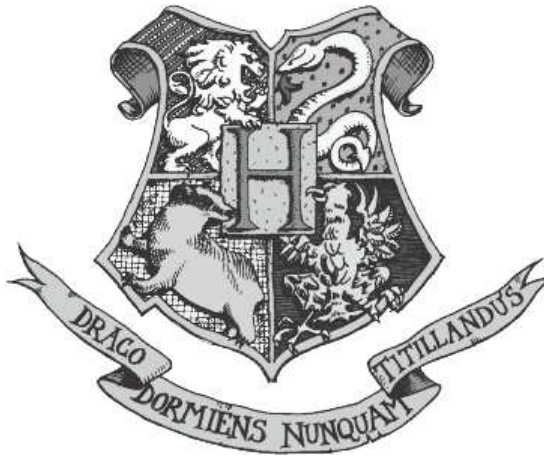


The Lost Generation

(1975-1982)



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Prequel to the *Psychic Serpent Trilogy*

Spoilers The first four canon books, the schoolbooks (*Fantastic Beasts* and *Quidditch Through the Ages*) plus the *Psychic Serpent Trilogy* (*Harry Potter and the Psychic Serpent*, *Harry Potter and the Time of Good Intentions* and *Harry Potter and the Triangle Prophecy*).

Summary Bill Weasley begins his education at Hogwarts in 1975, in the middle of Voldemort's reign of terror. He never suspects that the Gryffindor prefects he looks up to, Lily Evans and James Potter, will eventually have a son who saves the wizarding world, nor that the Weasley family will eventually play an important role in the Dark Lord's fall. All he knows is that in a very scary wizarding world, Hogwarts is a safe haven where he has always longed to be—until, that is, there are whispers of vampires and werewolves, of Death Eaters and traitors, and a Seeress pronounces a Prophecy which will shake the wizarding world to its very foundations...

Warning There are events and characters mentioned which appear in other books in the trilogy (such as two Weasley sisters who were born between Charlie and Percy). While it is not absolutely necessary to read the trilogy first (the third book is in progress) it may be helpful in some respects.

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— CHAPTER ONE —

Leaving Home

*In days to come the Dark Lord's fall
Is split by silver into gold.
A Triangle, each time, his bane.*

*One corner is a Lion tall,
Of good intent, named for the coal;
Twice hidden, both a beast and man.*

*One corner comes from blood of yore,
Child of the silver Moon so cold;
Dark Lord's servant and Lion's mate.*

*Last comes a flame-haired Daughter of War,
Caught between silver and the gold;
One of two and one of many.*

*The Lion loves the Daughter bright
As does the Child of silver Moon;
But the Dark Lord's servant shall betray.*

*What though they flee before their fate,
Three shall bring forth the days of doom,
And Love shall end the Dark Lord's reign.*

—The Triangle Prophecy

Monday, 1 September, 1975

“Charlie and Annie, say goodbye to Bill; he’ll be gone by the time you’re home.”

Bill Weasley tried not to show that he had a lump in his throat when his mother said this. His brother Charlie and his sister Annie were standing uncertainly by the front door with their rucksacks, waiting to dash out to the school bus when it came. Charlie, who was nine and starting his sixth year at the village school in Hogsmeade, tried to look manly about the goodbye, but the previous night as they lay in their beds in the bedroom they shared, Charlie had confided that he was going to miss Bill, and that he was more than a little scared to be the big brother.

Charlie showed none of these fears now as he put on a good show, shaking his brother’s hand and saying, “I’ll keep Annie and Peggy in line while you’re gone. And the garden gnomes.”

“Right. Let ’em know who’s boss,” Bill said, also putting on a good show. *I’m eleven years old, for crikey’s sake. And so are all the other first years, and I’ll bet none of them feel like crying because they’re leaving home for the first time....*

“Who? The girls or the gnomes?”

Bill grinned. “All of ’em.” Charlie grinned back at him, his gap-toothed smile and heavily freckled face imprinting themselves on Bill’s brain. He thought it was possible that his brother’s brown eyes looked a little shiny, but he dared not say anything about this.

And then Annie had to run to him and throw her arms around his waist, sobbing, “Don’t go, Bill!”

He crouched and took his five-year-old sister in his arms, holding her tightly, smoothing down her orange braids. Bill meant the world to Annie; he was her rock. She was only starting her second year at the village school, and next year when Charlie was in seventh year at the school, their youngest sister, Peggy would be nearly old enough to be a first year (her birthday wasn’t until November, but his mother had already been assured by the headmistress—her former employer—that

she would admit Peggy early). Bill had helped Annie with her homework (not really strenuous for the four-year-olds) and had sat with her and Charlie to eat lunch, instead of the other seventh years. Family was the most important thing, their parents always told them, and Bill had always taken that to heart. Now he felt as though he was abandoning them, and he had the distinct sensation of a heavy rock having taken up residence in his stomach; or perhaps it was a large, lumpy magnet attracted to the pole called Home.

Suddenly there was a very loud noise in the front garden; the bright green bus for the Hogsmeade school had *popped!* into existence in the middle of the flower bed, making Molly Weasley turn purple and rush out of the front door of her house, shaking her finger at the driver, who opened the door laconically and waited for Annie and Charlie to make their way up the steps into the bus' interior. When she was done her tirade, Molly hugged and kissed each of them, finally letting them board the bus with the other noisy, laughing children, and Bill stood waving at them from the front door as the double-decker bus with the legend *Hogsmeade Village School* abruptly disappeared again, with a loud sucking sound. Bill winced.

His mother walked back to the house with a sigh, shaking her head. "Sounds like he has to have that engine looked at again. I dread the thought of him putting it off much longer. What if the entire bus gets splinched when he's trying to bring the children home?"

Bill was startled by her saying this; she never used to voice her worries to him. Now it was almost as though he had advanced to the ranks of the adults, because he was getting ready to start at Hogwarts. *I'm not ready to grow up*, he thought desperately. *Please let me go back to the village school with my brother and sister..*

Inside, she picked little Peggy up from where she'd been playing on the hearthrug. "I still need to get Peggy dressed. Are you all packed?"

Bill nodded. "And I have my ticket." He brandished his train ticket and then put it back in his shirt pocket. *This is actually going to happen*, he thought. *I'm going away.*

His mother walked briskly up the stairs, the three-year-old on her hip, as she called, "Bill dear, could you clear the breakfast things for me?"

"No problem, Mum," he called. He went through to the kitchen, where half-eaten bowls of porridge, teacups and saucers, plates with toast and bacon crumbs and an open jar of marmalade stood scattered about with knives, forks and spoons in rather unpredictable places. (Why had Charlie evidently been trying to balance his fork on the handle of his teacup?)

Bill listened carefully first, to make sure his mother wasn't about to come thundering back down the stairs. Then he held out his hands and concentrated, and suddenly, in a rush, all of the detritus from breakfast had hurled itself into the stone sink under the window. The taps immediately turned on and started filling the sink with hot, soapy water. Bill looked at the table and groaned; the marmalade was no longer sitting there. And the jar had been open; that meant he couldn't just fish the soapy jar out of the water and dry it off. The marmalade was ruined. He sighed and went to the sink, retrieving the jar (full up with what looked like rather soapy marmalade) and then chucking it in the dustbin. His mother had always said he was going to do great things because of how early his magic had manifested itself, but he didn't always concentrate on things like only trying to get just the *dishes* into the sink, not the food. (He also noticed that there were tea leaves clinging to the soapsuds in the sink; he didn't have much hope that his mother wouldn't notice *that*.)

Luckily, since he lived in a wizarding household, he knew that the Ministry would be expecting magic to be occurring on a regular basis, and unless someone turned him in, he was unlikely to be caught doing magic outside of school while underage. He was very, very tired of having to hide his magic. It was against the law for him to do anything on purpose (not that that had stopped him). That was the one reason why he was glad to finally be going to Hogwarts; he could really *learn* magic now, instead of just repeating Latin conjugations and declensions and learning elementary magical history. He'd also learned his basic skills at the village school, reading, writing, mathematics and very, very simple Potions work. They also kept an herb garden of the more harmless plants they would later study in Herbology and they had a small petting zoo of friendly creatures like Kneazles and Nifflers, plus some toads and rats and salamanders and double-ended newts.

He had a wand now, and he would be starting on Charms and Transfiguration, and Defense against the Dark Arts—*real* magical studies. He itched to pull his wand out of his trunk and try some basic spells; he'd never felt anything like the sensation when he'd finally found his wand....a warm tingling all through him, starting at his fingers, where they wrapped around the rosewood; the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and the shower of red and gold sparks that burst from the wand tip was like a burst of fireworks. He'd tried out several dozen "wrong" wands, but that had simply made Mr. Ollivander more excited, more determined to find the right one. When it became apparent that the rosewood wand was the one for him (it had a phoenix feather core) the old man

went to get some brown paper to wrap it up. Bill looked about the messy shop, at the piles of wand boxes lying heaped up on every surface, and before he knew what he was doing, he'd waved his wand and all of the other wands jumped back into their proper boxes, and the boxes themselves were practically racing to file themselves back on the shelves where they had been.

His mother and brother and sisters had watched, open mouthed, when this happened. Bill grimaced; he'd starting doing accidental magic from the time he was very young, and whereas some people thought this meant he was very powerful, he felt more like he was burping very loudly in public every time this occurred. Mr. Ollivander had come back with the paper and string and calmly wrapped Bill's wand and took his six Galleons seven Sickles payment for it, not commenting on the altered state of the shop. Bill's impromptu spell had cleared up not just the scattered wands, but also a lot of the dust as well.

Bill had expected a scolding for doing magic in the shop, but for once Molly Weasley surprised him. She not only did not upbraid him for what he'd done, but when they were back outside, his mother sniffed disdainfully, looking back at the musty shop. "Well," she said, "he might have thanked you for putting the other wands back. Not that that place couldn't have done with a few dusting spells before ever we set foot in there...."

"*Bill!*" his mother called shrilly now.

"Yes, Mum?"

"Is Peggy's shoe down there?"

Bill found it near the kitchen fireplace. "Yes!" He sighed and carried it up the rickety stairs. He wished he dared to do a banishing charm to send it up, but having botched the breakfast clean-up, he felt it was safer to carry it. Plus, if he did another spell before going to school, he'd get another lecture from his mother. (That was the normal order of the day.) He'd had a very difficult time with his will-power lately, being so anxious to start Hogwarts. His mother had told him more than once that it wouldn't do to get in trouble before he even arrived at the school.

There were many spells whose incantations he did not know, but which he already did instinctively, and without a wand. He knew, however, that you were marked on *everything* at Hogwarts, and if you couldn't explain the theory on the written test or speak the correct incantation, or do the right wand-waving, passing the practical exam (getting the desired result, such as banishing a shoe) didn't count for much. He wasn't convinced he was going to be a great success at school; he knew he wasn't very hard-working, and he didn't think of himself as very bright, either. He was scared to death of disappointing his parents.

When Peggy was finally dressed, he and his mother went to the kitchen with his trunk and stood it on end. They were going to the Leaky Cauldron by Floo powder, then taking a Muggle taxi to King's Cross Station. His dad was already at his job at the Ministry; he'd Apparated away early that morning, before Bill had even awoken. Bill knew that everything at the Ministry had been in an uproar for several years, because of a Dark wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort (although everyone he knew said, "You-Know-Who") and his followers, the Death Eaters. But he still thought his dad could have woken him to say goodbye.

Bill grasped the handle of his trunk and threw the Floo powder into the flames. "*The Leaky Cauldron*," he said clearly, then stepped into the warm, breezy fire, trying not to lose his grip on the trunk handle (all he needed was for it to go flying into someone's sitting room and knock them out cold) as the grates of hundreds of wizarding fires whirled around him and his breakfast threatened to also start whirling around him.

Finally, he fell out into the dim front room of the Leaky Cauldron, a dingy old wizarding pub in London which masked the entrance to Diagon Alley, the wizarding shopping district. Bill dragged his trunk clear of the hearth, coughing from the soot he'd inhaled, and a moment later, his mother stepped out of the fire with little Peggy in her arms. She took down the hood she'd pulled over her daughter's head when they'd been traveling, and Peggy's copper curls were seen again. She laughed and clapped her little hands and demanded, "Again! Again!" She'd enjoyed the ride.

"Ere, now!" said Tom, the old almost-toothless publican, from behind the bar. "No bringin' somethin' that big through the Floo network in future!" he said, gesturing at Bill's trunk; it *had* banged about quite a lot on the way, Bill reflected, and was also covered in soot now. Bill grimaced, wondering how *he* looked. "I can' have every Hogwarts student comin' through here on the first day of term! Twould be mayhem!"

His mother reddened. "I'm sorry, Tom. We've never done this before. Bill's a first year, now, you know."

He grinned at the eldest Weasley child with his few remaining teeth. "Finally off t'Hogwarts! Tis a big day for ye."

"Yes, sir," Bill said uncertainly. He turned to his mother. "Mum—could you—could you clean up me

and my trunk before we get the taxi?" She nodded and waved her hand, and the soot immediately left him and his trunk. "Well," he said in a quavering voice to the old man. "G'bye."

Tom nodded and gave him another grin. "Good luck," he said tersely. *I'll need it*, Bill thought grimly, as he followed his mother out into the busy London street on which the Leaky Cauldron was situated. They climbed into the first taxi that stopped for them and the driver helped them put the trunk in the boot of the car. Bill leaned back on the soft leather seat, sighing, and wishing that the taxi ride would last forever. He had waited his whole life to go to Hogwarts, and now it was the last place on earth where he wanted to be.

* * * * *

Lily Evans stepped out of her parents' car. The car park of King's Cross Station was crowded with parents helping their children remove large trunks from the boots of the cars and there were numerous teenagers and almost-teenagers carrying cages with owls and wicker cases with cats. The fathers and mothers were doing helpful things like finding trolleys for hauling the trunks into the station. They looked fondly at the children they weren't going to see until the Christmas holiday and Lily could see more than one mother wipe a tear from her eye.

Lily sighed. Her parents weren't with her; her father was at St. Michael's Hospital again, at his wife's bedside. She hated to be going just when Mum was about to have the biopsy. At the same time, she hated sitting in the lounge, waiting, waiting for the doctor to walk in and say, "I'm afraid it's malignant," yet again. Of course, there had been the times when he'd walked in and said, "She's officially in remission," but those events were always superseded by these less cheerful ones. Three times she'd gone into remission. Three times she had come out of remission with cancer again.

Her sister Petunia was still sitting with the wheel of the car in a death grip, looking suspiciously at the other obvious Hogwarts students (if you knew what to look for) milling around the cars. Lily knew she would get no help from her. Petunia was extremely chagrined that Lily was making her late for work; she'd been clerking for Mr. Dursley at Grunnings Drills down in Surrey for three years, since she'd finished school, and she took great pride in getting there at eight in the morning, before anyone else, and making sure Mr. Dursley had a fresh pot of tea waiting for him and all of the pencils in the mug on his desk sharpened. Well before she knew he would arrive, she placed neatly fanned-out folders on his desk with the reports he needed to peruse to gauge the plant's effectiveness and productivity. She had meticulously researched and typed the reports the previous day. He wanted for nothing when he was in his office. Petunia Evans was a model secretary. After work, she would drive to St. Michael's and become the model daughter.

Lily tried to pull her trunk from the boot of the car, grunting. She had grown taller during the summer, but she was still on the thin side. She itched to pull out her wand and levitate the trunk, but she didn't dare. *Why can't prefects use magic outside of school?* she thought irritably. *If they think we're so responsible...*

She had received her letter naming her a prefect for Gryffindor the day after she had returned from her fourth year at Hogwarts. That had been a lovely day; Mum was home (she was still in remission then), and she had laughed delightedly when the owl had come swooping in the window she had opened in order to get the garden's green scent into the house. Unlike Petunia, Mum *liked* owls, and she thought it was frightfully clever the way witches and wizards used them to deliver the post. She fed the owl that delivered Lily's letter and tentatively petted its black feathers (not wanting to offend it), cooing to it about what a fine specimen it was.

Her parents had hugged her and exclaimed over her being a prefect, while Petunia had sat watching television, stony-faced.

"Petunia!" Mum had said, grinning. "Didn't you hear? Lily's a prefect!"

Petunia still stared doggedly at the screen.

"Petunia!" Dad said, a slight edge to his voice. "Did you hear what your mother said?"

The tall blonde girl looked up at her father, unblinking. "Yes. Lily is a prefect. How wonderful. Congratulations." Lily actually found herself being impressed by her sister's ability to speak without varying her inflection at all. If speaking in a monotone were to become an Olympic event, Petunia Evans would be a gold-medalist.

Lily continued struggling with the trunk, mentally cursing it, her sister, the car, her thin arms, her sister, school trains that left at eleven o'clock, her sister....

"Let me," said a familiar voice. Lily turned in surprise. Remus Lupin was standing beside her, his Muggle clothes hanging uneasily on his thin frame. His light-brown hair was in need of cutting, covering his ears, and that odd white lock of hair over his brow flopped as he moved. He picked up her trunk as though it weighed nothing, placing it on the ground next to his own trunk. He closed the boot of the car with a *chunk!* and then stacked both trunks and picked them up while Lily

carried her owl cage. The moment this occurred, Petunia floored the car, getting out of the car park as quickly as the old Renault would go, barely avoiding hitting a tall, thin black-haired boy with a severe expression and a hook nose. Lily's owl let loose some uniquely musical hoots as they walked to the platforms, reminding Lily of why she'd named her Calliope.

She had started off saying to Remus, "You can't possibly carry both of those—" but he had walked on calmly as though they weighed no more than a couple of pillows.

He said only, "They do block my sight a bit. Tell me when I have to go up steps, will you?"

She agreed to this, unable to fathom how a boy who looked so thin could be so strong. Perhaps he had enchanted his own trunk so it seemed to weigh nothing, but if he had put a similar enchantment on her trunk, she was unaware of it. She didn't see how he would have had the opportunity. *Maybe he's taken a strengthening potion*, she thought. That's probably it. And he wouldn't get in trouble for that, either. Except that Remus *hated* Potions and regularly performed dreadfully in that class....

When they reached the barrier between platforms nine and ten, he set the trunks down with a *thunk* that implied that they were *not* enchanted to seem weightless. Lily fought conflicting reactions inside herself. On the one hand, what he'd done was *rather* impressive, if it was pure physical strength, and she pushed down her admiration with an irritated frown, disliking the sort of girls who fawned on boys for their strength or sports prowess and especially not wanting to become one *herself*. Fighting this urge (besides the disgust she was feeling for herself) was her natural curiosity to know *how* he'd done it if it wasn't natural strength. It *must* have been magic of *some* kind....

They needed to go through the barrier unobtrusively, so Lily looked about her at the Muggles passing this way and that. She was still holding Calliope's cage and as she turned, she knocked the cage into someone who was suddenly standing very close to her.

Lily Evans looked up into the face of Severus Snape. He had also grown during the summer, and with his long black hair pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of his neck and his new beard and mustache defining his jaw and setting off his cheekbones, the sight of him made her catch her breath for a moment. *Stupid Slytherin git*, she thought, irritated. *Never with a nice thing to say to anyone. Why's he have to go and look like that now?*

He was thrusting one of the station trolleys at her. He already had one for his trunk. There were no adults with him either.

"You might want to use this," he said, pressing the trolley on her. "You would call less *attention* to yourselves."

With a disapproving look at her and a sneer at Remus Lupin, he marched casually toward the barrier with his trolley, and in the blink of an eye, he'd disappeared from sight. Lily looked at Remus, who rolled his eyes; he had nice eyes, she thought. Not brown but not green, with a touch of gold....

"Let's go," he said briskly, once Severus Snape was out of sight. Lily nodded and put her trunk and Calliope's cage on her trolley. She strode forward purposefully, bracing herself for the little rush of air that came with passing through the barrier. At the last second, as she was walking, she closed her eyes apprehensively (she would *never* really get used to this, she thought) and when she opened them she saw before her the Hogwarts Express, gleaming in the sunlight in all its glory, making her chest hitch. Even though she was starting her fifth year, it seemed like just yesterday she had received her Hogwarts letter....

She and her parents and Petunia had been having a lovely lunch outdoors on the terrace. It was high June, and the roses were glorious, as well as the African violets of which her mother—Violet—was so fond. Suddenly an owl had swooped down and landed on the back of Lily's chair, a large square parchment envelope in its beak. It seemed to want her to take it, and she did just this when she noticed that on the front of the envelope it said *Miss L. Evans, No. 10 Highgrove St., Appleby Magna, Leicestershire*. They hadn't yet moved to London because of her mother's health.

"It's for me!" she squealed excitedly. What a romantic way for someone to send her a letter, by trained owl! She had been rereading *Wuthering Heights* again—it was the fifth time. Each time she finished it again she spent several days mooning about the house wondering when *she* would ever make someone pine away for her because of unrequited love. She had a particular person in mind, whose name was not that far off "Heathcliff." And now here someone was sending her a mysterious letter in the beak of an owl!

She turned over the envelope and saw an odd purple seal, with a lion, a badger, a snake and an eagle surrounding the letter H.' Was that the H' she hoped for?

"How curious," she muttered as she opened the envelope, drawing out the heavy parchment on which the letter was written. As she read, she felt her face start flaming. She threw it down and hoped she could get into the house before she managed to burst into tears. *That stupid Hawthorn*

Watson, she thought, in her mind immediately accusing the boy from whom she'd been hoping to hear. A boy who, even Lily had to acknowledge (despite her crush), was rather crude and caused her no end of trouble. *Always calling me a witch. Now he does this....* Hawthorn was old for his year, having had some academic difficulty when he was younger. He was already shaving his sparse sandy-colored facial hair, she knew for certain that he smoked, and he had a devil-may-care attitude about him that clashed horribly with Lily's need for everyone to always abide strictly by the rules, which was the main reason why he needled her. And yet, there was also something about him which captured her imagination....

"Lily!" her mother called after her, seeing how upset her younger daughter was. Lily ran blindly toward the house, her tears already blurring her vision. As a result, she ran headlong into a *person*, standing where no person should have been.

Lily was certain that no one had been there a split second before. The person with whom she had collided was a tall, severe-looking woman with dark hair pulled back very tightly into a bun. She had square-rimmed spectacles and was wearing a plaid skirted suit and a very high-collared blouse with a brooch at her throat that bore the same lion, badger, snake, eagle and letter H' as the seal on her owl-delivered letter.

Lily stared at her, dimly aware that her mother and sister had started screaming. She stood transfixed as she looked up at the tall, thin woman, who looked back down at her kindly.

"I take it you are Lily?" she asked in precise, clipped tones. Lily nodded dumbly. "Well. You are rather *tall* for eleven, aren't you? Madam Malkin will have to give you robes for a second or third year and take them in so that they fit you properly and do not swallow you up. You'll get plenty of food at Hogwarts to put some meat on those bones, as well."

Before Lily could either process this information or ask what on earth the woman was talking about, her father suddenly ran up to her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her away from the strange woman. Still standing with his arms around his daughter, he glared at the intruder in his garden, who stood between them and their house as though blocking their path.

"Who are you?"

"I am Professor Minerva McGonagall." She paused, as though they should know who that was. When no one said anything (Lily's father's hands were starting to hurt her shoulders where he clutched her, and her mother and seventeen-year-old sister were also clinging to each other, pale as ghosts) she pointed to the letter on the ground. "I waited until I saw that Lily had read the letter." Another long pause as the Evans family continued to look at her with trepidation. She sighed. "I am the *author* of the letter, you understand."

Lily pried her father's fingers from her shoulders and walked cautiously to where she'd thrown down the thick parchment. She picked it up and looked at the signature again. *Professor Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress*. She looked up at the tall woman.

"You wrote this?"

"Of course. I suppose you thought it was a prank being played by one of your schoolmates? Do you know anyone at your school who uses owls to deliver the post?" Lily turned and eyed the owl who was still perched on the back of her chair, calmly preening itself. Lily shook her head vigorously. "Well, then," Professor McGonagall continued. "It is a lovely day, but I *do* have very sensitive skin. Would it be too much to ask that we converse indoors out of the sun?" She was asking a question and yet Lily had never heard anything that sounded so much like an order. She was thoroughly in charge. *Goodness*, Lily thought with alarm. *If she's the deputy headmistress, what must the headmaster be like?* She knew from the letter that the school's headmaster was one Albus Dumbledore.

"You—" her sister finally managed to say, pointing her finger at Minerva McGonagall; "you were a *cat!* Sitting right there, on the path! I was about to tell my mother that a stray was going to try to get our food, and then *you* were standing there!"

Professor McGonagall grimaced. "Stupid girl. And how else would I know that Lily had received her letter if I had not been able to watch unobtrusively? I have been lounging under that hibiscus—" she nodded at the plant "—in my cat form all morning. I was very still, so none of you noticed me. Muggles *are* remarkably unobservant most of the time, but one can hardly complain as it benefits us greatly. We would have to do far more memory charms if that weren't true...."

Her explanations were remarkably unexplanatory, Lily felt. *Muggles?* What were *Muggles?*

She led them into their own house, though the French doors that let onto the terrace from the conservatory, then into the kitchen from there and finally into the living room, where she seated herself in the center of the couch, very much like a queen, Lily thought, and folded her hands primly on her lap. The Evans family filed in uncertainly. Lily was fingering the thick parchment of the letter now, and it seemed that her heart had to be beating far faster than it ever had before. She

glanced down again at the letter.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

She swallowed and sat at McGonagall's feet, and the older woman began to explain to her family that she, Lily Evans, was a *witch*...

Lily shook her head to clear it. The platform was bustling with activity as students from first to seventh year tried to weave their way through the crowd and around packs of friends who were catching up and still more parents hugging and kissing their children and wishing them luck. Many of the students from wizarding families already wore their robes. She looked down at her Muggle clothes, which had formerly been her sister's, and felt rather conspicuous in her scratchy brown wool skirt and prim fawn-colored blouse. She wished she'd at least pinned her prefect badge to her blouse, but she'd already pinned it to a set of robes which were right at the top of her trunk, so that she could change easily soon after boarding the train. Amid the throngs of people on the platform, she suddenly felt very lonely. Severus Snape had immediately boarded the train, disappearing, and Remus Lupin had also disappeared into the crowd. Lily had one girlfriend in her year, Cecilia Ratkowski. She and Cecilia didn't get on very well with the twin sisters who were their other dormmates, Moira and Myra Edmunds. Moira and Myra didn't seem to need anyone else, but that was fine with Lily and Cecilia.

Only—during fourth year, Cecilia had begun to spend more and more time with some girls in the years above them and below them, and other girls in their year who were in Hufflepuff. (The Ravenclaw girls didn't deign to socialize with anyone else, and no one outside of Slytherin *wanted* to socialize with the Slytherin girls.) Lily was at a loss to explain why her friend had suddenly abandoned her; all Cecilia seemed to do with these other girls was gossip and discuss boys in the most immature way. Sometimes *makeup* was discussed at great length. Lily's parents had told her that she must wait until the age of seventeen to wear makeup, so she wasn't very eager to discuss what was out-of-bounds for her.

She missed being able to talk to her friend about their homework, and the news they were able to get from the outside world about Death Eater attacks, which had increased precipitously during the previous year. If she didn't have her other friends in her year, James, Sirius, Remus and Peter, to talk to about these things, she would have gone mad.

Of course, there were times when she was interested in "intelligent conversation" and the boys disappointed her as well. How much time could you devote to discussing *brooms*, for instance? She felt unlucky enough to have found out. And their favorite Quidditch teams. And their favorite comic book, about a Muggle named Marvin.

She was the only one in her year in Gryffindor who was thoroughly from the Muggle world. Cecilia's mother was Muggle, but her father was a wizard. The Edmunds twins were from a thoroughly wizarding family. James and Sirius' families were wizarding, and Remus and Peter were half-bloods, like Cecilia.

In some ways, though, even before Cecilia had abandoned her for more "girly" girls, she wasn't really her best friend. She felt that her true best friend was James Potter, although she couldn't tell him that, as *he* was best friends with Sirius Black, and boys were truly irrational about their best mates. Lily didn't know any boy who would willingly identify a *girl* as his best friend; it wasn't considered seemly. But Lily felt she could talk to James about anything; there also wasn't the added complication of a romantic entanglement; for the first three years of school she'd had a bit of a crush on Sirius Black, something which she'd shaken off during the previous year. The infuriating thing was that he'd *known* she was crushing on him and had been quite merciless about exploiting this for humor and making numerous jokes at her expense. The way he'd convinced her to get over her crush was no joke, though. She shuddered at the memory, looking around the platform for a familiar face.

Then she saw him; James Potter. He was making his way toward her through the crowd, already wearing his black robes and silver prefect badge, his dark hair as messy as ever, his glasses smudged (as usual), and his dark blue eyes flashing. She smiled when he came close enough and they exchanged a quick, friendly hug. She thought of James as a brother, in addition to her best friend. His girlfriend, a pretty dark-haired Hufflepuff girl named Bonita Manetti, was also a prefect; she was walking beside him, her smile widening when she saw Lily. Lily liked Bonnie very much. She wasn't one of the Hufflepuff girls with whom Cecilia discussed silly girly things; Lily wished Bonnie was in Gryffindor, as she was only able to see her during Herbology and Arithmancy. She didn't normally spend time with James and Bonnie together because they seemed to want to be alone at those times.

"Lily! Come on. There are some special compartments for prefects. We can all sit together near the front," Bonnie said, following soon after James, and also giving Lily a hug.

"I can help you with your trunk," James said. "Ours are already taken care of."

"Thanks," she said, picking up one of the trunk handles, while James took the one on the other end and Bonnie carried Calliope's cage for her. "I was afraid I'd never get it out of the car, but luckily, Remus happened by—" James suddenly dropped his end of the trunk, making Lily drop her end as well, and right on her foot. "Ow!" she cried out.

"Oh, um, sorry," he said awkwardly, picking it up again. Lily frowned and also picked up her end again.

"James!" Bonnie chided him. "Be careful. Lily could have hurt herself."

"I'm all right, really," Lily lied, limping forward; the toes on her right foot felt crushed. "Is there something wrong with Remus helping me?"

She could only see James' back as he walked ahead of her. "Ah—no, of course not."

"I *did* think it a little odd that he could handle both my trunk and his own—" she went on, bracing herself for James to drop his end of the trunk again. He hesitated for a moment, but continued onto the train without losing his grip on the handle this time.

"Both trunks you say?" he asked in an oddly strangled voice.

She didn't answer; when they reached the compartment, they all collapsed with exhaustion onto the seats. Lily glanced out the window; there were still loads of students on the platform, saying goodbye to their parents. A very tall, thin boy with red hair and shining blue eyes was blushing as his mother hugged him; Lily thought he might be a first year, as she didn't remember seeing him before, and because, in spite of his size, he still looked very young, with abundant freckles scattered across his snub childish nose. He knelt down to talk to his little sister, red-haired and blue-eyed like him. She talked to him also, but Lily couldn't hear any of it. Then she threw her thin little arms around his neck, clinging to him, and he closed his eyes, looking like he didn't want to go; Lily's nose itched and she blew it quickly, feeling her eyes sting. What a sweet family. She turned and looked at Bonnie, who was talking to James about her summer holiday. Why couldn't I have had a sister like Bonnie or a brother like James? she thought. Instead I'm stuck with horrid Petunia. It was bad enough to be with Petunia on a regular basis, but sitting with her in doctors' waiting rooms, anticipating the bad news about a biopsy was even worse....She shook herself to make this thought go away, then sighed and looked out the window again, but the red-haired boy was gone. His mother was holding his sister on her hip and waving, along with other students' family members still on the platform.

Then Lily felt that jolt under her as the train prepared to leave the station, and a fluttering in her stomach as she thought about returning to Hogwarts. This year she would be taking her Ordinary Wizarding Levels, or O.W.L.s. She was terribly nervous about them, even though she knew she would probably do just fine. Still, the nightmares about missing examinations or writing out a Transfiguration essay during the History of Magic exam had already started to plague her. She was a perfectionist but also easily distracted and, when she was being honest with herself, somewhat lazy and a procrastinator to boot. She had excellent marks on practical tests—especially Potions and Charms—because she just seemed to have a natural talent, but she knew she wasn't doing her best work when she dashed off a History of Magic Essay in an hour, written in her largest handwriting, so it would be a full three feet long. She did it anyway, because she'd put it off so long. As the landscape passed by, she sighed; she knew she had terrible work habits (which wasn't helped by the fact that all of her friends had terrible work habits too), but she was determined to improve this year, as it would probably be very difficult to fudge things on the O.W.L.s.

They watched the platform and waving people disappear from sight; soon they could see nothing but thick greenery on either side of the train as they began the long journey north. Lily felt very, very tired; James and Bonnie were talking animatedly and she hoped they wouldn't think her dreadfully rude if she just leaned her head on the window and took a little nap....

* * * * *

Bang! The door to the compartment slid open abruptly and Remus Lupin, Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew looked up in surprise. Sirius and Remus had been playing Exploding Snap while Peter watched, and for a second, the noise had made Remus think that Sirius had singed off his eyebrows again. He had also thought he detected a certain Slytherin's scent coming from the corridor, but had hoped that the person producing the scent would continue past their compartment. He groaned inwardly when he saw him standing in the doorway.

Severus Snape surveyed the compartment containing the three Gryffindors with clear distaste. Sirius, less restrained than Remus, wasted no time in making it clear that Snape was not wanted. "Sod off, Snape! This is our compartment!"

Snape ignored him, dragging his trunk into the compartment and then sitting heavily next to

Peter Pettigrew, who further shrank into the corner where he'd already been.

"You heard me, Slytherin!" Sirius said, standing. "Clear off!"

Severus Snape looked at him with a unique blend of malevolence and calm Remus never witnessed on anyone else's face. He raised one eyebrow, then took a small book out of his pocket and opened it where he had marked his place. Remus' sharp eyes saw that the book's title was *Romeo and Juliet*. This seemed odd to him, and he tried to think of a witty remark to make about it, but came up with nothing; witty remarks were Sirius' and James' territory, and he usually found himself tongue-tied and only thinking of witty remarks hours or even days after the opportunity to speak them had been at hand.

Snape had covered the title with his hand as he began to read, evidently determined to behave as though he were welcome in the compartment. Sirius came closer and Remus could tell he was about to lose it.

"I already told you, Snape—*clear off!* Shouldn't you be traveling in a *coffin*, anyway? With some soil from your native country?"

Severus Snape slammed down his book on the leather seat, making Peter jump. He stood up quickly, towering over Sirius and glaring down at him, black eyes into black eyes, the hatred quite mutual. His voice was low and even, his every syllable pronounced with the utmost precision.

"I would not be here if I had any choice about it. All of the compartments on the train are full except for the prefects' compartments, and as I am not a prefect, I did not attempt to go there. Perhaps the three of you would like to see whether your prefect friends will take you in? Then you will not have to ride in the same compartment as me. And for your information, although I have lived in London for many years, I was originally born in Scotland and Scotland has again become my home, so we are *surrounded* by soil from my native country." He smiled wickedly and Remus shivered. Could it be? Was he actually admitting—?

Snape sat and picked up his book once more. Remus frowned; at this rate Sirius would get into a fight before they even reached school. He looked at Peter, whose eyes were very wide; clearly he too wondered whether they'd be seeing a fight soon. Remus cleared his throat.

"Um, whose turn was it, Sirius? We weren't done playing."

Sirius turned and looked at him; Remus raised his eyebrows, hoping he would calm down and just ignore Snape. They usually managed to ignore Peter just fine, after all. The small round boy had been following them around since he'd been in the boat with them when they'd crossed the lake in their first year, along with James Potter, and he was also their fourth roommate in Gryffindor Tower.

"It's my turn," Sirius said, with a resentful glance at Snape, calmly reading his book and unwrapping a sweet he'd removed from his pocket. Remus' nose twitched. Toffee. His mouth watered. When would the witch with the food trolley arrive? It seemed like ages since he'd eaten breakfast.

After playing through a few more explosions (Remus saw that Snape was trying very hard not to do a different kind of exploding—with anger—when this happened) Remus Lupin finally detected the scent of pumpkin pasties wafting toward him. However, before the trolley reached their compartment, they heard what sounded like a scuffle and quite a lot of banging in the corridor. Curious, Sirius went to the door and opened it. Equally curious, Remus joined him in the doorway.

A thin red-haired boy who could only be a first year was struggling to drag his large trunk through the corridor, while the witch with the food trolley berated him for not being in his compartment.

"Please, miss, I don't have a compartment—I'm still looking—"

"You can't roam about the corridor with that bulky thing! You're in the way!" she cried shrilly. "Use yer loaf! You!" she cried, at Sirius, Remus or both—it was unclear.

"What?" Sirius said with a defensive tone to his voice.

"You take this boy in with you. I have to get through and he's in my way."

"Wait—we want to buy some things first—" Remus said quickly. He took out his money and bought some Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Chocolate Frogs and Spring Surprises. Sirius bought Fizzing Whizbees and Peter bought some more Beans plus a pumpkin pasty. Snape didn't buy anything.

After they'd paid for their purchases, they allowed the boy to drag his trunk into the compartment and the witch was able to get the trolley past him, sniffing disdainfully the entire time. The red-haired boy looked up at the giants in whose compartment he now found himself. Well, there were two giants, anyway; the boy with light brown hair punctuated by that strange white lock over his brow was only a little taller than him, and Bill thought it was quite possible that he might be taller than the round-faced boy cowering in the corner.

Remus could smell the fear on him and he felt sorry for the boy. He patted the seat next to him. "Here—sit. What's your name?"

The boy sat down between Remus and Sirius, who started opening their sweets. "Bill. Bill Weasley," he piped in a high voice. "I'm a first year." As soon as he said it, he winced, as his first-year status was painfully clear. Remus tried not to laugh, remembering that he still did the same, said things and then winced, wanting to snatch the words back into his mouth, hearing how stupid they sounded. *Of course he's a first year, he thought. As if he could be anything else.*

But he gave the boy a sympathetic smile and said, "I'm Remus Lupin and this is Sirius Black. Over there is Peter Pettigrew," he nodded at the smaller boy sitting in the opposite seat. "We're all Gryffindor. *That's* Severus Snape; he's Slytherin." Snape jerked his head up, his eyes burning at Remus'. "I am perfectly capable of introducing myself, Lupin. I choose not to," he said acidly. He buried his head in his book once more. Remus saw Bill swallow and look wide-eyed at Snape. Trying to distract him (and feeling his stomach move with hunger inside him) Remus opened his beans and offered the bag to Bill, who reached in and pulled one out. However, before he could bite into it, Remus snatched it from his hand, opened the window, and threw the bean off the train. Bill looked puzzled and a little hurt.

"Sorry," Remus apologized. "I should have picked one for you. You don't want to eat a dung-flavored one, do you?"

"How do you know what it is?" Bill asked him.

"Er—I have a really good sense of smell," he said truthfully, although he didn't volunteer the reason for his having this ability. "Here—I usually vet them for the others." He took out a bean and sniffed it. "This is okay. Tomato sauce."

Bill took the bean and began to chew it thoughtfully. He nodded to show that Remus had been correct. He went on sniffing out beans, removing them one by one and placing them in Bill's hand.

"Toast with marmalade, tar—you don't want that—" he threw the tar bean out the window. "Asparagus—here Peter, you like those—lemon chiffon, roast beef, Spotted Dick, rotten egg—" another one out the window "—bouillabaisse, peppermint, garlic, Yorkshire pudding—"

"Wait!" Sirius said in a yelled whisper. He glanced at Snape, who was again studiously ignoring them. "Which one is garlic?"

Bill handed it to him. "That one," he said innocently.

"No, Sirius," Remus started to say quietly, but it was too late; his friend was already pulling his wand out of his pocket and pointing it at Snape, who was deep in his book. He held up the bean and glared at Severus Snape.

"Hey, Snape!" he said suddenly. The Slytherin boy looked up, his eyes full of hatred, just as Sirius waved his wand and cried, "*Expello Bean!*"

The garlic bean in his hand shot across the compartment like a bullet, thanks to Sirius' banishing charm. Unfortunately, Severus Snape's mouth was slightly open in surprise, and the bean flew right between his parted lips. A second later, he was at the open window, spitting it out. He turned back to the interior of the compartment, murder in his eyes, glaring at Sirius Black, who was laughing uproariously and pointing at Snape.

"Oh! Oh! It's too funny!" he managed to say in the midst of his laughter, holding his stomach, almost breathless. Snape rounded on him and pulled out his wand.

Bill made a sound like "*Meep!*" and grabbed his trunk, hurtling toward the door and sliding it open with a bang just as a corresponding bang sounded behind him in the compartment and he heard Sirius Black cry, "*Hey! My face!*"

Bill Weasley didn't know what Severus Snape had done to Sirius Black's face, but he was getting out of that compartment before it happened to his own face and he had to eat by putting food in his ear or up his nose or something equally horrid.

Remus didn't usually throw his weight around, but he was concerned about the first year boy who had bolted when Snape was getting ready to retaliate against Sirius. He grabbed both of them by the scruffs of their necks and flung them into their seats. Severus Snape rubbed his neck after he landed; Sirius' face was covered in boils and he wasn't very happy about his friend trying to break up a perfectly enjoyable fight.

