Luna blinked several times, then snapped her gaze down to the bed. "I don't know anyone named Meghan," she said in a monotone. "And I don't like you. You're mean to me. Go away."

"Luna." Draco risked a few steps closer to the bed. "Don't let them do this to you."

"No one has done anything to me except show me the truth," Luna recited tonelessly. "I am not a Seer, just a deluded little girl. If I were kidnapped, no one would come to find me. If I were rescued, it would be by accident."

"Luna, look at me," Draco coaxed, moving closer with every word. "Look at me... you know that isn't true..."

"No one really thinks about me as a friend," Luna went on as though she hadn't heard. "They only let me come along because they have no way to get rid of me, and because sometimes I am useful. I understand that now."

Torture is not nearly enough to repay this. Draco went to one knee beside the bed. "Luna," he said, waving a hand between her eyes and the spot on the bedclothes she seemed so fascinated by. "Look at me."

"I don't want to." Luna kept her head where it was.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to see you and not See you."

The emphasis laid on the second word made Draco sure of her meaning. "Is it your Sight? Have they done something to it? Luna, if it's not working right, if you're Seeing too much again—"

"Too much?" Luna laughed bitterly. "You didn't worry so much about that last month. Or the month before. You tried to make me See too much. You wanted it. 'Maybe it'll break her down some, if she can't control it,' you said. But you found out I'm not so easy to destroy. So you tried to do the opposite. You tried to take it away from me. And now..." A small sob forced its way past her lips. "Now you have."

"Take it away?" Fear settled into Draco's chest, but in the back of his mind, one ray of hope still glimmered. "Luna—how do you know?"

"Because," Luna whispered. "When I look at you, all I can see is him."

The ray brightened, grew stronger. "Look again." Draco laid his hand under Luna's chin and lifted it as gently as a new-hatched chick. "Look the way you did two nights before Christmas, a long time ago."

Luna looked, and her eyes grew wider than ever. Her hand came up, tracing pricked ears in the air above Draco's head, whiskers to each side of

his face. "They told me you were dead," she breathed.

"They told me the same thing." Draco slid his hand along the line of Luna's jaw until he found her hair. "Funny how wrong they can be."

"Funny." Luna closed her eyes, tipped her head back, and let a true smile blossom slowly across her face. "Yes. I suppose it is."

Draco leaned forward and pressed his lips to the bare hollow of her throat. "I suppose you're right," he whispered against her skin. "You usually are."

A ragged gasp was his only answer. Then, silence.

"Hermione?" Ron looked up from the manual he was studying at the kitchen table. "What's going—mmmph!"

"I don't know," Hermione whispered breathlessly when she freed her lips from his. "But I need you right now."

"Well. If you say so."

The manual slithered unheeded to the floor.

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That Which Does Not Kill Us

Chapter 4

Hermione drowsed, lying at the same time in the circle of Ron's arms and on the warm grass of the Hogwarts grounds. The sun soaking into her skin made her want to curl up and purr, wash her tail, then perhaps bury her nose in one of her black patches and take a nap...

What a strange dream.

As soon as this thought crossed her mind, Ron's half-heard snores faded into silence and Hermione lay fully awake—or *is that fully asleep?*—on the shores of the lake. But though her boyfriend was gone, she was not alone. A man sat nearby, tossing pebbles into the water, and his face brought Hermione to her feet.

"Remus!"

The man started and looked up. "I'm sorry—have we met?"

"It's me, Professor. Hermione Granger. You taught me Defense Against the Dark Arts in my third year. We've known each other through the Order of the Phoenix since then." *Which does not explain this ridiculous urge to run over and hug him and beg him to make everything all better.* "But I thought..." Hermione faltered. "You see, there was a battle, and..."

"And?" Remus prompted after a moment.

"And... well... you're dead." Saying the words made Hermione's stomach tighten, but she pressed on. "You died fighting. You helped other people live. We won. The war's over."

"Dead," mused Remus, rolling a pebble on his palm. "It would explain a great deal. Certainly I seem to have passed through the river of Lethe. You know me, Miss—Granger, was it?" At Hermione's nod, he went on. "You know me better than I know myself. Until today, I have had no name for this person I am. No face, either—would you pardon me a moment?"

"Of course." Hermione watched, curious, as Remus bent over the lake. "Can I ask..."

"Whatever this is," Remus said without looking up, "dream or vision or visit from a supernatural being, it has given me back a gift I do not have in my everyday life. I intend to take advantage of it."

Hermione laughed. "I'm not supernatural! Well, I'm a witch, but so are you a wizard. It's natural to us to have magic."

"Thank you for the information, but I was not referring to magic." Remus straightened up once more. "My lack, in the life outside this place, whatever it may be, is more basic. I cannot see."

"Oh." Hermione sobered. "Is it... a good place? Where you are?"

"It is more good than bad," Remus said slowly, as though he had not thought about it before. "I am not alone. I have three companions, though only two of them are ever with me at any one time. If, as you say, magic is natural to your people—our people—then two of them may actually be one. It makes sense." He glanced over Hermione's shoulder. "And you seem to have a companion of your own."

"What?" Hermione turned to follow his line of sight.

A wispy, ghostlike Draco Malfoy smiled sheepishly.

"How *dare* you!" Hermione swung at his face but encountered only air. "Get out of my dream!"

"Not yet," Malfoy breathed, his words barely audible. "Not until you remember."

"Remember what? Remember that I loathe and despise you? I remember that perfectly well. Go away!"

"Not what I meant." Malfoy drifted past her, towards Remus, who was looking from him to Hermione with an expression of concentration on his face. "Remember... what we mean to each other..."

"Why don't you just blow away?" Hermione hissed under her breath.

Malfoy spun in place, looking panicked, just as the huge gust of wind hit him. For an instant, he struggled against it. Then he was gone.

"Are you sure you're not supernatural?" Remus inquired.

Hermione stared at the place where Malfoy had been. "I didn't know I could do that," she said quietly. "What else don't I know about?"

"A good question. One we should all ask ourselves." Remus came up the slope towards her, looking at her closely. "Miss Granger."

"Hermione, please."

"Hermione, then. May I... see you? As I would, if we were not where we are?" Remus lifted a hand by way of further explanation. "I have a suspicion.

Perhaps a strange one, but... may I?"

"Of course." Hermione sat down on the grass, waving him to a seat in front of her. "Go ahead."