"We certainly are *strong*, aren't we, Lupin?" Snape growled at him, glaring suspiciously. "No girls are here at the moment to appreciate your showing off, by the way."

"I wasn't—" he started to respond reflexively, then stopped himself, breathing deeply through his nose; he had been working on controlling his temper during the summer, and he wasn't going to throw away all of that hard work now.

"I wonder," Snape went on musingly, "how is it you are so strong? Taking a potion the headmaster should know about? Something with steroids, maybe? Of course, that still wouldn't explain your hearing or sense of smell," he continued to muse.

"Shut up," Remus responded. "Between the pair of you," he glared at Snape and Sirius, "you've

scared off that poor first year.”

He strode to the door of the compartment and slid it open. He could see Bill at the end of the car, about to cross into the next one, dragging his heavy trunk behind him.

“Oi, you! Um–Bill!”

But the boy didn’t look behind him or hesitate for a moment; he looked desperate to get as far away from Remus, Sirius and Snape as possible. Remus sighed and returned to the compartment, closing the door.

“He’s run off. Are you two happy?”

Snape didn’t answer, but retrieved his book from the floor and sat down to read again, glowering. Sirius–also not speaking–sat down with his arms folded across his chest next to Remus, who took out his wand and began painstakingly removing the boils, one by one. However, a small dot still marked Sirius’ skin where each boil had been even when Remus was done. He hoped his friend wouldn’t be too upset. Truthfully, Remus thought Sirius was a bit vain about his looks, and didn’t make any effort to find a girlfriend of substance, rather than just the prettiest one who would have him at any given moment. Remus sighed. He knew who he would like to be with, but that wasn’t going to happen.

Then he thought again about the boy, Bill, and hoped he would be all right. For once, he thought, someone was running away from him, scared to death, but it wasn’t because of anything he’d done...

* * * * *

Bang! The door to the compartment slid open abruptly and Lily looked up in surprise, jolted out of her sleep. She had no idea how long she’d been dozing. The young red-haired boy she’d seen on the platform stood in the doorway, his trunk visible behind him. His hair clung to his forehead in sweaty curls and he looked miserable.

“Um,” he hesitated, seeing three older students, all wearing silver prefect badges; “can–can I sit with you? Everywhere else is all full. Or–” he hesitated again.

“Or what?” James wanted to know; Lily was surprised. He was just as new as her at being a prefect, but suddenly he projected an authority she’d never seen from him before.

“Or they just don’t want me,” he finished softly. He looked very embarrassed. “I’ve been dragging my trunk all over the train since we pulled out of the station, and no one will let me sit with them.”

Lily checked her watch; it was already noon. “You’ve been wandering all over the train for an hour? You poor thing! Of course you can come in with us!”

He swallowed. “But–but isn’t this compartment for prefects?”

“Don’t you worry about that,” James said, getting up to help the boy with his trunk. “Who said you couldn’t sit with them when there was room?”

The boy shrugged and looked shifty-eyed. Lily was starting to wonder whether he was being completely truthful. “I dunno. I don’t think they went to the Hogsmeade village school, so I didn’t know them.”

“Where were they? What compartment?”

Lily patted the seat next to her and he sat down, his ears immediately turning red, which made her smile.

“I’d–I’d rather not say. I mean–I haven’t even gotten to the school yet. I don’t want to get a reputation already for grassing on someone.”

James smiled warmly at him. “Good man. All right, it doesn’t matter. But remember–when you’re at school, if someone’s bothering you, a prefect can give them detention or take away house points. The house competition is very important. They’ll think twice about bothering first years if they’re going to cost their house points. Their other house mates will be all over them if they keep doing it.”

“Thanks,” he said softly, smiling shyly at the three prefects. He felt very lucky to be where he was. He was starting to think he’d be in the corridor for the entire trip. He’d thought the witch with the food trolley might actually throw him off the train, and felt lucky that she’d merely told him off for blocking her way until he’d been temporarily taken in.

“What’s your name?” Lily asked him.

“Bill Weasley.”

“I’m Lily Evans and this is James Potter. We’re the fifth-year Gryffindor prefects. And this is Bonnie Manetti, one of the fifth-year Hufflepuff prefects.”

“Hello,” he said politely. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Lily smiled broadly at him, and so did Bonnie. James laughed. “Now, now–you keep that up

and both my girlfriend and my friend who's a girl are going to be crushing on you. Cut that out." Bill blushed furiously at the idea of girls four years older than him crushing on him. He only dared look at Lily out of the corner of his eye; she seemed impossibly grown up and beautiful, her long dark-red hair falling past her shoulders in waves, her large green eyes like emeralds, her smooth skin like cream, her smile like a dozen suns. And the other girl had full red lips and a dark beauty that stunned him, with large doe-like chocolate-brown eyes and curling black hair that framed her heart-shaped, olive-toned face. Bill assumed that Bonnie was James Potter's girlfriend and Lily was the girl-who-was-his-friend, but he didn't know how on earth the older boy had chosen; they both seemed like goddesses to him.

The boy seemed far more "normal" to Bill than the girls, with messy black hair and glasses he had to keep pushing up his nose, like Bill's dad. He had a spot on his chin that he occasionally picked at, and he looked like he might already be shaving (or at least, he looked like he *should* shave—there was a slight growth on his face already). When he smiled, his eyes crinkled up and Bill felt like he knew everything was going to be all right; he thought that James Potter was a very good choice for a prefect.

"I hope I'm in Gryffindor." Suddenly, Bill realized that he'd said it aloud. He glanced at Bonnie. "Or Hufflepuff—" he added, not wanting to be thought rude.

She smiled back at him. "That's all right. Are your parents magical?" He nodded. "What houses were they in?"

"They were both in Gryffindor," he answered, for once confident. He had heard so much about it over the years, he would have to hang his head in shame if he hadn't remembered *that*. "But I know that doesn't mean I'll be Gryffindor, too."

"Any older brothers or sisters?" James asked.

"I'm the oldest. My brother Charlie is in sixth year at the Hogsmeade school, and Annie's in second year. My youngest sister, Peggy, is almost three. She'll start school next year."

Now Lily beamed at him. "I saw her saying goodbye to you; she's adorable. She looked like she had quite a lot to say."

Bill clearly hesitated. "Actually—well, she was saying—"

"What?"

He sighed. "She was saying that I'm blue."

"Oh—that you're sad to be leaving home?"

"No—yes—well—" he bumbled around. How could he explain Peggy? No one in the family understood why she kept calling people colors.

"She meant I'm actually blue. The color blue. She does this all the time. She called Mum orange yesterday. Called Dad green last night. She'll do that; she'll just point at one of us and say, 'You're red!' or whatever. We thought at first that she actually didn't know her colors yet, but when Mum tests her on that kind of thing, she knows it all perfectly. We can't figure out why she does it."

Bonnie shrugged. "She's just a wee thing. She'll grow out of it."

When the witch came with the food trolley, she seemed to have forgotten that she'd told Bill off for having his trunk in her way. James very generously bought sweets and pumpkin pasties for everyone, and Bill sat in awe, watching and listening to the older students, not quite sure he should believe his good fortune, and feeling far better about leaving home as they neared Hogwarts. He finally seemed to have landed on his feet. The prefects really seemed to look out for the younger students. Maybe he would be all right after all.

* * * * *

Bill was glad he hadn't had supper yet, as he thought he was going to throw up. Seeing that enormous man and crossing the lake in the small boats was bad enough, but waiting in line to be Sorted was the most nerve-wracking thing he'd ever experienced in his life.

"*Attenborough, Hamilton,*" the deputy headmistress called out. Her name was Professor McGonagall, and her voice rang through the hall; "*Baddock, Ford. Broadbent, Miriam.*" They all quickly were proclaimed Slytherins. The Slytherin table erupted in cheers each time and, Bill noticed, they made rude gestures to the other tables which were cleverly camouflaged so the teachers couldn't see *just* how rude they were.

After that, Peregrin Booth, Mary Anne Boxwood and Wallis Cassell (who was a girl) all became Gryffindors, and it was that table's turn to celebrate. Rhea Cooper became the first new Hufflepuff, giving them their turn, but then Raisa Czaikowski and Finster Edwards caused the Slytherins to start celebrating again. Finally, Paul Firth and Lawrence Flitwick became the first new Ravenclaws and Juliet Hathaway became another Gryffindor. Bill watched her go to the Gryffindor table; she'd

been in the same boat with him, along with Cooper and Flitwick. That meant so far his boat had had a Gryffindor, a Hufflepuff and a Ravenclaw. Did all of the boats get one person from each house? he wondered. He swallowed. *Oh, no. I can't be a Slytherin, I can't, I can't...*

He knew all about the different houses, and he'd heard the Sorting Hat sing its song. He'd always assumed that he'd be going into Gryffindor, just like his parents. What if he wasn't in the same house? What if he was in Slytherin? How would they react?

Then Mafalda Hopkirk became a Slytherin and twin girls named Houseman became Ravenclaws. More cheering from those tables. *Why do I have to be at the end of the alphabet?* Bill thought miserably.

He listened with his heart in his throat as Lorelai Kidder, Rembert Leonard and Gregor Lovelace were named a Hufflepuff, Gryffindor and Slytherin. As Lovelace made his way to the Slytherin table, Bill glanced over to see who had been sorted into that house the year before. He grimaced when he saw Gilderoy Lockhart, who'd been one year ahead of him at the village school, and had been completely insufferable whenever Bill had had occasion to come into contact with him. More than once, Bill had heard him telling a girl how pretty she was and oh-drat-he-didn't-have-his-assignment, maybe-he-could-copy-hers...? It didn't surprise him a bit that Lockhart was sorted into Slytherin, so now Bill was *really* averse to winding up there too. *I cannot be in the same house with Gilderoy Lockhart.*

Roxanne Maine-Thorpe also became a Slytherin, and Bill swallowed; she had been at the village school with him as well, and was extraordinarily pretty, with cornsilk-blonde hair and luminous blue eyes. She glanced briefly at Bill before walking toward the cheering Slytherin table.

It was getting close now. Four more first years became Ravenclaws, interspersed with some Hufflepuffs, including one of his best friends from the village school, Jack Richards. This was followed by his other best friend, Orville Simpson, becoming a Gryffindor. They were finally on the W's. Mabel Walters became a Hufflepuff, and then finally Bill heard what he'd been waiting for:

"Weasley, William."

He walked forward nervously. *I will not throw up, I will not throw up...*

Then he was sitting on the stool with the hat on his shoulders, completely covering his head. And he heard the voice.

"Well, well, well, what have we here? I haven't had a Weasley in over twenty years. And you're an O'Connor as well, on the distaff side. Interesting. Ah, I am to understand there will be three more of you? Isn't that nice! Hmm. Prodigious magical abilities, I see. Not always following the rules, but well-intentioned. A leader-looks out for his brother and sisters. Helpful. A sense of justice. Hmm..."

And then-it was silent for a minute.

"Hello?" he thought at it after another minute of silence. *"Are you still thinking?"* Silence. He waited some more. Finally, it spoke again.

"Interesting. You waited, and then only asked once. Patience is a rare thing in one so young. Yet you are also not afraid to ask the probing question. I think we have one more for GRYFFINDOR!" it finally cried loudly. Bill sighed with relief and removed it from his head, putting it back on the stool so that Eli Webster and Gilbert Wimple could become Hufflepuffs and Alexander Wood, someone else he knew from the village school, could become another Gryffindor, striding over to the table and sitting down next to Bill with a very large smile on his smudged, dirty face, amid the cheers and yells for the final first year to join their house. Bill was flanked on his other side by his friend Orville, who was also grinning at him.

But suddenly, when the noise from the celebrating had died down, a very small voice was heard from the back of the Great Hall. A small dark-haired boy still stood by the doors; he was wringing his robes in his hands and looked like he might very well cry.

"Excuse me," he said quietly, although his voice echoed all around the hall. *"What about me?"*

Bill saw Professor McGonagall's eyes widen, and she strode quickly to the headmaster. Bill looked at him in awe; he was an extremely tall man with a very long silver beard and hair, half-moon spectacles and sparkling blue eyes. He leaned over and said something none of them could hear, and then she whispered a response. He shook his head. Then she ostentatiously checked her list once more, followed by her looking up at the boy again, clearing her throat.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she said, still managing to sound quite imperious. *"I must have overlooked your name. Please come forward and put on the hat."*

The boy looked very, very relieved. He strode forward and when he reached the stool with the hat he looked like he'd died and gone to heaven. He lifted it up and sat, then lowered the hat onto his head.

They all waited. And waited. All of the professors started murmuring to each other, but the headmaster did not appear to be paying any attention, keeping his eyes on the boy with the hat. At

length, Professor McGonagall approached the hat and lifted up the edge of it.

"Is everything all right in there?" she enquired.

The boy lifted the hat from his head. "It-wants to speak to the headmaster," he said shakily. Bill looked around at the other Gryffindors; was this a usual sort of thing? he wondered. But they all looked as puzzled as he felt; indeed, the entire hall had gone utterly silent as Dumbledore replaced his tall, stately wizard's hat with the decrepit old specimen that each first year had recently tried on. Now they watched and waited while Dumbledore had some sort of private conversation with the hat. Eventually, he removed it from his head and returned it to the boy.

"There was a small misunderstanding, but I think we've cleared it up," he said to him, his eyes twinkling at him kindly.

The boy put the hat on again and sat, and very soon the hat was saying, "HUFFLEPUFF!" Bill thought there were words that came before that, something like, "Might as well be," but he wasn't quite sure. The boy took off the hat and sprang happily over to the Hufflepuff table, where they were cheering for having one more person.

When the boy had risen from the stool, Bill had been briefly distracted by the sight of a large tawny owl flying in one of the high clerestory windows and swooping down onto the high table right in front of the headmaster. However, Bill saw that when the old man read the missive delivered by the owl, the sparkle went out of those blue eyes and he looked very grim indeed. Bill imagined that headmaster of Hogwarts must be a very difficult job.

Bill gazed around at the Great Hall now; he'd been too fixated on the Sorting Hat and with the worries running round his head to notice it properly before. The hundreds of candles floating overhead shed a warm glow on everyone and everything and the bewitched ceiling showed a picture of the night sky out-of-doors that was a riot of stars on sapphire velvet punctuated by a thin, silvery crescent moon.

The headmaster stood, still looking grim. "Welcome to Hogwarts!" he said, trying to sound jovial. "As I'm sure you are all quite hungry, I will give out the start of term notices after our meal. So for now, all I will say is-tuck in." He sat again, and Bill looked around, waiting to see the servants who would bring in the food, as the tables were all completely devoid of any nourishment. But then it seemed that he blinked, and before him was a feast of staggering proportions. Soon he had a plate heaped with steak and mashed potatoes and buttered peas and a goblet full of pumpkin juice. He and Orville grinned at each other again as they began to shovel mashed potatoes into their mouths.

Remus Lupin dug into his food with relish; he felt as though he hadn't eaten in a month. Then his sharp hearing picked up on something Professor McGonagall was saying; she was leaning slightly toward Dumbledore and muttering, "*Albus, this is highly irregular. He wasn't on the list...*"

"I know, I know, but I don't see any harm in giving him a chance. Perhaps within a few months--"

"And what if he doesn't? What then? And how is he here at all? I know I didn't send him a letter..."

"Minerva, I can't be concerned about that now; I'm afraid there is something of greater import to worry about..." Remus looked around; he was obviously the only one who could hear their very quiet conversation. He had also noticed the tawny owl, just as Bill Weasley had. He saw the headmaster slip the letter to Professor McGonagall now, and saw her face blanch as she read it. She, in turn, passed it to Professor Sprout, next to her. Professor Sprout taught Herbology and was the head of Hufflepuff house. She looked faint upon reading the letter, which she handed back to Professor McGonagall, who returned it to Dumbledore.

Remus Lupin turned back to his food, wondering what on earth could be more earth-shattering than the extreme irregularity of a first-year whose name wasn't on the list? He suddenly wished he was a prefect, like his friend James, so he'd feel comfortable asking about this. He looked up at James, who was laughing at some joke of Sirius'. Then he caught Lily Evans' eye; Lily was sitting next to James. Remus felt himself redden and he looked down at his food again. Whatever it is, he thought, if the headmaster wants us to know about it, we will.

When they'd polished off the puddings, the golden plates were magically spotless once again and Dumbledore nodded at two of the teachers. Bill saw a round, squat witch with wiry grey hair go to a tall boy with dark blond hair and greyish-blue eyes who sat at the Hufflepuff table. Then Professor McGonagall, who was also the head of Gryffindor House, came to the Gryffindor table and put her hand on James Potter's shoulder. Bill swallowed. James looked up in surprise, frowning, and Lily Evans looked very concerned. Bill saw that Remus Lupin and Sirius Black were also frowning.

"Come with me please, Potter," the professor said gently to him. James looked at his friends, giving a small shrug, but he also looked like he did not think he could be receiving good news. The two professors led the boys to a door behind the high table, and when the door was shut, the headmaster stood again and looked round the hall.

"As I said before, welcome to Hogwarts. Normally at this time, I would be reminding you that the

forest is out-of-bounds and that Quidditch trials will begin next week, but unfortunately, I must instead tell you that there has been another Death Eater attack, this time one that affects two Hogwarts students.”

Severus Snape jerked his head around. Was that why Potter was pulled away by McGonagall? he wondered. He almost felt sorry for the other boy, in spite of the bad blood that had been between them for the previous four years. He suddenly remembered, quite vividly, being summoned to the headmaster’s office just before last Christmas holiday and being informed of his own parents’ deaths. However, since *his* parents were killed by Aurors, it was assumed they were guilty of something (even though they weren’t), and he did not garner much sympathy from his fellow students upon being orphaned (although some of the Slytherin students took a brief break from harassing him).

He’d suddenly had to go to his uncle in Dunoon for his Christmas holiday, in Scotland, instead of down to Oxford, to his home. *Home*. It had been less than a year since his parents’ deaths. He still thought of Oxford as *home*. His parents had both grown up in Scotland, on the Firth of Clyde, but they had moved to Oxford soon after he was born, so that was the only home he had ever known. He couldn’t even understand his uncle’s accent half the time. (His parents’ accents had softened with years of living in Oxford.) He grimaced; James Potter would, no doubt, receive much sympathy if anyone in his family had died. He didn’t need Severus Snape feeling sorry for him.

“Early this afternoon,” the headmaster went on, “three Death Eaters led an attack in Diagon Alley which appeared to have a particular target, an Auror. Two people, a married couple, tried to assist him, as he was outnumbered, but they were killed. Soon after, Lord Voldemort himself arrived and killed the Auror, the original target. His wife attempted to retaliate, but she was also killed. The Auror, his wife, and the two people who died trying to protect him were the parents of two Hogwarts students. Their heads of house are speaking to them now. I am sorry that the term must begin on such a dark note, but I do want to remind you all that here at Hogwarts, you are all quite, quite safe. I am still conferring with the school’s Board of Governors concerning the issue of Hogsmeade visits. When a decision has been reached, you will all be informed. However, even should a single Hogsmeade visit be permitted, only third years and up who have had their forms signed by a parent or guardian will be permitted to go. I know this is disappointing, but the Board of Governors want to make certain that no Hogwarts student is needlessly endangered. We are all very saddened by the events of this afternoon; two families have been split asunder. The Board of Governors wish to prevent such tragedies from occurring in future.” He sighed, and Bill Weasley thought he looked more than a little doubtful.

Then the headmaster led the school in singing the school song, although led’ was perhaps too strong a word, Bill felt. As the words streamed out from his wand into the air above them, each student and teacher sang them to his or her favorite tune. The jumble of noise was over mercifully quickly; Bill had the distinct impression that no one was feeling very much like singing and they wanted to get it over with.

Before Lily Evans and a girl who he assumed was a sixth-year prefect herded Bill and the other first years up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower, he looked at the door where James Potter had gone. He’d been so nice on the train, Bill thought. Figures he’d have parents who would die trying to defend someone else. He wondered whether James Potter’s parents had been Gryffindors too. It seemed likely. He looked at the other Gryffindors marching up the stairs with him, at the shocked and saddened faces who knew now what James Potter was being told. Although their house had been suddenly touched by tragedy, Bill was also incredibly proud to be where he was. He was determined to do his best to be a credit to Gryffindor.

* * * * *

James looked at Professor McGonagall. She was usually quite unapproachable-looking, but now she was sniffing and had rather shiny eyes. Then he saw that Professor Sprout was even worse; her nose was red and so were her eyes, and she clutched a handkerchief in her stubby fingers with the dirt from the greenhouses permanently ingrained under the fingernails.

He glanced at the other boy, a seventh-year from Hufflepuff whom he knew to be David Bones. David didn’t look any more sure than James felt. The two of them stood next to each other, waiting to find out why they’d been brought here by their heads-of-house. It was quiet in the room for what seemed a very long time.

Finally Professor McGonagall spoke with difficulty, after clearing her throat. “James, David—I am afraid the headmaster has received some dreadful news.” James looked sideways at David Bones; this was going to be very bad, he suddenly knew. Normally McGonagall would have called them *Potter* and *Bones*. First names were *not* a good sign. She turned to David Bones. “David,” she said, “your father was an Auror—”

"Was?" the boy said hysterically, clutching at Professor Sprout's hand.

"-who was targeted by You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters," she went on with great difficulty. "He-he was caught unawares and outnumbered. James' parents tried to help, but-" she paused and caught James' eye. "They were killed. By the Death Eaters. Then You-Know-Who arrived and-killed your father, David. Your mother was grief-stricken and tried to curse him so-so he killed her too. I-I am so sorry," she finished quietly. James felt like a very large block of ice had taken up residence in his stomach. *His parents were dead. Mum and Dad. Gone.*

David Bones had thrown himself on Professor Sprout, crying freely, and now she also let herself go, crying and hugging the boy who was more than a foot taller than her, while he took comfort in her motherly presence. He sometimes muttered, "*No, no, it can't be....*"

James felt his eyes sting. He swallowed. *I'm a prefect. I'm not going to cry in front of others.* He looked up at Professor McGonagall.

"They-they were heroes, then," he said, his voice quavering just a little. She gave him a small smile and a nod.

"Of the highest order," she said stoutly.

He nodded, feeling empty inside.

Dead.

His parents were dead.

He was an orphan.

Suddenly, he heard a muffled cacophony through the heavy door; those still in the Great Hall were singing the school song. James felt hypnotized by the odd noises; he didn't know how long he stood there dumbly, paralyzed. Finally, feeling like a large doll, Professor McGonagall led him out the door and up to Gryffindor Tower. The other students had left after singing the song. The two of them didn't speak. When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, Professor McGonagall said, "*Lacewings!*" and the portrait swung open. He turned to her.

"Thank you, Professor. Good night," he said stoically. He had a feeling that if he said more, he'd be blubbering as badly as David Bones.

She nodded kindly at him. "If-if you ever want to talk, Potter-"

He nodded back at her. "Thank you," he said again, his voice dull. He climbed in through the hole and closed the portrait behind him. The common room was empty; after the long train ride and devastating news, everyone had evidently decided to go to bed instead of socializing in the common room and talking about their holidays. James sat in an armchair before the fire; he wasn't feeling like going up to his dorm yet. He didn't want to see his friends, to cope with their sympathy and their awkward but well-meant tactless comments, trying to prevent himself from crying in front of them the whole while. He swallowed and then felt a single tear trickle down his cheek. Alone, he could cry.

Then he heard a step on the stair and he hastily tried to wipe his face. He looked up and saw Lily Evans making her way across the common room. She still wore her Hogwarts robes with her prefect badge over her Muggle skirt and blouse.

Lily's heart was in her throat. Here she'd been thinking of her poor mum all day, wondering about the biopsy, and feeling sorry for herself should she eventually find herself motherless, and then with no warning at all, James' parents were dead and he was an orphan.

"Oh James!" she choked; he thought she looked like she'd already been crying. "I'm so sorry!" He stood and she threw her arms around him. Then he did it; he let go, let the loud wails and torrent of tears escape him. He could only do this with Lily, he realized. He adored Bonnie, but somehow he always felt like he had to be strong around her, so she wouldn't stop thinking him worthy of being her boyfriend. It wasn't that he thought she was superficial; he knew it was his stupid ego preventing him, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't let Bonnie see him fall apart; it was as unthinkable as crying on Sirius or Remus or Peter.

To James, Lily was the sister he'd never had, just as Sirius was the brother he'd never had. She'd already cried on him over her mother's illness during the previous two years; he'd always been there for her. Now his parents were dead and she'd been waiting for him, waiting to be the one shoulder he knew he could cry on. He held her tightly and wept, the sobs punching their way out of his stomach as he clutched at her, and she held her friend, her would-be brother, and wept out her heart with him.

The Way of All Flesh

Tuesday, 23 December, 1975

James Potter woke with a start.

He'd had the *dream* again.

It started off the same each time, like a memory, rather than a dream. He was back in the huge timbered Hogsmeade Village Hall, where his parents and David Bones' parents had had their state funeral. They were heroes of the wizarding world, the four of them, and every dignitary in the Ministry was there, the Hogwarts Board of Governors, all of the Hogwarts teachers, and as many of the students as were able to wangle permission to leave the castle. It was standing room only, and the overflow crowd outside the hall had to content themselves with listening to the eulogies over a magical sound system that blasted the dignified voices to the entire village.

In the dream, as in life, James sat in a chair in the front row of the hall, as he had at the actual funeral, beside David Bones and David's older sister, Alice. The three of them were immediately in front of the stage, which held the four flag-draped coffins. The Potters' coffins were draped with Welsh flags, the red dragon gamboling over a field half white and half vivid green (when he first met Lily, James thought her eyes were the same color as the green on the Welsh flag); the Bones' coffins carried Scotland's cross of St. Andrew, the white "X" stark and simple on the brilliant blue.

The Minister of Magic stood and spoke at the lectern which stood between the two pairs of coffins. Then an Auror who was David Bones' father's best friend. More and more people stood and went to the lectern, to say a few words about Elspeth King Potter, Henry James Potter, David Alan Bones, Sr., and Audrey Rourke Bones. When the Minister said the name "Henry," James was jolted from his fog. He'd let the man's pompous voice slide around him, not penetrate his consciousness, until he heard that. It sounded so strange to hear his dad called "Henry." No one called him that who knew him. Everyone called him Harry, and usually his mum affectionately called him Hal. As others came forward, James didn't pay much more attention, only noticing whether each person used the proper name for him. If they said "Henry," as a few people did other than the Minister, he immediately started looking up at them with suspicion. *Fraud*, he thought. *You don't even know his name.*

In the dream, as in life, he also stood when the tune of the wizarding anthem began to play. The ghostly band of enchanted instruments ground it out, with none of the irregularities James actually preferred in human-played instruments. The perfection was almost more annoying than any trombonist who hit a sour note, or a trumpeter who bleated when he should have blared. He knew it was coming now with a certainty that increased each time he had the dream. Each step along the way was something simply to be endured. The witches and wizards who moved in ritualistic, mechanical exactitude were one such step, folding up each flag that had draped one of the coffins, handing two to him and one each to David and Alice. The strains of the crowd singing filling his head as he held the flags to his chest: yet another step. In the dream, as in life, he did not cry. Nor did he sing. He turned slightly to look at his friends behind him. Bonnie and Lily were singing, even though Lily had told him many times that she thought the words to the wizarding anthem ridiculous, as they were set to the tune of *God Save the Queen*:

*Witches and wizards all
We do not stand in thrall
To Muggle might.
We, whom they never see
Flying aloft and free,
We ever shall hidden be*

From Muggle sight.

*Not slaves of king or queen
And never clearly seen
By Ministers.
Free to be what we are
Free as a shooting star
All equal and on a par
Brothers and sisters.*

Lily had also not made any bones about what she felt was the inherent hypocrisy in the anthem's words, as the wizarding world was hardly as egalitarian as the lyrics implied. Remembering this was yet another step. Then the friends and colleagues of his parents and the Boneses lifted the four coffins to their shoulders and walked solemnly out of the hall, while a piper wearing the MacBean tartan, for the Bones family, and a piper wearing the MacGregor tartan, for James' mother's clan, played *Flowers of the Forest* and followed the pallbearers. (An adequate spell for making bagpipes play by themselves had yet to be developed.) James and David and Alice followed the pipers, the other mourners falling into step behind them. James saw Lily and Bonnie walking together, holding hands, tracks of tears on both girls' faces, while Sirius and Remus walked together behind them, Peter bringing up the rear. In his dream, his friends all seemed to be more real than the other people in the hall, but that wasn't really different from life; in life, everyone else had seemed to be a painted backdrop to James, mere illusions.

Outside the hall, the four coffins were loaded into horseless hearses. He assumed the Bones coffins were going to be taken somewhere for an interment. His parents' coffins were not; they had left instructions to be cremated, so they were being taken to the crematorium on the other side of the village. They had also left instructions to James that his father's ashes were to be scattered over Bristol Sound, off the south coast of Wales, while his mother's were to be scattered over the lake at Hogwarts. However, since they had died together, he somehow thought they should be together in death, as well, and he had instructed the crematorium to give him two urns, but not one for each parent; he wanted each to contain a mixture of their ashes, so when he spread his parents' essence over the two bodies of water, they would still be together. The crematorium staff had agreed to the unusual request.

The hearses were gone: the final step before real life and his dream life diverged. James braced himself, knowing what was coming. The dream had always played out the same way.... Suddenly, an explosion rocked the ground beneath his feet, and he went to his knees. Standing before him, in a cloak with the hood pulled up so his face was shadowed, was the Dark Lord himself: *Voldemort*.

His wand was pointed at James, who could not see the face, but a cold voice said, "*You will die just like them. Stupid and brave....*"

"*Noooo!*" he cried each time he had the dream, before looking around frantically and finding himself, very abruptly, in his parents' summer cottage in the country, in Godric's Hollow. He was somehow standing again, holding his own wand out, and then suddenly, there was a flash of green light and the sound of speeding death....

James sat up in his four-poster, his heart going a mile a minute, sweat dripping down his face. He parted the deep red curtains and fumbled on his bedside table for his glasses, bringing the round tower room into focus. Stumbling to the windowsill, he poured himself some water from the silver jug that was kept there. The almost-full moon was sending a clear, white light into the still room. James drank his water and tried to stop shaking, tried to think of other things.

He looked at Remus' empty bed. *Poor Remus*, he instinctively thought. From the first time his friend had confessed to him, Sirius and Peter where he went every month during the full moon and why, the three friends had conspired to work out a way to help him, to make this time easier for him and to make him less isolated. For three years they'd been trying to master the Animagus transfiguration on their own, relying in part on James and his Invisibility Cloak to get into the Restricted Section of the library and find the information they needed. That alone had taken the better part of six months in second year. (He wasn't able to go every night; he needed to get *some* sleep.)

He must have scanned through thousands of books, looking for the right information. There were also books to be feared, books that sprayed ink in his face or made a carillon of bells begin to ring in alarm, or books that had even tried to bite him and box his ears. It was downright hazardous to read something from the Restricted Section. Filch had very nearly caught him several times because of the various spells Madam Pince had used on the books.

And then, when they finally had the information they needed, painstakingly copied by James onto a dozen parchments which had to be charmed so that they could only be read by someone

with the correct password (“*All shall fear the Marauders*”), there was the issue of sneaking out of Gryffindor Tower to practice, and also finding an isolated place in which to do it. All in all, James speculated that they could have learned the transfiguration in a year or less if they’d had all of the information right at the start and didn’t need to sneak around.

Now, finally, after all their work, they were going to be able to accompany Remus during the full moon. In the morning, they would all be leaving on the Hogwarts Express for the Christmas holiday, which they were spending together at Sirius’ home, Ascog Castle, on the Isle of Bute in the Firth of Clyde. James would have been going in any case, as the Blacks were now his guardians until he reached the age of seventeen, but Remus and Peter had received permission to come as well. The Lupin family had been dubious, as the moon would rise full and bright on Christmas Eve, but Sirius had assured them that they had very secure dungeons at Ascog and that Remus would be comfortable while waiting for his transformation, but unable to harm anyone.

The Blacks didn’t know about Remus’ “condition.” Sirius was not convinced that if they knew they would allow him to invite a werewolf home for the holidays. They were acquainted with Peter, but then, the Pettigrews were a very old wizarding family. They’d fallen somewhat on hard times, but they’d once been large landowners, there were four Ministers of Magic in their family tree (two each on Peter’s mother’s side and his father’s side), and they were also known to be descended from three of the four founders (all but Slytherin).

That Peter seemed a poor representative of this illustrious family was something that wasn’t discussed in his hearing. James knew he was all right, and even though Sirius and Remus still thought of him as something of a tag-along at times, they knew James would never agree to his being excluded from their group. He’d said to them early in first year, “We’re going to be in school together for *seven years*. How would you like to spend that time being the one outcast in your dorm, watching three friends who do everything together and knowing you’re not wanted? If we’re not going to be his friends, who will be?”

He hadn’t known then that Remus was a werewolf; that didn’t come out until early in second year. Remus had agreed immediately, and James felt he knew why: if anyone was a likely candidate for the outcast, it was the werewolf, wasn’t it? So they had included Peter in all of their activities, given him help in classes, and waited patiently (well, Sirius wasn’t exactly patient) for him to catch on during their three-year struggle to become Animagi. Truthfully, if they hadn’t had to spend so much time helping Peter along, it might have gone faster, but he was officially their friend and James, for one, didn’t begrudge him the time they’d had to spend doing this. They weren’t going to accompany Remus until they could all three do it together. Upon that they’d agreed long ago. Now that Peter was finally comfortable with his transfiguration and could hold it for a very long period of time, they could finally do this.

James heard Sirius and Peter snoring behind their bedcurtains. He hoped Remus was all right. Every month, the day before the full moon was very hard on Remus. He shook and shivered feverishly all day, and flinched whenever anyone touched him in the slightest. He’d again borrowed James’ Invisibility Cloak to go to the hospital wing to get some relief. James thought it must be the worst thing in the world to be a werewolf, to not only suffer the transformation for three nights out of every twenty-nine, but to have these dreadful symptoms on the day before, as well.

He’d forgotten about Remus during the previous month, unfortunately. He’d selfishly slipped out of Gryffindor Tower to see Bonnie, using the map they’d created (James simply couldn’t let go to waste some of the arcane information he’d gathered in the Restricted Section while looking up the Animagus Transfiguration). He and Bonnie weren’t ready to be completely intimate yet; they hadn’t even come close during their times alone together. James still had pangs when they collided noses when they kissed. He worried about whether she would notice that spot on his chin, whether his breath was bad, whether he’d become too sweaty while running to meet her and now had body odor as a result. In short, he was a nervous wreck about just *kissing* her, and did not feel remotely ready for the anxieties that were sure to accompany going further. In one part of his mind, he wanted to very badly, but in another he was utterly and completely terrified of having his abject incompetence revealed.

And then—he’d returned to the Gryffindor common room in his Invisibility Cloak and there *they* were, kneeling on the hearthrug, kissing desperately, their breathing raspy, evidently too worked up to notice that the portrait had opened and closed. He’d checked the map before entering. He’d seen the names of the people in the common room, even seen that the names were very close together. It never would have occurred to him—

His hands were laced in her hair and his mouth had moved down to her neck. Her dressing gown had slipped from her shoulders and her head was thrown back to give him more of her pale neck. What really struck James, though, was her passion. He had never thought of Lily that way, and here she was with Remus on the hearthrug, all of her usual decorum abandoned as she held

him to her and he kissed and sucked her neck and–

Remus finally came to his senses, though. He had lifted his head suddenly and sniffed the air, his eyes narrowed. James froze and resisted the urge to suck in his breath. *Sometimes he looked incredibly like a wolf even in his human form.* James had been attempting to move across the common room under his cloak. He'd been praying he could reach the stairs without being discovered. He did *not* want to witness his friends together like this....

"What is it?" Lily had whispered to Remus throatily. Her skin was flushed and her chest rose and fell rapidly. *Stop that,* James had ordered himself. *You're not supposed to be looking at Lily's chest. She's with Remus. At least, now she is. And she's like a sister to you.*

"James," Remus had said simply.

Lily had frowned, sitting back on the rug. "What?"

Remus hadn't answered her but rapidly stood and crossed the room to where James stood, his nose telling him exactly where to go. Invisibility Cloaks were useless around a werewolf. James, for his part, had remained rooted to the spot, knowing he was about to be unveiled and helpless to stop it. Remus had reached out unerringly and pulled the cloak from his friend, anger contorting his features.

"You couldn't have remembered your promise to let me use the cloak," he practically growled, "but you're not above using it yourself to do a little spying!" James had been unable to tell whether the sweat that had broken out on his brow was because of his usual monthly problems or because Lily had gotten him so worked up. James had moved his jaw, unable to speak, to defend himself.

Lily, the moment she saw James, had widened her already-enormous green eyes and snatched up her dressing gown from where it had fallen, sprinting to the stairs to the girls' dormitories and running up them rapidly. Remus had turned his head, watching her go. Then the anger seemed to seep out of him, and he threw himself into an armchair, running his fingers through his hair, shaking. James had sat in a nearby chair, stuttering out an apology and trying to explain about meeting Bonnie, and getting the nights wrong....

Remus had shaken his head while James was speaking, and when he was done said in a hoarse voice, "No, James. It isn't your fault. Actually–I'm glad you came in before anything else could happen." He was shivering feverishly again as he spoke, making James think that he looked anything but glad.

"I–I can sit with you here, if you'd like some company, Remus," he said quietly, still rather chagrined at interrupting his friends, and letting Remus down. He was also still somewhat shocked by the thought that Lily had been on the hearthrug with Remus, kissing him passionately and being kissed....

Remus gripped each of his arms with the opposite one, more like he was restraining himself than hugging himself. "Go now," he said between gritted teeth. "I don't want you here."

James swallowed. "I'm–I'm really sorry, Remus....Please don't be mad at me...."

"It's not that!" he had yelled at James. "Go–before I don't let you!"

His shaking was worse than ever. *What did he mean by that?*

"Remus–"

"Get out!" Remus shouted violently at him again. And yet–the hungry look James saw in his eyes clearly said, *Please.* It was a desperately pleading, not an angry order. *Please go,* Remus was clearly saying. James nodded quickly and grabbed up his cloak as Lily had grabbed her dressing gown, practically running up the stairs....

James returned to his bed, not closing the curtains around him but continuing to gaze at the moon, bobbing in the night sky. Soon they would be at Ascog, and they would all be together on the night of the full moon. *We're going to be there for our friend.* James let this idea take over his brain as he drifted off to sleep once more, hoping he would not again encounter the dream about Voldemort, and see the dreaded green flash and hear the cold, evil voice....

* * * * *

Severus Snape woke with a start.

He felt dreadful. He had that awful feeling that he needed to go back to the hospital wing for more Porphyry Potion, to manage his porphyria symptoms. He especially had the feeling that it couldn't wait until morning. He groaned and sat up. He didn't think it likely that his lightheadedness was from lack of sleep. At this rate he'd faint before reaching the hospital wing. He sighed. Better wake the damn prefect.

He'd been more than a little miffed that he hadn't been named as the prefect in his year, but he wasn't at all surprised by who *was* appointed. *Bloody pet,* he thought. The Ancient Runes

teacher, Professor Took, was the head of Slytherin House, and he'd named his favorite student in the year as prefect. *Just because I don't brown-nose and tell him what he wants to hear.* Actually, he reflected, it was probably because he hadn't taken Ancient Runes. In third year he'd begun to take Muggle Studies (the only Slytherin to do so in many years—his theory was *know thine enemy*) and Arithmancy. He thought Arithmancy was little better than Divination, but he had wanted to avoid Care of Magical Creatures. He was *not* good with animals. He'd actually *wanted* to take Ancient Runes (he'd bought the text in his first year and had already taught himself quite a lot), but the little exposure he'd had to Took as his head of house had convinced him that he could *not* tolerate having the man for a teacher for five years, and Arithmancy had been the only tolerable thing left. At least Professor Vector didn't seem to take Arithmancy too seriously. Severus' healthy skepticism was usually greeted with a sly smile. Was the professor perhaps more than a little aware of the silliness of it all? he wondered.

In any case, he was going to have to try to wake Karkaroff and convince him to accompany him to the hospital wing, so that if he fainted he wouldn't be alone, and so if they ran into Filch he could say that he'd gotten a prefect to take him to see Pomfrey so they shouldn't get detention for being out of bed. (Not that he'd mind getting Karkaroff a detention).

Igor had been insufferable before fifth year, but it was nothing compared to Igor the Prefect. Severus had had to fall back on minor things to cut him down to size—such as using Karkaroff's least favorite nickname.

"Iggy!" he called now, shaking the boy to wake him. *Gah. He sleeps like the dead.* "Karkaroff!" he tried this time, in case the boy was still pretending to be asleep because he refused to answer to the hated Iggy.'

The smaller boy finally rolled over and groaned, propping himself up on his elbows. "Go away, Snape. Leave me the hell alone."

"I need to go to the hospital wing. I'll get detention if I'm caught unless a prefect goes along."

Karkaroff smirked. "And remind me why I should care...?"

Severus Snape's mouth worked unpleasantly. "Because if you do this—I'll owe you."

Karkaroff considered this now. Severus didn't like the sly look that came over his face as he sat up the rest of the way and said, "I'll get my dressing gown and slippers."

Uh oh, Severus thought. *What's that git going to try to make me do now?* But then he had that feeling in his gut again and winced; he really needed to get to the hospital wing.

They walked through the dungeons for some time before finally reaching the stairs to the entrance hall. They continued up the marble stairs, Severus having to repeatedly wait for Karkaroff, who was dragging his feet sleepily (and to be as annoying as possible, Severus assumed). When they finally reached the hospital wing and opened the door to the infirmary, they discovered that someone else was already in one of the beds. Remus Lupin was lying on his side, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, beads of sweat on his brow. He shivered feverishly and he was a ghastly grey color. Then he opened his eyes, which stared into space, unseeing. There was a strange red light in those eyes.

Severus Snape stopped in alarm. *What was he doing here?* he wondered. It was clear, though, that he was not well, whatever the specific malady happened to be. Severus hugged the wall nervously, making his way to Madam Pomfrey's office to tell her he had come for some potion, not wanting to get anywhere near the other sick boy, in case he was contagious.

Karkaroff didn't take notice of any of this. "I'm going now. Don't forget—" he added, "—you owe me." Now Lupin was sitting up abruptly, staring at the two Slytherin boys fearfully. Severus could see him swallow; what was *he* afraid of? Oh, right, he remembered. Severus Snape, the big bad vampire. Over the centuries, many people with porphyria had mistakenly been labeled vampires, until now, the Muggle world assumed that was always the case, and they were ignorant of the fact that there really *were* vampires. He scowled at Lupin. Fine. If he wanted to be afraid of him, he was welcome. *Maybe I should file my incisors to a point,* Severus thought.

Karkaroff left and Severus rapped on Madam Pomfrey's office door, watching Lupin out of the corner of his eye. She opened it quickly, surprised to see him.

"Snape! What are—" She stopped when she saw his face, its jaundiced color and his pale lips. She helped him to a bed and whispered, "I'll get the potion. Professor Sprout just brought me a fresh batch of spleenwort. I've been brewing potions all day."

As she tried to leave his bedside, he grabbed her hand. "What's *he* here for?" he asked quietly.

She looked irritated. "Always coming down here for sleeping draughts. And he'll probably ask to sleep here again, instead of in his own dormitory. But don't worry—I'll take care of you first." She looked disapprovingly over at Remus Lupin again before leaving to get Severus Snape's potion.

Lupin was sitting up in bed, staring unnervingly at Severus Snape. *If I didn't know that he hated*

me I'd swear he fancied me, he thought, recoiling at the thought. *Gah. Even if I liked men, I could do better than that any day.*

"Are you staying?" Lupin asked him abruptly, his voice throaty.

"What?"

"I said are you staying?"

Severus Snape frowned. "What's it to you?"

Lupin started breathing more rapidly. "If I thought I wouldn't be alone, I wouldn't have bothered to come all the way down here...."

"Oh, you've got to have the infirmary all to yourself now, have you? Sorry, but some of us have *legitimate* medical concerns," he said, stopping himself before he blurted out his specific concern. '*Sleeping draught. Why don't you sod off and leave poor Madam Pomfrey alone? And me as well?*'

Lupin swung his head around jerkily. "I-I had expected to be alone, is all," he explained more quietly, not answering Snape's nastiness with more of the same. Severus Snape never knew what to do when someone did this; it was a way of life in Slytherin House to raise the stakes. Backing off was unheard of.

The Gryffindor boy slid off his bed and put his shoes back on, and pulled his dressing gown on over his pajamas. He ran to the door. "Tell Madam Pomfrey—tell her I'm feeling much better—"

It was clearly a lie. *You look like hell*, Severus Snape felt like telling him. Instead he said with a smirk, "Afraid to be alone with me?"

Lupin stopped and scrutinized him very seriously; the look in his eyes was quite unnerving. *Did Lupin fancy boys?* Severus wondered again. And yet—there was something more like the expression of a hungry predator lurking there. Like a wild animal.

"Yes. I am definitely afraid to be alone with you," he said levelly, his voice almost inaudible.

Severus settled back against his pillows, his mouth twisting again. "Huh! Gryffindor bravery my arse."

Lupin was at his side in two steps, grabbing a fistful of the Slytherin boy's dressing gown with each hand, pulling him up. Their faces were very close, and Lupin seemed to be *sniffing* Severus Snape.

"It's not what *you'd* do to *me* that I fear," he said quietly. Then he flung him back on the bed and walked unsteadily to the door, slamming it behind him.

* * * * *

Lily Evans did *not* wake with a start.

She shivered under her covers; she hadn't closed her bedcurtains completely, and she could see that the bright moon was making patterns on the wall of the room, dancing trees, the branches leafless. The macabre dance of the naked limbs was hypnotic—or at least, she hoped it would be. She hoped watching would finally help her to fall asleep. Lily had been lying awake for hours, unable to get her mind to settle down, her thoughts coming in a steady stream....

Only a month ago it had happened. Ever since September she had been noticing Remus Lupin more and more, and Severus Snape as well, feeling torn and conflicted, uncertain about how she felt about either boy. On the one hand Snape was in Slytherin, which was an excellent argument against even being civil to him most days. He certainly never went out of his way to be civil to others—especially Gryffindors.

On the other hand, she had noticed on the first day of the term—quite against her will—how striking he looked as he was maturing, how penetrating his dark eyes were, how they seemed to reach into her soul when he looked at her, even if it was to say something cutting (she had noticed that his sharp remarks were usually about her house or her friends, but not usually about her). He had been assigned to her as her Potions partner, and working side-by-side with him had given her the opportunity to get to know him in a way she hadn't expected. The cutting remarks had lessened considerably, and they'd managed to develop a working relationship that was mutually beneficial. In spite of now living with an uncle who ran an apothecary, his technique wasn't up to hers, and having to watch to make sure he didn't make mistakes made her more vigilant about her own work.

When he'd taken ill in class one day, she'd even accompanied him to the hospital wing and had sat with him while he'd taken a potion Madam Pomfrey had brewed for him. Lily wished she knew what it was; the matron had started to say the name, remembered Lily was there, and thought better of it.

They'd talked for some time while he waited for the potion to take effect. He was very precise with his language, which she appreciated, as she prided herself on precision as well, but it did make it difficult to get to know him better. Their interactions were so *formal*. She did learn a lot about him,

though. About his parents (although he refused to talk about their deaths), about his uncle, about living in Oxford, and moving to Dunoon. He'd learned to sail during the summer. Yachting was a popular pastime on the Firth of Clyde. There were yacht races in the bay down in Rothesay, on the Isle of Bute, in July. He and his uncle and their crew of wizards had come in a respectable fourth place. They didn't actually use magic for this; they sailed Muggle-style, for the sport of it. This shocked her, since he was a Slytherin. (But she found out that his uncle—and his late mother—had been Ravenclaws.) He would describe to her in precise detail the various types of knots he'd had to learn, and what each was for, but instead of listening carefully, she found herself letting his already-deep, mellifluous voice slide over her...she watched those large, dexterous hands with their thin, articulate fingers, as they pantomimed tying the various knots....

She also watched his face when he spoke of sailing. It was an activity that seemed so out of character for him. Indeed, he had never done it before his parents died. He'd led a very circumscribed, uneventful life down in Oxford, a life hemmed in by the bells chiming in the church towers. *Nine o'clock*. Read three chapters of *Hogwarts, A History*. Then, *twelve o'clock*. Luncheon. *One o'clock*. Afternoon constitutional. *Three o'clock*. Read two chapters of *The Dark Arts*. And *five o'clock*. Tea. Report to parents the day's activities, what was seen on the afternoon walk, what was read and remembered....

Sailing on the Firth of Clyde with his uncle was an unpredictable way to spend the summer; you never knew when a cooperative breeze would come up, when you would be able to sail effortlessly down to the Isle of Arran for the day, or even further south, skimming along the west coast, perhaps putting into Blackpool or Liverpool. Being away from the land, surrounded only by the shimmering water in all directions, was both the most exhilarating and most frightening experience of his life.

He had very sensitive skin, so he'd been wearing long trousers and sleeves and a hat, and constantly reapplying the salve his uncle made for him on the exposed parts of his skin. She didn't say anything about this. She knew others speculated that he was a vampire. She thought this was preposterous; he was a boy, just a normal boy. He was perhaps more formal and less-sure socially than many people his age, but she sensed no bloodlust in him, even when he was making his cutting remarks to her Gryffindor friends. She bristled when he did this (although she was less concerned about his hostility to Sirius than she had been in the past), but at the same time, she wondered whether he was jealous of their camaraderie, their easy friendship. He didn't have that with anyone in his house; there were people with whom he sometimes associated, but it almost seemed that they did it against their will, because they were afraid of him. He wasn't exactly the center of a close-knit circle of friends.

And yet, even though she *did* sometimes get a sense of bloodlust lurking just under the surface with Remus, he was unfailingly gentle with her and everyone else with whom he came in contact. In Professor McGonagall's class, when they were transfiguring animals into useful objects around the home, while most people were turning rabbits into slippers and toads into tea-cosies, Peter was turning a dove into a small pincushion. To test whether he'd succeeded, Peter had put a pin into his poor bird, who was now covered with embroidered cloth but still clearly a living, breathing creature, Remus had cradled the poor thing in his hands and plucked out the pin, carefully healed the bleeding wound with his wand. She had watched how gentle he was when he'd done this, and when he'd raised his eyes to hers afterward, it had been very hard to look away.

She had found herself looking at Remus quite a lot in the months leading up to *That Night*, as she thought of it. There was just something about him that drew her, something very different from Sirius. He was so unassuming, so gentle, so convinced that he didn't deserve friendship, so glad to have it. She had never known anyone who was gentler and yet stronger; she'd seen other perplexing demonstrations of his strength since he carried his and her trunks on the first day of the term, and she had come to the conclusion that he was just very strong. She tried to deny it deep down, but a part of her was as attracted to this idea as to his amazing eyes, and the way his hair flopped over his brow just so, and the way he didn't laugh out loud when he found something funny (as James and Sirius did); he ducked his head instead, while a small smile crept across his face....

She knew she was doing it again. She was developing another crush on a friend. *Didn't you learn your lesson with Sirius?* she demanded sternly of herself. But it didn't matter. Her friendship with Severus was progressing in a slow but predictable pattern that could very well result in a romantic relationship (if he were ever to let his guard down), but she didn't know what to think about Remus. Sometimes she thought she caught him looking at her, and other times he seemed to ignore her existence altogether. Once a month, he inexplicably became ill and needed to see Madam Pomfrey for days running, and then he was fine afterward. It may have been going on for years; she was so focused on Sirius when she was younger that she was unsure about this. The afternoon of *That Night* she had asked Remus whether he wanted her to accompany him to the hospital wing, but he had been violently adamant that he not only didn't want her to accompany him, he wanted her out

of his sight.

She had run upstairs after that, burying her face in her pillow, inexplicably breaking into tears. *He hates me.* No, she had told herself, trying to be sensible. *But he's annoyed with me. I'm just a pest....*

She had lain in bed, sleepless, much like this night, for hours on end, picturing him telling her to leave him alone, his face contorted, her heart breaking into a million pieces....

And then she hadn't been able to stand it any more. She just hated the idea of his being angry with her. She had decided that she would swallow her pride (this was *very* difficult for her at the best of times). She would apologize and beg to still be his friend, on whatever terms he wanted. She had hoped to get him to have that light in his eye again, that expression he had when their eyes had met in the transfiguration classroom and it seemed they were the only two people in the entire world.

Her crush on Sirius had never been like this, she knew. Sirius had made jokes at her expense. Sirius had exploited her willingness to do things for him, until finally, he had—

She shivered at the memory. She had never known it was possible to feel so repulsed by someone to whom she had previously felt so attracted....but then, she hadn't known *he* had the capacity to behave in that way....

Lily had shaken with nerves. *She was planning to break school rules.* This was not something she did lightly. She wasn't even certain it was something she'd done *at all* before (at least, with premeditation). She was going to go to the boys' dorms and try to get Remus to come down to the common room to talk to her. It was thrilling and terrifying to contemplate this. What if Sirius woke up and found her there? What if he told all of Gryffindor House? She had donned her dressing gown and started walking down to the common room, on the verge of fleeing back to her room several times before reaching it. Then it turned out she didn't need to risk going into the boys' dorms after all. He was already there by the fire, shivering and sweating at the same time, shaking convulsively, his legs drawn up to his chest, his arms hugging them. He had turned his head in alarm when she entered, his eyes widening.

"Lily! I thought I told you—"

"I know, Remus. But I—I just couldn't bear to think of you being cross with me. I had to talk to you, to apologize." She sank down on the floor next to him, hugging her own legs to her chest. His shaking seemed to grow worse when she was near him.

"*Please go,*" he had said, so quietly she could barely make out the words.

She touched his arm with her hand. He responded like a dog with its quarry's scent high in its nostrils; they flared as he turned to her. His eyes went wide and the fire reflecting in them made them look reddish.

"*Lily—*" he choked, as though his life-force were being sucked from him. He covered her hand with his. She had the strange feeling that he really did want her to stay, in spite of his words. She moved closer to him and put her arm around his shoulders.

"I'm not leaving you alone," she said insistently. "You shouldn't be alone, in this state." She brushed his hair out of his face tenderly with her other hand. He followed the movement of her hand with his nose, breathing her in as though she were an exotic flower. She caught her breath as his nose nuzzled her hand for a second before his lips made contact with her palm, as though he just couldn't help doing it....

She hadn't expected this at all. She'd thought they might sit together and talk, that she might distract him from feeling poorly. The moment she felt his lips on her skin, all of her nerves suddenly stood to attention. She thought it was possible she had stopped breathing. His face moved over her hand again, smelling it thoroughly, memorizing her scent as if he planned to track her....

He turned to look at her then; the red light in his eyes no longer seemed to be a trick of the firelight. It didn't scare her, though, and she watched, fascinated, as he leaned over and captured her lips with his. She put her hand against his chest to brace herself, and to push him away if need be. What would she do if he opened his mouth? That had been part of her undoing with Sirius. When he had suddenly, mercilessly (she thought) thrust his tongue into her mouth, she thought she would choke to death. Surely people didn't *like* doing this? she had thought. *It was disgusting.*

And yet—Remus was different. Suddenly she had found herself absolutely aching to taste him, to breathe with his breath. She parted her lips slightly and when she felt his tongue lightly brush against her lower teeth, she finally felt as though she was starting to understand why people did this, why they wanted to. He moved his mouth against hers a little more insistently, slowly bringing his tongue against hers in a gentle caress that was making her react in ways she also hadn't expected. She felt perspiration rise on her skin, she felt a warmth in her chest, and before she knew it, he was removing her dressing gown, she was on her knees before him, his mouth clamped on

her neck, his hands—*God*, she thought, *he has amazing hands...*

Her mind whirled as they continued, their breathing becoming more labored, their pulses racing. Then, without warning, Remus lifted his head and sniffed the air.

“*James.*”

Everything after that was a fog to her. Remus had crossed the room and removed the Invisibility Cloak from James (where had he gotten *that?* she wondered) and started screaming at him. James may have answered, she wasn’t sure. Mortified, remembering only the amazed and dazed expression on James Potter’s face, she had snatched up her dressing gown and run up the stairs to her dorm as though a wild animal was chasing her.

A month later, lying in her bed watching the moonlight play over the still room with the three sleeping girls, she played it all over in her head again. *This was Remus.* Suddenly, they were kissing and pawing each other on the common room floor. How had that happened? It still seemed as though that had been some other person down there, not the self-possessed Lily Evans, prefect. His touch had released a cascade of desires she hadn’t known lived within her, and they frightened her. She had felt utterly out of control, her body running the show instead of her mind. She *always* had to be in control. The alternative was unthinkable to her. And yet—the way he had made her feel—

This was *Remus*, she thought again. Remus with the luminous hazel eyes. Remus with the shy smile that made her catch her breath. Remus who was the nicest boy she knew, and therefore the last one she would ever expect to make a pass at her. But this wasn’t a pass; what Sirius had done was a pass. (Everyone knew what had happened, too, once they saw what she’d done to him.) This was—she didn’t have a word for it. It had been mutual, that was for sure. Remus had seemed to need her so, to want her. Sirius—he had simply assumed he could *do* certain things to her, that she would *let* him because of her crush. It was very different. Remus seemed to be doing everything as much for her as for him. She remembered his nose gently nudging her hand...

And then, the next day, he had ignored her. She had expected—she didn’t know what she expected, but it hadn’t been *that*. Her heart had gone crashing down into her feet. Had he just been trying to get what he could, like Sirius? It had felt so different, though. She didn’t want to think it of him. And when she decided to try to talk to him about it that night (he had avoided her all day), she found he wasn’t in the common room. She steeled herself to invade the boys’ dorms, as she’d planned to do previously, treading ever so lightly on the stone steps. To her shock, the entire fifth-year boys’ dorm had been empty. She had cautiously opened the curtains on one bed after another. All four boys were out of Gryffindor Tower. Suddenly, a prefect’s rage had risen in her. *They would lose Gryffindor house points if they were caught!* And that James. *He was a prefect! He should know better!*

Lily had gone back to bed, but not to sleep (she’d hadn’t slept a wink all night). She kept hearing the sound of howling wolves coming from the Forbidden Forest. The howls made the hair stand up all over her scalp. Were they just common wolves? she wondered, then stopped herself. Best not to think about what things lived in the forest. She’d heard too many stories for that to be conducive to sleep.

Three nights in a row, she’d gone to the boys’ dorms and found their beds empty. She was quite nervy about it now. On the morning after the third night, she cornered James when he was leaving the prefects’ bathroom and pulled him into an empty classroom.

“Where were the four of you last night? For the last *three* nights?” she had demanded. He looked shocked.

“In—in bed, of course,” he lied. He was quite pink; normally, James Potter gave a new meaning to *pale*. Not as much as Severus Snape, but close.

“No, you weren’t. I checked your dorm. All three nights I checked! What are you *thinking?* Do you want to send Gryffindor into negative house points?”

“Is that *really* why you’re asking?” he had responded, bristling. “Because I could ask you the same. Girls aren’t supposed to be sneaking into the boys’ dorms. You were probably far more likely to be caught *in* our dorm than we were to be caught *out* of it.”

She had opened her mouth to respond and shut it again, confused. *He could get her a detention!* A *month* of detentions. She clamped her lips together angrily (how *dare* he get the better of her!) and turned on her heel, leaving the room as quickly as she could, seeing red. A moment later he caught up with her and grabbed her arm.

“Wait! Lily—I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to threaten you or blackmail you or anything. But—but *why* were you checking to see that we were all in our dorm? Why did you go up there, really?”

She stared at him helplessly. *Because I’m a lovesick idiot.* That would be the truth. She wracked her brain for a plausible lie, but nothing came to her. Finally, feeling she could trust James, of all

people, she said softly, truthfully, "I was worried about Remus."

James stiffened, and his hand closed more firmly around her arm, so that she was tempted to cry out in pain, but she forced herself not to. "I see," he had said, and then she remembered his face when Remus had removed the Invisibility Cloak; didn't he and Bonnie do things like that? She had no idea, and would never dream of asking. "We—we were worried about him too," he said in a sudden rush. "That's why we weren't there. We'd taken him to the hospital wing and stayed with him. Madam Pomfrey let us. He's our friend, Lily. We wouldn't let anything happen to him. Don't worry about Remus."

He wasn't looking at her; his eyes slid around her, but wouldn't meet hers. *He's lying*, she felt sure. *He won't look me in the eye*. "If you say so," she answered reluctantly. How do you accuse one of your best friends of telling a bald-faced lie? She wanted to, very badly, but couldn't bring herself to do it. She walked away from him sadly. *James was lying to her*. That was almost as disillusioning as Remus kissing her passionately, then completely ignoring her. Both seemed contradictory to their basic natures. That meant there had to be a good reason for what each of them had done. But what *was* it?

Now she had another thing to think about. After a week, her relationship with the four boys normalized again somewhat, and Remus started to behave toward her as he had previously (but it was as though he had completely forgotten ever kissing her). James stopped going pink when he spoke to Lily, and looked her in the eye. She tried to forget about Remus. She tried to focus on her assignments. She wrote History of Magic essays and practiced learning new charms and brewed complicated potions and prepared for the O.W.L.s....But then the cycle had repeated itself, and Remus' physical condition had again deteriorated....

He had been shivering and perspiring during the day again, she remembered, staring at the underside of the canopy above her bed. Whatever malady overtook him on a regular basis, he was once more in its grip. She turned over in bed, wondering if he had yet again taken refuge in the common room. Did the other boys send him there? she wondered, growing angry with them on his behalf. Then she realized that this didn't square with them taking him to the hospital wing and staying with him there—if, in fact, that was what they *had* done (and she wasn't at all convinced, yet could not bring herself to ask Madam Pomfrey whether they'd been there, in case they all landed in trouble because of her).

Lily stood and slid her arms into the sleeves of her dressing gown and wrapped it securely around her. She walked softly to the door of her room in her bare feet, even though the stone floor was chilling her. She crept down the curving stairs to the common room, wondering if she would have the courage to check the boys' dorms again if he wasn't there. But she never found out whether she would be able to bring herself to do this, as Remus was again sitting before the roaring fire, shivering as though he'd been set adrift on an ice floe and the nearest warmth was half a world away, not three feet away.

He looked up at her with a stricken expression. "*Lily*," he whispered, giving her a look that made her want to do anything in her power to make him feel better.

"*Help me.*"

* * * * *

Sirius Black woke with a start.

Several floors below in Gryffindor Tower, a door had slammed noisily. He pulled himself up in bed and parted his bedcurtains, wondering what was going on. He crept out of bed and toward the door. When he was on the landing, he looked around cautiously, then took a deep breath and did it; he felt the change ripple through his body, felt the horrible pain as his bones wrenched themselves into a different shape, as his very internal organs shifted and metamorphosed into another creature's.

His paws landed softly on the stone floor. He turned his head to see his tail flicking. He felt quite satisfied inside. He hadn't told the others he was doing this, transforming whenever he felt the urge, for more practice. Yes, it was painful, but it also gave him an incredibly powerful feeling to be able to execute such advanced magic, and something that was so rare, at the age of fifteen. He had been very, very impatient for them to be able to accompany Remus during the full moon. He'd been ready ever since the term had started—well before that, in fact—but James had insisted that they continue to wait for Peter to be ready.

Sirius loved being in his dog form. He could smell things he couldn't as a human. He could hear incredibly well. He had started to feel like his nose and ears were stuffed up when he was in his human form, the difference was so marked. Being a dog made him feel more *alive* than he'd ever been in his life.

Now he started to descend the spiral stairs in his dog form, going toward the source of the noise.

It had come from the first-years' dorm, on the second level. The fifth-years were on the sixth level, high above the common room. He paused a flight above the first-year dorm, catching snatches of their conversation, even through the heavy door.

"You do know what shagging is, don't you?"

What on earth? Why were first years talking about that? he wondered. Then he heard the voices in the common room below, the sound unobscured by doors or walls or constrained by human hearing...

"Remus! That boy heard us!"

"Don't worry, Lily. We have the cloak. It'll be all right..."

Sirius padded softly back up the stairs and changed into his human form again before opening the door to his dorm and staggering to his bed. He threw himself back on his pillow. She was with him. One of his best friends. He felt like punching something, or someone. He felt—incredibly angry with himself. *It's all your fault*, came the accusing voice in his head. He couldn't bring himself to hate Remus; he didn't blame Remus at all, in fact. *You botched it up and now she hates you.*

It had happened after the Quidditch match that fell on the Saturday directly after Lily's birthday. Lily had been mooning over Sirius for years, although she tried to pretend she didn't care. (She did a very poor job of this.) It had been frankly embarrassing during the first three years of school, when he didn't care tuppence for girls. She'd go deep red whenever he was around, and when she'd gone (and sometimes even when she hadn't) the others would nudge him and wink and tease him about his *girlfriend*. It almost made him hate her. After all, she was an insufferable know-it-all. Who wanted someone like that for a girlfriend, and with hair in that dreadful *red*? Someone who was a skinny stick, and pale to boot (when she wasn't blushing over running into him).

Once, late in their second year, when some fourth years had teased him in the common room about his *girlfriend* he'd shouted irritably, "She's not my bleeding girlfriend! I wouldn't be caught dead with her!" Then he saw that she was still in the corner of the room. She'd looked up with a stricken expression on her face, and he felt a stab of guilt. The guilt had deepened when she'd fled the common room, disappearing for hours. *She's not so bad*, he had thought more charitably when it started to become quite late and she still hadn't returned. *She'll probably look all right when she's older.*

James had gone to look for her after she didn't turn up at the evening meal. Sirius was actually starting to feel somewhat anxious. *What if something happens to her because of me?* he thought. She never let him copy her homework—in spite of her crush, she was very scrupulous about this—but she had helped him with assignments many times. He'd shamelessly taken advantage of the fact that he knew she wouldn't refuse him. He'd used her time and again, he thought, feeling more and more like a complete cad.

He had sat near the bottom of the spiral stairs to the boys' dorms, waiting, and finally, James had come back with her. He'd walked in with his arm around her tenderly; her face was rather blotchy, as though she'd been crying. Sirius sank back into the shadows in the stairwell so they wouldn't see him.

"There, there," James had said softly to her. "He's my best friend and even I don't think he's worth this much fuss," he told her, making Sirius frown. *Thanks a lot, mate.*

"You don't understand. It was—he said *caught dead*. It just made me think—I'd—I'd just gotten a letter from my dad about my mum. She's—she's in hospital again—the cancer's back—" She buried her face in James' shoulder and he held her and patted her back, his cheek on her hair. Sirius grimaced. *Bloody hell*. He was going around insulting a girl with a dying mother. Why hadn't anyone told him Lily's mother had cancer? *Because no one thought you cared about her, that's why*, he answered himself.

Things hadn't improved much in third year, and by then she was sporting orthodontia, on top of everything else. She still blushed around him, still shot him nervous glances when she didn't think he knew. When they were doing assignments together she was better, she was able to focus on the work and be more businesslike. However, she took on the imperious manner of a teacher at these times, which didn't exactly make her more attractive to him.

Then when she returned from the Christmas holidays during fourth year, it was like she'd undergone a transformation. Suddenly, her hair looked like the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen—maybe she'd found a new shampoo?—her orthodontia was gone. He noticed for the first time how her green eyes sparkled. She had—she had a *figure* now. A slight one, but she was definitely no stick any more.

Now Sirius Black had a problem. He'd spent three-and-a-half years stating loudly and uncatagorically how he wouldn't have anything to do with Lily Evans. The trouble was—now he'd fallen for her. He'd fallen hard. How was he to undo everything he'd said about her since coming to

Hogwarts? He had no idea.

And to make matters, worse, he could tell that two of his friends had it bad for Lily too. Peter he wasn't worried about, but Remus....And on top of that, it was clear that Severus Snape was not immune to Miss Evans' charms either. In fact, he'd noticed Snape looking at her in second year and thought, Good luck to you if you go there, mate. Now he felt like he would kill Severus Snape if he ever tried to lay a finger on his Lily. *His Lily*. When had she become that? In his mind a transformation had taken place, and he had no idea what to do about it.

After the Quidditch match that had closely followed her birthday, the Gryffindors were celebrating in the common room; James had clinched the match again, racking up goals to keep them safely ahead so the Slytherin Seeker wouldn't even try to catch the Snitch, which meant their Seeker, feeble though he was, simply had to have a clear field to grab it. As one of the Beaters, Sirius played an important role in this, sending the Bludgers hurtling at the Slytherin Seeker while the Gryffindor Seeker made his way toward the small golden ball.

During the celebration, Sirius noticed Lily sitting alone; after congratulating James on his win, she'd retreated to a corner to read. Their exams weren't for two months. He shook his head. Someone need to teach this girl how to *live*. He sauntered over to her and sat down next to her. She looked up to see who it was, reddened, said a soft "hello," and buried her nose in the book again.

"*You know*," he said in a conspiratorial whisper. "*I hear there's a party we could go to. In the Gryffindor common room. Some sort of victory celebration.*"

She looked up then, grinning at him. He grinned back. Why, he thought, when she smiles....*She's going to break hearts*, he thought instinctively, not realizing that his might very well be the first.

She let him coax her away from the corner and got bottles of butterbeer for both of them, drawing her into the crowd of laughing people near the fire, who were rehashing some of James' exploits again. James flashed a smile at the two of them, jolting Sirius. Did he suspect his best friend's change of heart concerning Lily Evans?

Sirius' presence seemed to convince Lily to stay in the circle of people near the fire for the rest of the party. They sat next to each other on the hearthrug, and at one point—judging the moment very carefully—Sirius slung his arm carelessly over her shoulder. She looked at him suddenly with wide eyes when he did this. He smiled at her warmly and she blushed again, but it wasn't anything like when she'd been younger. He detected that her breathing had changed; he was able to move his hand gently to her neck and feel her quickened pulse. She caught her breath when his fingers brushed her skin. *Hmmm*, he thought. *She's rather responsive*.

Sirius and Lily remained as the other students slowly left, ascending the stairs amid huge yawns. Finally, it was just the two of them. Her skin still looked flushed in the firelight. She wore a simple white blouse and black skirt, her usual clunky black brogans on her feet, and socks pulled up to her knees. He let his eyes go down to her chest very briefly, then back up to her face, his arm still around her. He leaned closer to her and felt her hitch her breath in anticipation. Should he say something? he wondered. What *could* he say? *After years of saying I wanted nothing to do with you, could you please be my girl?* Smooth. Very smooth. He looked in her emerald eyes and decided that speaking was out of place just now.

Actions, not words, he thought. Suddenly, he covered her mouth with his, holding her to him. She pressed her lips against his, mouth closed, meeting his pressure with an equal one. He opened his eyes and found her eyes open too, looking back. He pulled back from her.

"You're not supposed to *look*," he told her irritably. This wasn't going as well as he'd hoped. She frowned.

"*You were*," she shot back. She was looking somewhat dissatisfied as well. *Did she know nothing?* he wondered. He wasn't even sure he could remember how many girls he'd kissed. Was he her first? Probably, he answered himself. Who *else* would have kissed her, after all?

He took a deep breath and put his hand on the back of her neck, pulling her close to him. "Just relax," he whispered to her as he pressed his lips against hers again. In response, she became tenser than ever, as though she were over-thinking the entire operation. *It's not Arithmancy*, he thought, irritated.

Her lips were still shut against his. *She really doesn't know anything*, he thought, bringing up his hand and pulling her jaw down somewhat impatiently and pushing his tongue against her lips. This finally caused her to open her mouth involuntarily, and he thrust his tongue in at last, holding her head in place. She started struggling against him, and he held her more tightly. She was making a peculiar sound in her throat, and he took this as encouragement, moving one hand down to her chest....

Finally, she wrenched her head away from him, her eyes dark with fear. She pulled out her wand from the pocket of her skirt and pointed it at him. Her breathing was labored and she looked angry

and disappointed. He was getting more irritated by the moment.

“Oh, come on, Lily. Put your wand away. It’s just *snogging*. It isn’t as though you haven’t been wanting me to do that for years—” Even as he said it, he realized how dreadful that sounded. He always had been terrible when it came to talking to girls. His most successful come-ons were the silent ones, the meaningful glances across the library, followed by a pretty girl meeting him behind the far bookcases, letting him kiss her without a word....

Lily gasped, and he knew she didn’t care for how callous he sounded. *He’d botched this up completely*, he realized. Now he not only had years of rejection to undo, but *this*. Right, he thought. Go with your strength. *Actions, not—*

But as he stepped toward her again, she pointed her wand and a burst of sparks shot out of the end, striking him in the face. He immediately felt his skin *moving* of its own accord. In a panic, he put his hands up to his face.

“Ow!” he cried, having poked himself in his left eye, which was near where his mouth should have been, only a little further down and to the right. He moved his hands over his face carefully; his left ear appeared to be where his nose used to reside, and his mouth was sideways on the left side of his forehead, while his other ear was upside down on the right side. His nose now protruded from the left side of his head, and his other eye was on the right where another ear used to be. He moved his head to the left, so he could see with binocular vision again, sort of; the eye on his lower right jaw and the one on the side of his head were a little too far apart for the world to look quite right to him.

“What have you done to me?” he cried in alarm; it was a very strange sensation for his forehead to be opening and closing when he spoke, and he also wound up wincing from the noise, because of the ear that had been placed so close to his mouth. She fled up the stairs and he sat down in a chair, closing his eyes (looking at anything was getting very disorienting to him) and exhaling noisily. *Had anyone ever botched anything so spectacularly?* he wondered.

His features remained rather mixed-up for a week, and he couldn’t practice the Animagus Transfiguration during that time. He made a mental note to hex anyone who called him “Picasso” when he was normal again. (Peter was particularly annoying during that week, smirking at him constantly, and Snape was *completely* insufferable.) No other girl would go near him in the meantime, and he had a most difficult time reading, eating and blowing his nose. Brushing his teeth was no picnic, either. Because she’d been in a panic, she’d actually messed up the spell, so for one of the teachers to reverse it would have been somewhat difficult. Professor McGonagall assured him that his features would migrate back to their proper positions over the space of about a week.

In the meantime, Sirius never knew where his eyes, nose, mouth and ears would be when he awoke in the morning, and they were usually in different places by the evening meal than they were at breakfast. Although McGonagall had pressed him, he wouldn’t reveal who had hexed him. She knew him well by now, and even with his limited vision he thought she wore an expression that said *He probably deserved it*. Secretly, he agreed with her. He didn’t speak to Lily during that week, and she did her best to avoid him anyway. Through his oddly-placed eyes he had seen James looking at her with his eyebrows raised (Sirius’ eyebrows were drifting around his nose and one of his ears). James might suspect, but he wouldn’t tell McGonagall it was Lily, that was fairly certain. Nonetheless, a rumor did start to go around that it *was* Lily who’d done it, because he’d made a pass at her. He’d put up with a good bit of ribbing even after his face looked normal again. Some rather daring people still insisted on calling him “Picasso,” but it was starting to die out.

Then he had watched her alternately looking at Severus Snape and Remus Lupin all during the autumn term, almost never looking at him any more, and certainly not the way she used to. In the meantime, every time he was with any other girl, he wound up comparing her unfavorably to Lily Evans, and coming away feeling vaguely dissatisfied and aimless.

Now-now she was with Remus. They’re down there, *right now*, he thought, making himself stay in his bed, forbidding himself from going back out into the stairwell and relying on the superior hearing he had as a dog to listen to what they were doing in the common room. *That wouldn’t be right*, he told himself sternly. *You had your chance, and now she’s moved on*.

He sighed noisily and laid back, staring up at the canopy. This was his comeuppance, obviously. He’d been a dreadful prat to her for years, and now *this*. The feature-rearrangement hex was nothing compared to *this*. And no matter how much he knew he had earned it with his insults and snideness toward her, and the incompetent pass, and no matter how much he knew Remus deserved a little bit of happiness, he couldn’t help feeling....

She’s going to break hearts.

He thought, *Done*.

Done and done.

* * * * *

Remus Lupin woke with a start.

He'd been huddled in a corner of the Transfiguration classroom under James' Invisibility Cloak, biding his time and waiting for all of the students to be in their dormitories and for the teachers to retreat to the staff wing before rising and going to the hospital wing for a sleeping draught from Madam Pomfrey. Luckily, James hadn't forgotten this month that he needed the cloak.

Before he'd started adolescence, the day before the full moon had been accompanied by a carnal craving that had been satisfied by food; his parents had never been able to fill his stomach on those days. When it was close to full was the only time he felt remotely calm, but his stomach emptied so quickly again that he had to eat almost constantly to keep from shaking to pieces. He had decided, based purely on his own experience and not any research he'd done on werewolves in general, that his body was preparing for the baser carnal desire of sinking his teeth into human flesh during the full moon, for that tearing and ravenous urge that soared through him when he was a wolf. However, as he'd become sexually mature, he'd begun to have carnal urges of a different nature during the day before the full moon. These were far worse than the random urges that struck any twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy, and unfortunately, the sort of activity that eased the tension during other times of the month gave him no relief whatsoever when it was the eve of the full moon. The only thing that seemed to help was actual proximity to another person. He needed to smell them, to touch them, to have them touch him and smell him, and then more, more....

Or at least, he assumed this was true. In his fifth year of school he had never had the courage to find out whether actually having sex with another person would ease the symptoms he experienced as the full moon approached. Early in second year, when he was shivering uncontrollably in his bed, James had come to him, wondering what was wrong. He'd sat next to Remus on the bed, and Remus' nose had started going into overdrive. Suddenly he felt the incredible need to smell James all over, to touch him, to be touched by him; his proximity was both exciting him incredibly, and at the same time it was a calming influence. Breathing in the other boy's scent made him feel so *right*, like he was close to a solution to his problem. He'd never been this close to someone when he was coping with the eve of the full moon. He hadn't known that this was what could calm him. And yet—he needed more than proximity. He needed—*more*.

And that thought terrified him. He was only twelve years old. So was James. They were both boys. James might not like boys, and they were so young, below the age of consent. People would think it was wrong for so many reasons....No one would care that Remus was going mad for lack of human touch, for that closeness which was greatest when two people joined their bodies in mutual delight....

So he'd drawn back from James in fear, fear of alienating his friend (*If he knew what was going through my mind!*) and fear of what this meant for him (*Do I like boys? Do I like girls?*). He'd ordered James to go back to his bed, and the other boy, clearly still concerned, complied.

Once he was lying by himself again, Remus had sniffed the air; the scent of the other three boys was heady and sexual. All four of them were bundles of walking hormones, and with his werewolf sense of smell, Remus was even more aware of this. Sirius had been wanking in the bathroom, he was sure. Nothing unusual there. But the smell that lingered on his friend, which wafted across the room, was starting to make Remus sweat and shiver again, and he burrowed under his blankets, miserable, afraid that any moment he would spring out and rape one of the other boys. *I'm stronger than any of them*, he thought suddenly. *I could do it, just take one of them....* And then he thought, *I'm a terrible person. I'm not even a person; I'm a beast, an animal....*

The next morning, James had come to talk to him again, and Sirius and Peter noticed and joined him, all of them on Remus' bed.

"What's wrong, Remus? I can tell something's wrong; you can't hide it any longer," James had said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

Remus swallowed, looking round at his friends; they seemed genuinely concerned. His second year had barely begun. He'd been friends with these boys for a year, and they did everything together—almost. (He went to the Shrieking Shack by himself every month.) Finally, he made a decision. He plucked up his courage and blurted it out.

"I'm a werewolf."

They stared back and forth at each other, and then Sirius started laughing first, followed by Peter, and then James.

"All right, then, *don't* tell us," Sirius said. "*Werewolf*. Is that the best you can do? All right, I'm the bleeding Queen of England," he began in a high voice, "and I want my tea and crumpets *now!*"

Peter guffawed so hard he had to run to get a handkerchief to blow his nose. James was looking concerned again, though. While Sirius and Peter were carrying on, he quietly said to Remus, "What

is it *really*?"

Remus looked at him sadly. "I *said*. I'm a werewolf. Tonight when the sun sets and the moon rises, I will change into a wolf. Any human who is near me runs the risk of being bitten and turned into a wolf also or just plain being killed." His voice was soft and steady, and Sirius and Peter finally settled down. The three boys were absolutely still, listening to Remus' quiet words. "I am why the Whomping Willow was planted. It conceals a passageway to the Shrieking Shack. When I press a certain knot on the roots of the tree the limbs stop moving and I can go through into the passage. When I transform, if there are no humans to devour, I attack myself. That is what the villagers hear coming from the Shrieking Shack. They hear me. That is why I need to go to Madam Pomfrey each morning after a night with a full moon, so she can repair my wounds. And last night—" he nodded at James "—my body was—was getting ready for the transformation. The night and day before the full moon is—is very difficult—"

Finally, they had believed him. They didn't disown him as a friend. He almost felt like crying; had anyone *ever* had such good friends? he wondered.

But that didn't solve his monthly problem. Each month that followed, he spent the day before the full moon in agony, around boys whose hormones were jumping about constantly, and around girls who were in complete denial about their sexuality, even as he could smell which ones were menstruating, which were ovulating. They all smelled like *sex* to Remus Lupin, and they all drove him mad, boy and girl alike. He began to haunt the hospital wing on the eve of the full moon, asking the matron for sleeping draughts (James' idea), but soon she grew tired of him and wouldn't let him have a potion if it was too early in the evening.

"Go back to bed," she'd say tiredly. "It's only eight o'clock. You haven't even *tried* to get to sleep on your own. You don't want to become dependent on a potion to fall asleep every night."

Although the staff knew he was a werewolf, and even that that was why the Shrieking Shack had been built and the Whomping Willow planted, no one—including his friends—really knew about what he went through *before* the full moon. He was ashamed; he couldn't go to Professor Dumbledore and explain, "I'm sorry sir, everything you've done for me isn't quite enough. I need complete *carte blanche* to shag anyone I want on the night before the full moon, or I'll go mad."