Closing his eyes, Remus cupped her face in his hands. To Hermione's astonishment, his touch sent a tiny shiver of pleasure down her spine. *Am I absolutely shameless? I've only been with Ron for three months, and Remus was my teacher!*

But as Remus' fingers slid over her lips and cheekbones, the feelings intensified, and Hermione had to fight not to pull away. *I told him he could. He's doing nothing wrong. I won't pull away in the middle.*

Besides, it isn't quite like it is with Ron. It feels... different. Still good, but different. Some of her guilt eased. *At least I'm not falling in love with a dead man who could be my father.*

A jolt like an electric shock shot through her. Remus gasped and pulled back, opening his eyes and staring at her. "What—"

"I don't know," Hermione panted, hand on her chest. "I just... I don't know." She caught her breath and found a smile to show him. "Am I pretty the way you usually see?"

"Far more than pretty." Remus laid a hand gently on her cheek again. "You remind me of a lady I know. She cares for me, helps me to do the things I cannot do for myself, though she never speaks to me. I suspect she has been hurt by other men." His face hardened for an instant. "I will not hurt her that way. She offers, but I refuse."

Too moral for his own good, said a cynical voice in the back of Hermione's mind. **As usual.**

Hermione stiffened. **Get out of my head!**

No, you get out of mine, the voice retorted. **Or at least cooperate with me and help me fix things around here.**

Who are you?

Try and figure it out yourself, why don't you? The voice laughed without humour. **I'll give you a hint. If things were the way they were supposed to be, we could never have had this conversation.**

Well that's a fat lot of help!

The voice disdained to reply.

"Talking to yourself?" Remus said, smiling at her.

Hermione started to laugh, then stopped. "I think I may have been," she said slowly. "I think I may just have been..."

"Ron?"

"Mm-hmm?" Ron came partway awake. "Whazzit, Neenie?"

"Tell me about our first kiss." The weight on his torso shifted and resettled into a new formation. "Tell me everything you remember."

"Kay." Ron squirmed a bit to the left to relieve the pressure on a rib. "Sort of like this, actually. We were in the bed together in one of the bedrooms at Headquarters, you were up on top of me, but we had all our clothes on and we weren't doing anything Mum shouldn't see. Just lying there."

"Did you kiss me? Or did I kiss you?"

"You kissed me. Definitely."

"And did you say anything that made me do it?"

"I think... something about house-elves?" Ron frowned. "No, that's not right. Wasn't house-elves. I told you..."

Another bedroom, another moment in time superimposed itself on this one within Ron's mind. "I told you, just do what you wanted to. I wasn't going to do anything unless you said I could. Unless you told me to. Because you'd been scared. Something bad happened to you. Something where you were trapped, you couldn't get free, someone else could make you do things. So I was just going to let you be in control. Do what you wanted. And you said..."

Ron laughed. "You said what you wanted was for me to help you figure out what you wanted. I said maybe you wanted to kiss me. Turns out I was—"

Hermione's lips fastened onto his, silencing him but at the same time rendering the word moot.

"That was nice," Ron said sleepily when he could talk again. "Why the pop quiz?"

Hermione's weight on him decreased, then vanished. "Get up," she said, and the light went on overhead.

"Oi!" Ron rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. "It's got to be gone midnight, Hermione—"

"Get up ." Hermione grabbed a foot and yanked. Ron only skidded a few inches, but he could feel her winding up for another tug—

"I'm up," he said, waving her off. "I'm up. Gimme a second." *Whatever's got into her, easier just to go along at this point. Let her run herself out of power, then bring her home when she crashes. Shouldn't take too long.* "All right, I'm up." He heaved himself upright. "Where are we going?"

"St. Mungo's."

"*What?*"

"Ron, something's very wrong." Hermione pulled down a box from the top shelf of his closet and yanked it open. Inside was the one thing of Harry's they hadn't put away in deep storage or given to a museum somewhere. "We have to find out what it is."

"Why do we have to find out what it is right now?" Ron sneaked a look at the Muggle-style alarm clock. Sure enough, 01:04 glowed disturbingly red against the black. "Why can't it wait until morning?"

Hermione paused in freeing the Invisibility Cloak from its wrappings. "You're awake now, aren't you?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Tell me about our first kiss."

"But I just..."

"Tell me again."

Ron sighed. "All right. We were lying in a bed at number twelve, Grimmauld Place..." He stopped. "No, that's not right. We were at Hogwarts, outside the Room of Requirement..." He shook his head hard as two separate visions tried to co-exist. "What the bloody—"

"*That's why we have to go now.*" Hermione pulled the last fastener free and shook the Cloak out, one of his mum's lavender sachets falling from its folds into the box. "Because I can't think of any reason for anyone to tamper with our memories of our first kiss and leave all the other ones alone."

Ron swallowed against a chill at the idea of someone inside his head, messing around with his thoughts. *I'm messed up enough as it is...* "I'd guess you're not just doing this because you want us to get checked out right away," he said, sliding off the bed to find his shoes.

"We have to find Harry." Hermione dropped the Cloak on top of its box and pulled out her wand to Summon her own shoes from their place by the door. "Either him or Malfoy."

"Malfoy?" Ron jerked partway upright and hit his head on the bedframe. "Ow. Why Malfoy?"

"When did I get this?" Hermione demanded instead of answering. As Ron backed cautiously out from under the bed on all fours, he could see that she was pointing at her cheek, at the small scar there.

"Er, during the battle at Hogwarts?"

"That's what I thought too. But it's too well healed for that. It looks like it was done years ago, not months. And that's why I think we need to find Malfoy."

"What, because your scar is older than you thought it was?"

"No." Hermione shoved her feet into her shoes and began to lace one up. "Because he had one too."

The man who now knew his name was Remus Lupin sat by the lake for a few more minutes after the girl named Hermione had disappeared. Then he stood up and began to walk towards the castle.

Something is very wrong with me. With all of us. His mind supplied touch-scent-sound images of the three other living creatures with whom he shared his days and nights. *Why did I never notice that the woman and the wolf are never present at the same time? Or that the dog is disquietingly intelligent? And why did I accept such a limited existence? Even for a blind werewolf and his mute companion, there should be more to life than a small cottage in the middle of a forest...*

As he approached the castle, he could see that it had the appearance of a place long abandoned. A great deal of the masonry looked ready to collapse at a finger's touch, the doors and windows were heavily boarded up, and a large sign hung over the entrance, bearing one word in bright red paint.

DANGER

Before Remus could do more than take in the word, a piece of stone high above lost its grip on its neighbour. Remus stepped back in automatic reaction as it sailed towards the roof of the nearest piece of castle. *And it's not alone—that whole tower looks like it's ready to fall—*

The rock went through the castle roof with a resounding crash.

Inside, a woman screamed in terror.