He couldn't admit to the headmaster or matron what was bothering him. And he shuddered to think of the jokes Sirius would make if he knew. It was just too embarrassing. So he shouldered on, finally falling back on sneaking down to sleep in the common room when he couldn't bear the scents of his friends any longer, or when he hadn't been able to talk Madam Pomfrey into giving him a potion which would guarantee him instant sleep. He had gone as far as asking James whether he could borrow the Invisibility Cloak on the night before the full moon so he could go to the hospital wing for the potion late at night without being seen. When she was tired, Madam Pomfrey was more pliable and often let him sleep in the infirmary after taking the potion, instead of taking it back up to his dorm in a vial. She slept nearby, but in a different room; and she didn't bother him, at any rate, being too old to give off any sort of sexual scent. She hadn't been a sexual being for decades, and he was grateful for this. Yearning after the matron was one more headache he didn't need.

But this night...After the corridors had all gone quiet and he'd awoken in his uncomfortable position on the floor of the Transfiguration classroom, he'd put on the Invisibility Cloak and made his way to the hospital wing. He didn't want to be discovered by Filch and his cat, Mrs. Norris. He took off the cloak and stuffed it in his dressing gown pocket before entering the infirmary.

Then, while he was waiting for the matron to get the potion, *he* had shown up, with that git, Karkaroff. Remus watched Severus Snape enter the room, his eyes narrowed into slits. *He likes Lily*, he knew. It was painfully obvious. Every time they were in Potions together, the way he looked at her when she didn't know he was looking made it very, very clear how he felt. And yet—he had far more right to like Lily than he, Remus, did. He was a werewolf. He could never really be with anyone. He had watched his friends pair off with girls and thought *I can't do that*. He didn't dare. James had Bonnie, and Sirius had—whichever girl it was this week. Peter didn't have anyone, but that was hardly surprising. Remus thought he might have a little thing for Lily, too.

Remus couldn't help but hate Severus Snape. Snape who was so tall. Snape who played Keeper on the Slytherin Quidditch team (although he could almost never prevent James from scoring; James was a *brilliant* Chaser). Snape who made Lily smile and sometimes blush in Potions class, who made her get that *wondering* look on her face. It was stupid; he shouldn't feel jealous that Snape might actually have a chance with her. He had no business being with *any* girl, let alone Lily Evans. But still—

The scent of the other boy wafted across the room to him. *I do not want to want that git*, he thought irritably. Remus squeezed his eyes shut, feeling beads of sweat on his brow. He shivered feverishly. Then he opened his eyes again, watching the other boy. Snape hugged the wall nervously,

making his way to Madam Pomfrey's office. Karkaroff moved toward the door again. "I'm going now. Don't forget—" he added; "you owe me." *What does that mean?* Remus wondered. He sat up, swallowing. Snape scowled at him.

After Karkaroff left, Snape rapped on Madam Pomfrey's office door; Remus could see Snape watching him out of the corner of his eye. She opened the door quickly; Remus knew she was in the middle of preparing his sleeping draught.

"Snape! What are—" She stopped when she saw his face, then helped him to a bed. With his very sensitive ears, Remus heard her whisper to Snape, "I'll get the potion. Professor Sprout just brought me a fresh batch of spleenwort. I've been brewing potions all day."

Snape grabbed her hand. "What's *he* here for?" he asked quietly. Remus sensitive ears heard this too.

She looked irritated. "Always coming down here for sleeping draughts. And he'll probably ask to sleep here again, instead of in his own dormitory. But don't worry—I'll take care of you first." She looked disapprovingly at Remus again before leaving to get Snape's potion.

Remus sat up straighter, finding it very difficult to not stare at Severus Snape. His beard defined his jaw and high cheekbones very nicely....*Aargh*, he thought. *Stop that. I do not want to have these kinds of thoughts about Snape.*

But his mind ran away with him anyway. The two of them, in the infirmary, alone....*No*. He shook his head to clear it. *'Not a good idea' would be the understatement of the century....*

"Are you staying?" Remus asked him abruptly, his voice throaty.

"What?" Snape sounded startled.

"I said, are you staying?"

Snape frowned. "What's it to you?"

Remus couldn't help it; he started breathing more rapidly. "If I thought I wouldn't be alone, I wouldn't have bothered to come all the way down here...." Then he wished he hadn't said this; it must sound very strange.

"Oh, you've got to have the infirmary all to yourself now, have you?" Snape shot at him. "Sorry, but some of us have *legitimate* medical concerns." Then he looked like he was worried he'd said too much. *What was wrong with him?* Remus wondered. "*Sleeping draught*. Why don't you sod off and leave poor Madam Pomfrey alone? And me as well?"

"I—I had expected to be alone, is all." Remus slid off his bed and put his shoes back on, pulling his dressing gown on over his pajamas. He ran to the door. "Tell Madam Pomfrey—tell her I'm feeling much better—" Snape looked unconvinced about this, but he smirked, "Afraid to be alone with me?"

Remus stopped; the other boy's scent was very strong. He looked at him, at the bit of pale skin revealed by the V of his dressing gown, at his large hands. Snape looked unnerved by his scrutiny.

"Yes," he admitted softly. "I am definitely afraid to be alone with you."

Snape settled back against his pillows, his mouth twisting again. "Huh! Gryffindor bravery my arse."

Remus was at his side in two steps, grabbing a fistful of Snape's dressing gown with each hand, pulling him up, breathing him in hungrily. Their faces were very close.

"It's not what *you'd* do to *me* that I fear," he said quietly. He flung him back on the bed and walked unsteadily to the door, slamming it behind him.

He had decided he couldn't risk staying. He felt so on edge. Ever since he'd given in to his desires and starting kissing Lily during the previous month, he'd been dreading this night. That had been so amazing; inhaling her, hearing her sighs and feeling her fingers fluttering over him....until James had come in and brought him to his senses. Which he was glad of. And yet not....

In the corridor, he tried to get his breath. *Damn!* He would have to go back up to the common room. There wasn't anywhere else to go, unless he wanted to risk leaving the castle and going through the passage to the Shrieking Shack. The winter wind beat against the windows in the corridor and a cold breeze swirled around his ankles; the castle was draughty, but it was at least shelter, and there was *some* warmth. The Shrieking Shack had none. And if he went to sleep all night on the floor of a classroom, covered in the Invisibility Cloak, he would probably be found by Filch and Norris; he couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't snore, or throw the cloak off in his sleep.

He gave the password and entered Gryffindor Tower, taking off the cloak and bundling it into the pocket of his dressing gown again. He sat before the fire, remembering Snape's scent, and beginning to shake again. *Damn Snape!* He was so close to getting the sleeping draught from Pomfrey....But he didn't know how long she would take getting Snape's potion, how long after that she would have his sleeping draught ready, and how long both boys would be there, alone in the infirmary, waiting for their potions to take effect. *What was wrong with Snape, anyway?* he wondered. But he didn't

have long to ponder this.

As he sat before the fire, shaking, his nose started quivering again. *No, no, no*, he thought. *Go away. I can't bear it. I can't fight it...* He heard her soft footsteps come closer and closer as she descended the stairs.

Finally, she had reached the common room. She walked toward him slowly, then stopped. He couldn't help staring at her; she was so beautiful, so compassionate. He knew he'd already hurt her a great deal, yet, miraculously, she didn't hate him for it. She was here looking for him in spite of that. He had wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms the morning after they'd first kissed, to tell her how much he loved her and to kiss her again. But he dared not do this. He was a monster. He dared not ever love anyone, nor ask them to love him.

And yet, even as he thought this, he moved his eyes over her hungrily, aching for her, and not just because he was a werewolf. His resolved crumbled utterly as he whispered, "*Lily. Help me.*"

* * * * *

Bill Weasley woke with a start.

The door to the first-years' dorm slammed noisily and Peregrin Booth came hurtling back into the room, leapt onto his bed and dove under the covers. The other boys woke also, and immediately started telling off Booth for being so noisy upon returning from the lavatory in the middle of the night.

"I don't care *how* cold the floor is," Alex Wood said to him angrily, after Orville Simpson had told Booth to do something to himself which was probably physically impossible. Sleep was still making Alex's voice a little thick. "Put on a pair of bleeding slippers or boots or *something*. Don't just—"

"*That's not why I was running!*" Booth said breathlessly. He sat up, leaning forward, clearly hoping he'd goad the other boys into asking what was really making him run. His fair blond hair shivered in a pudding-bowl shape around his head.

Rembert Leonard, his fox-like face poking between his bedcurtains, took the bait. "All right—why were you running?" Leonard was Booth's best friend, and was bound to ask. The blond boy called him Bert and in turn his friend called him Perry. Bill and Alex and Orville Simpson, who tended to stick together, called them Booth and Leonard. The two groups of boys rarely interacted when it wasn't absolutely necessary. It was merely incidental that they all had to live together.

"There's—there's something in the common room! I heard noises when I came out of the loo, so I went downstairs to find out what it was. I looked around the whole room—couldn't see a thing—but there were still these *noises*....I think there's something *evil* down there."

Orville rolled his eyes and smacked his forehead. "*Honestly*. You *are* aware that ghosts live here? In the castle? *There's something evil down there*...." he said in a squeaky voice intended to mock Booth, whose voice hadn't yet deepened—and in spite of the fact that his own voice still cracked and wavered between alto and tenor on a regular basis. He shook his head in disgust. Orville Simpson was a half-blood and had grown up in the magical world, like Bill and Alex, who were both pure-bloods. Booth and Leonard were both Muggle-borns and still shocked by many things they encountered in the magical world—of which they'd each had only four months' experience.

Booth smirked at Orville. "Very funny, *Simpson*." His voice went squeaky when he said the name, mocking Orville right back. "I know what ghosts sound like and what they do. *This was no ghost*. There were voices. Two voices. Sort of grunting and groaning. Sometimes sighing. I even heard a laugh."

Bill looked at Alex and saw the knowing expression on his face. Bill hoped no one could see him blushing in the semi-darkness—he could *feel* it, though. From what Booth had said, he could guess what was going on in the common room, and he could tell Alex had drawn the same conclusion. Bill braced himself—

"Let's go!"

"Wood!" Booth yelled as Alex bolted across the room to the door. "Where are you going?"

Alex turned around at the door with an evil grin on his face. His dark hair was standing on end, like a gang of exclamation points. "I'm going to find out who's shagging in the common room, that's where I'm going."

"Who's sha-*what*?"

Alex rolled his eyes, and now Orville joined him by the door, also rolling his eyes. Since the term had started in September, Bill had been a little disconcerted by Orville's aping many things Alex did, but now he was used to it—although he stubbornly refused to do the same. "That's what you were hearing, you stupid git. The sounds of *shagging*. You *do* know what shagging is, don't you?"

Booth was shuffling his feet, embarrassed. "I know about babies and all that. I'm not a three-year-old."

Alex snorted. "Fooled me. And just about everyone else, too."

Booth bristled now, and his best friend came to stand by his side in solidarity. Alex ignored them. "Who wants to come?" he said to Orville and Bill, a wicked smile on his face. "Get it? I said who wants to—"

"*We get it!*" Bill hissed, trying to shut him up. "All right, let's go—"

Against his better judgment, he followed Alex down the spiral stairs to the common room. Orville was practically stepping on his heels. He turned his head briefly and saw that Booth and Leonard were bringing up the rear. He experienced a pang for a moment—who would want five eleven-year-old boys walking in on them at such a crucial time? (If there really was shagging going on.) And yet his curiosity had gotten the better of him and he couldn't resist trying to find out what was going on....

Alex had reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped; Bill plowed into him, having expected him to keep moving. Alex looked around the common room with his eyes narrowed. Bill looked too; not a soul was in sight. There was no sound, either; certainly not the sounds Booth had described.

"See?" he said now. "I told you I hadn't been able to see anyone. It's not humans; it's got to be something else...."

Bill shrugged. "Maybe whoever it was went back upstairs."

"The boy would have had to go past our dorm. I'm sure no one did. And only the seventh years are lower down than us," Orville reminded them all. The seventh years were on the first floor up from the common room and the first years were on the second floor; they would remain in this dorm for the next seven years, only the sign on the door changing as they grew older.

"*Could* have been seventh years. Most likely, really," Bill responded softly, looking around the room again.

"Nah," Leonard responded. "Their door has this dreadfully loud squeaky hinge. Needs oiling. If someone had gone into their dorm, we'd have heard it. I can tell every time one of them gets up to use the loo in the night. It's like an angry screech owl." Bill remembered that this was true; the noise echoed all up and down the stone stairwell whenever the seventh-year door was opened. The seventh years didn't care, evidently.

The five of them stood near the foot of the stairs, looking around the room nervously. Was some evil being going to suddenly swoop at them out of nowhere? Was a ghost playing games with them?

"They could have just left Gryffindor Tower," Alex suggested in a whisper. Whispering seemed necessary for some reason. The other boys nodded.

"That's easy enough to find out," Booth said sensibly. "Just ask the Fat Lady."

They all hesitated; it meant going out into the corridor. Being out of their house after hours. They'd had it drummed into them for almost four months that that was a serious punishable offense. Bill looked at his dormmates; Orville still had the look of sleep in his eyes, and his matted hair made it seem that a sandy-colored animal had decided to sleep on his head. Alex made no move toward the portrait hole; he bit his lip nervously, his dark eyes very large in his pale face. Booth and Leonard actually seemed to be trembling.

Bill felt a curious sick feeling in the vicinity of his stomach, and swallowed; it wasn't fear so much as self-loathing. *I should do it*, he thought, still not moving.

They all looked back and forth at each other and waited.

Finally, Bill couldn't take it any longer; he hated the way he was feeling and had to do something about it. *It'll just be for a minute*. "I'll do it," he said disgustedly, crossing the room before he could change his mind, opening the portrait hole and stepping into the corridor. He shivered as a draught swirled round his ankles and up his pajama legs; the portrait hole still open, he looked up at the Fat Lady uncertainly.

"Er, excuse me, ma'am," he began awkwardly, never having addressed the Fat Lady except to give her the password to Gryffindor Tower. "Can you tell me whether anyone has come out of Gryffindor Tower recently?"

She looked down at him kindly. "Only you, lad. And it's rather late for that. You had better run along to bed."

"In a minute," he said, feeling more comfortable now. "You're quite sure? What about—" he lowered his voice in case the others were listening from inside the common room. "—ghosts?" he said even more quietly, feeling just a bit foolish.

"Well, now, that's a possibility for going *in*—" she began.

"What do you mean?" he said in a normal tone of voice, forgetting to whisper.

"I mean that a little while ago, a disembodied voice gave me the password and asked to enter, and so I opened. I saw no one pass me, however, so I do not know who it may have been. He did

have the password, though.”

“*He?*” Bill noticed that she’d assigned a gender to the unseen intruder. “A man?”

“A man’s voice, yes. Not like yours. I *do* like the sound of a good boy soprano. Do you sing?” she added hopefully.

“Er, no,” he told her, turning pink. “At least, you wouldn’t want to hear it. Anyway, this person had the password, then you opened the entrance, and that’s the last time anyone came or went until I came out here?”

“That’s right, dear. Of course, if it was a ghost, it was a ghost who had forgotten he could pass through walls. That would be a very odd sort of ghost.”

He stood deep in thought for a half minute, still holding onto the portrait frame, so he could easily reenter the common room. There was a thought starting to form in his mind, but in his sleepy state it felt like it would get away if he tried to pounce on it too quickly, before it was fully formed....

“Well,” he told the Fat Lady slowly. “Thanks for your help—”

“*Aha!*” cried a familiar, gravelly voice with a flourish of triumph. Bill whirled, letting go of the portrait, which swung closed, leaving him stranded in the corridor. A grey cat, walking languidly, came round the corner, followed by Argus Filch, who carried a parchment and quill in one hand and a lantern in the other, despite the flaring torches on the corridor walls. Bill felt his heart leap into his throat.

“*Aha!*” the caretaker repeated with relish, coming closer to Bill and holding the lantern in his face, as though he would otherwise be unable to see the boy with the bright red hair. “Out of your house after hours! Where’ve you been, then, eh? An ickle firstie, if I’m not mistaken, flaunting the rules! What will you be doing by the time you’re a seventh year? That’s what *I’d* like to know. You delinquents all start as you mean to go on, I’ve seen it before....”

“But—but—I just now came out here,” Bill piped, irked that his voice sounded even higher than usual. He couldn’t help it—the pitch went up when he was nervous. “We—we thought there was an intruder in Gryffindor Tower. I was asking the Fat Lady whether she’d opened the portrait to let someone leave—I had to step out here to talk to her...”

“A likely story,” he sneered, his grimy features twisting into a mask of distinct contempt. “If that was true you should have had a prefect come out and check. That’s what they’re *for*. A first year isn’t supposed to take these things on himself.” He pulled out his quill and spread the parchment on the stone wall next to the Fat Lady’s portrait.

“Name?” he prompted.

“Bill Weasley,” he mumbled. Filch’s quill scribbled across the parchment. After he’d taken the name down, he continued to write with the quill for an alarmingly long period of time. Then he grunted with satisfaction and rolled up the parchment, slipping the quill inside.

“Second one out of bed tonight!” he said, with what probably passed for happiness (for him), rocking back and forth on his old boots, his eyes glittering. “Stupid Slytherin prefect, claiming he was taking a student to the hospital wing....”

“Maybe he was!” Bill responded hotly, keenly feeling the injustice of this, forgetting that it might not be wise to yell at someone who was in the middle of giving him a detention. “Did you go to the hospital wing to check? He might have been telling the truth. And if you’re giving detentions to prefects who say they’re on official business, how would it have helped for me to get a prefect to come out and talk to the Fat Lady? You’d have just given *him* a detention instead of me!”

Filch looked at him, complete and utter loathing on his lined old face. A vein was throbbing in his cheek. A *first year* was daring to speak to *him* like this. “You,” he hissed between his teeth, “will have *detention* tomorrow evening at eight o’clock. You will be—”

“I can’t,” Bill said automatically, frowning. Filch’s eyes bugged out at him; now his left eyelid was twitching, in addition to the dancing vein.

“*What did you say to me?*” he breathed in disbelief, glaring at him malevolently, as though Bill had sprouted another head.

Bill quaked under his gaze. “I—I won’t be here. The Christmas holiday. I’m getting the Hogwarts Express home tomorrow.”

Filch had clearly forgotten about the holiday. Bill watched him, wondering if he was going to have a complete melt-down. *He’s barking*, Bill thought, watching the shifting expressions flow over the man’s face, as though one ghost after another were attempting to take possession of the man’s body and then thinking better of it.

Finally, he bent over Bill and said between his clenched yellow teeth, “Then you’ll do detention your first night back, when the new term starts.” His breath was sour in Bill’s face, a blast of putrid

decay, and he fought not to wince; he didn't think it wise to show too extreme a reaction to this.

"Yes, sir," he choked out, trying not to breathe through his nose, wishing he had a head cold so he wouldn't be able to smell.

"Now get in your house!" he barked at Bill, who quickly gave the Fat Lady the password and ran through the portrait hole, his heart going a mile a minute. When he was in the common room again, he stood still, catching his breath. There was no one to be seen. The other first-year boys had apparently fled up the stairs to their dorm again. They had probably heard Filch's voice.

With another look around the quiet common room, Bill decided Booth was also mad and had been letting his imagination run away with him.

Except—

The Fat Lady *had* said that someone she couldn't see had given the password to enter Gryffindor Tower. He walked slowly up the spiral stairs to the first-year dorm, thinking about this. When he reached his room again, he walked calmly to his bed and climbed in, but he didn't lie down; he sat up, staring at the window, full of bright moonlight.

Finally, he whispered, "Alex?" Silence. "Alex?" he said again, more loudly.

"What?" came the sleepy reply. "That you, Bill? You all right?"

Yeah, like you really cared, Bill thought. *Probably ran up the stairs like a dragon was after you. You'd have wet your pants if it had been you out in the corridor with Filch.* He felt irritated.

"I got a detention," he said casually, as though this happened every night and was of extreme unimportance. "Listen. I thought of something."

There was a bit of a delay before his friend groaned, "What?"

"The Fat Lady said someone she couldn't see gave her the password and came in. But no one went out."

Alex scrambled to sit up, clearly more awake now. Bill saw that Orville was sitting up now, too. The other two boys had evidently fallen asleep again.

"What do you reckon that means?" Orville asked.

"I know what that means," Alex whispered, his voice full of certainty. "It means someone in an *Invisibility Cloak*."

"An *Invisibility Cloak*?" Orville breathed in disbelief. "What Hogwarts student would have an *Invisibility Cloak*? Why not just walk around wearing something made of a thousand Galleons sewn together?"

The three boys were quiet. Then, from the far bed, came a small, high voice.

"I heard that one of the prefects has an *Invisibility Cloak*," Peregrin Booth said, his voice seeming very loud in the quiet room.

Bill and Orville and Alex looked round at each other, their jaws dropping open. *A prefect!* How shocking!

"Well, that narrows it down to six people, now doesn't it?" Alex said, sounding predatory, like a hunter closing in on his quarry.

"Three," Booth said. "I heard it was a boy."

"Three people," Alex mused, as though he'd just thought of this himself and Booth hadn't said anything.

"So," Orville said now, "there's the seventh year prefect, What's-His-Name—"

"Stephen Pearce," Bill said automatically.

"No girlfriend," Alex said authoritatively. "And he's huge. Impossible for him to walk about quietly under an *Invisibility Cloak*. Plus, he's Muggle-born. He probably doesn't even know they exist, let alone how to get one."

"How *do* you get one?" Rembert Leonard asked quietly, also sitting up in his bed now, unable to resist joining in.

"I know they exist, and *I'm* Muggle-born," Booth said, bristling.

"Yeah, yeah, you've got a phonographic memory, I know—"

"That's *photographic* memory," the blond boy informed him with an exasperated sigh; Bill knew he was as frustrated with their isolation from the Muggle world as the other boys were with his and Leonard's ignorance of the wizarding world.

They were all quiet for a minute, thinking.

"I heard," Leonard said quietly, "that the fifth year prefect had one."

"Had what?" Alex said, as though he'd started to fall asleep again.

"An *Invisibility Cloak*."

"*Potter*?" Orville said in awe. "You reckon that was *Potter* down in the common room? Who

with?"

"Dunno. They must have been together under the Invisibility Cloak, and that's why Perry didn't see anyone when he went down. They could have been there still when we all went, but staying very still and quiet."

"The Fat Lady said someone entered she couldn't see," Bill said softly, in a daze. "Potter's girlfriend is in Hufflepuff. He could have given her the cloak to be able to get here without being seen. The way Filch was prowling around, the only way you'd want to be out is with one of those cloaks. He said he gave detention to a prefect who claimed to be taking a student to the hospital wing."

The other boys shook their heads over Filch. Suddenly a yawning epidemic overtook them, beginning with Booth and finally reaching Bill, who sank back onto his pillow, thinking. *So. James Potter was down in the common room with Bonnie Manetti.* Where were they now? he wondered. He thought of Bonnie and her large dark eyes, her dazzling smile and the dimples in her cheeks. *Potter was one lucky bastard,* he thought. Then he felt awful when he remembered that Potter had become an orphan on the first day of the term. *Poor Potter,* he thought instead. *But at least he has Bonnie. That's something.* Although at this point in his life he knew that if he had to choose between his parents and a girlfriend, he'd take his parents. His family was everything to him.

The dorm was quiet again, and soon Bill heard Booth and Leonard snoring softly. He stared at the ceiling and started to drift off to sleep, when suddenly, Alex's voice came at him out of the darkness again.

"Bill?"

"Yeah?"

"D'you-d'you like any of our girls?"

"Our?"

"In Gryffindor."

"Oh." He thought now of Lily Evans, but didn't say anything about this. "Do you?" he asked instead.

"Well," Alex hesitated. "Mary Ann is nice." Mary Ann Boxwood was one of the three girls in their year.

"I guess." Then Bill thought of Potions class, with the Slytherins. He thought specifically of Roxanne Maine-Thorpe....

"But girls are a ruddy pain in the arse," Alex said now, his voice hard. "More trouble than they're worth." He sounded more like he was trying to convince himself than Bill.

"Right," Bill said, more to be agreeable and to bring the conversation to a close than because he believed this.

"Right," Alex repeated into the darkness.

But somehow, as he let his eyes close and drifted back into sleep, Bill had a feeling that James Potter was the last person in the world who would agree with that statement.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 31 December, 1975

As the sky lightened in the east, pale pink fingers of light began to make their way across the flat, overcast sky that sat on the South Wales coast like a leaden weight. No sun could actually be seen; instead, the light seemed to emanate from the sky in general, no one area seeming brighter than any other. Gulls cried out overhead, occasionally settling on frost-touched rocks or on the rail that defined the edges of the Penarth Promenade.

James Potter watched the waves slap the shingle mercilessly, white froth edging the wet weapons until they revealed themselves to be nothing more than insubstantial water, slinking back into the sea half-apologetically. He looked down at the simple black basaltware urn in his hand. The other one was back in his trunk at Ascog castle. He'd been waiting for almost four months to scatter his parents' ashes, and now he hesitated, as though this meant severing the last ties he had to them forever. *They're gone,* he told himself sternly. *And this is what they wanted.* He tried not to think of the funeral again, in case a memory of the dream crept into his head instead. He hadn't told anyone about the dream. Not Bonnie, not his mates, not Lily. They'd think he was mad.

James looked at Bonnie, standing beside him. Her face was sympathetic, even as she clutched her cloak around her; the wind off the sea was sharp, like receiving a slap in the face over and over. Sirius stood on his other side, then Lily, Peter, and Remus. They'd all come with him, his girlfriend and his best friends, just as they would stand beside him when he did the same thing at Hogwarts.

The cold air was making his eyes sting and his nose itched; he reasoned that it *must* be the weather, because he'd cried so many tears for his parents already. Enough was enough. He had to be strong, to go on and be a man they would be proud of. He lifted his chin and sniffed the sea air; he watched Bonnie's hair blow into her face and knew that the wind had changed; it was behind them. It was safe now.

He said a silent farewell to his mum and dad as he opened the urn and watched the ashes blow over the sand and into the water. He watched a particularly loud gull swerve upward on the wind, as though it knew what the wind was blowing to the sea. James tipped his head back, watching as the bird flew directly over him, inland, as if telling him that his past was in the sea now, follow the gull inland to the future, *his* future....

Lily's eyes stung and she wiped them hastily with the back of her hands. She reached instinctively for the person standing nearest her, who turned out to be Sirius. He closed his arms around her sympathetically and smiled down at her. She looked up then, startled, and backed away from him hastily. His face clouded when she did this. She turned then to the boy on her other side, and Peter held his friend as she sobbed quietly for their friend's parents, now at one with the sea.

Sirius turned away from them; she was still angry with him, or scared of him, at least. Still didn't trust him. He sighed and leaned his hands on the rough wooden rail. He played the events of the previous April over in his head yet again, wishing he could take back everything he'd said and done (and not just because of how difficult it was to function for the following week). He never seemed to *think* before he acted. He always went purely with his gut instinct, and he'd regretted that many times, yet still—

Sirius Black looked at the ecstasy on Peter Pettigrew's face. Hmph. Peter didn't stand a chance with her—that much he knew. Perhaps that was why she turned to him now. He was as safe as you could get, was Peter. Talk about non-threatening. He cursed himself again. Damn! *If only....*

He looked at her now, straightening up after having cried on Peter, and then looking at Remus with such longing it took his breath away. Then he saw that Remus returned this. *He loves her too*, he realized, surprised that this was the word he thought of. *Love*. And yet—why didn't the two of them cling together? Why was there this distance between them? He remembered hearing their voices wafting up from the common room on the night before they'd gotten the Hogwarts Express home for the holidays. Had he completely misunderstood what was going on down there? Were they together or weren't they?

He turned back to James, who was watching the sea again. Sirius' sister Ursula was waiting for them at the end of the promenade, ready to walk them all to an unobtrusive spot where they could use the Portkey back to Ascog Castle. His parents had spent the previous four months building another floor of the castle, so that Sirius' previous room was now the guest room and he and James had bedrooms on the top floor. His mother had said she was going to get his father to build a roof garden. James had said he liked his new room when he'd seen it, but he looked around rather listlessly at everything these days. He'd merely drifted through the previous term, never really seeming fully present, always—Sirius assumed—thinking of his parents.

Sirius was only fifteen and he could be tactless and thoughtless, but he cared fiercely about his friends—including Lily—and would do anything in his power to protect them. He hoped Lily and Remus could work things out. *If I can't have her, it should be him*, he thought. Remus deserved a little happiness. It had been amazing, when they'd accompanied Remus during the full moon the previous week, feeling his power beside him as they prowled around the shores of Loch Ascog, and he padded in his dog form beside the wolf, his friend. Because of Remus, he had learned a maddeningly difficult bit of Transfiguration that he could utilize the rest of his life. He didn't begrudge Remus being with Lily; he only hoped he realized how lucky he was, and didn't botch things up. *Like I did*, he thought.

As the sun continued to rise, James turned from the sea and held his hands out to his friends. "Thanks, everyone," he said to them quietly. They nodded and smiled at him through their tears. Then, Sirius put his arm around James' shoulder and James put his around Bonnie's. Lily also put her arm around Bonnie's shoulder, and Peter took Lily's hand while Remus slung his arm across Peter's small, thin shoulders. Linked thusly, the six friends walked down the promenade into the rising sun, girding themselves to face the uncertainties of the New Year.

— CHAPTER THREE —

Premeditation

Tuesday, 21 January, 1976

Lily eyed Remus, sitting on the other side of the Transfiguration classroom. He was sitting with James, Sirius and Peter around him as though he was using them as human shields. He'd been avoiding her since they'd all returned from the Christmas break, even though they'd almost—

“Miss Evans!” Professor McGonagall said sternly. Lily looked up in alarm, then down at the table where she was sitting; she had failed to notice that her quill had trailed off the edge of her parchment and was doodling hearts on the old, scratched wood writing surface. It did not look remotely like the O.W.L. information Professor McGonagall had been writing on the chalkboard. Reddening, Lily pulled out her wand and cleaned the desk quickly, trying not to catch Cecilia's eye; Cecilia was still under the impression that Lily was crushing on Sirius Black, in spite of the rather severe hexes she had put on him after his incompetent pass the previous April. She hadn't said anything to Cecilia about Remus.

The Thompson twins turned in unison and gave Lily a disdainful look; they always had perfectly neat notes in a cramped, small hand that was as identical as the two of them. Lily fought the urge to stick her tongue out at the backs of their heads when they turned forward again. She still did that at home sometimes, when Petunia wasn't looking, but there were more people to see her here, and she was a prefect. That, of course, was yet another reason why Moira and Myra Thompson did not care for her. She also had the distinct impression that Cecilia resented her for being the girl in their year named prefect. She sighed for a moment, stealing a look at the boys.

None of James' friends seemed to resent *him* being a prefect. The four of them were practically joined at the hip. Not for the last time, she wondered what they'd gotten up to those three nights running when she'd been checking their dorm, so she could talk to Remus.

Remus....

She remembered being in the common room with him just before the holiday, under the Invisibility Cloak. Sometimes she thought she might have imagined it; that she might have imagined his hands against her skin, his mouth on hers, the low growl in his throat that had sent a thrill through her, the knowledge that she was driving him mad. He was driving her mad too, in a way she never suspect she *could* be driven mad before the previous November. Suddenly, under the cloak on the hearthrug in the middle of the night, she felt as though she were consumed by him, as though she couldn't touch enough of his skin, as she opened his pajama shirt and moved her lips down to his chest....

And then that first year boy had blundered down into the common room and gone running back upstairs in fright. It had brought them to their senses; they had awkwardly dressed themselves again and walked carefully, both of them under the cloak, to the curving stairs leading to the girls' dorms, going half-way up the first flight very carefully, then sitting down on the steps next to each other, huddled together, listening for—something.

She had watched Remus in the strange light filtering through the cloak from the torches on the curving walls. He seemed to be listening, his eyes narrowed, but Lily couldn't hear a thing. He was frowning, looking upset. Sweat had broken out on his brow again and she longed to tenderly wipe it with her hand, kiss away his cares....She didn't hear anything until the boys arrived in the common room. Then she heard them discussing whether to ask the Fat Lady about people leaving Gryffindor Tower. Lily had grasped Remus' wrist very hard; if the guardian of the threshold of their house confirmed that no one had left, would the boys be brave enough (or foolhardy enough) to try the girls' dorms?

Lily sat very still, waiting, wondering. When she looked at Remus she saw an expression in his eyes that made her catch her breath. It seemed her heart had stopped; the love she saw there was

frightening, awe-inspiring. To be loved so fiercely—for the best word she could think of for his overall expression was fierce—was unsettling, and not a little scary. She still wasn't completely certain where she stood on the matter, whether she wanted to be with Remus or Severus, but as he started kissing her neck again she felt that there was quite a lot to recommend Remus....

She gasped, holding him to her, as his mouth sent shivers running up her spine. His hands had slipped under her nightdress and were moving up her legs, raising goose-pimples as they progressed higher and higher. Suddenly she had a thought—a sobering, bracing thought. *I could have a baby.* She looked at Remus, wide-eyed. Then she leaned forward and whispered this concern in his ear. He drew back and looked at her with a very alarmed expression.

"You haven't taken the potion then?"

"Potion?"

He drew back a little more, which was all he could do, as they were both under the cloak still.

"Go-go see Madam Pomfrey. Tell her what you want. She doesn't ask stupid questions, don't worry. Sirius told me."

"*Sirius!*" she said, but a second later she knew there was no call to be shocked. *Yes. Sirius. I should have known.*

"You—you should go back to bed, Lily. Before we—we do something we—"

Remus had started shaking again, beads of sweat flying from his brow. Lily had noticed how calm he was when they were in contact with each other, how touching and kissing her had somehow centered him, made him focussed and strangely in control of himself (while this made *her* feel entirely unfocussed and *out-of-control*). None of his advances seemed awkward or unsure, oddly enough. There was a confidence in all of his actions that wasn't suggested by his quivering when they weren't touching. *What's wrong with him?* she had wondered yet again. *And if physical contact of this sort makes it better, why hasn't he sought it out before?* But then she realized how awkward that could be, to ask for someone's touch for *medical* reasons.

"Are you certain, Remus?" she had whispered, reaching out her hand to caress his cheek, feeling the soft growth that had already sprouted there. He groaned when she touched him, closing his eyes and leaning into her hand, unable to stop himself from touching his lips to her palm, the inside of her wrist, the soft skin on the inside of her forearm, the crook of her elbow....

Lily gasped as his lips traveled up her arm; she felt her control slipping away, and found herself thinking *I need to be in control all of the time WHY?*

But then Remus wrenched himself away from her as though it required a superhuman effort.

"Go back to bed, Lily!" he choked out before rising and running back down the stairs. She was no longer covered by the cloak and she couldn't see him, although she heard his feet pattering down the stairs....

The bell rang and Lily looked up as though waking from a deep sleep. The other students were packing their bags and chattering about what they wanted for lunch. Lily packed her rucksack slowly, under the disapproving gaze of Professor McGonagall. She tried to slink out of the room fast on the heels of Moira and Myra, but Professor McGonagall was not going to let this happen.

"Miss Evans, may I see you please?"

Lily turned slowly, her stomach clenching within her, and not with hunger. She heard the other students' footsteps disappearing down the corridor, walking toward blessed freedom, while she was faced with her rather humorless-looking Transfiguration teacher and head-of-house. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen Professor McGonagall's lips go so thin.

But as Professor McGonagall looked grimly at Lily, her expression slowly softened. "Lily, your mind was not on your work today." Lily looked sheepish.

"I'm—I'm sorry Professor. I'll—I'll get the notes from James, in case I missed anything."

Professor McGonagall was looking at her more kindly now. "How is your mother, Lily? I do hope you had a nice visit with your family during the holidays. If there is ever anything you wish to discuss—"

Lily mostly wanted to discuss ways she could manage to drop into a hole in the floor, preferably one that led down to the dungeons where someone *should* be banished for thinking about boys instead of a poor dying mother....*No*, she immediately corrected her thought. *Mum is not dying.* She looked up at Professor McGonagall, swallowing.

"Yes, the holiday was fine. Mum is feeling a little better. She was home, so we were able to have a normal Christmas," she told Professor McGonagall. *If normal is everyone walking on eggshells all of the time and never daring to say the words sick' or dying,' let alone cancer' or chemotherapy.'*

"Good, good. Perhaps you will soon be able to devote your full attention to your studies again," she said now, a little sterner, looking over her square-rimmed spectacles at the abnormally tall girl.

Lily kept wishing and wishing for that hole in the floor, but none appeared. "Yes ma'am," she said meekly.

"Now off to lunch with you!" she said, shooing Lily out the door and turning back to her desk to collect her own things. Lily didn't need to be told twice; she bolted from the room and then ran flat-out down the corridor to the stairs. When she reached the Great Hall she was out of breath and the only place left to sit at the Gryffindor table was between Sirius and James.

She gritted her teeth and sat, ignoring Sirius' presence, turning to James and saying, "I think I missed some things during class. Can I borrow your Transfiguration notes later?"

He looked wide-eyed and alarmed for some reason. He'd just taken a bite of shepherd's pie and the mashed potatoes were clearly visible through his open mouth. Lily made a face and reached out and pushed his jaw upward with a snap. He came to his senses and swallowed his food.

"Er, yes, of course. Fine. Except—they're rather a mess. Very disorganized. Let me copy them over for you first." She saw that his Transfiguration copybook was sitting on the table, next to his plate.

"I'm sure it's fine. I've managed to make out your handwriting before—"

"No!" he screamed suddenly, snatching the book away from her reach. Everyone around them stared. "Er, I mean—no. I don't want to put you through that. Really. I don't mind copying them over for you."

Lily looked suspiciously at the book. "What's in that book, James Potter?" she said softly, her face very close to his.

James glanced over his shoulder and Lily glanced too; he seemed to be looking in the direction of the Hufflepuff table. *Bonnie. Right. I should have known*, Lily thought. She gave him a conspiratorial smile.

"If you've been writing some love-poetry or something for Bonnie, I promise not to laugh," she whispered to him. "I could even look it over for you. I swear I won't say a word to her. It'll be a total surprise. Are you working on something for Valentine's Day?"

James looked frozen for a moment, then abruptly, his facial features came to life again. "Yes! That's it. But no! I mean—" He dropped his voice. "I'd be too embarrassed for anyone to look at it," he whispered back. "It's—it's really dreadful. Needs a lot of work. Please—just let me copy over the notes for you. All right?"

Lily smiled at him; his ears were red under his messy black hair and he suddenly looked very young to her, like a ten-year-old with his first crush. "I promise not to say anything to Bonnie. I'm sure she'll be thrilled with whatever you give her. What girl wouldn't want a boy to write her a love poem?"

James smiled feebly, scooping more food onto his fork. "Right. What girl wouldn't want that?" he mumbled before filling his mouth again.

Lily hadn't taken any food yet; she didn't feel very hungry. However, they had Double Potions with the Slytherins that afternoon, and she knew that if she didn't eat something the potion she was brewing would likely start to look tempting before long. She reached for a chicken leg and as she was placing it on her plate, she raised her eyes and met Remus Lupin's gaze across the table.

What girl wouldn't want that....?

She lowered her eyes again, sinking her teeth into the chicken, trying not to choke on it, hoping she could convince it to stay in her stomach. *Remus, Remus....What's wrong with me? Why do you hold me and kiss me and look at me like you love me—and then ignore me?*

As soon as she'd returned from the holiday, she'd gone to see Madam Pomfrey. She'd hemmed and hawed about why she'd come to see her, looking for bruises or scratches on her arms or legs, but she was surprisingly unmarked for someone who did tend to stumble and fall over her great feet quite a lot. Finally she had tried a different excuse for coming to the infirmary.

"Actually, I'm here because of—um—my monthly—um—"

"Aaah—" Madam Pomfrey breathed in understanding. She was shocked by how squeamish some of the girls were about discussing this—especially the Muggle-born girls. She clucked as she came to sit next to Lily on the side of the infirmary bed. *Poor thing...she probably had such a backward upbringing....*

"Except—" Lily went on, "—it's actually—I'm really here to find out how—well—to keep on *having* my monthly—er—what I mean is—"

"Oooh!" Madam Pomfrey said again. *She was afraid of getting pregnant.* Well, it was not for nothing that Hogwarts had been a coeducational boarding school for a thousand years. Most Muggle institutions, she knew, had been single-sex schools until very recently, and quite a number still were. She, on the other hand, was an old hand at giving out a certain potion and turning a

blind eye. She knew that teenagers will be teenagers, and it was best to be realistic and do what was necessary to prevent accidents...

"I know just what you need, my dear," she said, patting Lily's knee briskly, then rising and disappearing into her office. Lily bit her lip, panic rising in her chest. She considered bolting, but Madam Pomfrey was back very quickly; evidently, it was very easy for her to lay her hands on what she needed.

She handed Lily a corked vial with an amber liquid in it. "Prophylaxis Potion. Lasts six months. That's a year's worth right there. Two doses. Will that suit you? You're lucky. This is a good time to get it. You can just remember to have more right at the beginning of January next year."

Lily looked at her, terrified. This felt so—so *premeditated*. And the matron was being so matter-of-fact about it all. If Lily did this, she would be changed forever. *But I almost already was changed forever*, she remembered, trying to think whether she loathed or loved the first year boys for intruding on her and Remus. *And if it happens again....there will be one less thing to worry about....one less thing to stop us....*

She uncorked the vial and some wispy smoke emerged from the neck of the bottle. Madam Pomfrey looked urgent now.

"Drink it quickly. Don't let the vapor dissipate."

Lily looked at her again, wide-eyed, then back at the vial. She took a deep breath and put it to her lips, tipping her head back quickly, remembering how her father would take a shot of whiskey after returning home from seeing her mother, when her mum was undergoing radiation....

"Good girl," Madam Pomfrey told her, taking the empty vial, which was still smoking. "No chance of any—*accidents*, eh?"

Lily felt her blush break out on her face like hives. *No, no accidents here*. She tried to smile at the matron, but the taste of the potion had been the vilest thing that had ever passed her lips. She licked her lips uncertainly, wondering how many days it would be before the disgusting flavor stopped making her remember the stuff. Evidently, she was not successful at hiding her opinion of the potion's taste.

"Oh, what a face!" Madam Pomfrey chuckled. Lily scowled; just what she needed, the matron *laughing* at her. "I'm sorry dear, I usually bring out the other potion at the same time and I forgot."

She returned to her office and returned with another vial; this one was a small and brown with a long cork. Madam Pomfrey opened it and poured some viscous tan potion into a spoon. Lily was torn between being nervous about taking something else Madam Pomfrey wanted to give her and being disappointed that it was only a spoonful—how was that little bit going to take away the horrid, disgusting taste, when she'd had an entire vial of the other stuff?

But she obediently opened her mouth and let Madam Pomfrey put the spoon past her lips; she was immediately pleasantly surprised by a lovely warmth spreading through her limbs, and her mouth was filled not by the taste of the vile Prophylaxis Potion, but a succession of flavors. She could swear she was eating some delicious, creamy tomato soup; long after she knew she had swallowed the contents of the spoon, she could still taste it in her mouth and even feel it flowing down her throat. That was followed by the unmistakable flavor of juicy, tender roast beef and a baked potato with a crispy skin and sweet creamy butter...finally, she tasted the most wonderful blueberry pie with fresh whipped cream. It—it felt so *real*. She swallowed and looked up at Madam Pomfrey in amazement. The matron looked rather smug.

"There you go! Isn't that much better?" Lily nodded, her eyes wide. Madam Pomfrey sniffed. "Perfectly good bad-taste antidote potion and *he* had to go and try to turn it into *chewing gum*..." She was bustling around again as though she'd forgotten Lily was there.

"Who?" Lily asked quietly.

"Will—oh, never mind," Madam Pomfrey said, flustered, having begun to answer and thinking better of it. "You go on now, and no more worries. If you have any questions, feel free to return. I, ah, have some books which you may find to be helpful...."

Lily blushed. The idea of coming to Madam Pomfrey for anything else connected to *this* was appalling (although she was glad that even if she did come back, she could ask for books, instead of being subjected to face-to-face advice).

"Thank you. I'll remember that."

After she left, Madam Pomfrey shook her head while straightening up her office. She hoped the poor girl wasn't going to get her heart broken. That was often the way, the first time. At least, she reasoned, even if she did choose the wrong boy, she wouldn't have to worry about a baby on top of all that.

Remus didn't look at her all through lunch. Lily sighed and shouldered her rucksack, falling into step beside Cecilia, who was looking cross with her again. Lily decided not to speak to her; she wasn't interested in getting into a row just before a long class and feeling out of sorts during the entire afternoon. Remus and now James were already making her feel out of sorts, she didn't need Cecilia to make things worse. Why did she always feel so *alone*?

They filed into the Potions dungeon and went to their work stations; Severus Snape was already at the station he shared with Lily Evans. He started to smile at her as she approached, then shyly looked down at his text instead, averting his eyes from her. She heaved another sigh as she sat and removed her text and parchment and quills from her bag, her loneliness threatening to completely overwhelm her. *I'm not an overgrown baby*, she told herself sternly. *I will not cry because I feel like I don't have any real friends....*

She kept her eyes doggedly on her parchment as she wrote down what the Potions Master was writing on the chalkboard, trying to ignore the presence of Severus beside her. Finally, she looked up at his profile; he was bent over his own parchment, intent on his work, and she wondered again how a boy could seem so unmistakably to like her and yet want nothing to do with her at the very same time.

Suddenly he turned and met her gaze, and for the moment when their eyes locked, Lily felt a spark of hope. But then the professor began to speak again, and Severus abruptly turned his face to the front, and when they pulled out their cauldrons and began brewing the potion of the day, he managed to be constantly staring into the cauldron, or at measuring cups, or into flagons of this extract or that....He always managed to have somewhere to look other than at *her*.

She turned from him and focussed on her own work, working with her usual precision, getting that satisfying feeling from everything coming together *just right*, producing the desired result.

When it was late afternoon, their potions had all been simmering long enough, and the professor sent the Thompson twins round with flasks for everyone to store their potions. Lily poured her decoction into her flask very carefully, trying not to tip the funnel, then magically glued a piece of parchment on the side with her name, year, house, and the name of the potion on the side. Next, Igor Karkaroff came round with a tray to collect everyone's flasks. As she placed hers on the tray, Lily shivered under Karkaroff's gaze; she didn't like him at all and avoided sitting near him at prefects' meetings whenever she could. She knew that he also frequently made life difficult for Severus. She saw Severus stiffen and glare at Karkaroff when he noticed the way he was looking at Lily, and Lily felt a small bit of satisfaction inside. Then she looked up and noticed that Sirius was also bristling, noticing both Karkaroff *and* Snape.

She also noticed that Remus was shaking and sweating again, leaning on his worktable, looking as though he might faint any second; his eyes were dilated so that they looked almost completely black, and there was that red flash again....

The bell rang for the end of class, and as they were filing out, Lily touched Remus' arm and said softly to him, "Can I talk to you?" He swallowed, then looked down where she'd touched him. He nodded mutely and followed her into the corridor. He was very pale.

When the other students had filed up the stairs and left them standing in the corridor alone, Lily said nervously, "This way," hoping she would remember the way she had been told. She led them down one corridor, then another, then hesitated, feeling lost. Remus put his hand on her arm.

"I know a place," he said hoarsely, directing her to a tapestry which, when lifted, revealed a hidden corridor leading to a single door, the door for which she'd been searching. She tried to open it, to no avail. He stepped forward, however, and pulled it open with no problem.

They both entered; even as he did so, he thought, *We shouldn't be here. It's too risky. We might-* He didn't even want to *think* about what they might do. And yet-it was *all* he'd been thinking about in the previous twenty-four hours. He knew this was a place some students sometimes came at night; he knew what they did here. He had never entered the room, though he had guarded the entrance more than once (for Sirius). Both he and Lily looked around now, wondering how many students had been here, how many assassinations had taken place in this hidden corner of the castle....

Although the chief distinguishing characteristics of the room were stacks of books and cauldrons festooned by cobwebs, some enterprising person had transfigured a table (or just chopped off its legs) so that it was bed-height, and conjured some cushions and a coverlet for it (the coverlet was the only surface in the room not covered with dust and cobwebs, attesting to its frequent use). Some dim light shone down from a high barred window, but it was otherwise dark.

Remus swallowed, looking at Lily, his heart beating painfully fast. *We shouldn't be here*, he thought. *We shouldn't-*

But now Lily was doing the last thing he expected: she was crying. She couldn't hold it in any

longer. He stared at her in surprise, wondering what had brought this on.

"Do you—do you hate me, Remus?" she managed to finally say, after several false starts.

His jaw dropped. "Lily! Of—of course not! You're—you're one of my best friends—" He winced then; oh, *that* sounded wonderful. *Best friends.*

"It's just that—last month, just before the holidays, and the month before that, we—we—"

He nodded. "I—I know. Listen, Lily, there's something I have to tell you...." He looked at her dear, dear face, the tears streaming down it, her enormous green eyes. *Tell her, his brain screamed. Tell her and get it over with.*

But he couldn't. He couldn't bear the thought of the fear and revulsion he knew he would see on her face when she found out. Telling his mates was different. None of *them* were considering being intimate with him. They could all change into their Animagus forms and be safe with him. *Lily isn't safe with me, he knew.* And then he also knew that he couldn't tell her the truth—not the complete truth.

"I've—I've got a problem. I contracted a kind of illness when I was young, and—and every so often it makes me feel—makes me feel kind of insane. It makes me want—want—"

She watched his face carefully, the truth dawning on her. *Oh. It's a disease. He doesn't really want ME—he wants ANYONE.* Her face dropped when she realized what was going on. That explained it. That explained a lot. Why else would he seem so intent on being with her sometimes, and avoiding her other times?

And yet—when he lifted his eyes to her again, the desire and emotion she saw there seemed so *genuine.* She caught her breath upon seeing it. Maybe—maybe if she *helped* him, she thought. Maybe he'd come round....

She blushed at the thought. This was very different now than what she'd envisioned. She hadn't imagined treating this like a medical cure of some kind, some clinical encounter with a goal in mind other than physically demonstrating their love. But maybe—maybe if she *did* help him—

"Remus," she said softly. "When we were together in the common room, both times, I noticed—I noticed that I made you a little calmer. You're—you're right. We *are* friends. Maybe—if you'd like—I could help you with this problem. As—as a friend."

There. She'd said it. She felt her face burning, hoping he didn't think she was a dreadful person. She wanted to say, *I love you Remus. Please love me too...* She wanted this to be so different, but perhaps that would come with time....

Remus stared at her. Had he heard what he *thought* he had heard? Did he possibly have the opportunity to be with the angel of his dreams, who was now offering to be an angel of mercy? She was walking toward him, shaking nervously, and when she was standing right in front of him, his senses started to go into overdrive. She had only to touch his arm lightly with her hand and he pulled her to him, seeking her mouth hungrily, pulling at her lips, and when she slid her arms around his neck and opened her mouth under his he felt something in him collapse at last, the wall which separated him from others, which prevented him from experiencing this last intimacy....

He slid his mouth down her neck, feeling her pulse, teasing it with his teeth and hearing her sharp intake of breath. He was calm again, purposeful, working somehow with a sixth sense that didn't come from any experience but something bone-deep and ancient, urging him on....

"*Just so you know,*" she whispered in his ear, her voice sounding very loud to him, "*I've been to Madam Pomfrey for that potion.*" He pulled back from her; in the darkness, others would not have been able to see her expression, but with his wolf's eyes he could see the look of complete trust on her face, and—*love?* How could she love *him?* No, he thought. You're just being delusional. She said she was doing this *as a friend.* Don't go making more of it than—

"Ah!" he cried out as her hands made tentative contact with him. He reached for her again, pulling her against his body roughly, and they tumbled onto the makeshift bed. As each garment was removed, Remus felt calmer and more in control, and Lily felt more and more agitated and *out* of control. He caressed and kissed her, tasting every bit of skin he could, and her breathing became faster and faster, until she could wait no longer, and she pulled him to her, her intentions completely clear.

Remus had never felt so at peace with the world; being one with Lily was amazing. He felt both strong and weak, elated and sad. Somehow, it didn't matter that these conflicting emotions were rolling through him; they cancelled each other out and left a serenity in their wake that was suddenly interrupted by an ecstasy so intense that he had to clamp his mouth to her neck to stifle his cry.

She uttered her own cry of surprise, closing her eyes, then opening them again, her hands grasping his upper arms convulsively. As she tumbled to earth, trying to get her breath, she became aware of a stickiness in her hair, near her ear. She put her hand on her neck and Remus's

sharp eyes could see that it came away red.

He pulled away from her, horrified. *I've bitten her.* "Oh, Lily! I'm—I'm so sorry!" he stammered. He found his wand and lit it, getting a better view of the dark red stain on her neck and hand. *It was a good thing I didn't pierce her jugular!* And then he saw that his fingers had left bruises on her arms and legs, and he saw scratches on her hip, and on one breast....He hadn't realized he'd been so rough with her. It was a matter, he supposed, of not realizing his own strength. He felt like dying. *I've hurt Lily.* He'd been careless and let himself go and now....

But she was being very calm about it. They were lying on top of their Hogwarts robes; she reached into the pile of Muggle clothes on the floor, looking for her wand. She quickly dealt with the wound on her neck, and cleaned the blood from her hand and hair. Remus watched her do this, feeling dreadful.

"It's all right, really," she said shakily.

Thank goodness I'm in my human form, he thought. He hoped that the bite, the scratches and the bruises were the worst of it. What if he had broken some of her bones? How would they explain that to Madam Pomfrey, let alone Professor McGonagall? What if—

"Remus," Lily was whispering now, reaching out her hand to him. "How do you feel?"

"How do *I* feel? I feel—Oh, Lily. I've never felt so—so—"

She smiled in the dark. "Me too. I mean—do you feel calmer?"

He closed his eyes and thought about this, and discovered that he really was utterly serene now. He wasn't sweating or shaking, he didn't feel as though his blood was racing through his veins at ten times the normal speed, that his heart was running away with him. "Yes. I feel—I feel fine," he whispered back, a huge understatement. She took his wand and extinguished the light, then put both wands back on the floor with their clothes. She reached her hand out to him again, beckoning him, and he obeyed, lying by her side, holding her, feeling that smooth skin under his fingers once more, trying not to think of the bruises he'd caused. He looked at her well-loved face in the dark, knowing that she didn't suspect that he could see her quite clearly. He wanted so much to tell her his feelings. He was already so in love with her, and now—now she had done this wonderful thing—

But it wasn't because *she* loved *him*, he reminded himself. In a *way*, it was, because it was her love for him as a friend. But it wasn't the kind of love he wanted from her...He swallowed, continuing to watch her, holding her to him.

Lily listened to his breathing as he fell asleep, knowing that she was changed forever. He had been rougher than she had expected, at times, and then unexpectedly gentle at others. She felt overwhelmed, processing all of the new sensations and desires. But although he had finally opened himself up to her this way, she could feel that there was still a part of him that he withheld from her. *Can't you love me with your heart too, Remus?* she thought as she put her hand on his bare chest, feeling the rhythm of his life beneath her palm. *It will happen,* she told herself firmly. Give it time. Give *him* time.

It will happen.

* * * * *

Bill put his goblet down after taking a long swig of pumpkin juice, washing down a very large dinner. He felt very sleepy now, with his full tummy, and wished he didn't have to write a yard-long History of Magic parchment, due in the morning. *At least I'm not in fifth year yet,* he thought, listening to the things the older students were doing to prepare for the O.W.L.s.

Across the table, Cecilia Ratkowski, Lily's friend, was saying to James Potter, "Where's Lily? Did you see where she went after Potions? We were going to meet in the library before dinner, but she never showed up."

James looked up and down the table, frowning. "I don't know where she went. Did you see where Remus went? He doesn't seem to be here either."

Bill pricked up his ears. Did that mean anything? Maybe it did and maybe it didn't. But—Sirius Black had a *look* on his face that might mean it *did* mean something....

James stood and announced, "I'm going to go look for them."

Sirius pulled him down and hissed at him, "*Leave them alone.*" When he suddenly met Bill's gaze and scowled at him, Bill ducked his head; grotty ickle firsties weren't supposed to eavesdrop on fifth-years.

"What do you mean? They've missed dinner. They'll be hungry. I'm just going to—"

But Sirius muttered something in James' ear, something which made the prefect go bright red.

"Oh," James said softly, swallowing. "Are you sure?"

"Well, I'm not entirely, but I've put two and two together and come up with—two. If you know

what I mean.”

James nodded, still red. “Right.”

Bill looked down quickly again before Sirius could send another glare his way. Why was James Potter being so queer about his friends? he wondered. After all, he’d been in the common room with his Hufflepuff girlfriend. Bill saw Bonnie smile and wave at James now, across the Great Hall. James smiled back and gave a small wave. Sirius nudged him.

“You and Bonnie have *plans* tonight?”

James grimaced. “Just to meet in the library to do homework. Stop looking like that Sirius! I’m not kidding. It’s not *code* for something else. The trouble is—there’s something I need to get—”

He looked furtively around, and Bill now tried to look very interested in the crumbs from his chocolate cake. James’ voice had dropped; Bill strained to hear what he was saying above the hubbub of the Great Hall.

“—from a *certain place*, for which I need a *certain product* from Mr. Moony, Mr. Padfoot, Mr. Wormtail and Mr. Prongs. Trouble is, I think *Remus* has just what I need....”

Sirius nodded. “*Right*,” he whispered. “*I gave it to him this morning. He sometimes feels the need to go off alone the day before. You know. He can use it to make sure no one sneaks up on him.*”

Bill tried not to look as interested in this as he really was. *The day before what?* And what sort of object didn’t allow people to sneak up on you? he wondered. He didn’t think it was the Invisibility Cloak that he knew James Potter owned. And he had no idea who Mr. Moony, Mr. Padfoot, Mr. Wormtail or Mr. Prongs were. He’d ask Alex later. If anyone knew, it was Alex.

Dinner was over and the students started moving off toward the entrance hall and up the marble stairs to their dormitories, except for the Slytherins, who went down to the dungeons to reach theirs.

Lily awoke in utter darkness, disoriented, wondering where she was. Moving her hands down, she realized to her horror that she wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing. Then she felt Remus’ hot breath on her neck and remembered. She shook him.

“Remus!” she hissed. “Wake up! We can’t stay down here. Oh, I hope it isn’t too late at night....If Filch catches us trying to get back into Gryffindor Tower....”

She fumbled for her wand and lit it. The small light was just strong enough to show both of their pale bodies, and she noticed now the bruises that Remus had caused in his passion. She swallowed. Should she go to Madam Pomfrey? she wondered. The matron might try to find out who had done it. She might get Remus in trouble. *And* her parents might find out. That was the last thing she needed. Lily hadn’t even noticed him giving her the bruises, just as she hadn’t been immediately aware of his biting her; she was too caught up in what they were doing.

Then she had the opportunity to look at Remus, and she caught her breath, wishing now that she’d been able to *see* him earlier. Her first thought was that he was beautiful, which she knew men didn’t want to hear, but her second thought was that he looked like she’d done him far more damage than he’d done her. Then she touched the marks on his arms and chest, realizing that they were old, that she couldn’t have done that to him. *What have you been through, Remus?* she wondered. She brushed his hair tenderly from his face and tried to wake him again by leaning over and gently kissing him.

“Remus. *Remus.*”

His eyes finally opened, just a little at first. Then they flew open in shock, and Lily realized that he was probably just as surprised as she had been.

He gazed at her. *So beautiful....* His sharp intake of breath made her flush, so that her flesh was no longer pale, but taking on a rosy glow. She didn’t move to cover herself, and Remus didn’t either. He reached his hand up to her face, cupping her cheek in his hand, glad that they felt so natural around each other now, that they could just *be* together like this without embarrassment or scrambling to throw on clothes. He had never dreamed it would be possible for him to feel so at peace before the full moon. He felt like he was reborn, and it was all because of her.

“Remus, what time is it?” Lily, however, did not sound relaxed. She seemed quite agitated.

He leaned over the side of their “bed,” fumbling amongst his clothes to find the watch he’d removed. When he located it he held it near her wandlight so he could see it.

“Seven-fifteen.”

Her jaw dropped. “We’ve been here all night? Oh, no—we’re going to be in so much trouble—”

He sat up now and took her hands, never having felt more calm and collected. “No, Lily, I think it’s seven-fifteen *at night*. Dinner probably ended about forty-five minutes ago. We’re fine. If we get back to the common room by nine or ten no one will care. Don’t worry. Let’s get dressed.”

When they were wearing their clothes again, Remus said, “Wait. Before we go, there’s something I want to check.” He pulled a piece of parchment out of his pocket and spread it on the bed, directing

Lily to hold her wandlight over it so he could see it adequately. She frowned.

"What's—"

"*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*" he pronounced carefully, waving his wand over the parchment. Slowly, the map of Hogwarts that he had helped create started spreading over the parchment. Lily Evans' mouth was hanging open in amazement.

"How—when—how—my *god*, Remus! This is—this is absolutely brilliant!" She picked up the map and held it before her, her eyes scanning over it rapidly. "And look! There are names!"

He laughed, taking the parchment from her gently. "I know, Lily. I helped create it."

"*You!*"

"And James and Sirius and Peter."

"But—but where on earth did you find out about how to enchant a piece of parchment so it would do *this*?"

Remus watched the wonder on her face, enjoying her reaction. "Well, you know James' Invisibility Cloak? It's also rather useful for looking into the books in the Restricted Section of the library late at night..."

"*Remus!*"

He laughed. "Oh, don't be so shocked. You knew we'd been getting up to mischief for the last five years."

"Yes, but I had no idea *how much* mischief, or what kind. *The Restricted Section!*"

You still have no idea, he thought ruefully. He waved the map. "Well, our rule-breaking produced this. And *this* will help us get to the kitchens for a bit of food, then back up to Gryffindor Tower without running into a single person. Well worth it, I think."

She laughed now, sitting and shaking her head. "If the four of you applied yourselves as much to your schoolwork—"

"—we wouldn't have the time to devote to truly *interesting* and *useful* pieces of wizardry, like this map."

She grinned at him and he smiled back at her in the dim light from her wand. His eyes were their usual hazel again, and he had a charming dimple in his left cheek when he smiled. She caught her breath, marveling at what they had done again. She swallowed, still gazing at him. Then she couldn't resist voicing her thoughts.

"You have such a nice smile," she whispered.

But that made the smile disappear. She felt her heart sink into her shoes. He reached out and touched her neck, where he'd bitten her. "Are you sure you're all right, Lily?"

She nodded soberly. "You just—you were very enthusiastic," she said softly.

He grimaced, then looked down at the map again. There were some Slytherins passing through the corridor where the tapestry hung that obscured the passage leading to this room. After those students passed, they were finally able to leave and make their way to the kitchens. The house-elves waited on them hand and foot for a while (Lily could never get used to that) and then they used several secret passages to reach the corridor where the Fat Lady guarded the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. They entered separately, first Lily, Remus fifteen minutes later.

When he entered, Lily was nowhere in sight. He joined James, Sirius and Peter near the fire, explaining that he had needed to go off alone, since he was feeling slightly ill before the full moon, but he was feeling much better now. Peter nodded and asked him whether he'd done his Transfiguration essay, and could he copy some of it, while James and Sirius exchanged significant glances that Remus didn't like. He turned the map over to James before going up to bed. It was a strange sensation, sleeping in his own bed the night before the full moon without feeling ill with desire; he lay back and closed his eyes, thinking of Lily as he drifted off into a peaceful slumber.

On the other side of Remus' closed bed hangings, the large black dog sniffed the air quite a lot, and then he seemed to nod. *He knew that smell*. Suddenly, the dog changed into a black-haired teenage boy, looking grimly at the closed hangings.

"Please don't hurt her," he whispered to his sleeping friend, before returning to his own bed, where he tossed sleeplessly for hours before finally succumbing to exhaustion.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 21 April, 1976

Bill sighed. He hated Herbology. It just seemed to drag on and on and on. No matter what he did, he couldn't seem to get interested in taking care of the plants in the greenhouses. He could answer

any questions Professor Sprout put to him about spleenwort or bloodwort or St. John's wort, but he just could not be interested in the plants in anything other than an academic capacity.

It didn't help that it was just over two weeks since he had returned from the Burrow for the Easter holiday, and a fresh wave of homesickness was washing over him. He missed talking to Charlie at night, he missed Annie and Peggy, he missed his dad, and most of all, he missed his mum. He was her right hand, especially now that she was so far along with the baby....

It had been something of a shock to get the owl at the end of February about the new baby coming. He would have another little brother or sister in early September, not long after Annie's birthday. *Poor baby*, he thought. September birthday. Because of Annie's birthday being on the first, when they always started school, hers was always celebrated before the end of August, and then on the day itself—nothing. Bill thought he would find that pretty depressing, but Annie didn't seem to mind, as she received her presents early. He had remembered about a month after he'd started school that he'd forgotten to say anything to her about her birthday on the day itself, since he was starting Hogwarts and was understandably distracted. *When I'm a dad*, he thought, *I'll make sure none of my kids are born around the first of September.*

His birthday was in early January, so he'd received his presents during the Christmas holiday, as usual. *That's another thing I won't do when I have kids*, he thought. *No kid should be born so close to Christmas that the two events get lumped together.* Christmas presents should be Christmas presents and birthday presents should be birthday presents, and *never the twain shall meet.* Charlie was lucky; his birthday was on Valentine's Day, but he always had a proper birthday anyway because Valentine's Day just wasn't the same as Christmas.

He heaved another sigh and checked his watch; in ten minutes the bell would ring for lunch and he'd be out of the bloody greenhouse and eating in the Great Hall. All around him, the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs in his year were writing down information about Devil's Snare and trying to avoid getting too close to the specimen Professor Sprout was showing them; she had caused the frosted roof panels in the greenhouse to go pitch black, blocking the sun, so they could see what the plant was like when it wasn't inhibited. When she ended the spell on the roof panels and the plant shriveled back into its oversized pot again, the boy sitting next to Bill whistled through his teeth, impressed. Bill didn't know him very well; he was the boy whose name hadn't been on the sorting list in September.

"Amazing, isn't it?" the boy said in wonder, his eyes round as saucers. Bill shrugged nonchalantly.

"I guess. I'd much rather be in Charms or Transfiguration, though. I don't think I've ever been so bored in my *life*," Bill confided in a whisper.

The dark-haired boy lifted his eyes from his parchment. "Really? I'm dreadful in those classes. Unless it's a written test. I can explain the theory just fine. I just—"

Then Bill remembered that this boy also hadn't been able to fly when they'd had their flying lessons during the autumn term. As soon as Bill had walked up to his broom and said, "*Up!*" it had leapt into his hand. But then, he and Charlie had been flying around the Burrow for years, practicing Quidditch in the nearby orchard. It took longer for some others, but within ten minutes everyone but this boy had been floating in the air on a broom, while he stood over his, still crying "*Up! Up!*" repeatedly, starting to look like he was on the verge of tears. Madam Hooch had gently suggested that he stay after and let her give him private tuition. Bill never did find out whether the boy had learnt to fly.

Bill shook his head. "I hate written tests. I can *do* them. It's just a bore to me, though. I'd rather be *doing* magic, not just writing about it. And History of Magic—well, the less said about that, the better."

The other boy laughed. "I don't mind the reading for that. It's very interesting. But I agree with you about the class. Even *I* can't stay awake in *that* one."

Bill laughed too, and, a little sheepishly, because they'd been in the same Herbology class all year, said, "What's your name?"

"Geoff. I know yours. You're Bill Weasley."

Bill nodded. Professor Sprout had had to upbraid him more than once for falling asleep in her class, taking points from Gryffindor while she was at it. Bill shuddered to think how many points he'd cost his house because Herbology was right before lunch, and he habitually fell asleep from hunger.

He was very glad that he was not in Hufflepuff; he doubted that she would have been as indulgent with him as Professor McGonagall had been when he'd returned from the Christmas holiday and Filch still wanted to give him his detention. Bill explained to her that Booth had heard noises in the common room (although he didn't describe them) and that he had taken it upon himself to ask

the Fat Lady whether anyone had opened the portrait hole because no one else had wanted to do it. Unlike Filch, McGonagall had nodded approvingly at his initiative and canceled the detention. Bill had tried not to grin maniacally when leaving her office; he knew he was the closest thing she had to a pet amongst the first years, and he didn't want her to think he was taking advantage of her.

Charms and Transfiguration were his favorite classes, and he always learned each new skill before anyone else. Both Flitwick and McGonagall frequently had him go around and help others who weren't catching on as quickly. While Flitwick could be absolutely extravagant in his praise, she would just give him a small smile and a nod when she saw his patient words producing the desired results. Because of this, her reactions always meant more to him. Neither teacher usually let a class pass without saying to Bill, "*Ten points for Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley,*" often more than once (which helped to make up for the points taken by Sprout), but McGonagall's clear look of approval was always far more encouraging to Bill than twenty or thirty points from Flitwick.

Bill also never complained if Professor McGonagall said, "Late to class again! Five points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley," since he usually made it up later, both in her class and in Flitwick's. (Flitwick, he had noticed, never took points from anyone; he was also freer than McGonagall in distributing praise.) Since Transfiguration was first thing in the morning, he sometimes overslept (yelling at Alex and Orville later for letting him do so) and missed breakfast. On these days, he had to hurry to class while still struggling into his robes and tying his necktie, and he knew his stomach would be rumbling all morning. He did wish he could work out a way to keep from being late; he felt very, very small when she had to upbraid him in this way. Also, when he was late she usually did not have him assist the other students and was even more reticent than usual in giving him praise. (He had blown his chance to be an example by being tardy.)

Although his head-of-house could be very stern at times, and was definitely someone you didn't want to cross (especially when she was taking points), it was all the more special to Bill when he saw that subtle look of approval on her face. It wasn't easy to see, but it was there. Bill had learned what to look for; he had also noticed that the other Gryffindor students in his year did not inspire this in her. She never praised him overmuch, though; he assumed she didn't want him to get a swelled head, or to discourage the other students. Bill was never smug or bragged, and his classmates took assistance from him with good grace, never feeling he was looking down on them.

He looked at kindly Professor Sprout, who was nonetheless frequently exasperated with him. Nice as she could be most of the time, he couldn't possibly imagine *Herbology* being *anyone's* favorite class, but Geoff seemed to enjoy it.

"Where you from, Geoff?"

He shrugged. "Here and there. We moved around a lot. You?"

"Not far from Exeter. We're outside a village called Ottery St. Catchpole."

"We were in Exeter for a time. Any brothers or sisters?"

"One brother, two sisters, and another on the way."

Geoff looked envious. "It's always been just me and my parents. I was so glad when I finally got my Hogwarts letter and could come here instead of picking up and moving every couple of months, sometimes every couple of weeks—"

Bill squinted at him. "So you *did* get a letter? I wondered about that—"

"Yeah, only it looked really old. And it didn't come until a few days before the start of term. I know most people get theirs in June. I've never been able to work that out. Maybe the problem was that we move so often. It was three times last summer. But I definitely received a letter. Best day of my life, that was."

Bill nodded. Even when he was homesick, he knew just what the other boy meant.

Finally, the bell rang and Bill leapt up, grinning, his rucksack already packed and on his back. Orville and Alex fell into step beside him as they walked through the allée of oak trees that were like a tunnel leading back to the castle from the greenhouses.

"Did you *ever* think we'd get out of there?" Alex groaned as they trudged heavily up the sloping path, the green boughs forming a roof over their heads.

"Never," answered Orville with feeling, rubbing his empty stomach through his robes.

Bill was silent, thinking of his mother's wonderful meals, and wishing he could be at home to help her manage. He hadn't let her get up almost the entire time he'd been at home; he'd insisted that anything she needed he could get for her. He'd taken care of tucking in Peggy and Annie at night while his father was working late at the office (again), and he was very stern with Charlie whenever he seemed like he might be making a mess or doing anything else to make more work for their mother. Charlie had been cross with him a few times because of this, and Bill had had to restrain himself from cuffing him when Charlie had called him Mum, in a very snide voice.

He sighed as he ate his roast chicken and buttered peas. He saw the Hufflepuff boy, Geoff,

sitting at the table on the other side of the hall, and he wondered briefly what it would be like to be an only child, and to live the kind of nomadic existence he had evidently led before coming to Hogwarts. Then Bill wondered again why Geoff hadn't been on the list of students to be sorted; he also wondered why had had received his Hogwarts letter so late in the summer...

Alex nudged him. "Go on. Go talk to her. You know you want to." Bill looked up in alarm, wondering what on earth Alex was talking about. While he was thinking and chewing, Bill had been staring into space, but as he widened his eyes, he saw now that it appeared that he had been gazing longingly at the Slytherin table, and specifically, at Roxanne Maine-Thorpe.

He grimaced and elbowed Alex right back. "Sod off. I wasn't looking at *her*."

Alex went back to his own food, grinning. "But you are often enough. You should see yourself in Potions..."

Bill thought about bringing up Mary Ann Boxwood, but as she was sitting right across from the two of them, he decided to ignore his friend instead. He bent over his plate, determined to show that he didn't give two Knuts what Roxanne Maine-Thorpe was up to.

Lily Evans was sitting to his left, playing with her food with her fork, a listless expression on her face. Bill chewed and swallowed.

"Are you all right?" he asked her, concerned. She nodded.

"I'll be fine," she said tonelessly, not looking at him. Then she turned and picked up her rucksack, leaving without looking at anyone. Bill looked at her full plate. She didn't appear to have eaten anything.

The four boys in her year followed her with their eyes. Sirius tried to get Remus' attention, to no avail. He elbowed James and looked at him with raised eyebrows. James shrugged, then said softly, "I'll find out."

He rose and went after her; in the entrance hall, before Lily had a chance to go down the stairs to the dungeons, he called her name. She turned, wearing the same listless expression.

"What's wrong, Lily?" he asked her, his face very concerned.

She couldn't even muster up the energy to give him a false smile.

"I'm fine," she lied, her face drawn and tired. There were dark circles under her green eyes, which looked very dull.

"Staying up late too often?" he asked. "Too much O.W.L. revision?"

She shook her head, not looking at him but at some indeterminate spot on the floor. She seemed to do that so often lately, tune out and stare at nothing. He'd become so accustomed to this that he was jolted when she met his eyes.

"Do you think I'm a good person, James?" she asked him abruptly.

"Wh-what?" he sputtered, startled. "Of-of course you are, Lily. Why on earth would you ask such a question?"

But now she was staring at some point in the distance again, shaking her head slowly, as if in a trance. "No reason..."

She turned and started walking down the stairs with no warning, no farewell. James continued to stand in the entrance hall, frowning, knowing that Lily Evans was definitely *not* all right, but not knowing why or what to do about it. She was his friend, and he hated seeing her like this. Was she depressed about something? Knowing her, she was having a pre-O.W.L. crisis of confidence. He was suffering from a bit of that himself. Bonnie was going to meet with him in the library after their last class; he could invite Lily to come along and join them. She'd see that everyone was feeling anxious and inadequate about the upcoming ordeal. No one looked forward to the O.W.L.s, or assumed that they were going to do well. She needed to see that her jitters were perfectly normal.

Lily reached the Potions dungeon and walked to her work station. She unpacked her supplies and waited for the other students to arrive for class, then sighed, thinking of her most recent time with Remus....

It had been only three days earlier, and as usual, when they were together, they went after each other passionately, but afterward...

She wiped away an errant tear that had run down her nose. She was supposed to be so *clever*, and yet she felt so *stupid*. In January, after their first time, he'd avoided her the next day and then disappeared during the next three nights. The same thing happened in February, and then March. Any time she tried to approach him when he wasn't sweating and shaking, he didn't seem to want to have anything to do with her. Once, in mid-March, she'd cornered him in a remote stairwell and kissed him. He had responded at first, clutching her to him, but then he had abruptly thrust her away, claiming that he had to go to a detention, running off faster than Lily had ever seen anyone move.

He had even completely overlooked her birthday, which James and Sirius and even Peter had remembered. Someone else had remembered her birthday too, and the thought made her feel warm inside now. Severus had been so nervous about giving her a gift, so shy. It was a book, of course, but it was a book of *sonnets*, of all things. He had stuttered and bumbled about the entire time, then ran off before she could even open it and thank him.

She sighed again. Two boys who liked her. One who was even *sleeping* with her, and yet she didn't have a proper boyfriend, someone who was willing to own up to caring about her, someone who was willing to behave as though she *didn't* have a disease of some sort, or as though ashamed of her....

When Severus Snape arrived with the other Slytherins and took his place next to her, she smiled briefly at him before turning to her work. He met her eyes for a moment, then turned away, making her want to kick something. *What's wrong with me?* She thought of Sirius' brief period of deciding he wanted to be with her after all. She thought of Remus kissing her passionately and touching her—following by weeks of ignoring her and behaving as though he was afraid to be alone with her. Clearly, she thought, *that* is the aberration, not the norm. The usual way of things is that Lily Evans is treated like a pariah, an Untouchable. She felt like she was carrying a large sign saying, *To be avoided at all costs. If you want a girlfriend, look anywhere but here.*

When she had seen that Remus was in a bad way again, a few days earlier, and had approached him after lunch, she touched his arm gently and asked him, "Remus—do you—do you need me?"

He had nodded desperately, with a look that burned, and they had hastened down to the dungeons, to the dusty storeroom where they'd gone the first time, and afterward Remus had traced her face with his finger and said softly, "You're so amazing, Lily."

Her heart had skipped a beat, seeing the look in his eyes. She had brought his hand to her lips and gazed back at him, unwilling to let the moment end. But then he had checked the map again, and found that some other students were approaching the room where they were, so they hastily dressed and left. They were in the corridor near the Potions Dungeon again when she turned and found that he'd disappeared. She whirled, and called his name, but he was gone. Had he taken one of the shortcuts on the map? she wondered. She had leaned against the hard stone wall, sinking down, tears coming unbidden as she longed to be in his arms again, just holding him and being held, telling him she loved him and hearing the same words back. But that happened only in her fantasies....

She noticed that Severus was about to add his diced dragon's liver to his potion too soon, and without chopping it finely enough first. She stopped him with her hand on his arm, shaking her head, so that the professor wouldn't notice.

"Thanks," he whispered, also watching the professor cautiously. "Can you—can you stay and help me a bit after class? There's a potion I'm trying to brew—I could really use your help. I'm starting to get a bit worried about the O.W.L.s."

She looked up into his eyes, then turned and saw Peter scrutinizing the two of them. She couldn't read his expression. She looked up at Severus again and said quietly, "All right."

He smiled at her shyly, then turned back to his potion. Lily discreetly took the dragon's liver and her cleaver and chopped it finely on her cutting board, sliding it back to Severus' side of the worktable when she was done. He gave her a small smile and mouthed the words *thank you*. She rewarded him with a brilliant smile. She had to force it a bit, because she was still feeling so down, but she wanted to do this. She had also noticed that Sirius was looking at her and Severus, and unlike Peter, his expression was quite easy to read. He was not happy about her smiling at Severus Snape, not happy at all. *Sod off, Sirius Black*, she thought.

At the end of the class, they turned in their potion vials as usual and cleaned their workstations. When the other students were preparing to go, the professor noticed that Severus did not pack up his supplies.

"I'm staying to do some extra work, Professor," Severus told him. "Preparation for the O.W.L.s. Lily is going to help me." Lily noticed that James swung his head around upon hearing that, and she wondered why he looked so interested.

The Potions Master accepted this and left them alone in the dungeon. Severus smiled down at Lily and she smiled back. She leaned over, looking at the page he'd marked in the potions text, wondering what they were going to brew. Her hair was falling into her face, which looked very tired but no less beautiful for that. He withdrew the necessary ingredients from his supply of apothecary items.

Lily watched his hands as he worked; she loved his long, tapered fingers. They looked so elegant. She wondered what he would do if she asked him whether he'd ever played the piano. *Probably run screaming into the night*, she thought, frowning. He looked up at her.

“All right, Lily?”

She gave him a broad smile again. “Yes, Severus. Never better.” I’ll be cheerful, she thought. Upbeat. A virtual ray of sunshine. No one will be more pleasant company. How could anyone not want to spend time with me?

He nodded, but looked a little perplexed, as though he could tell she was forcing her cheery mood. “Good,” was all he said before turning back to his preparations.

They chatted as they worked, and slowly, Lily began to feel better. He still did not open up to her any more than he usually did, but he didn’t recoil at the mere touch of her hand, either, as Remus did when he wasn’t “needing” her. When Severus wasn’t looking, she admired the way his closely-trimmed beard and mustache hugged his face, defining his lantern jaw and high cheekbones, remembering that she had initially been upset at noticing this on the first day of the term, in September. *Why was I upset?* she wondered now.

The flames beneath the cauldron crackled merrily, and Lily and Severus talked and occasionally laughed as they worked. They never noticed light, careful footsteps on the hard stone floor, footsteps belonging to someone who had entered the room wearing an Invisibility Cloak; a person who stayed long after they had left, thinking about what he had seen, and trying to work out what to do about it....

Notes: Readers who are familiar with Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* will recognize that the second potion Madam Pomfrey gives Lily possesses the same qualities as the gum that turns Violet Beauregarde into a human blueberry. (Lily, obviously, does not suffer that fate.) I also made some changes to the previous chapter: I decided to use the real Welsh flag on the Potters’ coffins, rather than the wizarding Welsh flag that I made up (it was meant to be ironic that the Muggle flag had the magical creature—a dragon—while the Wizarding flag did not). I also corrected the name of the seventh-year whom the first year boys discuss in their dormitory. Originally it was Sam Bell (a character who first appears in *Harry Potter and the Time of Good Intentions*), who is supposed to be four years older. The name has been changed to Stephen Pearce. I have also adjusted the date formats in all chapters to be in day, month, year order rather than month, day, year, which is largely American. This format will be used henceforth.