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That Which Does Not Kill Us

Chapter 5

Draco hurried down the hall, one arm held close to his chest with Starwing perched on it. Letha had sent him a Patronus a few moments earlier. The great silver dog had only said one word, but that word was all that was needed.

"Harry."

Now he was following it, back along a part of the hall he'd come through, but no—it was taking a turn he hadn't made—

Is it just me, or is it darker down here than it was back there? Draco shivered, and felt Starwing fluff her feathers in response. *But what could possibly be worse than what they were doing to her?*

On second thought, I don't want to know.

Which, of course, means I'm about to find out.

The dog veered into a room to the left. Draco followed it in, whistling a two-note pattern to identify himself. Meghan, curled in a corner, leapt up anyway, but ran into his arms (or rather arm) instead of attacking as she would have a stranger. "Don't look," she whispered into his robes. "Don't look, don't look, Draco, don't look..."

I'm going to regret this.

Draco turned his head and looked.

At the other end of the room, Letha stood silhouetted against a green glow. Her hands, one with her wand, one without, were moving in what Draco recognized as rune patterns, but they were well beyond any he'd studied even in seventh year. He licked his lips and grimaced; Letha's and Meghan's scents permeated the air with bitter anger and fear, and Starwing had hidden her head under her wing.

But I have to know.

He stepped to one side, Meghan still clinging to him, and looked again.

Within the green glow hung a human figure, suspended like a puppet on wires, arms and legs limp, head back, mouth open as though gasping for air. As the face came into clear view, Draco swallowed. There were lines there worn deep by pain, lines that hadn't been there a few months earlier.

And I ought to know.

Letha spoke three words, sharp and commanding, and the glow flickered and winked out.

Harry Potter fell limply to the floor.

Harry didn't bother to open his eyes. He'd been doing this for too long to get excited over just another world. Granted, this one was less comfortable than some—often he started out in bed or some variation on bed—but far more comfortable than many. The most recent encounter with Voldemort came to mind.

Funny how it worked out. He has control over what the worlds he goes to are like, but not over whether or not I'm there. I can't control what world they put me in, but apparently neither can they. Otherwise why would they bother with the nice ones?

Unless they were trying to drive him mad faster by alternating pleasure and pain... he thought he'd read somewhere that worked the best...

Well, no, I know what works the best. Making everything unreliable and unbelievable, until the only sanity you can find is in your own mind.

Of course, at the moment, this particular world didn't seem terribly sane.

I'm sure there's a perfectly good reason why I'm lying naked on a cold floor with people whispering off that way somewhere. There might even be one that doesn't make me gag.

Harry debated it with himself and decided that yes, he did actually want to know.

He opened his eyes.

The room was poorly lit and blurry, though the latter was probably a function of his missing glasses.

People ahoy. Looks like two—make that three—no, four. Where'd that last one come from? She definitely wasn't there a moment ago...

"That last one" held out her hand to one of the first figures he'd seen, then came forward towards Harry slowly. Her hands were where he could see them; neither held a wand, though one was closed around a small dark item Harry recognized after a moment of squinting.

"Those—" He broke off, coughing. The girl stopped, looking worried.

"Those are mine," Harry said when he could speak again. "May I have them, please?" He pointed at the glasses in the girl's hand.

"Of course." The girl advanced the final few paces and handed the glasses to Harry. "I was coming to give them to you anyway."

Harry smiled as her face came into focus beyond the lenses. Her voice had identified her to him already, but it was good to see a friendly face again.

At least I think she's friendly...

"Hello, Luna," he said aloud.

"I'm glad you know me." Luna held out her hand, and Harry clasped it. "I went through something a little like what they did to you. It was very frightening. I wasn't sure of who anyone was when I was rescued."

"Is that what this is, then? A rescue?" Harry peered over Luna's shoulder, trying to identify the people with her. One of them sounded and smelled (*smelled?*) familiar, but the other two were harder to place...

"Yes. I know you won't believe it at first, because I didn't. But it really is." Luna looked curiously at, not the area Harry had been hoping she wouldn't look too closely at, but his chest. "Can you tell me about those?"

"What?" Harry looked down. Four small gold medallions lay against his skin.

"Oh, these." He stroked them with a finger. "I wouldn't let them go. I let everything else go, but not these. I even caught the others and held onto them when they were thrown away... most of them, anyway, there was one set I didn't get, I think it stayed with the person it belonged to..."

He stopped.

What am I talking about?

"You caught others like these?" Luna's eyes widened even further. "Harry, what did you do with them? Please tell me."

"I don't know." Harry kept stroking the pendants, his finger rubbing over one carving that occupied the entire side of one pendant. A cat, he thought it was, except it had big feet and a stubby tail, and tufts of fur on its ears. "I just know I wouldn't let go of them..."

His finger snagged on something. He pulled.

A second gold chain spilled out of the first and hung from his fingertip.

Remus leapt forward, dodging another hurtling lump of rock, and slammed his shoulder against the boards on the door. Again—again—the wood was starting to yield—

With a resounding crash, he broke through, keeping his feet more by luck than by will. The hall beyond would have been gracious and welcoming if it hadn't looked as though no one had been there for a hundred years. Panels were missing from the walls and the banister on the marble staircase had crumbled.

"Where are you?" he shouted. "Say something!"

"Down here!" came an answering scream from beneath his feet. "Hurry, it's caving in!"

Remus started to look around for a stairway, but found he was already moving. A shadow on his left which he had barely noticed turned out to be the entrance to a descending flight of steps, and he was in a dungeonesque hall before he had a moment to think.

A crash from above vibrated dust and pebbles down onto his head. He ducked, and the woman wailed aloud somewhere ahead of him.

"Keep talking!" Remus called, moving towards the sound. "Guide me to you!"

"All... all right." She sounded shaken, but her voice was still strong. "What do you want me to say?"

Surprised by the question, Remus laughed. "I don't think it matters..." He squeezed past a partial blockage in the hallway, gritting his teeth as skin scraped off his elbows and knuckles. "Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

"I don't know. I'm not very interesting." A sound that could have been a laugh or a sob, and was probably some of both. "I'm married, or I was. I don't know if my husband still wants me. Our children are gone now, and we're all we've got, but he's been so distant, so cold lately. It's as if he doesn't even know me."

Remus pulled a few stones away from another cave-in, this one more complete. "Maybe you just need to remind him about you," he suggested. "You can practice on me."

This sound was very definitely a laugh. "If you insist... where should I start?"