— CHAPTER FOUR —

Liking and Loving

Tuesday, 25 August, 1976

Bill woke to the strident sound of his new baby brother demanding to be fed. He groaned, covered his head with a pillow, rolled over and attempted to get back to sleep. The baby's wailing continued unabated. He lifted up his pillow and peered at the clock on the table between his bed and Charlie's. In the grey pre-dawn light he could see that it was going on five o'clock. *Blimey*, Bill thought. *I will be so glad to get back to school...*

Finally, the baby's cries lessened and ceased altogether. Bill assumed that his mother had settled into the rocking chair in the corner of his parents' bedroom and put the baby to her breast at last. It had probably taken very little time for her to push her feet into her slippers and plod to the baby's cot, then carry him to the rocking chair, but Bill had quickly been reminded that when a baby is crying, it seems like an eternity. He sighed. The baby wasn't due until the third of September, but had been born early, on the twenty-second of August, almost two weeks sooner than expected. The early arrival had thrown the entire household into chaos.

Well, he thought, if we had listened to Peggy, we'd have known....

On the morning the baby was born, Peggy had woken him early, standing next to his bed with her thumb in her mouth, grinning around the soggy digit.

"Mum's gonna have the baby," she had said in a monotone, pulling her cheek away from her teeth with the thumb, then resuming her sucking. She didn't look happy.

Bill had stared at her, barely awake. He hadn't taken advantage of the traditional summertime luxury of sleeping late now that his mother was so very, very pregnant. He was usually up with the sun, dressing and feeding Peggy and Annie, while Charlie sprawled across his bed, snoring softly, oblivious to the responsibilities Bill had taken on. But this day, Peggy was waking him earlier than usual; the sun was barely up. On the other hand, if he'd known how early the baby would wake him, he'd have considered this to be practically having a lie-in.

"What're you doing out of your cot already?" he asked her, barely able to speak, he was so tired.

"Climbed," she said simply, around her thumb.

"Go back to bed," he said tersely, rolling over and tucking his fist under his pillow, drawing up his knees again, closing his eyes against the morning. Several minutes passed. She didn't move. He could hear her regular breathing behind him.

"Mum's gonna have the baby," he heard her say again.

"I know!" he exploded, turning around on the bed, punching his pillow. "You've been saying that *all week*. We *know* she's going to have the baby. Leave me alone." He rolled over again, squeezing his eyes shut, feeling faintly guilty for losing his temper. She wasn't even four years old yet; he shouldn't get hacked off at her. She would be going to the village school for the first time in September, along with Charlie and Annie. The thought made him a bit nervous; Peggy was very bright, but sometimes she still seemed very young to him, and he wondered whether his parents should have pressed the headmistress to allow Peggy to start school a year early. It was probably because of the baby, he reasoned, trying to imagine his poor mother dealing with both Peggy and a new life after sending Annie and Charlie off to school each day.

Drat. Now he was *thinking*. She had started to make the wheels in his head turn round, so that it was less likely he would be able to drop off again. *Drat drat drat*.

"She's gonna have the baby *today*," her voice cut through the darkness behind his eyelids. He fought the temptation to open his eyes to look at her, speaking half into his pillow.

"The baby isn't due for almost two more weeks," he growled. "Go back to bed, Peggy. It isn't time to get up yet. It's Saturday morning—"

"Mum's gonna have the baby—"

"*Will you stop saying that?*" he screamed in frustration now, losing the battle and sitting up, his messy red hair standing wildly on end.

"Shut up, Bill," Charlie muttered sleepily across the chasm between their beds.

"Shut up, yourself, Chickie. I'm trying to get Peggy out of here."

"Don't call me that."

"*Chickie-Chickie-Chickie.*"

A muffled, "Sod off," came from the vicinity where Charlie's face was pressed into his pillow.

"Mum's gonna have the baby," Peggy said again, still utterly composed. Bill seethed.

"Annie!" he called. "Annie, come get Peggy and take her back to bed!"

Through the wall he heard his other sister cry, "Do it yourself! It's my birthday!" That was Annie. Of all of them, she was the only one skilled at not being exploited. No one took advantage of Annie Weasley. She hadn't yet turned six, but she already seemed to be able to take in hand the people around her, bend them to her will, and handily avoid others bending *her* to *their* will. Bill had no idea how she managed it.

Yes, *I do*, he thought, as he turned his body and brought his feet crashing down onto the floor next to his bed, scooping Peggy up into his arms and carrying her on his hip back to the girls' bedroom. *She manages it because I let her. And everyone else does, too.*

He put Peggy back in her cot and frowned at Annie, who was reclining in her bed with her hands behind her head, her face perfectly expressionless.

"It isn't your birthday today, it's just your party today," he reminded her. Her birthday was the first day of the term, so her party was being held early.

"Yeah, and Mum's going to ruin it by having the baby today," Annie told him. He groaned.

"Don't you start—"

"Peggy told me," she said simply. "She knows about these things. She'll be right. I don't *want* her to be right, but she will be. You'll see."

Bill looked at her with narrowed eyes. Was their little sister a Seeress? he wondered, not wanting to say this aloud. He turned and looked at her; she had curled up in her cot again, a stuffed tiger clutched to her chest, the thumb never leaving her mouth, her long red eyelashes on her pale, freckled cheeks. She looked so ordinary. She was probably just—

"*Arthur!*" he heard his mother cry out. "*Arthur!* Go get the midwife! My water just broke!"

Bill swallowed.

Mum's gonna have the baby.

Yes, she certainly was.

The birthday party was canceled; five families had to be contacted to inform them of the change in plans. Then they had to be packed off to their aunt's house in Bristol while their mother worked to bring the new life into the world. Bill insisted that he should stay and help boil water or something, but the first hair-raising cry he heard wafting down the stairs made it very hard for him to argue with his father when this idea was rejected. He stepped into the warm green flames and was soon tumbling out of the fireplace at his Aunt Meg's house, glad he wouldn't have to listen to hours of his mother in agony.

Ten hours later, his aunt came into the sitting room where Bill had been reading *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2*. Annie and Peggy were playing with dolls on the hearthrug and Charlie was trying to teach their aunt's English bulldog to do tricks. He glared balefully at Charlie and adamantly refused to play dead, roll over, sit up or shake hands. Charlie sighed.

"All right, then," he said to the stubborn animal. "Stay there and don't move a muscle or show a facial expression! Don't do a *thing!* Good, good dog!"

Bill looked up from his book and laughed. Normally Charlie was quite adept with animals, but Aunt Meg's dog could pass for a statue most of the time. Part of the problem was that he was quite elderly. Their aunt said he would be something like two-hundred and ten years old if he were a wizard.

Secretly, Bill thought Annie and the dog were kindred spirits. *No one can tell you what to do*, he thought enviously at the dog. *If you don't want to—you don't.*

"Children! I've got exciting news! You have a new little *brother!*" Aunt Meg said, clapping her hands together.

"Brilliant!" Charlie said enthusiastically. "Another brother!" Annie threw a pillow at him. For once, their aunt didn't care. She was in her early thirties, but she and their Uncle Alfred had only been married for a couple of years, and didn't have any children yet.

"His name is Percy," Aunt Meg went on, "and he's good and strong and—"

"Percy!" Charlie gasped, making a dreadful face. "What'd they want to go and give him a stupid name like *that* for? Surely it's not too late to change it?"

Aunt Meg put her hands on her hips and glared at her nephew. "Charles Weasley, you will *behave*. Percy's a very nice name. Your mum told me she's been thinking that's the perfect name for the baby if it's a boy ever since she read Bill's first letter from Hogwarts." She nodded at Bill. "One of the other Gryffindor boys in his year is named Percy, and she liked the name so much, she—"

"Perry!" Bill exploded now, throwing down his book. "I told her that the other boys in my dorm are Alex Wood, Orville Simpson, Rembert Leonard and *Perry* Booth. It's short for Peregrin. I don't even call him by his first name, usually. Just Booth. Tell me she *hasn't* named the baby after *Booth*."

His aunt frowned at him. "Perhaps if you improved your penmanship, your mother would have known that his name was Perry and not Percy. Honestly! I needed a translator to read the thank-you note you sent for your Christmas gift. You'd think with your mother standing over you while you wrote it, it might at least be *legible*," she added knowledgeably. "So, since you wanted to be told this—*No*. Evidently your parents *haven't* named your new brother after Booth, as you call him, seeing as his name isn't *actually* Percy."

Bill groaned. "Aw, but she *thought* his name was Percy." He bit back a dozen expletives which he knew would get his mouth washed out with soap. *Perry. Percy. Damn. Alex will never let me hear the end of this*, Bill thought.

Alex's mother had also had a baby that year, in early May. The baby's name was Oliver. Alex's six-year-old brother was Leander. "Notice a pattern?" he'd said sarcastically to Bill when he'd found out the new baby's name. Alex was sure to get wind of the Percy/Perry mix-up and milk it for all it was worth.

Peggy lifted her face to her aunt, looking as she had that morning, and said, "Mummy has replaced me."

Aunt Meg strode across the room and swung Peggy up onto her hip. "No, she hasn't, pumpkin. You can share your mummy with the new baby."

"I *was* her baby and now *he* is."

Aunt Meg swayed, holding the small child. "Oh, Peggy, Peggy...." she crooned, "you'll always be your mummy's baby. Everyone's always their mummy's baby...."

Peggy shook her head against her aunt's shoulder, tears running down her face, her bottom lip pushed out, looking miserable. Bill bit his lip again, unable to contemplate what this must be like for her. He had no clear memory of being the one and only focus of his parents' lives, as he was so young when Charlie was born. He didn't remember not being a big brother.

"Yeah, well I'm the one whose bloody birthday party was canceled," Annie interjected grumpily.

"Annie!" Aunt Meg exclaimed, scandalized. Bill noticed, however, that that was the extent of the reaction. Annie consistently got away with things that he and Charlie didn't dare do, and saying "bloody" within the hearing of an adult who had power over them was one of them.

They were permitted back in the house the following day, cautiously entering their parents' bedroom, where their mother was enthroned in the massive carved maple bed, holding a very small, red, wrinkled thing which suddenly erupted in a squall of noise when it was hungry. Their father had wanted to take the next day off, but he received an urgent owl near bedtime and it looked like he would have to go into the office after all. The next morning, his father kissed his mother goodbye and Apparated to the Ministry.

From that moment on, the day was complete and utter chaos.

When his father arrived home, his mother, exhausted and disheveled, confronted him in the filthy kitchen, where there wasn't a sign of tea. Peggy clung to her leg, crying, and Bill tried to pry her off, finally succeeding by falling backward and knocking his head on the kitchen table. Charlie and Annie were visible through the doorway to the living room, pulling each other's hair and growling, "*Say it!*" and "*No, you say it!*" over and over. Upstairs, baby Percy's howls finally became loud enough to be heard downstairs, and that noise started to drown out everything else.

"Arthur Weasley," Molly said to him with a quaver in her voice, barely audible over the noise the children were making, "tomorrow *you* are in charge of the children, except for Percy. If you cannot get the day off, then you'll have to take them to the office. I can probably get Meg to take them for the rest of the month after that, but—I—I *cannot* take another day like this! I've had *no sleep*, Annie and Charlie are constantly at each other; Bill is at his wit's end with Peggy; she keeps trying to climb on me when I'm nursing the baby; and I *just can't take it!*" Her eyes were wild, and he patted her shoulders gently.

"Of course, Molly," he said in a soothing voice, as though she were a fractious pony. "Of course I

can take them off your hands. A new baby is always very demanding, you want to focus on him..."

She rubbed the backs of her hands across her eyes, which had dark circles under them. "It's not that I don't love them all," she said tiredly. "I *do*. Right now it's—it's just *too much*. If Percy hadn't been early, I could cope. After the new term starts, I should be fine...." she assured her husband.

Bill looked up at his parents from his spot on the floor; his head ached mightily, but the more alarming thing was the sight of his mother just going to pieces. He remembered his aunt saying something to his Uncle Alfred, something like, "I hope this time Molly has an easier time with the post-partum dep—" before her husband had noticed the children listening.

He had opened his eyes wide, gesturing to the four of them and saying, "Hush! Little pitchers...."

His aunt had quieted, her lips drawn very thin. Bill regarded his mother; he knew she loved them all, but, he realized, gazing round at the disorderly house and Charlie and Annie each holding fistfuls of the other's hair, sometimes it was probably hard to *like* them. Times like this.

Arthur Weasley took his wife in his arms and crooned to her, as though the baby wasn't howling at top volume, as though Charlie and Annie weren't threatening to make each other bald. "Of course, Molly," he said again. "I'm sure they'll enjoy seeing the Ministry...."

Bill gave up on sleeping and sat up groggily. They had never gone to work with their father before. Bill knew it was going to be his job to keep Peggy and Annie from getting into trouble—and Charlie too, but he couldn't let on to Charlie that he was doing this. He was *not* looking forward to dealing with a stubborn Annie and a heartbroken Peggy all day. Peggy had done almost nothing since Percy's birth but insist that he was going to replace her in their mother's heart. That wasn't how she put it, of course, but Bill could tell it was what she meant. And he had no idea when Annie was going to let go of the birthday party, but he strongly suspected she was going to be holding *that* grudge against their mother and Percy for years to come.

The sun finally rose all the way and their father entered their room, already wearing his robes, his glasses perched on the top of his head. The red hair there was just starting to thin, ever so slightly.

"Come on, boys! Time to get up! Exciting doings! You get to see what old Dad does to earn a living!"

Bill looked sideways at the sleepy Charlie, who appeared to be singularly unenthusiastic.

"Now, er, have you seen my glasses, boys?" he said uncertainly. They told him his spectacles were on top of his head. "Ah, there they are. Good, good!" he burred, placing them across his nose, where they belonged. Bill and Charlie looked at each other. *It was going to be one of those days.*

They dressed and Bill helped the girls dress; they ate breakfast and continued to listen to their father's excited chatter about the things he would show them.

"So, we'll be going by Floo to the Leaky Cauldron," he said needlessly as he spooned porridge into his mouth at the breakfast table. "You know the drill on that; you've all gone shopping with your mum. But this time, we're not going to Diagon Alley." His blue eyes twinkled at them all. "We're going to be getting the Muggle Underground to a *certain* station." He paused tantalizingly. Charlie rolled his eyes, as did Annie.

"All right, Dad," Charlie said tiredly. "Why are we going to a *certain* station?"

"You'll see!" their father crowed now. Bill and Charlie looked at each other; their father was *very* undignified when he was excited.

Their mother kissed them all goodbye, still wearing her dressing gown, her hair looking like a frowzy orange mop. "Be good, all of you. And don't touch anything, especially in your father's office. Arthur, do be sure to keep any confiscated items out of reach of the children. You never know what some of those contraband articles have been enchanted to do."

Their father brightened. "There you go, children! You can watch me put revealing charms on contraband Muggle artifacts, to discover all of the spells that have been put on them! Doesn't that sound exciting?"

The four of them looked listlessly at each other.

"Yeah, loads," Annie said, rolling her eyes.

"Annabel Weasley, you behave yourself," her mother told her sternly. "I don't want to hear about any pranks. It's bad enough the number of times I had to go see the headmistress last year—"

For once, Annie looked quite sheepish, but Bill wasn't certain it wasn't an act. "Yes, Mum," she said meekly.

They all stepped into the fire after she had kissed each of them. Bill went last. Just as he moved toward the flames he heard Percy awake and begin that characteristic wail. His mother turned and began to climb the stairs wearily, and then she whirled out of sight as he was swept through the Floo network to London.

* * * * *

Bill and Peggy had been through the streets of London in a taxi to get to King's Cross, and then his mother had hired another to get the three of them all the way home from London at the end of the term (since old Tom didn't want them going through the Leaky Cauldron again). But Charlie and Annie, who had never been in the Muggle part of London before, looked floored by its enormity when they stepped out onto the Muggle side for the first time in their short lives. Peggy held one of Bill's hands and Annie the other as they walked to the nearest tube station.

Bill watched his father fumble with the Muggle money needed to pay their fares; the younger children stared around at the station and the crowds of people, none of whom wore robes or pointed hats. Bill fought the urge to stare as well; he hadn't been in the Underground before, either, but he didn't want to look like a country bumpkin in the big city for the first time (even though this was pretty close to the mark).

When the train pulled into the station and the doors opened, Charlie exclaimed, "Cor, Dad! The doors are magic! Muggles can do magic!"

"Sssh!" his father cautioned him. "Quiet, Charlie! It's done with eckeltricity, not magi—not what we use. I don't really understand how it works, but—"

Bill bounced excitedly on his toes; they were the only people left on the platform. "Let's get on before it leaves, Dad!"

"Oh, right, right," his father said, hustling his brood onto the train just in time for the doors to snap shut behind them.

Bill watched the Muggles closely as they stopped at each station and the mix of people around them changed constantly. His father's wizarding robes earned him some curious glances, and one or two Muggles looked at each other and shrugged, saying, "Priest?" *A good thing he's not wearing his hat*, Bill thought ruefully. For someone who adored Muggles, his dad was dreadful at passing as one, or even fully understanding the way they lived. Bill knew, for instance, that the word was *electricity*.

When they pulled into Westminster station, their father hustled them off the train. Bill started to move toward the exit with his sisters in tow, but his father called his name. He turned, confused.

"This way, Bill," Arthur Weasley said to his eldest son, an amused glint in his eye. Bill frowned; his father was gesturing toward a wall with a variety of theatre advertisements on it. Something called *Mousetrap* seemed to be very popular. Muggles would watch anything, Bill had concluded long ago.

"The exit's this way, Dad," he said, gesturing with his head. As the last of the Muggles who'd been on the train with them drifted away up the stairs, they were left standing on a lonely, deserted platform. His father was just hopeless sometimes. But this time his father knew something he didn't.

"Not for us, it isn't." He looked furtively around. "All right, you go first, Charlie. Walk right toward that wall and don't slow down; just go straight ahead very quickly. Can you do that? Be a brave lad, there you go."

Charlie frowned and glanced at Bill, who shrugged. *All right*, his expression seemed to say. *If I wind up in hospital because my dad told me to walk into a wall, he'll get it from Mum*. The ten-year-old walked forward, swinging his arms, looking like he was fighting the urge to put his hands up to defend himself from the wall, and then he-disappeared.

"All right, Bill. You take Peggy and I'll come after you with Annie. Take it at a good trot."

Bill stared at the wall where his brother had disappeared. He didn't like the barrier at King's Cross that took him to the Hogwarts Express, and he didn't like the looks of this, either. He walked forward, with Peggy slightly behind him, struggling to keep up with him. At what would have been the moment of impact, he winced, but forced himself to keep moving forward—

—and found himself in a tube-like corridor made of terra cotta-colored brick. Large red-orange tiles covered the floor. It was like being in a giant sewer pipe with a flat bottom. Their father appeared in the corridor with Annie a moment after Bill went through with Peggy, and he immediately turned to the left, still holding Annie's hand. Bill, Charlie and Peggy followed them wordlessly. They walked some distance from the entry point, which did not have any particularly distinctive appearance on the magic side.

Their father mumbled what sounded like a number, and Bill realized that his father had been walking looking at his feet, counting his paces. His father turned and smiled at him. "I'm used to Apparating. Had to get instructions for coming this way. Most of us come to work by Apparating, but it's good to know this way as well. If there were a lockdown, Apparition wouldn't be possible." Then he seemed to think better of talking about *lockdowns*, and looked like he wished he could

snatch back his words. *In case of You-Know-Who*, Bill thought. The summer had not seen an abatement of Death Eater activity. His parents had taken to reading the *Daily Prophet* and then throwing it in the flames before he or his siblings could read it. Once or twice, Bill had managed to nick the paper before it was burnt, but the news was so depressing he didn't attempt this often.

His father raised his wand and Bill saw that there was a slight indentation in one brick, which was the one his father tapped now with his wand. Suddenly, an archway appeared, and they followed their father through it. They were in a corridor that was identical to the first one. After a few minutes, it abruptly opened out into a large circular space that was about twenty feet in diameter, with numerous doorways around the perimeter. Bill stared at the people visible through the doorways; they didn't look quite right. He watched a wizard carrying a box with a leaping furry thing in it. When he disappeared to the right of the doorjamb, it seemed that he should have reappeared in the doorway that was a mere six inches or so to its right. However, an old bald wizard, as wrinkled as a rhino, moved toward the wizard with the furry leaping thing, and it appeared that they would collide. He too disappeared, and did not reappear in the doorway where Bill had seen the first wizard, although it seemed that he should.

Then Bill noticed that there were labels on the doorways. COEC, IUMO, DMGS, DIMC, DRCMC, and DMT were some of the legends. His father explained that the abbreviations were for Committee on Experiment Charms, Improper Use of Magic Office, Department of Magical Games and Sports, Department of International Magical Cooperation, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and the Department of Magical Transportation.

They also saw the doorways for the Goblin Liaison Office, the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad and the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, where their father worked. Bill frowned at the doorways, trying to work out just what was wrong. The people walking past them appeared suddenly, then disappeared just as suddenly.

His father saw his perplexed look. "You want to know, don't you son?" His dad didn't have to say more than that. Bill nodded. "These are portals," Arthur Weasley said, smiling. "When you walk through one of these doorways, you are in the actual location of the office on the other side. The portals are all really here, but the offices are spread out over the entire London Underground system."

"The Underground?"

"During the war, the Muggle War Office used old Tube stations as military offices. They used stations that had already fallen into disuse. I remember my dad said they used them as air-raid shelters, when the need arose. Worked very well for that. I was sent up north during the war, of course, with the rest of the children, and Muggle children, too. Can you imagine it? Just about every child in the country, Muggle or wizard, packed off to the country. After the war, our Ministry made a deal with the Muggle Prime Minister to take over the old Underground Offices. They can't be accessed by Muggles anymore; you can only get to them if you can Apparate or know how to get into here from Westminster Station. Except for Aldwych, but I won't go into that right now. It's much more convenient to use the portals than to Apparate around from office to office, which you can't do anyway if you're with a suspect."

Two of the portals were not like the others. One did not show an office with people bustling about; it was just a black rectangle, with no sign. The other didn't look like a portal at all. It was another rounded corridor, brick covering every surface, like the passage from which they'd emerged. His father saw Bill looking at the dark doorway. "Unspeakables," he said in a hushed voice. "Department of Mysteries. They can get out, but no one else can go in. Except I've never actually seen anyone come out of there..."

Peggy stood staring at the black rectangle, her brow furrowed. She seemed to be *listening intently*.

"Let me show you something else before we go to my office," he said, taking his youngest daughter's hand and dragging her down the pipe-like brick corridor, which slanted subtly downward. Bill and the others followed, and after it turned a few times, the round room with the office portals was no longer visible behind them. There were more than a few that their father hadn't explained, but Bill didn't question him as they continued on their way. After a few minutes, the corridor came to an end. They were confronted with a large bronze door with "MoM" in raised, ornately intertwined pewter letters. Their father said something Bill didn't catch, and the door swung toward them. They entered and found themselves in another corridor, rectilinear now rather than rounded; Bill thought it looked remarkably like the corridors in the dungeons at Hogwarts. They all continued to follow their father.

They turned another corner and came to another large bronze door. Their father pointed his wand at it and said, "*Alohomora!*" The heavy-looking bronze door opened and they entered.

They were at the top of a room that was a kind of pit; serried rows of benches dropped off before them, rather like a square funnel, Bill thought. There was a flat, open space in the center. A chair sat in the middle of that open space, chains around the back and legs, leading Bill to believe that it was *not* reserved for the Minister of Magic.

"Do you know where this is?" their father asked.

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked back.

"What's above this? Above where we're standing. Do you know?"

All four children shook their heads dumbly.

"Parliament." He grinned at the shock on their faces. "Hasn't Professor Binns covered this with you, Bill?" Bill had barely squeaked through his exam in History of Magic; he could never stay awake during the lectures. He avoided his father's gaze. "What was London called in Roman times?"

Bill thought, biting his lip. He thought he knew this one, but his answer was very uncertain-sounding. "Londinium?"

His father nodded. "Right. Good. And do you know how long this chamber has been here?" He didn't wait for an answer this time. "A very, very long time. Since *before* there was ever a place called Londinium. Before there was a Parliament, or a Prime Minister."

"Before kings and queens?" Peggy piped up, the thumb in her mouth making her words a little muffled.

"Actually, no, Peggy. But it was before there was one king or queen who ruled all of Great Britain. Before there was a Great Britain, for that matter. This has been here since the days when there were many kings and queens on this island, ruling over many realms. In some places there were people called chiefs instead of kings or queens. Not just up in Scotland. And do you know what else there was?"

Bill frowned and shook his head. His father sighed and looked around. "There was *magic*," he said softly, his voice wistful. "I don't mean that we don't have magic now, of course. I mean that no one had to *hide* their magic. Wizards and Muggles lived side by side and no one worried about what would happen if a Muggle saw a spell being performed or a potion being brewed. Magical people were some of the most important in each village, in fact, and they could make a good living telling fortunes and providing elixirs for illnesses and giving people good luck charms for their new houses or as baby gifts...." He sighed again. "It was a golden age, when the walls we have today between wizard and Muggle didn't exist, and it didn't matter."

"What happened?" Annie asked.

He sighed. "The Romans happened. Julius Caesar invaded Britain—when Charlie?" his father asked him suddenly.

"Er—"Charlie hesitated.

"Bill?"

Bill bit his lip. "In 55 B.C.?" he said slowly, uncertainly.

"Right!" his father said, grinning. Bill heaved a sigh of relief; Charlie didn't seem to mind that his brother had answered for him.

"Rome had already been expelling witches and wizards—usually astrologers—for almost a hundred years," their father went on. "The invaders brought their anti-magic sentiments with them. Here, as in Rome, consulting a diviner or being a diviner—especially if you were talking about the fate of the Emperor or the state—was considered treasonous."

Bill glanced at Peggy, wondering whether she was listening. He saw Annie look at Peggy, too, as though her thoughts were the same as Bill's. Peggy was humming and skipping up and down the serried rows of benches, having a grand time, as though this chamber had *really* been built for three-year-olds to get their exercise. She seemed utterly carefree for the first time since the baby was born, as though everything their father was saying was completely over her head—which it might have been. Suddenly Annie dropped her grim, serious look and became a typical not-quite-six-year-old again, joining her sister in the game of skipping up and down the rows of benches. Charlie looked like he wanted to join them; he was nibbling at his nails, clearly getting restless.

Bill turned back to his father. He raised his voice to be heard above the racket of the girls leaping from bench to bench. "Treasonous?" he asked, perplexed. Arthur Weasley laughed.

"Yes. Asking about the Emperor's fortune was considered treason because you might be a political rival, you see. And if the Emperor asked *you* to tell his fortune and you predicted his death, or the city falling to an invading army, it was also treason. Even if you were just reading the signs. Talk about being the bearer of bad news....Which means they didn't *really* want to know what was going to happen, of course. And a wife who used certain, er, magic potions without her husband's

authorization could be killed, as well as the person who brewed the potion for her. Love potions were a witch's or wizard's biggest trade, usually, but they were completely illegal. In spite of this, Emperors were having potions made for them all the time, and Tiberius also had a court astrologer, Thrasyllus, who was considered the power behind the throne. As Emperor, he could follow the law or break it as he saw fit. Mostly, wizards and witches who told fortunes or made potions used magic to escape persecution or just accepted exile from Rome. Four thousand magical folk left Rome under Tiberius.

"And then there was Caligula. He declared himself a deity and demanded to be worshipped. In Judea, in particular, people flatly refused, as it went against their religion. Many wizards, being rather independent-minded, didn't buy into it either. Luckily, Caligula got himself killed, and the Judeans were safe for a little while longer. But it was only about thirty years longer. And then there was Nero, who decided to blame Christians for Rome burning, as many people were pointing the finger at *him*. Most people didn't believe they were responsible, and wizards and witches worked at rescuing as many of them as possible, although many still died rather gruesomely."

Charlie whispered, "How?"

His father raised his eyebrows. "Well, they were accused of burning Rome, so Nero—" He didn't finish.

Charlie got his meaning and swallowed. "Oh," he said softly. His father smiled grimly and patted him on the shoulder.

"In those days, since witches and wizards were considered highly suspect because they could tell fortunes—which could include foretelling death for the Emperor—and concoct powerful potions—which could be used to poison the Emperor—they were rather sympathetic toward other groups that were accused of treason just because they wouldn't worship the Emperor. When witches and wizards were arrested on witchcraft charges, they didn't just use their magic to get themselves out of prison—they also freed any other prisoners who were in similar situations, like Judean zealots, and later, Christians, both of whom would sometimes refuse to go, even when the prison doors were wide open. They had already decided to be martyrs."

Bill frowned. "Why would anyone die who didn't have to?" But then he remembered that James Potter's parents had died fighting to save others, and that they might have known they were doomed, and kept on anyway. His father grimaced and looked at him.

"It's a choice some people make, Bill," he said quietly, and Bill was startled by the look in his father's eyes; he knew with certainty that if he needed to lay his life down for any of his children or for their mother, Arthur Weasley would do it without question.

"Well," his father went on, "just a handful of years after Rome burned, the Empire finally succeeded in putting down the rebellion that had been going on for years in Judea. That's been causing trouble for almost two-thousand years now, although ever since I went up north when I was young, Muggle war news depresses me dreadfully, and I avoid it when I can...."

"The law of Rome had been the law of the land here in Britain since Julius Caesar had invaded, even though there were plenty of rebellious people here who didn't like it. Technically, this was as much a part of the Empire as Rome itself, even though it was so far away. Whenever a Governor came into power who was more stringent about the anti-magic laws, wizards would move away from Londinium to the countryside, except for those who lived in Diagon Alley, which had been sealed off from the Muggle world after the invasion. Hidden by magic, some of them stayed here in the heart of the city, away from the prying eyes of the Romans." He looked thoughtfully around the chamber. "After the Empire fell, now and then over the years, there were times when we had rulers who made it safe for magical folk to come out of hiding again. Do you know who one of them was?" He raised his eyebrows meaningfully at Bill, who was glad he knew this one.

"Arthur," he said with certainty.

"Yes, Arthur!" his father crowed; then, as though they didn't know their own father's name, he said, "My name!"

Annie happened to be skipping along a bench right next to them now; as she passed, she rolled her eyes.

"And then what, Dad?" Charlie asked, genuinely wanting to know. Their father didn't notice him giving Annie a sharp pinch on the arm. She winced, but seemed determined not to cry out in pain. She ground her right foot into Charlie's left foot as their father stared at the ceiling, oblivious.

"Ah, well, after Arthur died, it was a dark time. There were Viking invasions. It was a very difficult time. And then there were the Inquisitions. No one cared about what Merlin meant to King Arthur. No one seemed to remember that wizards used to break the Christians out of prison when they were arrested by the Romans. The church started cracking down on magic, calling it heresy, and witches and wizards were called heretics even though many magical folk *were* Christians. A

number of *clergy* were wizards as well, and there were entire orders of monks and nuns made up of wizards and witches. It didn't matter. They were branded as apostates and drummed out of the church, and sometimes hounded out of their homes and their villages."

"Couldn't they use magic to fight back?" Annie asked, surprising Bill. He hadn't thought she was paying attention. Now she was standing on a bench a couple of rows down from them, trying to balance on one foot without falling over. Peggy was lounging in the chair at the bottom that was draped in chains; she was panting, out of breath.

"Ah, but they didn't want to hurt the Muggles. Some of them used magic to escape, but it was a point of pride among magical folk that Muggles were never to be hurt. If a Muggle wanted to hire you to put a terrible spell on someone else, that was a dreadful crime among our kind. I think after living peacefully with Muggles for so long, after Rome fell, it seemed unbelievable that they were no longer considered quite *human*.

"Witches and wizards who were taken into custody tried to reason with their friends and neighbors. You see, they *knew* the people persecuting them. They weren't faceless Roman soldiers whom they'd never seen before. They weren't strangers. But suddenly, magical people weren't to be tolerated. You asked about why someone would choose to be a martyr, Bill. Well, many of our kind allowed themselves to be martyred rather than harm a hair on the head of a Muggle or use magic to escape. It was later, during other witch-hunting frenzies of the Middle Ages, after the Crusades, that witches and wizards used magic, as they did under the Romans, or did things like putting freezing charms on the flames when they were burned at the stake." He sighed noisily again. "They were convinced that their neighbors and friends couldn't *possibly* just stand there and watch them die, cheering it on, even. But they did exactly that."

"And then Hogwarts was founded—" Bill said softly. His father nodded.

"Yes. And because of the Inquisitions, Salazar Slytherin didn't want Muggle-born students at the school. I think he may have lost some family members to the purges, but we don't really know. The exact reason for his feeling that way is lost to time now. There were rumors that he went to France after his falling out with the other three founders, but that's another thing we don't know for sure."

They went back to their father's office, the girls dragging their feet; they'd enjoyed romping about. They met his co-workers, and Bill could tell that the three younger children were itching to touch some of the confiscated items in the storeroom while their father wrote letters to people about the objects they had charmed. (He was feeling a little tempted himself, and wondered whether this was ever a problem for his father.) Bill glanced at one of the letters when his father had finished it and was busily writing a new one.

Dear Mr. Tansy,

On behalf of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, I would like to apologize for our having had to confiscate your bicycle. I appreciate that you were taking your dog to the vet for an emergency (I will give you the benefit of the doubt that it is a dog, as Dangerous Creatures is another department), but your neighbor, a respected Muggle history teacher, had an unobstructed view of this activity, which is in violation of the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy. It's too bad he wasn't a journalist, as no one would believe what he'd seen if he'd told. And you're very lucky he's not a bookmaker. Everyone believes every word they say.

The bicycle will be returned to you after we have removed all charms from it. To aid us in our work, if you could owl us with the specific spells you have placed on it, that would be very helpful. So far we are, of course, aware of the flying spell (which, by law, can only be placed on brooms, and then only by licensed broom manufacturers). We assume there is a braking charm, as well, but we are uncertain whether it is a spell on the entire bicycle, much as a braking charm on a broom, or whether it goes into effect when one presses the lever to activate the Muggle brake. We have many artifacts to process every day and rather than spending hours and hours stripping down your bicycle, your cooperation would make our job much easier. (And your bicycle will be returned to you more quickly.)

I do hope your neighbor is doing well after the Obliviators put that memory charm on him, and I hope he hasn't forgotten too much of the history he teaches. (The Obliviator only had time to talk to him about the fall of the Roman Empire through the Magna Carta.) Once you have changed to transporting yourself by broom, I trust you will restrict yourself to flying at night? I do not believe more memory charms would be in your neighbor's best interest, as the entire Middle Ages might fall out of his head if he gets another one.

I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Arthur Weasley

Misuse of Muggle Artifacts

Ministry of Magic

Bill frowned. "Letting him off rather light, aren't you? And asking him to help you? What if he just tells you to sod—er, what if he says no?"

Arthur Weasley sighed. "Almost all of them do. I hate to say it, but it's usually the ones who aren't very bright who cooperate. So we do wind up having to strip down most things ourselves, but in case someone really is interested in saving us the trouble, we reckon it can't hurt to ask."

Bill carefully placed the letter back on his father's pile and the four children sat on chairs around the perimeter of the room, swinging their legs impatiently. After a little while, their father looked up, saw how restless they were, and said, "Listen, Bill. Why don't you take Charlie and the girls to the commissary for a little something? Here, I'll draw you directions..."

Bill and his brother and sisters left the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, Bill in the lead, carrying the parchment his father had handed him and squinting at his father's tiny handwriting.

When they arrived, they discovered that it was empty except for a plump young witch who was putting cleaning charms on the tables and an old grizzled wizard who sat in the corner reading the *Daily Prophet* and pouring something from a hip flask into a cup of steaming hot tea. The four of them sat at a table well away from the old wizard, looking around carefully, and wondering how they were going to get food.

After a few minutes, the witch saw that they were floundering, and she came to them and explained the system. They rose and went to get plates from a central table, and when they returned to where they'd been sitting, each of them addressed his or her plate to order.

"*Bread pudding with caramel sauce*," Charlie promptly said to his plate.

"*Spotted dick*," Annie told her plate imperiously.

"What do you want, Peggy?" Bill asked her, unsure whether he should let her order on her own.

"*Turkish delight*," she said clearly to her plate, ignoring him.

Bill shrugged, deciding to go along. "*Trifle*," he said to his plate. Their mother would have a fit if she knew about the amount of sugar they were consuming before lunch, but their mother wasn't here. They seldom had much in the way of sweets at home; puddings they had, after tea, and they had a little bit of pocket money they could use on sweets when they went to Diagon Alley. But they never had sweets this early in the day.

"Bill, we're going to need some flannels to clean up," Peggy said to him at one point; her words were a little garbled, as she was chewing.

Bill frowned. "To clean up what? They have people here who do that, or house-elves or something."

"But we're going to need the flannels to clean up when Charlie spills his pumpkin juice."

Bill laughed. "Don't have much faith in him, do you?" But a moment later, Charlie had knocked his arm into his goblet and spilled pumpkin juice down the middle of the table, necessitating some scrambling out of the way. Charlie frowned at Peggy.

"You jinxed me! If you hadn't said—"

"She just *knew*, Chickie," Annie broke in. Charlie growled at her.

"Don't call me that!"

"Watch out, Annie—" Peggy started to say as Charlie reached out for a handful of his sister's hair.

"You could have told me sooner!" Annie complained, as her voice rose to a shriek.

"Shut up!" Bill commanded them all. "You," he said, speaking to Charlie, "clean up your mess. *You*," he said to the girls, "take your food and eat at that table there. I don't want to hear *one more sound* from any of you while we're in here, understand?" They stared at him for a second, as though they'd never seen him before. Charlie slowly took his hands from Annie's head and went to look for a flannel to clean the table. Soon they were all sitting and eating quietly again.

When they had all finished except for Charlie, they rose to go. Bill took Peggy's and Annie's hands. "Coming, Charlie?"

Charlie looked up at him in bliss, his brown eyes looking slightly glazed-over, his mouth full. "Naw. Oo go. I'll ee dere zood."

Bill frowned at him. "*I'll be there soon*," Annie said, translating, an impatient edge to her voice. Bill nodded and turned to go.

In the corridor, he said to Annie, "You'd better behave yourself in school this year, Annie. You've got to set an example for Peggy, and Mum will have enough to do with the new baby without you getting called up on the carpet all the time."

She bristled. "I *was* good last year."

He held her hand more tightly. "Not as good as you could have or should have been. I mean, that time you put those salamanders in Charlie's lunch—"

"That bloody sod grassed on me!" she exclaimed. Bill stopped, shocked.

"Annie Weasley! You watch your mouth! Mum will be mortified if the headmistress hears you talking like that! *That's* the sort of thing I mean. No more bad language, and no more pranks. You're only *six*—or you will be in a week. What are you going to be getting up to when you're at Hogwarts?"

As they strode through the corridors, the girls having to struggle to keep up with Bill's long impatient strides, Annie had a wicked little grin on her face.

"You'll see...."

Charlie, in the meantime, had finished his pudding and sat back, patting his little round tummy contentedly and sighing. The witch had gone and the old wizard had stopped reading his newspaper. Charlie was suddenly aware that the old man was scrutinizing *him*. He swallowed, wondering how to leave without it looking like he was running from the man.

Instead, the old wizard rose from his seat and began to walk across the room, a loud *clunking* noise being made on every other step. He stopped at Charlie's table and peered down at him, his beady black eyes very sharp and critical-looking. His grey mane of hair hung partly in his face, his hands were gnarled, and his cheeks were fissured with too many lines to count. Charlie swallowed.

Then, the man's face suddenly broke into a smile. Broke was the most appropriate word, in Charlie's opinion, as it caused something like a gash to cut across the man's face. "Hello, there, laddie. Don't have to ask whose bairn *you* are, do I?"

Charlie didn't reply, as he wasn't certain what the man was talking about.

"A Weasley, right?"

Oh, Charlie thought, understanding now. "Yes, sir," he responded, barely audible. "I'm a Weasley."

The old man nodded. "Speak up when you say that. Be *proud* of it, lad."

"All right," Charlie answered, still whispering. "I-I will."

Charlie dared to stand now; his knees were knocking together. He didn't know who this old wizard was, but he evidently knew his dad and liked him, so that was a good thing, he thought. *Right?*

"I-I should be getting back to the others," he said feebly, his voice still very soft. The old man nodded.

"You tell your dad hello from Alastor. I'd come to see him, but we'd end up talking for an hour or two, and I have an appointment elsewhere. Which one are you?"

"Which one?"

"The eldest? Next eldest?"

"Oh. I'm—I'm Charlie. Bill is the eldest."

He nodded his grey head. "Right, right. Well, you'll be going to Hogwarts soon, then?"

"Not—not until next September."

"That's fine. You'll do all right, lad. Don't fret. There's plenty I want to be terrified when they meet me, but you're not one of them. You've no cause to fear an Auror at your age, I hope."

Oh, he thought. *That explains it. He's an Auror.* Charlie swallowed, meaning to sidle toward the door, but suddenly, his attention was caught by the carved wooden foot he saw peeking out from under the old man's robes. He looked up at the weather-beaten face.