"Tell me about..." Remus dropped a large cobble to one side. "Tell me about your family. All the different ways they came to you, and what you love

about them." *And where that came from, I have no idea...*

But his unseen conversation partner took the opening and ran with it. By the time he could squeeze through the gap he'd created, Remus knew all about the couple's best friends, who were like a brother and sister to them; their two sons and two daughters, none of whom would have had that title by most common usages; and their home, large but still crowded with the eight of them, where squabbles abounded but truly serious fights were rare.

Except that I don't think she's had time to tell me nearly as much as I knownow...

Experimentally, Remus reached out and knocked a stone free where it threatened to bruise his chest.

That sign over the entrance means something, his mind whispered. Something more than what it seems.

"How helpful," Remus muttered.

"Are you still there?" the woman called from ahead. She sounded closer, but her voice was still muffled, and Remus winced as he looked ahead and saw the reason. The hall was completely filled with rubble, and he knew it was at least fifty yards until there was a door to any room where she could be trapped. He was already tired and hurting, and he wanted nothing more than to sit down and give up.

But she could be caught in an air pocket halfway in. Or even just a few feet. I can't give up now—she obviously can't get out by herself—

"Yes," he called back, starting to roll some of the smaller stones down the heap. "I'm here."

Hermione spun out of the St. Mungo's fireplace into a storm of shouting.

"There she goes!"

"Catch her!"

"Careful not to hurt her!"

Ron shook ashes out of his hair, shedding his momentary resemblance to his father, and stared at the center of the commotion, which was circling the room at twenty miles an hour while emitting a loud wailing noise. "Is that a cat?" he said tentatively.

Hermione shook her head, feeling soot drift out of her own hair. "Too big," she said. "It's a wildcat. I'm not sure what kind."

The feline skidded to a halt next to them, stared at them wide-eyed for a moment, then bolted for the shelter of Ron's robes.

Ron yelped and turned to flee, but Hermione caught his arm. "Stay still!" she hissed. "If you run, it'll chase you!"

And besides, I think we want to help it.

She went to one knee and extended a hand to the tuft-eared head now poking out from under Ron's black robes—*lynx*, her mind finally supplied. A pink nose sniffed her fingers, and the lynx sighed and visibly relaxed.

"Thank goodness," said a man's voice from behind her. "We've been trying to settle her down for several minutes; she came in with uncontrolled transformations, and when we tried to stabilize her, it worked, but..."

"She stabilized in the wrong form," Hermione finished, standing up and turning to face the Healer. "She's human, then?"

"As far as we can tell. She could be a transfiguration gone badly wrong, but she seemed intelligent when she was coherent and able to speak. She wouldn't tell us what happened to her, but my guess is she was trying an Animagus transformation and it got out of hand."

"She's sitting on my foot," said Ron, grimacing.

"Be glad she's not doing something else to your foot," the Healer recommended. "She's clawed two people already. Not seriously, but she could do some damage if she were so inclined."

Ron gulped and stood very still.

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That Which Does Not Kill Us

Chapter 6

"You won't hurt us, pretty girl," Hermione cooed, bending down again to let the lynx sniff at her hand. "Will you? No, you won't. You're too sweet... you'd never hurt us..."

Ron suddenly made a strangled sound.

"Did she hurt you?" Hermione and the Healer said in unison.

"No," Ron said quickly. "No, I'm fine. Just... just fine..." He shut his eyes and rubbed a hand across them. "Look, can we try to deal with her?" he said, looking back at the Healer. "She must like us for some reason. Maybe I smell good."

Hermione snorted.

"Don't start," Ron shot at her.

"She is calmer with you than with anyone," the Healer said thoughtfully. "I can't see that it would hurt."

"We'll need it quiet, though," Hermione said, catching the semi-desperate glance that had gone with Ron's words. "So nothing else startles her. Can you do a Privacy Spell for us?"

"Of course. I'll come to check on you in a few minutes." The Healer drew his wand and enclosed them with a wall of grey smoke, dimming the sounds of voices from beyond it.

The lynx began to purr smugly. "Ginny," Ron said through gritted teeth. "Off."

"Gin—" Hermione broke off with a gasp as the lynx tumbled forward and changed halfway through the movement into Ron's sister, shaking with laughter.

"You think you smell good?" she choked. "When did you shower last?"

"None of your business—what's going on here?" Ron demanded. "When did you learn to do that?"

"Same time you did," said Ginny cheekily. "Or don't you remember?"

"I don't think we remember," Hermione said slowly. "Are you saying that we're..."

"Try it." Ginny rolled her shoulders. "Ooh. Stiff. I haven't done that in too long."

Ron looked askance at his sister. "That was you, wasn't it?" he said. "Talking in my head like that?"

Ginny nodded. "And it wasn't easy, either," she said. "I practically had to draw blood before you'd listen."

"Talking in his head?" Hermione said over this. "How?"

"It's a long story..." Ginny sighed at Hermione's 'tell me anyway' expression. "There's something between us all. You and me and Ron and five other people. A magical bond, that lets us do more than we can alone. And one of the side-effects is that, if we're blood-related in the first degree, like parents or brothers and sisters, we can talk silently when we touch." She smiled. "Comes in handy."

"Right," Ron said, shaking his head. "What was this about Animagus?"

"Try it." Ginny drew her wand. "Here, let me help you."

A snap-flick, and the floor underneath Ron vanished. He shrieked—the sound changed pitch, curving sharply upwards, even as he himself shrank and twisted—

Hermione held out her arm, and the red-feathered hawk backwinged to a landing on her wrist, hissing under its breath.

Ginny vanished the chasm with another wave of her wand. "I'm telling Mum you said that."

Ron hopped off Hermione's arm and resumed his human form, nearly falling (Hermione caught him in time). "You don't even know what I said," he complained.

"I don't have to. I know you." Ginny looked at Hermione. "Do you want to try?"

"Yes—but not like that, please."

"I wouldn't. Your form is different." Ginny grinned. "I could conjure a fierce dog and a tree if you want."

Hermione bared her teeth and spat, and thought of tales of good words said and promises kept. Lightfoot, hunt-quick, scents and sounds all telling stories of their own...

Ginny must be teasing. Ron smells fine to me. Neenie the calico cat reared up and planted her claws delicately in Ron's robes, purring her loudest. And Ginny smells like hope. Hope, and people I haven't seen in a long time.

Too long.

It's time to change that.

Harry rubbed the gold chain between his fingers, thinking furiously.

There was a world a few weeks ago. A good one. Voldemort was there, but not as strong as he was in a lot of the others. At least not yet. Or maybe there was just more on my side to counter him. Point is, they had necklaces like this.

But does that mean I'm back in that world now and I'll be leaving again in the morning? Or am I actually awake this time, out of whatever was happening to me, and this is my real world?

I could handle that world being real. But I don't want to trust too much that it is yet.

Still, real or not, I have to get involved here.

"Can you tell whose these are?" he asked Luna, handing her the chain. He seemed to recall a trick to it, something about the different engravings on the medallions, but he didn't want to risk interpreting them and look stupid when he was wrong.

Luna flipped one medallion back and forth. "These are mine," she said, sliding the chain over her head. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Harry hooked a finger back inside his own chain and, experimentally, willed it intangible to his neck. A moment later, his finger was the only thing holding the chain off the ground.

That works like it should, at least.

He slid all the fingers of both hands inside the loop, as though he were playing cat's cradle, and concentrated. Small footsteps sounded alongside him, but his mind dismissed it as no threat.

I want all of you out of there now, he told the pendants silently. I've held you long enough. Time to come out. In three, two, one...

He pulled his hands apart.

The right hand still held his own chain and medallions. The left could have been a display at a jewelry shop. Greenish light gleamed on animal figures dancing on pendants, making them look almost alive. The jewels inset into each pendant flashed the light through themselves, green, green-yellow, green-blue, and the almost black Harry assumed was red.

That worked like it should too.

The footsteps sounded again, this time behind him. Before he could react, a blanket dropped over his head. "Here," said a girl's voice. "Start with this."

Start with... right. I'm not wearing anything. How exactly did I manage to forget that?

And why am I not panicking when that could have been the first step in kidnapping me? It was a few times, if I remember right. And most of those didn't turn out well.

Harry filed these thoughts under "investigate later", poked his head out from under the blanket, and got a look at the person who'd ambushed him with it. She was small, brown-skinned, and staring at him challengingly with the gray eyes he remembered so well from his short visit a few weeks back.

Or do I remember them from somewhere else?

"Hello, Meghan," he said.

Meghan beamed and dropped to one knee to throw her arms around him. "Harry! I knew you'd know me!"

"Er..." Harry hugged her back, trying to decide how much to tell her.

She's glad to see me. Maybe I should just leave it.

But he hated lying, even by omission, and letting his little sister think he knew exactly who he was and where he belonged would be the worst kind of lie.

"I do and I don't," he said, letting go of Meghan to pick through his handful of pendants. "I know your name and what you look like and who you are, or who you ought to be. But I've visited so many worlds these last few..."

"Months," supplied a male voice from one of the two remaining silhouettes. "About three months."

"Thank you." Harry rubbed the carving of a hawk on one pendant before pushing it aside. "I've been in a new world every day for those three months. People with the same faces acted completely differently one day to the next. They wanted different things from me. They wanted me to be different. And sometimes it was a little different, and sometimes it was a lot."

"And sometimes, the people you thought you could trust sold you out," a woman's voice said from the other silhouette. "Or the people you'd said goodnight to the night before, the next day were ten years dead."

"Yes. Exactly." A set of pendants with three blue-green jewels and one almost black, a dog and a winged horse occupying opposite sides of the first pendant, slid off Harry's hand. "Here you go."

"But this is where you belong," Meghan said, pressing her pendants to her lips before she put them on. "This is the real world. They aren't playing with you anymore."

"I'd like to believe you, but how can I be sure?" Harry looked around at the room. "The other worlds all started like this too. Waking up somewhere, with someone nearby. In a bed, or in a dungeon, or in a tree. With friends, or allies, or enemies. But somewhere, with someone."

"What do I count as?" said the male of the silhouetted pair, stepping forward to where Harry could see his face.

Harry sized the other up. "Depends on how you act," he said finally. "And whether or not I'm still here tomorrow."

Draco inclined his head. "I look forward to finding out."

Remus pried at a huge stone, almost a boulder, that seemed to be supporting a great deal of the rubble blocking the corridor. If he could shift it, just possibly the woman beyond the stones could climb out through the gaps that would be created.

Which brings me to something I probably should have asked quite a while ago.

"What's your name?"

The woman laughed a little. "Do you mean my real name, or what people usually call me?"

"I'm not particular. Whichever you prefer."

"Well, then, my name is Gertrude. But I'm mostly known by a nickname a friend gave me a long time ago." A long pause, as though she were nerving herself up for something. "I go by Danger."

Remus sagged against the boulder. "And here I thought the sign out front was just cautionary," he said.

"That too, I'm sure. This place isn't safe." Danger exhaled a shaky breath. "Maybe... maybe you should leave. Get out while you still can, before it comes down on both our heads."

"No." Remus let the boulder lie for the moment and began digging around one side of it, hoping to find a handhold. "If I can get you out of here, I will."

"You're too good." Danger added something in a low tone.

"What was that?" Remus asked, pushing a mound of pebbles out of the way with his foot.

"Nothing."

"No, it wasn't. Please tell me."

A brief growl. "I won't explain it."

"I can live with that. But I do want to know."

"I said, that's probably why I love you."

Remus' hands froze in place on the boulder.

Why she loves me.

Someone who's always there, always helpful. A constant companion, even to the point of things I wouldn't do. Because I thought it would be taking advantage.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

The scent was as familiar as his own. It clung to everything in his home, in his life, and it was beginning to worm deep into his mind, to trigger memories and associations long buried.

"I married you last night..."

"Yes. I'll come back."

"...shared between you as all things are shared..."

Remus flattened his palms against the stone. *Melt this*, he directed silently. *Melt this, and form it into an archway which will support this ceiling so that it does not fall. Do not harm the woman on the other side of these rocks while you work.*

He could feel the power humming in his fingers, begging to be set loose, but he'd used one word too many, or too few, or not quite the right one... he could still fix it, it wasn't beyond redemption, but he had to work quickly...

"Now," he said aloud, and only after he had said it did he hear the tone, commanding and firm, as though he knew from long practice how to marshal the reluctant into completing unpleasant tasks.

There was no stone under his fingers. There was only warmth, and the movement of air, and footsteps that he knew, approaching him hesitantly. "Remus," a voice whispered. "It really is you..."

Remus Lupin opened his eyes and gathered his wife into his arms. "It really is me," he told her, stroking her hair, wiping the tears of joy away from her face. "I'm here. Everything's all right now."

And for just that one moment, it was true.

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That Which Does Not Kill Us

Chapter 7

The otherworldly equivalents of alarm bells clanged, summoning the attention of the being called Luq. Reluctantly turning away from the delicious sights of one Harry Potter shivering in a cell in Azkaban and another set upon by a werewolf, he "tuned in" on the universe which was sounding the alarm.

What, that place again? I thought I had everything well in hand. None of them seemed likely to make trouble...