"Please, sir—do you have that because—because you're an Auror?" Then he wished he hadn't asked; it probably wasn't quite polite to ask people about why they needed wooden legs.

"This?" the old man said, knocking on the wood loudly with his knuckles. "Nah. I got that in the Great War. Place called Gallipoli. Do you want some sound advice, lad?" Charlie was starting to feel braver and nodded at the wizened Auror. "If anyone ever tells you to run flat-out at people firing machine guns while you're holding nothing but a bayonet—don't bother with your wand. Just run like hell in the opposite direction. Or tell'em to go to hell."

Charlie frowned now, not quite understanding this. But he said, "Um—all right—"

The old wizard laughed now, slapping Charlie on the back. "There's a good lad. Always know when to humor your elders, eh? Also not a bad piece of advice."

The Auror was rather alarming when he laughed. He kept his hand on Charlie's shoulder and they walked out of the commissary together. Charlie was relieved to see that the old man was turning in the opposite direction from him.

"Ta, lad," he said before he left. "Don't forget to tell your dad hello for me, and congratulations on the new Weasley. I have a wee gift for the bairn I'm sending along soon. You be good for your mum and don't make any trouble, mind."

"Yes, sir," Charlie said, less numb with fright, but not completely fearless, remembering that the Auror had seen him fighting with his sister. Would he tell? Somehow he thought not. The Auror

clumped down the corridor and turned a corner, disappearing from sight. Charlie turned and ran back to his father's office, hoping he was remembering all of the turns correctly. He was panting when he arrived; his father was showing Bill and his sisters an enchanted doorbell that evidently spewed insults at people the owner didn't like.

"Not at *all* inconspicuous," their father complained. "And *salesmen*. The things it said to *them*. Even the postman, asking whether he had late-notices. The fellow did quite a lot of business with Muggles and was often late paying his bills, so the postman was evidently bringing a lot of notices of that sort. The bell was telling the postman to put the bills in—well, a rather inaccessible part of his anatomy," he said, clearing his throat, remembering he was speaking to children. They all looked up in surprise when Charlie arrived, panting, in the doorway.

His father looked concerned. "Charlie! Are you all right?"

Charlie grimaced, unsure of how to tell his father that his friend had been rather frightening. "Er, yeah. I saw—I mean, I met a friend of yours. An Auror."

His father brightened. "Oh, really? Which one?"

"He—he said his name was Alastor."

"Oh, yes. Moody. Well; I'm not surprised you look like that after meeting *him*." He chuckled, but stopped quickly, seeing that his son didn't think it was at all funny. "He couldn't stop by?"

"No. He said he had an appointment." Charlie was feeling calmer and more collected now. "He also said congratulations on the new baby and he'd be sending a gift soon."

Arthur Weasley laughed. "Yes, I daresay he will. It will probably be another Dark Detector of some sort. He has them all over his place. You should see it. He's always afraid someone's going to ambush him in his own home. He even has his dustbins set to spray rubbish on anyone messing about outside his house." He chuckled again. "No one else would be able to get away with that. And there were a couple of times when he nearly didn't. But you know how it is; in these times, no one wants to be hard on an Auror, especially one like Moody who's brought in so many dark wizards. It really should be interesting to see what he sends us; you should see some of the things he sent when you and the others were born," he added, nodding at Bill and the girls.

Bill frowned. "Why don't we use them?"

"Hmm?" his father asked, sitting at his desk again and pulling a stack of work toward him. "Why? Well, most of them aren't really very useful on a daily basis. Well—one thing might be, come to think of it. He sent it when you were born, with instructions for adding to it as each additional child came along...."

"What?" Bill wanted to know.

His father shrugged. "It's just a clock. Although it isn't, really. It shows where the people in a household are, rather than telling the time. It's not really a Dark Detector, per se, but it could be useful, I suppose, if we brought it down out of the attic and dusted it off. I've been scared to death of having Moody over at the house because I'll have to bring that thing downstairs first. If he ever suspected we weren't using it, he'd accuse us of relaxing our ever-present CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he barked in a gruff voice very unlike their father, making them all jump. He cackled with glee afterward.

"Moody's got a bit of a reputation for being paranoid, in case you couldn't tell. Good bloke though. As I said, one of our finest Aurors."

Bill sighed, looking at Charlie, wishing *he'd* met Moody-the-Auror. *But nothing interesting ever happens to me*, he thought wistfully, staring at the pile of work his father had to plow through. *I bet I'll wind up just like my dad, in a dead-end job with no possibility for advancement and too many mouths to feed.* He sank his chin into his hands and settled down to wait for the long, long day to end.

* * * * *

Thursday, 1 October, 1976

Lily watched Severus Snape while they worked in Potions class. She was having a very hard time forgetting a prank that Sirius had played on Severus not long after the new term had begun. *Should I worry?* she wondered. Sometimes her fears seemed silly, sometimes not. She had to wonder whether Sirius was really antagonistic about her spending time with Severus because he was jealous, or because he genuinely thought Lily was in danger.

The prank had occurred at dinner on the third Sunday of the term. It had started out as a wonderful end to a beautiful day, a golden autumn Sunday, when most of the students had gone out of doors to revel in the beautiful weather, flying their broomsticks, practicing Quidditch, or just lounging by the lake. At the evening meal, the ceiling of the Great Hall was a deep sapphire

blue, with a crescent moon visible amid a crowd of stars. Lily had been sitting next to Cecilia at the Gryffindor table, James across from them. Lily remembered it very clearly: James, his prefect badge glittering on his robes, was laughing at something Sirius, who was seated next to him, was saying. There was a cheerful hubbub of conversation in the hall.

Remus was sitting on James' other side. She tried not to stare at him; she had just been with him a week earlier, after telling herself she wasn't going to let this happen again. She felt weak, like the world's worst person. Remus, as usual, had seemed oblivious to her inner turmoil. Now he leaned over his plate, shoveling in his food as though worried someone would snatch it from him any moment. *He always eats that way*, she reminded herself, and it occurred to her to wonder whether he usually had enough to eat at home.

She was more and more aware of Peter Pettigrew's crush on her; he was sitting next to her, as he usually did. Sometimes he made her very nervous. She would turn a corner in the castle and find him there, as though he'd been following her. She hoped James would never lend his Invisibility Cloak to Peter. She shuddered at the idea of him sneaking into the girls' dorms....

Lily studiously ignored Peter, listening to Cecilia instead, laughing at something she knew was meant to be funny, hoping Cecilia wouldn't actually ask her what she'd said. She glanced furtively over at the Slytherin table while Cecilia continued talking. Severus Snape was eating with his head down, not talking to anyone around him. She swallowed, looking at him. *Sometimes he just seemed to emanate loneliness....*

Severus jerked his head up suddenly and glared at another Slytherin boy, whose hawk-nose was more pronounced than his. Lily could tell the boy had said something Severus didn't like.

Then she saw that Sirius had risen and was creeping toward the Slytherin table with a goblet in one hand and something vaguely spherical and bulky in his other. Severus' back stiffened, as though he had a vague awareness that someone was looking at the back of his head. She looked uncertainly at Remus, who was leaning around James Potter's in order to have a better view of what Sirius was doing. She saw him turn to James briefly, grinning, before going back to watching Sirius. At that moment, she felt like she didn't like her friends very much at all, even though she was still hopelessly in love with Remus. *Just because you love someone*, she reminded herself, *doesn't mean it's easy to like them always.*

When Sirius reached the Slytherin table, he tapped Severus Snape on the shoulder. He whirled around, as though expecting it, and Lily saw Sirius discreetly hand the goblet and round item to the boy sitting next to Severus, who switched Severus' goblet for the one Sirius had brought and placed the round item in the middle of Severus' dinner plate. *Even the Slytherins are in on it*, she thought indignantly, wondering what exactly was going on, and feeling helpless to stop it.

"What?" Severus barked at Sirius, turning away from his plate. The sound carried across the room, above the rest of the conversation. There was a brief lull, then the students went right on.

"What what?" Lily heard Sirius say, looking like he was trying not to laugh. Severus glowered at him, then turned back to his dinner. When he saw the thing on his plate (Lily couldn't tell what it was from across the room), he pushed it away from him in a panic, banging it into his goblet. Nervously, he picked up the goblet and gulped, but lowered it almost immediately and spit out the contents.

Lily saw something red splatter on the tablecloth and his robes, and on the people on either side of him. "Eeeew—" some Slytherin girls complained. Severus turned angrily to Sirius. *Was that blood on his teeth and around his mouth?* Lily wondered. Blood. *Sirius had given him a goblet of blood.* When she realized this, she gripped her fork fiercely, having an incredible urge to stab Sirius Black with it.

Sirius was back at the Gryffindor table now, laughing with Remus. She felt like stabbing him, too. Peter Pettigrew tried to be a part of their joke, laughing along, but he was largely ignored by the other boys. She turned and glared at him, and he cowered under her gimlet eye. James Potter glanced over at the Slytherin table; when he looked back at Lily, he seemed distinctly uncomfortable. Lily had to try very hard *not* to run to Severus and comfort him. It was equally difficult to resist putting a hex on Sirius Black.

"Are you all right, Lily?" James asked her suddenly, looking concerned.

"Why did he do that?" she demanded, as though Sirius weren't standing right there. "How could you do that?" she said, addressing Sirius now, although she suspected it was the old vampire rumor rearing its ugly head again.

"Why are you defending *him*?" Sirius wanted to know, glancing at Remus briefly out of the corner of his eye. Remus had sobered and was looking as cowed under her gaze as Peter, so she glowered at James instead, as she didn't want to look at Sirius. But James glared back.

"Don't look at *me*. I had nothing to do with this."

"Oh, washing your hands, are you? And I suppose you've *never* had anything to do with *anything* that's happened to Severus?" she said testily. He looked uncomfortable at that, turning to look again at the Slytherin table. When he turned back he was frowning.

Suddenly, Professor McGonagall was standing next to Sirius. Lily could see that Dumbledore was standing over Severus, his hand on his shoulder.

"Black," McGonagall said imperiously. "Come with me. We have a detention to discuss," she said, her mouth very thin. "And *proper conduct at meals*," she added, each syllable very crisp. Lily felt very grumpy; Sirius didn't even look a *little* remorseful as McGonagall led him away. He seemed to think a detention was worth having played the prank.

As Lily worked by Severus' side all through Potions class, she thought about the goblet of blood. *Why would Sirius do that?* she thought. *Because he's an insufferable git, that's why*, her brain answered. *And because everyone thinks he's a vampire*. She looked at Severus' pale, pale skin, watched his dark eyes move over the potions ingredients. She had crossed the Great Hall after dinner on the night of the prank and had discovered the largest head of garlic she'd ever seen sitting on Severus' plate. *Why should he fear garlic?* And then she remembered that he had to put a salve on his skin to be able to go sailing, and he had also mentioned that he and his uncle preferred cloudy weather for sailing. She *had* thought the vampire nonsense was exactly that, but now she wasn't so sure....What if he really *was* a vampire?

It was this question, and the possible answer, that made her especially nervous. *Oh, you're being stupid*, she tried to tell herself. *It's just a silly rumor. It couldn't be.*

Still, when he asked her to stay to help him after the class was over, she hesitated, thinking of the goblet of blood, thinking of the enormous head of garlic.

"I-I need to get some notes from—from James. Maybe another time?" she said nervously. He looked very disappointed, and started packing up his things.

"Oh. Well, if you can't stay, then I'll wait until a day that you can." He sounded forlorn, and she felt like a heel as she bolted after James and the others. But in the corridor, she found none of the Gryffindor boys. Sirius, Remus, Peter and James had just left moments before, and now only the other Slytherins were there, moving toward their common room (she assumed) while Cecilia, Moira and Myra moved in the opposite direction, toward the stairs to the entrance hall. As she stood in the corridor, contemplating the absence of the boys and biting her lip, Severus came up behind her, startling her. His steps were very quiet.

"What's wrong? I thought you had to—"

"No," she answered nervously. "There's been a change of plan. Do you still want to work on a potion?" She tried not to be silly about this. She'd worked alone with him countless times in the dungeons; why should anything be different now that Sirius had played a woefully tasteless prank on Severus? And yet—it was.

A little.

Lily looked up at him, standing next to her at the work table. He seemed so much more mature since the new term had started. They had both performed well on their O.W.L.s, and he credited her with helping him do as well as he did in Potions. She was surprised he had asked her to stay to help him today, though, as Slytherin had a Quidditch match coming up soon against Hufflepuff, and he had been down on the pitch every afternoon between the end of classes and when dinner was served, to get in some practice before dark. Severus was the Keeper for the Slytherin team.

While they waited for the potion to brew, they talked. Lily made sure she listened attentively as well as contributing to the conversation, and she found that he was opening up more and more—only to retreat and withdraw before she could delve too deeply into his psyche, his innermost thoughts, his desires and ambitions. There were times when he smiled at her and she thought, *Yes. It will be different with Severus...* Other times she thought, *Same old story...* They had corresponded frequently during the summer, but his letters had always been very stiff and formal, very revealing about his day-to-day activities, very unrevealing about his inner life. She wondered for the millionth time what he was hiding.

Finally, it seemed that the potion was almost ready. Lily leaned over his potions text, reading. "You know, Severus, you didn't tell me why you wanted to make Eutharsos Potion, or what it was for—"

Severus suddenly panicked and grabbed the book from her, putting it on the side of the cauldron away from her. "It-it doesn't matter, does it?" his voice shook. "Thank you for your help. I would've botched it, most likely. Where are—your friends?"

"They're—off doing things they don't want me to know about." She assumed that they had managed to disappear quickly after class by using that map Remus had shown her. She sighed. "For the past year—" she began, then looked up at him, shook herself. She wasn't going to dwell on how

they seemed to be purposefully excluding her, whispering amongst themselves, disappearing mysteriously....Remus being distant with her except when he needed her was only a part of it, really. She changed the subject back to the potion. "Actually, if you'd have boiled anything but the roots, you certainly would botched it up. But you still haven't let me read what it's for--"

She reached for the closed book he'd set down just as he poured the potion into a beaker, straining it through cheesecloth. Lily was still paging through the book, searching for the right potion recipe.

Severus stared uncertainly at the murky concoction and then drank it all down, just as Lily cried, "Aha! Here it is..."

But as she read, Severus Snape began to feel rather peculiar. Each individual part of his body seemed to go to sleep, then wake up again. He looked at Lily; he could see deep into her clear green eyes, and each strand of hair on her head. Why, he thought, they aren't all red. That one is gold, and that one copper....He was seeing everything with a clarity he'd never experienced before.

Lily stared at him. His eyes looked a bit glassy; then he shook himself and his eyes looked closer to normal again. She realized that the potion had probably taken effect. She turned to the book again, still trying to figure out what he'd taken. Finally, she found the right entry. "*Eutharsos Potion,*" she read, "*is brewed from the root of Eupatorium fistulosum, a common weed that grows to a height of seven feet. Over three-thousand years old, Eutharsos Potion increases a person's courage and makes him feel safe whether he is or not. One of the most common fears is speaking to large groups; Eutharsos Potion has proved very effective as a method of assisting people with this fear...*"

Severus saw that she was frowning as she read, a vertical line developing between her brows. Still looking down at the book, she said, "I still don't see why you need to..."

But Severus Snape was feeling very different, very daring. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. He looked extremely determined, and his eyes burned into hers.

"Lily," he said in a firm voice, no longer shaking. "I have to tell you something." He pulled her closer to him; she looked up at him, perplexed.

"I love you," he said suddenly, and lowered his mouth to hers. Lily couldn't move; she was frozen, unresponsive at first. It was starting to feel like Sirius all over again. *No*, she thought. *I don't want it to be like that.* She had waited for so long for Remus to say that to her, especially in the throes of passion, but she'd never heard the words pass his lips. She thought, *I should probably say it back to Severus.* But did she feel the same way? She liked him a good deal, and she was attracted to him, but did she *love* him?

And then she thought of the description of the potion in the book, but she tried to push this to the back of her mind as she slid her hands up around his neck. *I like Severus*, she reminded herself. *I've wondered what it would be like to kiss him, and here it is, happening...* He pulled her closer and she decided to open her mouth under his. He seemed momentarily startled, then clutched at her, and the fevered nature of the kiss increased.

This is how it's supposed to be, she thought. *No furtive groping on the common room floor late at night, or frenzied coupling in an old dungeon storage room....* He was actually a very good kisser, and she felt her pulse quicken. Lily wanted to cry for joy--and then she wanted to cry for a different reason. No matter how hard she tried, she found that she just could *not* forget the potions text. And there was Sirius' prank to consider. This situation was an improvement over Remus, but it still had its problems.

Eutharsos Potion increases a person's courage and makes him feel safe whether he is or not....

He needed to take a potion to approach me, she thought, feeling less sure that she wanted to be kissing him. The more she thought about it, the angrier she felt. Plus, there was still the vampire question. Finally, trying maintain her dignity (and especially, trying not to cry), Lily pulled back and slapped him hard across the face.

"How dare you!" she cried, backing away from Severus, her chest heaving. She pulled her hair behind her with her hands, then nervously began twisting it into a coil. She wouldn't look at him. He had an expression of complete and utter confusion on his face.

"How dare I--" Severus began, baffled.

For once, she let her emotions flow freely. "How dare you take that--that courage potion and *then* kiss me! Is that what it takes for a boy to tell me he cares about me and kiss me? I'm so sick of being treated like a disembodied brain floating around here, like I don't exist from the neck down." Or, she thought, being treated like I'm nothing *but* a body, as Remus has been doing. *I'm a whole person!* she wanted to scream. She felt like a dam had burst, as she voiced the frustrations that had plagued her for the previous two years. "'Ask Lily, she knows the answer'," she said in a snide, high-pitched voice. "I'm a human being! I have feelings, and needs. Taking a potion to talk to me is--insulting. Am I so scary?" she demanded of him. He looked at her with wide eyes, obviously a

bit alarmed.

He thought it might be a bit tactless to tell her, *Yes. I'm scared to death to talk to you about how I feel. Why do you think I took the potion?* Luckily, the potion was making him feel fairly confident, so he said, "No, Lily, that's not it. I was just-just nervous. I've wanted to say this for so long..." He had. For so very long...

"Then you should have just said it!" she spat at him. "Damn you..." she trailed off, looking like she was going to cry. She frequently looked on the verge of tears lately. He had wanted many times to enfold her in his arms and comfort her, tell her that whatever was frightening her or upsetting her, he would be her rock.... Thanks to the influence of the potion, he finally felt the confidence to step closer to her and put his arms around her. She acquiesced at first, putting her head on his chest, then pulled away, wiping her eyes, adopting a more businesslike manner. Perhaps, he thought, she realized that this was also because of the potion. She glared at him.

"You meet me under the oaks by the greenhouses in four days time, or however long it takes that potion to wear off. Don't take any more of it! Then if you want to tell me you love me and kiss me-well, we'll see! But don't you touch me until that damn potion wears off!" Her eyes were blazing, and she turned and stormed out of the room. Severus stared after her, his stomach clenching.

Had she just told him to meet her by the oaks? To kiss her and tell her he loved her? He couldn't quite believe it. And she actually had kissed him back. He touched his lips in wonder. She actually seemed to want him to profess his love without being under the influence of any foreign substances....

He smiled broadly and resisted the urge to give a little skip into the air. *Yes! Lily Evans. Severus Snape and Lily Evans.* He tried saying it out loud, then looked around guiltily, in case anyone heard him. And he saw, to his dismay, that someone had indeed heard him: a tall, thin, red-haired boy who was, despite his height, probably only in first or second year. The boy was standing in the doorway of the potions dungeon, and Severus thought he looked vaguely familiar. *Gah. All of these children look alike.*

"What?" Severus Snape snapped at him.

"Er," the boy said uncertainly, looking like he was going to bolt any second. "I was looking for the Potions Master," he said very quickly. Somehow, Severus Snape wasn't convinced that that was what the boy had meant to say.

"Well, he's not here!" Snape answered him tersely.

"Oh, okay," the boy said, bolting. Severus Snape put his face into the corridor for a moment, watching the long, thin legs sprinting away from him as though he was running from death itself.

* * * * *

It had all started with just trying to get a good night's sleep. Bill was tired of the noise around him in the second-years boys' dorm.

"I'll bet you he is," Alex Wood said, with an evil edge to his voice.

"Bet you he isn't," Booth countered.

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Then why did Sirius Black give him that goblet of blood? And the garlic? Did you see the way he acted about the garlic? And when he spewed the blood all over....even the Slytherins were disgusted. If no one else had been around, I bet he would have drunk every drop."

It *had* been rather spectacular, Bill remembered. Trust Sirius Black to play the prank of pranks.

"Come on. They wouldn't let a bloody vampire into the school. What'll you be suggesting next? That the Head Girl is a banshee?"

"She screams like one," Orville Simpson groused sleepily.

"Ha!" Alex said, triumphant. "You said *bloody vampire*. What other kind is there?"

Bill sighed. He was very, very tired, having been writing a yard-long History of Magic essay until after midnight, including some things his dad had told him about the Emperor Tiberius, and now he couldn't get any sleep for all of the noise in the room.

"Someone go and offer to let him *bite* you, why don't you, and find out *that way*?" Bill suggested irritably, punching his pillow. *I got more sleep at home with a yowling baby in the house.*

"All right," Rembert Leonard agreed.

"Who should do it?" Orville Simpson asked, sounding more awake. Bill heard some movement and steps across the stone floor of the round tower room.

Suddenly, in a burst of noise, the other four boys tore open his curtains and proclaimed, "Bill! Bill will do it!" they yelled gleefully.

"You've got to offer yourself up to Snape, *Weasley*. See whether he makes a snack of you," Booth said, smacking his lips.

"I am *not* getting involved in this," Bill told them, wondering if he'd get in a *great deal* of trouble for hexing all four of them.

"It was *your* suggestion," Booth pointed out.

"Doesn't anyone around here recognize sarcasm when they hear it?"

"No," Leonard said decisively.

"If you do it—you can make one of us do something we don't want to do," Alex said with a wicked smile. Now Bill was feeling slightly wicked himself.

"How about something you *want* to do?"

Orville frowned. "What do you mean?"

Bill looked at Alex. "I mean that if I do this, *you*," he said to his best friend, "have to kiss Mary Ann Boxwood. On the *mouth*."

Alex looked appalled. "No! No way!"

"If I can ask Snape—a possible vampire, according to you—to bite me on the neck, you can kiss the girl you're crushing on."

"I am not—" Alex started to say.

He was interrupted by Booth and Leonard repeating the sing-song chant, "*Mary Ann and Alex, Mary Ann and Alex...*"

"Sod off," Alex said grumpily, returning to his own bed. Bill rolled over to get back to sleep.

In the morning, Bill had forgotten all about it, as though it had been a dream, but Alex reminded him after breakfast, after the first and second classes, after lunch, and when all of their classes were done for the day. He still had his end of the bargain to uphold. As they left their last class, Bill thought, *Now I have to find Severus Snape and ask him to bite me*. He grimaced at the thought. *Erg*.

"Where do I even find him?" Bill asked Alex as they walked back to the Gryffindor common room. "What if he's in his dorm?"

Alex shrugged. "Then you wait until later."

When they reached the common room, Bill threw himself into a chair near the windows. A chess game was going on nearby. "No, really," he said. "It's a huge castle. How'm I supposed to find one person in this place? He could be anywhere."

Suddenly, the twin girls from sixth year looked up from their chess game. Bill couldn't remember their names.

"If you're looking for someone, ask James and Sirius," one of them said.

"They always seem to know where everyone is," the other one said.

Bill felt very grumpy; he did *not* really want someone to solve his problem. Alex grinned at him evilly. "Go on then, you. Get up to their dorm and ask them."

Bill grimaced and dragged himself to the spiral stairs. He trudged up, up the stone steps until he was on the level where the sixth years lived. The door was locked and he heard a muffled hum of conversation behind it. He knocked loudly, hoping they wouldn't hex him for disturbing them. He heard footsteps approaching the door and it was swung open by James Potter, who immediately grinned when he saw Bill.

"Weasley! Hullo there. What can I do for you?" Behind Potter, Bill saw that Peter Pettigrew and Remus Lupin were hurriedly pulling the curtains around a four-poster with a lot of parchments on it.

"Um. Those twin girls in your year. Downstairs. They said you could help me find someone. In the castle," he added awkwardly. Potter got a wise look on his face and ushered Bill into the room, locking the door securely.

"Well. You came to the right place," Potter told him conspiratorially. "Sirius! Get out the you-know-what."

Sirius Black nodded and went to his wardrobe. He opened the door, which was mirrored on the inside, and rummaged among some boxes on the floor. However, in the mirror, Bill could see that that wasn't where he was getting the you-know-what from. After he saw Black slip a piece of parchment from the pocket of a robe hanging in the wardrobe, Black made some more pointless noise with the boxes, and finally turned round with the parchment. Pettigrew, of all people, yelled, "No!" and jumped at Black, putting himself between him and Bill, seemingly to keep Bill from seeing the parchment.

"Do you want him to *see* it?" Pettigrew demanded of Black, who looked chagrined.

"Sorry. You're right," he said quietly to the small boy. Raising his voice, he said to Bill, "You wait over there. You'll get your information, don't worry. But—turn around."

Bill turned, and he noticed that in this position, the open door of another wardrobe was at the perfect angle to give him a clear view of what Black was doing with the parchment, reflected in the mirror on that wardrobe's door. Bill heard him say, as he touched his wand to the parchment, "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*"

Bill covered his mouth to keep them from hearing his gasp (he wasn't supposed to be able to see what they were doing) as lines began to draw themselves all over the parchment. *It was a map*, he could tell. *A map of Hogwarts castle!* But how would that help him find Severus Snape?

"So," Black said, "who are we looking for, then?"

Bill swallowed. "Snape."

There was nothing but silence behind him. "Snape," Sirius Black repeated without inflection.

"That's right."

James Potter said, "That's easy. We just left him. He's down in the potions dungeon."

"Sirius!" Pettigrew said now. Bill heard the parchment being rattled. "Look how close together their dots are! It's like—like one dot!" Bill wanted to turn around, but he willed himself to stay put.

"I'm going down there," he heard Sirius Black say stiffly, obviously very angry.

"No, Sirius," Potter said, his voice shaking. You don't *know*—

"But—what if he's—*you know*—"

James Potter was sounding very annoyed. "Oh, come on, Sirius. You're the only one who really believes that—"

"I'm not! Even the Slytherins—"

"And you're going to take *their* word for it?" Potter countered.

Sirius Black began cataloguing every unlikable thing there was about Severus Snape. Roughly every other item on the list was *He's a slimy Slytherin*.

It seemed to Bill that Remus Lupin had been very quiet. Now, reflected in the wardrobe mirror, Bill could see that he was staring at the map.

"Send Weasley," he said softly.

"What?" Sirius said, interrupting his anti-Snape diatribe. He had reached number forty-three: *He's a really, really, really slimy Slytherin*.

"Send Weasley. He'll be an intrusion. It's better than one of us."

"But he might—" Sirius began.

"Shut it, Padfoot," Remus said suddenly. "That's rubbish and you know it. Send Weasley. That's all that will be necessary. He's looking for him anyway." He resumed contemplating the map. Bill was mystified about how a map could tell him where Snape was, but then he saw in the mirror that Remus had taken out his wand; he tapped the map and said, "*Mischief managed.*"

Bill swallowed. The map disappeared again. *They had charmed a parchment to reveal its secrets only with a password. Another password wiped it clean.* Bill couldn't believe it. It was an amazing piece of magic, and he was fairly certain it *wasn't* on the Hogwarts curriculum for *any* year.

"Th-thanks," Bill stuttered out, trying to walk toward the door without looking at the wardrobe where he knew Sirius Black was returning the parchment to its hiding place (its real hiding place, not in the boxes on the floor of the wardrobe, as he wanted Bill to believe). When he was on the landing again, he heard them securely bolt the door and resume the hum of conversation.

All the way down to the dungeons, he just kept marveling at the map he'd seen, still wondering what the "dots" were, and how a map could help you locate a person. Then he stopped, remembering a conversation he'd overheard at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall the previous spring.

James Potter had been talking about meeting his girlfriend in the library, and he had said, "The trouble is—there's something I need to get from a *certain place*, for which I need a *certain product* from Mr. Moony, Mr. Padfoot, Mr. Wormtail and Mr. Prongs. Trouble is, I think *Remus* has just what I need...."

Bill remembered that Sirius Black had said something about giving "it" to Remus that morning. "*He sometimes feels the need to go off alone the day before,*" he had added. "*You know. He can use it to make sure no one sneaks up on him.*" And Bill had wondered what could *possibly* keep a person from sneaking up on you? Other than an Invisibility Cloak, and he didn't think that was what Black meant. And up in the dorm, Remus Lupin had called Sirius *Padfoot*....

It must have been the map they were talking about, Bill decided. The map must—it must *show* the locations of people in the castle. As he realized this, his heartbeat increased. *They could do anything, go anywhere, with such a map*, he realized.

Since Sirius Black was evidently "Padfoot," the other names must be the codenames his friends

were using. He wondered which one was Moony, which Wormtail and which Prongs. *Prongs?* he thought. Odd, that. Why would you use a codename like *Prongs?* Wormtail wasn't much better. Moony was all right. That was probably Pettigrew, he guessed. All he ever seemed to do was moon about after Lily Evans.

He was still thinking about this when he reached the corridor outside the potions dungeon, but he stopped when he heard something very strange. A girl was yelling in the dungeon, and Bill couldn't believe what she was saying:

"You meet me under the oaks by the greenhouses in four days time, or however long it takes that potion to wear off. Don't take any more of it! Then if you want to tell me you love me and kiss me—well, we'll see! But don't you touch me until that damn potion wears off!"

Bill was even more shocked when *Lily Evans*, of all people, stormed into the corridor, her eyes blazing. He pressed himself into the wall, and she passed without his presence registering; she looked blinded by rage, so he wasn't completely surprised. What he *was* interested in was knowing *who had she been talking to?*

Then, he heard a voice in the dungeon say, "*Severus Snape and Lily Evans.*" Bill walked toward the door, seeing the boy he'd come looking for looking uncharacteristically dreamy and lovesick. When Severus Snape looked up and noticed Bill's presence, his face closed up. Bill didn't even remember their exchange precisely; he remembered later that he made up something about looking for the Potions Master, who wasn't there. When Snape told him as much, very tersely, Bill went tearing up the stairs out of the dungeon, having no idea what he would tell Alex Wood and the others. If he told them what really happened, what Lily Evans had said, they'd never believe him.

But if Severus Snape was a vampire, Lily Evans, for one, certainly didn't seem to mind.

Notes: In the Pensieve chapter of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* Moody does not yet have his magical eye, and that is supposed to be after Voldemort's fall. As such, he does not yet have his magical eye in this chapter, and no one has yet given him the name of "Mad-Eye." Earlier in *GoF*, Charlie speaks of going to work with his father and meeting Moody, so this is my version of that. (Bill does not say he met him, so I did not have anyone but Charlie actually speak to him.) Readers who are familiar with my fic *Harry Potter and the Psychic Serpent* will recognize some incidents that are mentioned in that story, although they are presented from a different point of view here. I first developed my concept of the Ministry of Magic's physical description for Chapter 30 of *Psychic Serpent*, where the reader may get Harry's perspective on it. The only other thing I have to add at this time is that I do not consider the film(s) to be canon, so please, no one else tell me that James Potter was a Seeker, not a Chaser. J.K. Rowling called him a Chaser in an online chat well before the film was released. While it is true that she approved many things for the script, I can only assume that she approved his Quidditch position changed to Seeker because, frankly, it doesn't matter one way or the other. Since I made James a Chaser back when I started writing *Psychic Serpent*, well before the film's release, a Chaser he shall remain in my universe.

— CHAPTER FIVE —

Wolf's Howl

Friday, 11 December, 1976

Lily shifted uncomfortably in the hospital bed; she was going to get bedsores at this rate. She couldn't do much but lie on her back and wait for the boneset under the bandages to work its miracles. She never had a broken bone in her life, and while she was very glad to be able to avail herself of wizarding medicine—something her mother couldn't do—she still remembered the pain of breaking the bone with a freshness she was afraid wouldn't go away for some time.

She tried to think of something more pleasant than breaking her leg. She thought of Severus. That made a slow smile spread across her face. Almost as though he had read her mind, the door to the infirmary opened and he entered, and the expression he wore on his face made her catch her breath. The intensity of feeling she saw there was humbling. *Do I deserve that?* she wondered. She tried not to think, *Do I feel the same way?* How could she not? How could she not return his feelings, when he had expressed them at such cost, and he treated her like a queen, and adored her beyond all reason?

He was swiftly at her bedside, with his long strides, and he sat, never taking his eyes from her, reaching for her slim, pale hand, holding it firmly. She gazed back at him; they were both silent for several minutes.

“What are you thinking?” she finally asked him softly.

He held her hand even more firmly, as though it was the most precious thing to him. “That day...under the oaks...”

She gave him a small smile. “I was, too.”

It had without a doubt been a time to remember, the day when the Eutharsos Potion had worn off and he had met her under the oaks that led to the greenhouses....

The huge overarching trees were every shade of scarlet and ochre; acorns and fallen leaves carpeted the sheltered path between the oaks. She started down the path nervously, feeling a chill run through her bones from a cool autumn breeze and the fact that no sun infiltrated this passage, since too many leaves still clung to the branches.

She had challenged Severus, in the Potions Dungeon. *Then if you want to tell me you love me and kiss me—well, we'll see!* Would he do it? What would she do if he did? She remembered what it was like to kiss him, to feel like she was treasured for *herself*, not just someone who could satisfy a physical craving, someone who happened to be the nearest warm body. Realizing that he might not have proclaimed his love or kissed her were it not for the potion had been crushing.

She saw from the far end of the leafy tunnel that Severus was waiting for her, idly tearing leaves apart as he waited. He sat on the ground, leaning against the trunk of an enormous tree near the end of the arboreal passage, closest to the greenhouses; his dark robes puddled around him and his skin was very pale. There wasn't a ray of sun touching him. *Don't think about the vampire thing*, she told herself as she drew nearer. A split second later, she thought, *Drat. Too late.*

Severus Snape watched her approach, his stomach in knots. He was quite certain that the Eutharsos Potion had worn off. His heart was pounding in his chest too insistently for it to still be in effect. Underneath the spreading branches he could see Lily drawing nearer, her robes billowing behind her. He couldn't take his eyes off her. *She's actually coming to meet me*, he thought, incredulous. *She's not being threatened, or coerced....*

An attack of nerves struck him forcibly and he struggled to calm himself again before she was close enough to see how shaky he was. When she was a couple of yards away, he began to stand, but before he was on his feet, she was starting to sit, and he awkwardly fell to the ground again, feeling incredibly stupid and ungainly. She was having trouble adjusting her robes, yanking at

them with an irritated frown, to prevent them from pulling down in the back and strangling her. He smiled, watching her; she seemed she might put a curse on the robes any second, her face appeared so cross. Then he tried to sober, in case she thought he was laughing at her. That was the last thing he wanted her to think. One reason he loved her was that, in spite of her brilliance and beauty, she was also incredibly *human*. He remembered holding her in his arms, and the way she had responded to his kiss, opening her mouth under his....

He wished he had dared to make more of the potion. He was afraid she would see that his hands were shaking.

She did see them, but pretended she didn't. She looked at him squarely, and with no preamble, said, "Well, Severus?"

He tried to *imagine* that he was under the influence of the potion, and the placebo effect started to help him; he moved his eyes down to her hands in her lap, and picked up one of them, twined his long fingers in between hers, raised his eyes to hers again. "Lily," he began, his voice catching. He cleared his throat, then tried beginning again. "Lily," he finally managed to say, "I meant what I said in the Potions Dungeon."

She frowned and shook her head. "Try again." But she liked the feeling of holding his hand and did not separate her fingers from his.

He cleared his throat yet again. "Lily," he said louder and firmer, deciding to get it over with. "I love you." He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips, pulling back after the quick contact, waiting for the verdict. His heart was a thunderstorm in his ears.

Lily smiled this time, glancing down at their linked hands, then back up at his face. "There, now, was that so hard? I mean, without potion?" Severus shook his head, a slight smile pulling at his mouth. "But that kiss," she went on, "wasn't much like the one from the other day, was it?" she said in a lower voice, hoping he understood her meaning. *Where's the rabid Slytherin, dying to get unsuspecting Gryffindor girls alone to have his way with them?* she wondered, thinking about a typical Slytherin stereotype. *He can really be quite sweet when he's not trying to be a typical Slytherin....*

She was feeling daring as leaned in toward him, opening her mouth a little, seeing for a split second that he was shocked. A moment later, his shock had given way to desire and pleasure, as he enfolded her in his arms and deepened the kiss, holding her head up to his, snaking his hand under her hair, stroking her neck with his long fingers in order to hear her sigh against his mouth, feel her shudder slightly with the sensation. They both broke the kiss slowly at the same time, pulling back tentatively, lips tingling. She loved the way his dark eyes shone with happiness, thinking, *I did that.*

But then his eyes became hooded once more, familiar to her from accompanying him to the hospital wing. She saw pain there, but unlike the physical pain she had sometimes seen him withstand, this seemed more like an emotional pain. Severus looked at her soberly. He had vacillated on whether to tell her, but somehow he knew that he had to be honest with her from the start or it would be no good. She *knew* what others said about him, and although she hadn't seemed to believe, and had just been kissing him deeply, he wanted to be certain she knew the truth. He wanted to be completely open with her and avoid complications later. If she didn't want to be with him after hearing what he had to say, he would just have to accept that, he thought, his breath catching. But hopefully....hopefully it wouldn't matter to her and she wouldn't leave him....

"There's something else I want to tell you, Lily. Something no one else knows. Well, no other students. I want you to know everything about me." He tried to keep his voice from going up in pitch, but it wasn't easy. He'd never in his life told anyone outside his family about this. The headmaster and matron knew, but his parents had told them, when he'd started school. Before they had been killed by over-enthusiastic Aurors who would never be brought to justice....He shook his head, trying to concentrate and simultaneously gauge whether she was likely to take it well.

Lily appeared to be a little apprehensive, but didn't say anything. She gazed at him expectantly, silently, but with an air of *judging* that he found difficult to ignore. To be fair, he wasn't sure how someone *should* look who had just kissed someone and then heard, *I want you to know everything about me.* She was bound to be apprehensive.

Severus went on. "I want you to know the truth, about why I avoid the sunlight, and eating garlic, and that potion I have to get from Madam Pomfrey..."

Lily felt bile rise in her throat, as she thought about *kissing* him; she backed up from him a little, pointing at him with a shaking hand, feeling like her heart had stopped. *Sirius was right!* She said it aloud now: "Sirius was right!" She was breathing quickly and looking like she might bolt any second.

"What?" He frowned, utterly confused; then his eyes widened as understanding dawned on him.

But she was barreling on.

"Well, avoiding sunlight, and garlic, and going to Madam Pomfrey for potion regularly—Sirius saw it, but I didn't want to!" The night of the goblet-of-blood prank, he'd been ranting about this in the Gryffindor common room. James had rolled his eyes and argued with him, stating all of the reasons why it couldn't be. "James thought he was crazy, but—you're a vampire! Oh, my god, I let you kiss me..." She touched her lips, then withdrew her hand hastily, as though her mouth had been soiled.

His jaw dropped. She actually *believed* that rot. "Is that what—" He appeared to be both angry and sad. "No, Lily. I am not a bloody vampire. Pardon the pun. I have porphyria."

"Porphyria?" She was perplexed.

"It's a liver disease. I take Porphyry Potion for it, made largely of spleenwort, with love-lies-bleeding as well. There's also a topical salve I can put on, to increase the time I can spend in the sun. Porphyria is a little like hepatitis, but it's hereditary. It's not usually found in wizard bloodlines, but I had a Muggle great-great-grandfather or something like that, and he had it." He explained to her then about the photophobia, or sun-sensitivity, and his sensitivity to the alium bulb and all related bulbs, which meant he had to avoid onions and garlic. She correctly surmised that since it was a liver disease, it affects his blood.

"Yes. So, at one time, it was thought that people with porphyria needed other people's blood. Hence the whole idea that those suffering from it were vampires."

She was confused again. "But—there are real vampires, aren't there?"

"Oh, yes, and they can't go out in the sun either. And I do have a reflection—not that I care much for it..." She smiled at his modesty; *she* liked his appearance just fine. "But they really do drink blood. People with porphyria don't, although it was assumed that they did—that we did—for centuries. And vampires are only repelled by garlic; I have a bad reaction to anything related to alium—" He explained that he had bad reactions especially to elephant garlic and shallots, and that the sun made him appear jaundiced and gave him blisters, since he couldn't process its nutrients, like most fair-skinned people. "It's a chronic, incurable disease, both in the wizarding world and the Muggle world. It can be treated, managed, but there's no cure, and if I have children, there's an excellent chance they'll inherit it."