The world came into clearer focus, and Luq snarled a curse. Half his careful work had been undone already, and more was unraveling every second. As he watched, the incipient magic around the dream-figures of the werewolf and his wife (and weren't they a sappy little pair) gathered itself, took form, and lanced outwards from their sleeping forms to that of the dog on the hearthstone of the cottage.

I'll obviously have to take a few more steps when I put this right. Luq absently began the preparations for entering the Dangerverse's origin point, the "command center" of the world; most of his mind was taken up with thoughts of how to keep this from happening again.

I underestimated the two Black children—that was my biggest mistake—so I'll have to neutralize them. The boy will likely be destroyed by watching me undo all his work, and as for the girl... there must be a Dark wizard somewhere around there who needs a virgin sacrifice.

He came out of his reverie to see that the gateway to the world's place of origin was ready. Pleased, he stepped through.

Every origin point looked different. This one resembled a large, messy room which obviously served three people as sleeping and living quarters. The "computer" which would allow him to manipulate the universe at will was in the far right corner. He started towards it, then stopped. Someone with short red hair, wearing cut-off jeans and a T-shirt, was already sitting at it.

"Hello, Luq," she said, turning towards him. "I've been waiting for you."

Sirius rolled over, fell off the hearth, and woke up halfway to the floor.

"Ow!"

Wait a second, did I just say ow? I thought I was stuck as a dog. Dogs can't say ow. So that would mean...

Though not a scholar of logic, Sirius was nonetheless able to work through this problem, and the conclusion he drew—bulwarked by the color view of the ceiling he was now getting from his position on the floor, and the way his body responded when he tried rolling over and getting up—would have befitted a master of the subject. Though most master logicians do not celebrate a successful proof by dancing around the room shouting "YES!" at the top of their lungs.

Quite finished? said a female voice in the back of his head after a few moments. **You're needed elsewhere.**

"Oh really?" Sirius said aloud, just for the pleasure of hearing his voice.

Oh really. Check your pocket—I think you may still have your wand. If not, you'll have to scrounge when you get there.

"Where's there?" Sirius patted his pocket and grinned. "And no scrounging needed. But I'd like to know where I'm headed."

London. St. Mungo's. The control room first. After that, take it as you find it. Good luck.

"Thanks." Sirius started for the door, then stopped, glancing back at the intertwined figures on the bed. "Should I..."

Leave them for now. They'll come when it's time.

"Right."

Outside the cottage, Sirius turned in place, concentrating on a secluded grove of trees in a London park conveniently near most of the major wizarding institutions. The moon, waxing gibbous above him, winked off and on again as he changed locations with a loud crack.

A little out of practice, but at least I didn't splinch. Now then, time to find a pretty Healer and a sweet little Healer-apprentice, and maybe a few others along the way...

Remus had no idea how long he'd been holding Danger—*not long enough*—when he heard an ominous rumble from overhead. "We have to go," he said into her hair. "We can't stay here."

"You're right." Danger pushed away from him, looking up at him regretfully. "You're right. I just don't want to lose this... I don't want to go back and lose you again..."

Remus shook his head. "You won't lose me again," he said. "Whatever was holding me, finding you broke it. I suspect it had the same effect on you. But if I'm wrong..." He grinned at her. "You have my full permission to pin me down on the bed and take shameless advantage of me."

"Remus John Lupin—" Danger stopped and smiled impishly. "Actually, that sounds wonderful. I think I will. But later. Let's see if it will be necessary first."

Hand in hand, they stepped from the dream into reality.

Remus opened his eyes first, and closed them again in thankfulness as the tiny cottage came into view. *I never realized how much I relied on my vision until it was gone...*

You were right, a familiar and most welcome voice spoke up silently. **I can do this again—now let me see if...**

A wheezing cough close by his side, and Remus instinctively started to put his arm around Danger, only to find it already there. **It seems my body was wiser than I**, he said musingly.

Danger coughed once more. "Seems like..." she said hoarsely. **God, I sound awful, what's wrong with me?**

Rust? Remus suggested whimsically. **I doubt it's permanent, love. It'll likely get better with time.**

"I hope you're right," Danger croaked. She lifted her head and looked around the room. "Wait, where's Sirius? He was right there when I climbed in with you..."

Remus followed her pointing finger (not without a silent thrill at the ability) and frowned. The hearthstone was indeed devoid of dog. "Where could he have gone at this hour?"

Exactly the same place you two need to go, said a female voice in the back of both their minds. **London, St. Mungo's. Once you're there, just follow your noses.**

"To what?" Remus asked.

"Trouble," whispered Danger. **Remus, come on, we have to hurry—there's so much I haven't had a chance to tell you yet, everything that happened to everyone else, and if it's St. Mungo's it's most likely Harry—**

Harry—wait a second— Remus felt at his neck, then cursed. His pendants were gone. **The blood bond, it'll be broken, his mind's vulnerable, and Voldemort isn't dead, is he?**

No. He's not. But that's not the worst of it.

Remus untangled his arm from Danger and slid out of the bed, starting for the door. **Somehow I have the feeling I'm not going to like this.**

However did you guess. Her tone was grim as she matched his pace a step behind. **Let me start with Harry and work my way around...**

Harry was beginning, against his will, to believe in this world.

It's probably not real, he tried to remind himself. *Here today, gone tomorrow. Don't get attached.* But it was hard, so hard, when this world seemed to be filling every void the others had left in his heart. Friends, siblings, even a mother, who had held him gently and transformed the blanket he was holding around him into actual clothing...

And now this.

"I *knew* something wasn't right," Ginny whispered against his neck, a tear tracing a line down his skin, hot to cool. "I just *knew* it. Harry, oh, Harry, I've missed you..."

"I know." It was a good, standard, non-committal answer, and Harry thought the hand he was running through Ginny's hair would substitute well for any other words she might be expecting. Words like "I've missed you too" or even "I love you".

There were so many girls who expected me to love them. And a few guys, but let's not get into that. This feels right, but... so did some of the others. How can I tell?

The only sure way to know would be if he woke up in this world again tomorrow morning. Until then, he wasn't going to let it have his heart.

Of course, it might already be here... in which case, not a problem.

He looked over Ginny's shoulder at a sight which would have been bizarre in many of the worlds he'd visited and commonplace in others, though usually for different reasons than it was happening here: Draco and Hermione holding hands and gazing, enraptured, into each other's eyes. Ron was standing to one side fidgeting, obviously less than happy with his girlfriend being this close to someone who'd been, until yesterday, "the enemy". Luna and Meghan were whispering in a corner, and Letha was guarding the door.

Correction. Letha is running out the door.

Neville sidestepped the woman and came into the room, giving Meghan a quick hug as she darted to him. "There's someone in the hallway you'll want to see," he told her. "But give them a moment first."

Someone Meghan and Letha both want to see... wait a minute...

Harry got to his feet, nodding to Neville, and crossed towards the door, Ginny matching him step for step with her arm hooked firmly around his. Draco and Hermione came out of their trance as they passed, Hermione grabbing Ron and pulling his head down to her mouth so that she could kiss him while Draco started towards Luna, who was waiting for him. Neville and Meghan were looking out the door, Neville holding Meghan gently against him with her back to his front, Meghan quivering with suppressed eagerness.

I have friends, a girlfriend, a brother and two sisters, a mum... there's only one thing missing, and I don't think it'll be missing much longer...

Letha reappeared in the doorway, her eyes shining. Beside her was the person Harry had suspected.

Ginny let him go as he ran to Padfoot, hugging his godfather tight around the shoulders and feeling the man's arm around him, the other around Meghan, who had arrived at the same moment despite her longer run.

Almost without Harry's noticing, his last reservation about this world quietly evaporated. There was no more question in his mind. He was home.

"Oh, how touching," Luq sneered, reading over the red-haired woman's shoulder from his seat halfway up the rungs of the bunk bed behind her. "What will you do next? Bring in rainbow unicorns for them all to ride away?"

"No," the woman said calmly, setting her section break in place. "Actually, I thought it was time to throw a little challenge at them."

"A challenge? You?" Luq snorted. "A few limp-wristed Aurors, I suppose."

The woman merely began to type again. Within a few sentences, Luq had stopped sneering. Within a few more, he gave up all pretensions and merely watched as the thin, white-skinned figure robed itself and prepared for what it knew must be the final battle with its adversary.

Good she may be, but this young lady has a surprising grasp of evil...

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That Which Does Not Kill Us

Chapter 8

Harry closed his eyes and let himself bask in his godfather's embrace.

Yesterday, I was in a world where he was dead. The day before that, he was a traitor. And the day before that... He made a face, mentally, at the particular relationship he'd walked in on the physical side of. *I suppose there are things that could have scarred me deeper, but it's hard to think of one off the top of my head.*

Sudden, blinding pain through his scar made him gasp. Meghan squeaked beside him, then was gone, leaving him alone in Padfoot's arms. His godfather pulled him back to arm's length, looking at him closely. "Harry? What is it? Talk to me."

"Voldemort..." Harry managed, pressing his fingers against his scar. "He's close... angry..."

"What about your bond with Remus?" Letha demanded. "That should be protecting you. Why isn't it?"

"Because it can't!" Hermione said suddenly. "Harry, the pendants, do you have all of them? Every set?"

"Don't know." Harry tried to think, then gave it up as a bad job and dug into his pocket for the last two sets of gold medallions he'd had hidden within his own. "Just these left..."

Hermione took them from his hand. "Moony's and Danger's," she said with certainty after only a moment's inspection. "The other half of the bond isn't there, so it can't work. You've got to fight him, Harry—try and keep him out—"

The pain cut off abruptly. Harry sagged against Padfoot's arm. "Too late," he said, catching his breath.

"I don't like the way that sounds," said Ron darkly.

"You shouldn't." Harry looked towards the door. "He's here. In this building. He knows where we are, and he's coming. He wants—I don't know what he wants, but it won't be good. We have to get out, keep moving—"

Suiting action to word, he found his feet and started towards the door, Padfoot helping keep him upright, the rest of the Pride pulling out their wands and closing in behind, Letha bringing up the rear watchfully.

This is bad. This is very bad. Harry glanced over his shoulder at his friends and family. *We're none of us in top form, some of us might even still distrust others—the only thing we can hope for is that he's weak too, and that so many of us against only one of him will do some good—*

With a sound like a whipcrack, sullen red energy appeared around Harry, shoving Padfoot away from him and into a wall, knocking Ron backwards into Draco. Harry nearly fell but got his balance back at the last second, as the shield around him expanded into a half-sphere taking up most of the corridor. The Pride and Letha slipped out of the room past it, wands out, eyes wide.

"I don't like this," Draco muttered.

A low chuckle accompanied a soft pop. "There was no thought of pleasing you when it was christened," mocked the figure who had just appeared inside the shield with Harry.

Harry dropped to all fours and had just time to wonder why before his instinctive reaction completed itself. Hackles raised, teeth bared, Wolf snarled defiance at a skeletally thin Lord Voldemort.

"Tsk tsk," Voldemort said lazily. "Such a bad dog. I must teach you some manners, if you are to be my companion through eternity."

Companion? You? Never. Wolf growled again and began to stalk around the inside of the colorless shield.

"Ah, but I insist. You see, my Death Eaters discovered the most curious thing when they rescued me from the scene of our near-fatal battle." Voldemort tapped his wand against his fingertips as he spoke. "When you improved, I improved. When your health declined, so did mine. It would seem that, quite without my knowledge, I have made you into a guarantor of my own life. Which means that you must live."

Wolf put his ears back. *My teeth can be sharp for my flesh as easily as yours—if you are not lying, of course.*

"But I cannot let you continue to fight against me. Nor your friends—" Voldemort flicked his wand sharply, and a second shield sprang up beyond the first. Vaguely, Wolf heard the cries of alarm. "However, they are secondary. I must make you both obedient to me and invulnerable to harm before I can deal with them. Save your breath," he called out to the Pride, and Wolf's nose caught the scent of burned air. "These shields are pure magic. No object and no spell can pass in or out of them unless I allow it."

Then you will allow it. Wolf circled behind Voldemort. *I will make you.*

He sprang. Voldemort turned barely in time and flung him away into the shield with a spell.

The fight was on.

Pure magic, Danger repeated, peering around the corner more to get a better look at the two shields. **Pure magic—what is that making me think of?**

This? Remus spread a concept in her mind.

Yes! Danger almost laughed aloud, catching herself just in time. **Yes, of course—but that doesn't help us, tonight isn't...** She trailed off, tasting his thoughts. **Oh no. You can't mean this.**

It's the only way we'll get help to Harry in time. And if they truly are linked, that would make Harry a Horcrux—which word you'll notice he avoided using...

Which means he doesn't know that we know, Danger finished. **Or that we went after them, or destroyed most of them—all of them, we thought—**

Except for Harry. Remus nodded, his face set. **Because we had no idea he was a Horcrux, until this moment.**

But that means... Danger faltered. **No. No, Remus, no, you can't! That can't be the only way!**

Remus started to speak, then stopped, frowning. His thoughts raced. Danger caught only fragments. *...wouldn't work otherwise... might be able to... worth a try...*

He blinked twice and came back into full contact with her. **I need you to do what we already discussed, and do it quickly. If you can bargain for a few moments awake before your price begins, so much the better, but we have to move fast or we'll lose our chance...**

Danger nodded and closed her eyes, framing her request carefully. It would be the most important one of her life.

"That's enough now, Harry," Voldemort said, an undertone of laughter in his words. "Playtime is over."

Wolf howled, the sound twisting in his throat into a shout of pain as he retransformed into Harry. His head was on fire, splitting down the middle along the line of his scar—the bilious, burning green magic he recalled from the graveyard was inside his mind again, and this time it was moving to take him over—he fought, trying to force it back, but he was too weak from his months of imprisonment, Voldemort was winning, in only another moment he'd have total control of Harry's mind—

No! Harry tightened his hands into fists and shoved back at the acid green, imagining his own red strength pushing it away and crushing it. Voldemort pulled back, startled, and Harry pressed his advantage. *Get OUT of my HEAD, get out right NOW—*

"Can you make me?" Voldemort taunted, and the acid of his power began to eat away at Harry's stone walls. "All alone, can you make me?"

Harry shut his eyes and took a deep breath, then another, concentrating on his heartbeat. He could feel Voldemort's confusion at the fringes of his mind, but forced himself to stay focused on what he was doing until—just another second—

There.

He opened his eyes and smiled sweetly at Voldemort. "Who said I was alone?" he asked.

A flick of a mental switch, and Voldemort staggered back a pace as the magic of the Pack and Pride, lacking only two touches, filled Harry's mind. "Fools," he hissed. "I can destroy you all, do not think I will not... this changes nothing except the length of your dying..."

"Big talk," Padfoot said from outside the shield, his arms around Letha and Meghan. "Let's see you pull it off."

"If you insist." Voldemort's wand came up. Harry readied himself to dodge—it'd be extra hard with the green still eddying around his mind, watching him think—

A snarl sounded outside the shield, and paws slapped floor—a shock to the green magic, and then another—

Harry staggered back a pace and went to one knee as Voldemort's presence in his mind vanished. The Dark Lord himself was staring in shock at the creature which had breached his shields as though they weren't there.

It's a wolf—no, it isn't either—

Harry yanked the pendants from his pocket, pulled the two sets apart, and threw the one with the preponderance of red jewels frantically forward. The werewolf jerked his head up, caught the chain in his teeth, and flipped it backwards over his head, where it melted into his fur and disappeared.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and reached forward to touch the tuft-furred tail. **Where've you been, then?**

Long story, said Moony laconically.

Danger with you? No, never mind me, I'm being stupid, she must be. You're tame, and besides, tonight's not full moon. She change you to get through the shields?

Why yes, she did. Moony gave the rippling growl that was his wolf form's chuckle. **Now don't fight me. This is going to hurt.**

What?

Without warning, Moony whipped around and pounced, knocking Harry over backwards. Blue eyes scrutinized his face closely, and one gray-furred paw slid upwards to Harry's forehead. **Everybody out**, ordered the voice of the alpha. The Pack-magic vanished.

Harry swallowed once, then flattened his hands against the floor. **Ready**, he sent.

"What are you doing?" Voldemort demanded from across the shield. "Stop—NO!"

Moony bared his claws and raked them across Harry's scar.

Harry screamed, unable to help himself—he thought what came before had hurt, but this was indescribable. It felt as if a piece of his soul were being ripped out—

Across the shield, Voldemort screamed as well.

Wait, soul— not my soul, his soul—

Moony set his teeth into something invisible just above Harry's face and jerked his head around as if tearing out an enemy's throat.

Harry was positive his head had exploded. Nothing else could account for the pain. *Someone kill me now? Please?*

Not a chance, Harry-kins, Moony's voice said in his head. A cool nose made its way along Harry's jawline, and some of the pain vanished in its wake. **I'm sorry I had to hurt you, but it was the only way I could see to stop him. And it worked. You're not linked to him anymore, at all.**

Not linked—I was basically a Horcrux, wasn't I? A 'guarantor of his life?' Harry pried an eyelid open and found the light not unbearable. **That must have been why I couldn't beat him back at Hogwarts.**

Most likely. Moony stepped off Harry's chest, maintaining contact with a paw against Harry's hand but allowing him to see Voldemort crumpled in a heap at the other end of the shields. **And I don't know about you, but since we got all the other Horcruxes before the battle, this looks like a prime opportunity to me...**

Harry grinned ferally, pushing himself upright and wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. **You took the words right out of my head. Shall we do it together?**

Oh, I wouldn't want to steal your moment. You are 'The Chosen One', after all. Whenever you're ready, o mighty savior of the world...

Harry thumped Moony between the ears with a blood-streaked fist, then looked back at Voldemort, who was starting to stir. "You can dish it out, but you can't take it very well, can you?" he said, shaking his head. "Pitiful. The greatest Dark wizard in a hundred years, beaten by a werewolf and a teenager." Twin flicks of his hands created balls of fire in his palms. "Of course, certain things do help..."

Voldemort had just time to realize what was about to happen to him before the fire expanded to fill every available space within the inner shield.

Luq hissed between his teeth.

"Do you really think insults are wise right now?" said the red-haired woman, turning to regard him. "You are in my space, you know. My world. My power."

"You have no power over such as me," Luq informed her grandly. "I can leave whenever I choose." He jumped down from his perch. "As I so choose now."

"Leave, then," the woman said, turning back to her computer. "Have a nice time."

Luq grumbled another curse, then headed for the door. *I shall have to find another iteration of the world she watches less closely. Learn from my mistakes here—leave none of them both aware of their past and able to act on it in any capacity—*

He opened the door and stepped through.

The corridor on the other side looked distinctly familiar.

Twelve people, or rather eleven people and a werewolf, turned to look at him.

What—how—

Four spells converged on him before he could think more than that.

You'll be subject to their world's rules until you put everything back the way it was, the woman's voice informed him before the spells impacted. **Except Voldemort, of course. He stays dead. And leave their memories alone. They deserve those. Everything else gets fixed.**

I hate you, Luq thought with all the force he could muster.

A mental grin. **I'm used to that. Once everything's back to normal, you can leave. Don't come back.** A chuckle. **Or I won't make it temporary, next time.**

Luq was just starting to frame his scathing reply when the spells struck him.

Unconsciousness, for the first time in his existence, was a blessing.

Anne Walsh smiled to herself. "Maybe I won't bother making it temporary this time," she said, beginning to type once more. "After all, Rowling's Lucius turned out to care about his son, at least a little, so mine obviously isn't the same person..."

This was going to be fun.