Lily looked at him silently, pityingly. Severus saw this and tried not to let his anger overwhelm him. Keeping his voice very even, he said, "Don't look at me that way, Lily. Don't pity me. That's not why I told you. I just thought you should know." He wished she would stop looking at him that way, with that sad, pitying expression....

"Oh, Severus," she said at last, linking her arm through his, putting her head on his shoulder. He smiled down at her; not a huge smile, but an unsure pulling at the corners of his mouth. He wasn't completely convinced that she wasn't still feeling sorry for him. But then she lifted her head and brushed her lips against his, and he parted his lips and tentatively flicked his tongue against her teeth, forgetting everything else as he drew her face to his for another kiss. This kiss wasn't as deep as the earlier one, but it had an element of honesty to it that the earlier one had lacked. *She knew*. She knew all about him and she hadn't turned and fled. Then Lily curled up next to him, her head on his chest, while he felt her warm weight against him and stroked her hair and wondered how he had gotten this lucky....

"What are you smiling about?" he asked her, smiling a little himself as he held her hand and marveled at the beautiful juxtaposition of her deep red hair on the crisp white hospital linen. She squeezed his hand and her eyes twinkled mischievously.

"I was thinking how I'd like to kiss you right now," she said boldly. He tensed up, as he usually did when she said anything similar. He was not very verbal about this sort of thing, she had found. However—she was trying to have their physical relationship go more slowly than it had between her and Remus, and all they had done thus far was some snogging. Even groping had been kept to a minimum. She dreaded him finding out how she had broken her leg....

The door to the infirmary opened again and James and Bonnie entered. Severus abruptly withdrew his hand from hers and stood up awkwardly, knocking his chair over, then fumbling to right it.

"Um, so, those are the chapters you are expected to read for Potions. I promised the Potions Master I would tell you and I have," he said to her, his voice's crisp businesslike air only marred by a brief quaver.

He turned and practically walked right into James Potter and Bonita Manetti. He didn't acknowledge them at all. They might have been merely pieces of furniture he was trying to avoid walking into. Both James and Bonnie frowned after him as he slammed the door of the infirmary on his way out. When they turned back to Lily, she forced herself to smile, wishing she could have had more time with Severus. On the other hand, it was also nerve-wracking to be with him, since they

were in an early awkward phase of their relationship, and were not telling people that they were seeing each other. It had been his idea; he was afraid her Gryffindor friends would make trouble. She'd insisted that she wasn't ashamed of him, but he hadn't budged. Severus, she had quickly discovered, could be *very* stubborn. Visiting with Bonnie and James, her friends, would be a bit more relaxing, all told.

They soon had her laughing about Herbology mishaps and other things; James didn't actually talk much, but let the girls chatter. He found himself glancing furtively back and forth between the two of them.

James knew how Lily had broken her leg.

The thought of it made his mouth go dry. Seeing her now, lying in the bed wearing the hospital smock....He tried to focus on Bonnie, instead, pretty Bonnie, with her wide smile and sparkling eyes, her perfect small nose and heart-shaped face, which had endearing dimples when she smiled....but somehow his eyes kept going back to Lily....

He knew that she was sleeping with Remus. He couldn't understand why they weren't a public couple, why it just seemed to be—shagging. And now—now was she interested in *Snape*? Sirius insisted this was true; James wasn't so sure. If they were indeed a couple, they behaved very oddly together. But ever since he'd found out about Lily and Remus, he'd had a very difficult time thinking of her in the same way, in a *sisterly* way. He remembered how she had given herself over to passion, when he had found her and Remus in the common room almost a year earlier. She had seemed like a different person. A person who crept into his dreams far too often these days, instead of the person who belonged there, his girlfriend, Bonnie....

"Don't you think so, James?" Bonnie looked at him expectantly.

"Huh? What?" he sputtered. "Oh, um, of course. Whatever you say, Bonnie."

Both girls looked at each other, their eyes merry, before bursting into hysterical laughter. "You haven't any idea what Bonnie said, do you James?" Lily said, almost breathless.

He reddened and shook his head. "Sorry. I'm knackered." It wasn't a complete lie; it was just far in advance. The full moon would be rising when the sun set, and he and the others would be accompanying Remus. In the morning he *would* be completely exhausted. "I think I might go have a lie-down before dinner. I—I hope you'll excuse me Lily. I really did want to visit with you—"

She smiled indulgently; he was so flustered. It was quite endearing, really, Lily thought. James had never quite lost the air of a lost eleven-year-old, despite the fact that he could also exert a surprising authority at times, now that he was in his second year as a prefect. When he was caught daydreaming, he turned bright red. Lily suspected he'd been thinking of Bonnie. *They make such a nice couple*, she thought. Then she sighed inwardly. *No one will ever think that about me and Severus.*

Bonnie took his hand as he stood. "Don't worry. I'll keep Lily company. You go rest," she told him, as he leaned down to give her a peck on the cheek. He thought for a moment of kissing her on the lips, but he had a feeling that she didn't want to be that demonstrative in front of someone else. He left the infirmary and stood in the corridor, leaning heavily against the door, hearing the murmur of the girls' voices again. *Bonnie is my girlfriend*, he reminded himself. *Sirius already tried to make an incompetent pass at Lily, and Peter is always fawning over her, and she's actually sleeping with Remus. Don't get any stupid ideas about a girl who thinks of you as a brother.*

He strode through the corridors, trying to get his mind off Lily, but it was difficult, since he was soon going to be wandering the Forbidden Forest with her lover. James frowned, trying to figure out how he felt about Remus. Deep down, although he envied him a bit, he didn't begrudge him a little happiness. He just wished—he didn't know what he wished. He wished that he and Bonnie hadn't finally slept together on Halloween, that was something he knew he wished. It had been an unmitigated disaster. Awkwardness personified. He hadn't even finished, but lied about it, and when he tried to do more for her (she seemed to be *incredibly* disappointed, but denied it) she had been appalled, asking him, *What on earth are you doing?* and scuttling away from his hands and mouth. When he'd tried to tell her (badly, as he'd never done it, only heard about it), she was *aghast*, and he knew then that he would not be seeing her in the throes of passion that night.

They had attempted to have sex again a few weeks later, with a little more success (on James' part) but she still wouldn't let him help her to completion. She insisted it was fine, *she* was fine, and said something vague about it being all for *him*, anyway. He hated her feeling that way, as though it were some obligation on her part, something she'd decided to do because she thought he expected it. He hoped he'd never given her that impression. Perhaps some other girls had. On the whole, neither time had been very *emotionally* satisfying. After each encounter, they'd cuddled and whispered endearments to each other, but it all felt rather empty, somehow. The second time especially, feeling sated and knowing she wasn't, he couldn't help thinking that Lily wouldn't be like

that, Lily had a passion and a fire in her that—

He shook himself as he walked. He was doing it again. *Remus and Lily. Don't think about Remus and Lily. Oh, bugger, I'm thinking about Remus and Lily.* It also didn't help that Sirius frequently returned to Gryffindor Tower in the middle of the night after romantic liaisons, wanting to regale the other boys with every detail of his latest conquest. Sirius couldn't be said to have a girlfriend, strictly speaking, but he certainly didn't lack for girls queuing up to compete for the privilege. James had let him think his relationship with Bonnie had gone further than it had before they'd actually slept together the first time (or attempted to sleep together), in order to stop Sirius from ribbing him mercilessly. He hadn't felt ready yet. *A bloke's allowed to take these things slowly if he wants to*, he had thought. Now he wished he'd taken it even slower.

In the infirmary, Bonnie bade Lily goodbye and left. When the other girl was gone, Lily let her face relax; it almost hurt from smiling so much. She peeked under the sheet to peek at her leg. She wished she hadn't given in and gone down to the common room the night before....but she hadn't met him the week after kissing Severus under the oaks, and she hadn't met him the month after that, either, feeling very bad for him when she saw the outward signs of his suffering. The first time, he had asked her the next day whether she was feeling well, and she said she'd been exceptionally tired the night before. He nodded, but did not speak of it again. The following month, two days afterward, he asked her whether she was angry with him. She denied it, and didn't mention the way in which she'd been providing him with "friendly" help. He didn't mention it either.

And then, the previous day, all day, his face had been grey and dripping with sweat, his eyes had been wide and pained, with that red glint in them, and she started to feel incredibly guilty. She knew she could give him relief, but she still loved him, and being with him when she couldn't tell him how she felt was excruciating. She knew he would give her as much physical pleasure as she gave him, but she wanted to accompany that with a proclamation of her feelings. She was afraid that if they went on this way she couldn't help but blurt it out eventually, which would be incredibly awkward, as she didn't return her feelings. And yet—she positively *ached* from not being able to tell him. And she also felt guilty for meeting with Severus, for kissing him when she wasn't completely certain her feelings for him were as strong as they were for Remus. She did *have* feelings for Severus, but—

The door to the infirmary opened once more and she looked up, surprised. It was Remus. His face was ashen. He walked over to her nervously; she was blushing deeply, from seeing him right after thinking about him, but he interpreted this as anger. As far as he could tell, he was probably the last person she wanted to see. She didn't exactly have a welcoming expression on her face, he thought. When he stood beside her bed, he twisted his robes in his fingers nervously.

"I know I'm the last person you want to see right now, Lily," he said, his voice shaking. Her eyes were very round.

No, she thought. *Unfortunately, that's only partially true...*

"Don't be silly, Remus," she answered, her voice also shaking. "You didn't mean to hurt me."

"But I broke your leg!"

"Sssh!" she said quickly, hushing him, glancing toward Madam Pomfrey's office, lest she hear him. "I told Madam Pomfrey I fell down the stairs, remember?"

"But-but—" Remus said, sinking into a chair by her bedside and then bending over, his face buried in the sheets and blankets on her bed. She tentatively touched his head, then laced her fingers through his hair soothingly, her heart turning over.

"Don't, Remus," she whispered as his shoulders hunched and he cried silently. "I'll be fine, really," she murmured.

She wondered now whether the fact that she hadn't met him since September had meant there was a kind of dammed up river of passion which had burst when she'd come into the common room the night before. He'd been about to put on the Invisibility Cloak and leave, but stood near the portrait hole, still holding its silvery folds, and the moment he saw her enter the room his eyes had dilated and she had felt like he was a hunter and she the prey. Yet, it was a delicious feeling; she'd almost forgotten what this was like, being with Remus. She'd tried to tell herself that she was moving on, with Severus, that Remus had never thought of her as anything more than a helpful friend. She knew she needed to get over him, to stop thinking he would ever proclaim his love, and sleeping with him was certainly *not* going to help. She had quite purposefully *not* met him when she'd seen his symptoms flare up during the previous two months, she reminded herself. She had promised herself that she was not going to get caught up in him again, not when he didn't love her....

All of that went flying out the window the moment he strode across the room and took her in his arms. She immediately responded, pulling him to her, and they didn't even remember to cover

themselves with the Invisibility Cloak until they were both completely unclothed. None of their other encounters had been quite so fervent, even when he'd bitten her. Then, near the end, when he was very close, he'd pulled her legs around his waist more thoroughly, but the way he'd pulled her left leg had made her cry out, and then he realized, in his hazy lust-filled stupor, that there had been a report like a gunshot, and that her leg was no longer behaving as it should. Her eyes were black with pain and she bit her lip, moaning in her throat not with passion, but with agony.

"I think," she had finally whispered with a rasp in her voice, tears running down into her hair, "m-my leg is b-broken...."

He had separated from her, his stomach clenching, his brain crying, *No! I've hurt her again!* He stared at her for what seemed an eternity, before coming to his senses and taking action. He pulled his wand from the pile of clothes and waved it over her leg, saying shakily, "*Ferula.*" A splint and bandages now wrapped her leg, so that it wasn't flopping awkwardly about. She still needed to see Madam Pomfrey though, he thought. *Stupid! So stupid!* he berated himself silently.

He pulled on his boxers and helped Lily pull her nightdress over her head so she was covered. They were no longer under the cloak. Remus reached for it when he heard footsteps on the stairs from the boys' dorms, but too late; James was entering the room, his wand out, his hair standing on end and his glasses hooked over only one ear. He hadn't pulled his dressing gown on over his too-short pajamas and he was very pale. When he saw them, Lily blushed deeply, wishing she could flee up the stairs to the girls' dorm, like the other time James had found them together. He walked toward them, frowning.

"I-I heard a noise--"

He looked back and forth between Remus and Lily, the evidence of what they'd been doing quite plain. Remus was still wearing only his underwear, and Lily only wore her nightdress. She hadn't tried to pull her knickers on over the splint; they lay on the floor nearby, next to her dressing gown, which she also wished she was wearing, as her nightdress was rather thin and James seemed to be looking at it very intently, making her blush persist.

"Lily-Lily broke her leg," Remus said, pulling on his trousers clumsily, as though the break had occurred spontaneously and had nothing to do with the sexual activity in which they'd obviously been engaged.

James' eyes widened. "*What?*" he whispered. He immediately went on his knees next to her. She didn't know whether to feel grateful for his concern or incredibly embarrassed that he knew they'd been shagging. It didn't help that her knickers were right next to his knee.

He sat her up and gently helped her put her arms into her dressing gown sleeves, carefully rolling her side to side in order to wrap it around her and tie the belt. He noticed the knickers then, his mouth working soundlessly, unsure what to do about this. She grimaced and reached out for them, hurriedly stuffing them into her dressing gown pocket, her face feeling very hot. He put his hand on her brow; it felt icy against her skin.

"You're burning up," he said. "You rest while I talk to Remus about the best way to get you to the hospital wing, all right?"

She nodded, her eyes very wide still; she felt oddly bereft when he left her side to go speak to Remus, who had been pacing the floor about ten feet away, wringing his hands, looking dreadful.

"Finish getting dressed," James said sharply, using what Remus thought of as his prefect's voice. His friend quickly donned the rest of his clothes again. "All right. We need to get her to the hospital wing," he said, switching to a whisper now so Lily wouldn't think him rude for speaking about her in the third person. "Can you carry her alone, do you think?" James knew that Remus was preternaturally strong because of his lycanthropy, but he was shaking and perspiring, there was a yellow cast to his skin and the red glint in his eyes was constant instead of appearing as an occasional flash. Remus shook his head vigorously. James nodded. "I could do it if you like. If I stun her, there's a spell I can use to transport an unconscious person--except I'd rather not put her through that right now if we can do it some other way. She's already had one shock to her system. A stunner wouldn't be the best idea. If she actually blacks out from the pain, *then* I can use the spell--"

"I-I can't carry her alone," Remus said croakily; James had to strain to hear him. "Not-not the way I am right now. Not enough control. What with it being the eve of the full moon....But I might be able to do it with you." James was already nodding in understanding.

"Right. We could make a kind of chair for her, with our arms, and go that way," he said quietly, trying to be clearheaded, trying to be the strong one. "And we have to have our story straight, too, before we leave, both for Pomfrey and in case we run into Filch or any professors."

"What d-do you mean?" Remus seemed to be having trouble speaking now, and James hoped he wasn't going to collapse. They were standing very close together, and Remus seemed to be *smelling*

him, breathing in his essence. James stepped back a few inches and cleared his throat.

"I mean—the professors know you're a werewolf, but they can't know that you had anything to do with the injury. It wouldn't look good for you. Even though you didn't bite someone....Understand? We'll say—we'll say Lily thought she heard someone in the common room and she was drowsy and stumbled when she was coming down. She broke her leg falling down the stairs. Agreed? We need to make sure none of us say the word 'werewolf'."

"Ssssh!" Remus said suddenly, even though James' voice hadn't risen above a whisper, to avoid disturbing Lily, who was lying on the floor still, waiting. James frowned at him.

"Why are you—? Oh, no. Surely she—oh, god, Remus, don't tell me—" But he saw the expression in his friend's eyes and knew immediately. "She doesn't *know*?" he hissed. He suddenly felt like throttling Remus, but he restrained himself, as he knew his friend was already berating himself for breaking Lily's leg.

"H-hullo?" Lily's strained voice floated to them from the corner where she was waiting. "Are—are we going soon?"

James glaring at Remus, they returned to Lily and slid their arms under her, locking their hands together, then lifting her at the same time, while her warm weight tested their bond. James found that his face was in her hair as they walked toward the portrait hole and he could see the freckles across her nose very clearly. She turned her head suddenly and tried to kiss him on the cheek, but missed and came very close to the left corner of his mouth.

"Thank you, James," she said simply. He reddened and hastened to get her out into the corridor and to the hospital wing. It seemed to take forever. They discussed the falling-down-the-stairs story on the way there, quietly, should they be overheard by Filch or anyone else. However, they met no one on the way and Lily was soon being clucked over by Madam Pomfrey, who praised Remus' splint and started bustling about, getting Lily a boneset and some bandages. The two boys stayed while she worked, and then Madam Pomfrey took one look at their weary faces, the bags under their eyes, and offered some of the empty beds in the infirmary to them, so they wouldn't need to go all the way back to Gryffindor Tower to get some sleep.

James climbed gratefully into a bed near Lily's, but Remus nervously backed up from them. "No," he'd rasped. "I—I can't bear it—" And he bolted from the infirmary while the three who remained exchanged puzzled glances. Lily thought his guilt might be overwhelming him, and later, as they talked to each other before falling asleep, James said as much.

She lifted Remus' face to her now. "I'm fine, Remus. Please stop this. Just—sit with me for a while. Talk to me. We don't talk enough any more. I'd—I'd rather not think about last night. Distract me. Talk to me about other things."

What she most wanted to do was to hear him say he loved her, and tell him the same thing, but instead she listened to his halting words, prompting him occasionally, and eventually, they were conversing naturally again, in a way she missed. She watched his face as he spoke, the grey lock of hair bobbing above his brow, that dimple he had only in the left cheek when he smiled or laughed....

She hadn't noticed how dark it was getting; now that the solstice was nearing, there was very little daylight at all between sunrise and sunset; the sun went down when classes were barely over for the day, and before the evening meal. Suddenly, the infirmary door flew open. Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew stood there, panting as though they'd been running.

"There you are!" Sirius cried, striding into the room, while Peter straggled behind. "You missed class!" Remus turned, surprised, then stared out of the infirmary windows, his eyes widening.

"Bloody hell," Remus breathed when he saw how low in the sky the sun was. Lily frowned.

"Yeah, there *will* be bloody hell to pay if you don't come with us *right now*," Sirius said threateningly. Lily crossed her arms.

"Sirius Black! How dare you speak to him that way! We were talking! You're being *very* rude!" She glared at him.

Sirius drew his lips into a line. "Better for me to be rude than for you to wind up—"

"So!" Peter cried suddenly, stepping in front of Sirius and coming forward to drag on Remus' arm. "We'll have to come visit you tomorrow morning, Lily. So sorry we didn't come today. *Aren't* we, Sirius?"

Remus let himself be dragged away from the bed by Peter Pettigrew, of all people. Lily watched them, perplexed. "But—what on earth—?" she began.

"Dinner!" Peter said suddenly, his eyes very round. "Can't have Remus being late for dinner! Got to run! It's getting late!" He glared pointedly at Remus. "*Very, very, very late!*"

Remus nodded vigorously. "Yes, Lily. Quite. I—I have to go. Thanks for coming to get me, mates," he said in a voice that had become strangely throaty. Lily was still frowning.

"Remus didn't say anything about being hungry. And it isn't time for dinner yet. You could have let him stay for a *few* more—"

Sirius started to say, "Oh, you don't want to see him once he realizes how hungry he really *is*—"

Peter *hit* Sirius in the ribs with the back of his hand, making a rather loud sound, so Lily knew it had been painful. She was completely shocked; Peter hitting Sirius? And yet—Sirius didn't retaliate, but seemed to think he'd been justifiably chastised. Lily's head was swimming. The boys were behaving *very* strangely. As they hurried toward the infirmary door, it suddenly swung open, causing all three of them to cry out, "*Aaaaah!*" in surprise and stumble into the newcomer.

Standing in the doorway was Severus Snape. He was holding a tray of food—but not for long. The three Gryffindors barreled into him and in seconds the tray was flying through the air and food and dishes and other tableware were airborne as well. Much of the food—what didn't wind up on the floor—eventually landed on Snape.

Lily had never heard swearing quite like what came out of Severus' mouth now. He called the Gryffindors every vile, profane name he could think of. He damned their great-great-great-grandchildren to hell. He insulted their ancestors for five generations back. They were, according to him, worse than all of the Squibs and Muggles put together. He called into question the existence or effectiveness of their brains, their penises, and their testicles (not in that order). He suggested that much of what he had been carrying on the tray would fit very nicely in their various bodily orifices (one in particular), and that the items would, in fact, soon be taking up residence there.

Sirius, Peter and Remus heard none of it.

The moment they had collided with Severus Snape, they were bolting out of the infirmary, and Lily could hear their footsteps receding along the corridor. Severus continued to rant angrily, shaking his fist after them. Breathing heavily, anger still roiling through him, he met Lily's gaze, finding her staring at him with wide eyes.

"Er," he said uncertainly, painfully aware of the awkwardness of losing his temper to such an extreme in front of the girl with whom he was in love and whose affections he daily doubted he deserved. Surely she would think him a monster now, for treating her friends in such a manner. However, he saw after his initial panic that her eyes were actually shining with amusement and a slight smile was pulling at her mouth. She reached into the drawer of the table next to her bed for her wand; waving it at the mess, she said calmly, "*Ordo ex chaos,*" and before he knew what was happening, the tray had leapt into his hands again, and the food and dishes, including a pitcher of pumpkin juice, had returned to their original places. He looked at her, unable to help smiling; was it any wonder he was in love with her? She could sit there and listen to him condemn her friends (while covered in pumpkin juice and mashed potatoes, no less, which was hardly dignified) and still smile at him, then recite a simple spell (the *perfect* spell) to rectify the situation.

He walked to her bed slowly, afraid now that he would do something stupid like trip over his own feet and spill it all again. "I thought you might like your tea early, Lily. I asked Professor McGonagall permission to get you some food from the kitchens before the rest of the school went down for their meal. She—she seemed to think it odd, but she took me to the kitchens herself. Perhaps she thought I was going to get up to some mischief, add a potion to the food going to the Gryffindor table or something." He tried not to grin, but it was very difficult. He sobered again and continued, "So, here you are. And—and I can stay to keep you company, if you like. There's enough for two of us. I—I've seen what you like to eat, so I thought you might like some shepherd's pie. That's what I brought." Then he realized that that sounded like he'd been spying on her. *Now she'll order me out of her sight,* he thought gloomily, wishing he'd said that Professor McGonagall had suggested the shepherd's pie. But she sat up straighter in the bed and smiled at him.

"That's lovely, Severus. I adore the Hogwarts shepherd's pie. That's so considerate of you. Do sit." He released his breath, relief flooding him, as he rested the tray on the bed and sat in the chair vacated by Remus Lupin. "I used to hate shepherd's pie before Hogwarts. My mum's was terrible, but my dad and sister and I never dared tell her that we didn't like it...." Her eyes were sad then, and he remembered her mother's situation. He nodded.

"Right. I had a row with my dad the day before he and my mum were killed, and I still wish that we could have—" Then he stopped. *Oh, could we try to be more tactless, Severus?* he scolded himself, realizing what he'd said. "Oh, I'm sorry Lily. I didn't mean that your mum—"

She sniffled and wiped her eyes quickly. "No, that's all right, Severus. I know just what you mean. That's—that's why we never said anything, you know? We never know when we—we might be forced to say goodbye to her. But at least—at least we *know* that's a danger," she said softly, impatiently pushing her hair behind her ears, clearly trying to master her emotions again. "You had no warning. Nor James. So sudden....It's just not fair." She put one hand over his and squeezed. He turned his palm upward under her grasp and squeezed back.

"Why—why don't we eat, Lily?" he said quietly, trying to forget what had occurred when he'd entered the infirmary. She nodded and soon they were unable to converse for their full mouths. At length, though, Lily swallowed a mouthful of mashed potatoes and said, "You did rather lose it there, you know. Not that I blame you. And I thought *I* had a temper."

Severus was surprised. He choked down his mouthful of food. "Well—that's another symptom of porphyria. It—it makes one rather tetchy at times. I wonder sometimes how different my personality would be if I didn't have this ruddy disease."

She grinned. Holding her goblet, about to take a sip, she said merrily, "You certainly wouldn't be the Severus Snape we all know and love!" Right afterward, she put the goblet to her lips, but she almost spit out her pumpkin juice when she saw the expression on Severus' face. *I said love*. She managed to swallow the liquid without choking, but only just. *I didn't say that I loved him*, she thought. But it came close. She still wasn't truly certain of her feelings for him, and hadn't returned his proclamation of love. He either hadn't noticed, reckoning that her actions spoke louder than her words (two months of occasional furtive snogging had to count for something), or he was giving her time to work up to saying the same words he had.

"Er," she said uncertainly, trying to salvage the situation. Severus looked like he could have been knocked over with a feather. "I certainly don't think Sirius would recognize you. Or the other lads in Gryffindor. You wouldn't want to put them into shock, now would you?" She hoped he couldn't tell that her smile was forced now.

His eyes narrowed as he turned to glance back at the door, and his expression didn't change when he turned to Lily. "Why were they bolting out of here?" he asked, although it almost sounded like a rhetorical question.

Even though he may not have been expecting an answer, Lily replied, "Dinner, they said, even though that's not for a couple of hours. Sirius and Peter seemed very concerned that Remus might be hungry. Couldn't wait another moment to drag him out of here."

Then she realized that she shouldn't have said that; now it was obvious that Remus had been visiting her alone and Sirius and Peter had arrived suddenly just to retrieve him from the infirmary. But oddly, Severus didn't seem to notice this small detail. He stared into space, his eyes narrowed still.

"What are they *really* up to, do you think?" he said in a musing voice, again almost as though he didn't expect an answer.

Lily sighed. "Wouldn't I like to know! Sometimes—" Her eyes moved toward Madam Pomfrey's office. "Sometimes," she whispered, "they're out of the dorm *all night*. James, too. Perhaps that's what they're doing tonight. But—but I don't want to get them into trouble. You won't report this, will you Severus?" She took his hand in hers and raised her eyebrows.

He gazed at her, unable to deny her anything.

"Of course not, Lily. Of course not."

* * * * *

The Gryffindor common room was a boisterous place just after the last class of the day; students were tired of the drudgery of school work and welcomed a respite in the form of Exploding Snap, chess, gobstones, or just plain pointless chatter. Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew stood in the open portrait hole; Remus Lupin leaned against the side of the hole, looking unwell. Sirius and Peter waved their arms, trying to get James Potter's attention. James was near the fireplace, immersed in a conversation with another member of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, oblivious to his friends' panic.

Suddenly, the boy to whom he was speaking noticed Sirius' waving arms. "I think they're trying to get your attention," he said, gesturing with his head toward the portrait hole. James' turned his head, finally seeing Sirius, Peter and Remus. Swallowing, he said abruptly, "Thank you. I—I need to go now." He tried not to run to the doorway, walking instead in a loping, ungainly gait which was clearly trying *not* to be a run.

None of them noticed the interest that the second-year boys took in the departure of the sixth year boys. They were sitting at a table near the windows, supposed to be doing revision, but actually playing Exploding Snap. Alex Wood raised his eyebrows at Bill Weasley, sitting across from him, and nudged Orville Simpson with his elbow. Perry Booth was to Bill's right, and Rembert Leonard was to Booth's right. They noticed Wood's interest in the older boys and when Alex leaned toward Bill and whispered, "What do you suppose *that* was about?" it was Booth who answered.

"I think they're going down to the Forbidden Forest," he said urgently, also whispering. "I heard Sirius Black talking about it yesterday. Sometimes they sneak out and spend *all night* in the forest."

Orville scowled. "Don't be stupid. No one could spend all night in the forest and live to tell

about it. Especially not tonight. There're werewolves in there, and there's a full moon tonight. Plus there're other things in there. Not as bad as werewolves, but still....They'd have to be *mad*."

Leonard's eyes widened at the mention of werewolves. "Maybe they're werewolf *hunters!* Maybe they're going to *kill* the werewolves!"

"Or die trying," Booth added ominously.

"Sssh!" Bill said suddenly; Leonard and Booth had become far too noisy. "Let's take this conversation elsewhere," he said to the other boys, rising in what he thought was a nonchalant manner. He sauntered to the portrait hole, occasionally checking to see whether any older students, especially prefects, were still busy or noticing that the second-year boys were all leaving together.

Once in the corridor, they saw flickering shadows some distance ahead of them, round a corner, and hung back for a moment, worried that the older boys might realize they were being followed. When the shadows were no longer visible, they moved, occasionally stopping if they drew too close to the other group.

James took in Remus' appearance, concerned, and very upset with himself for forgetting the time. Remus was loping along, unable to walk with a completely human gait now, and James worried that he might transform too soon. They had to at least get him out of the castle so that the three of them could transfigure themselves without anyone seeing. They could transfigure within the castle if they had to, especially if it came down to a choice between letting Remus hurt someone and risking having it known that they were illegal Animagi. But they would rather not have it come to that.

James grabbed Remus' arm when he paused for a moment and sniffed the air.

"Come *on!* Don't stop!" James said impatiently, even though they were running late because they'd had to hunt him down.

"Someone's following us," Remus said quietly. "Someone who smells like the Gryffindor common room. More than one."

"So someone from Gryffindor is going down to the library or something. So what?" Sirius said impatiently. "We have to get you outside *now*."

Remus let them hustle him down the stairs, down down down, until they were finally in the entrance hall. And then they were out on the grounds and bolting for the safe haven of the Whomping Willow. Remus was practically running on all fours now, and he was becoming hairier and hairier. He felt positively feral, although he was still technically in his human form. Every inch of his skin seemed to bristle with animal instinct, instincts which would allow him to hunt down his prey, to outsmart it and corner it, even to toy with it before killing....He was acutely aware of the scents his friends were giving off, scents of poorly-masked fear, scents which made his mouth water as he thought of sinking his teeth into human flesh—

No. I am still a man. I am not a beast—yet.

He tore for the Whomping Willow as though his life—and the lives of his friends—depended on it.

It did.

Outside, in the night air, there were numerous smells that might mask the scent of five twelve-year-old boys also exiting the castle, their breaths appearing as small grey clouds as they shivered without cloaks in the December evening.

They saw the older boys running toward the infamous willow tree, and furtively hurried after them, crouching behind shrubbery and tree trunks on the way, should the other boys look back. There was still a very faint light in the western sky and no moon yet to illumine their way. Only the evening star shone in the sky so far, and the silhouettes of the sixth-year boys were difficult to make out in the blue shadows of twilight.

When they were about twenty feet away, the wild, flailing branches of the tree were hard to distinguish from the gesticulations of the sixth-years. When they had come to within twelve feet, hidden in the shrubbery, they suddenly saw the branches freeze. Bill grasped Alex's arm painfully; Alex froze and turned to Bill, but Bill couldn't see his expression in the dark. In the short time they'd been out of the castle, the sun had set completely and the blue velvet sky was almost completely unrelieved by any light, save for the pinprick of bright light that was Venus, plus a few smaller, lesser stars whose names Bill might know were he ever to remain conscious in Astronomy class.

Cautiously, they began moving again, trying not to step on any twigs or make any kind of sound. Bill had never seen the Whomping Willow still like this. Had one of the sixth-years done that? If so, how?

He looked up and gasped. The sixth-years were gone. "Where'd they go?" he asked Alex urgently. Alex shrugged.

"Were you watching?" Bill asked Orville, who shook his head.

"I was," Booth said, sounding smug. "It looked like they went *into* the tree. Into the roots, actually. Like going into a tunnel."

They all stood with their own roots firmly attached to the soil, all of them loath to move closer. It started to become brighter as the moon rose, full and round, and then, from the direction of the Whomping Willow, they heard an unearthly cry. Someone was in an enormous amount of pain. It—it didn't sound quite *human*. Then they heard similar cries coming from the forest. There were two or three all told. Bill's heart was hammering painfully in his chest.

And then—then they heard it.

"*Aaa-rooooooo!*"

A wolf's cry emanated from the willow, reverberating through its trunk and carrying on the chill night air. An answering cry went up from the forest, one, two, three of them, and, realizing what this meant, Bill said to the other boys, "I think we should get inside *now!*"

He didn't need to tell them twice; in seconds, all five boys were running flat-out back to the castle, struggling to get enough air from the freezing stuff that was filling their lungs. When they had opened the heavy front doors and were safely back in the entrance hall, leaning against the closed door and trying to catch their breaths, they all looked at each other with wild eyes, not saying anything, but clearly all thinking the same thing.

They went into the Great Hall to wait for the meal, still mute, not one of them willing to voice their fears.

Are we living with a werewolf? Bill wondered, examining the other boys' faces, unsure whether they'd think him mad for even suggesting this. Then he remembered that the other sixth-year boys had all gone into the willow together. *Are we living with four werewolves?* was his next thought, which made his heart practically skip a beat.

When the evening meal finally began, he looked up at the head table, at the headmaster. Would the headmaster let a werewolf into the school? He thought about what he knew concerning Albus Dumbledore. He couldn't imagine him keeping anyone out. If one of the sixth-years was a werewolf—or all of them—they were at least making an effort to be away from humans during the full moon. Bill ate his meal with his head down, listening carefully for snippets of conversation from others, but no one at the Gryffindor table was discussing the sixth-years, or even wondering why they weren't in the Great Hall. The one person who might take notice—Lily Evans—also was not present, but he knew it was because she was in the hospital wing with a broken leg.

As he prepared for bed that night, Bill went to the dormitory window and looked out over the grounds. The moon floated over the forest, silvering the treetops. Opening the leaded window and letting a blast of night air into the round tower room, he heard, carried clearly on the wind, something he had heard before but never really thought about: the sound of wolves howling. The wolves walked tonight in the forest, where a human would either become food or another werewolf. Bill closed the window again, shivering, but not from the cold. He climbed into his four-poster and closed the hangings.

But as he lay there, failing to sleep for hours on end, he was certain that, even with the window closed, he could still hear the lonely sound of a wolf's howl.

And each time, the howl was answered three-fold.

* * * * *

Saturday, 12 December, 1976

As the sun was rising, Sirius, James, Peter and Remus dragged themselves to the front door of the castle and opened it, staggering into the entrance hall. They threw themselves onto the marble stairs, breathing heavily. It had been an exhausting night; they had remained in the Shrieking Shack instead of wandering the grounds or the forest. Sirius had been trying to talk the others into running free (which is what Bill had overheard), but their hasty exit from the castle had meant that none of them had cloaks with them—they'd forgotten. The three Animagi were equipped for staying out in the cold, in their animal forms, but once he turned into a human again, Remus would be shivering and cold, unprotected by fur.

James looked at Remus, who was quite torn up, despite the fact that the wounds were already starting to heal. Still, he would need some additional help from Madam Pomfrey in order not to look like he'd been through a war—which was exactly what he *had* been through. He had been strangely predatory the previous evening, more than usual, struggling, in his wolf form, to get out of the tunnel almost as soon as they were under the willow. It was highly unlikely that he would be able to get through the flailing tree branches, but just in case, James had gouged him with his antlers, little Peter, as a rat, had bitten his wolf's tail, and Sirius had landed a vicious bite on his

flank which had finally made Remus turn and retaliate against his friends, chasing them down the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack and away from the tree roots. In his stag form, James had a bad feeling that Remus was particularly agitated because he'd been right about someone following them. He feared that there were humans wandering the grounds, and Remus could smell them. In his stag form, he had a kind of sixth sense when humans were around, and it was going off like mad before they all fled and ran for the shack. It was of utmost importance that Remus not escape the tunnel; the three of them had never actually had to stop Remus from attacking a human in human form. While they assumed, in theory, that they would be able to do this as Animagi, they also hoped that this theory would never be put to the test.

As if in retaliation for costing him a meal, Remus spent hours on end attacking the three of them, and then biting and scratching himself when he grew tired of that, before beginning another onslaught on his friends. They were all a bit bloodied, although Peter less so than the other boys (as a rat, he made a much smaller target for Remus than James and Sirius). He stood first and made to go up the stairs, not speaking, just groaning with every move he made. Sirius also rose creakily, saying simply, "I could use a shower." He trudged up the stairs after Peter.

When they were gone, James finally felt like he could move. He looked at Remus and said, "Do you want help getting up to the hospital wing?" The werewolf raised haunted eyes and nodded mutely, and soon the two boys were climbing the stairs, Remus' arm over James' shoulder. At the door to the infirmary, James said, "I think I'll go have a shower, too. I shouldn't go in with you probably. Pomfrey—she'll think we were out together."

"We were," Remus whispered, glad that the first night of the full moon was over; he thought he'd go mad from being so close to James when they were helping Lily. He was especially afraid that he'd attack his friend when he came stumbling into the common room after his and Lily's love-making had been interrupted by his breaking Lily's leg. He was still very keyed up, hadn't obtained his release, and when James was standing so close to him—

But that was then. Why was it so difficult for him to stand close to James *now*? He had learned, over the years, not to comment on the way other people smelled in the morning; they couldn't help it, not before showering, and they had no idea how very acute their smell was. Even his friends didn't realize the extent of this ability because the vast majority of the time he kept his opinions of their odors to himself. But now—now James also had an underlying odor of *want*, of *desire*, and Remus felt confused; he'd experienced this strange feeling of being attracted to boys before, but it had always been (he thought) the day before the full moon. He was frightened, standing with James before the infirmary door, frightened that any moment he would reach out for his friend and alienate him forever. *Maybe this gets worse as I get older.* he thought. *Oh, that's bloody brilliant,* he also thought, sarcastically. *Just what I need.*

"Pomfrey knows I am what I am," he said quietly, trying to forget about his desire for James. "But she doesn't know any students know, or that you lot spent the night with me. Go. You're a prefect; you don't want to get into trouble."

James nodded and watched Remus turn the knob and enter the infirmary. Remus closed the door behind him and leaned on it for a moment, trying to work out how he could desire both James and Lily. But then he reminded himself, *You're a monster. Monsters do vile things....*

"Who's there?" came a sharp voice. Madam Pomfrey emerged from her office, having been up rather early. When she saw who her visitor was, she nodded grimly. "Right. Let's get you sorted out." Remus grimaced; she was never exactly gentle with him. Remus had the distinct impression that she thought it was a dreadful idea to have a werewolf at the school.

When his wounds were cleaned and dressed, she dismissed him, retreating to her office once more. Remus was about to go, when his eyes fell on Lily, still asleep, her eyes moving slightly beneath her eyelids. He walked to her bed and sat in the visitor's chair, just watching her sleep. Finally, he couldn't help himself; tears running down his face, he said to her, "Oh, Lily. You have no idea how sorry I am I hurt you. I never wanted that to happen. I love you so much. I never told you because I didn't want you to feel awkward; I know you don't love me, you're just helping me as a friend. And that just makes me love you more." He put his head down on the bed, his tears wetting the sheets. After a while, he rose and leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. "That's right, sleep well, love." Gazing lovingly at her, he turned to leave, not at all surprised to see James standing in the doorway of the infirmary (he had both heard and smelt him). He wiped the remaining tears from his face and nodded at his friend, but didn't say anything before leaving.

James watched the door close, then went to sit by Lily, where Remus had been. He also watched her sleep, wondering how she felt about Remus. Was she really just "helping" him as "a friend?" Or was she also hiding her feelings? He could swear he'd seen her gazing at Remus with looks that spoke of far more than friendship. He felt a pang of jealousy again, and tried to push it down. *I love Bonnie,* he reminded himself. Yet he continued to watch Lily Evans sleep as if fascinated; he

watched her chest rise and fall, he watched her frown or smile as her dreams warranted.

Lily's dream had started as a lovely summer outing. She and Remus were in an open field, with a picnic spread on the grass. They were sitting close together, feeding each other strawberries, inevitably following up each mouthful with a kiss. But then one of the strawberries was no longer a strawberry; it was a piece of bleeding flesh. Lily recoiled from it, but Remus casually took it in his mouth, blood running down his chin as he chewed the raw meat as casually as if it really were a piece of fruit. Then she saw that all of the picnic foods spread on the blanket were grisly pieces of dead animals, or, in the case of the main course, a whole goat that had been ripped open, its viscera on display. Lily held her hand to her mouth, feeling her gorge rising, but when she turned back to Remus, he was once again eating strawberries. A glance at the picnic blanket revealed the food she'd seen before, cold (cooked) chicken, a pie, some salad. No dead animals in sight (other than the chicken).

And now Remus was holding her in his arms and kissing her, saying, "Oh, Lily. You have no idea how sorry I am I hurt you. I never wanted that to happen. I love you so much. I never told you because I didn't want you to feel awkward; I know you don't love me, you're just helping me as a friend. And that just makes me love you more." She thought her heart would break from happiness; he seemed so *real*. She could *hear his voice*. And she even thought she felt a kiss on her forehead....

But when she swam up to consciousness from the depths of her dream and managed to open her eyes, she found James Potter sitting by her bedside, his head on the sheets as though he'd grown tired of waiting for her to wake. She shook his shoulder gently. "James? Wake up, James. How long have you been here?"

He yawned and stretched. "I don't know. I-I came to check on you around dawn. I couldn't sleep anyway."

She peered into his haggard face. "You don't look as though you've slept a wink all night. Were you just tossing and turning?"

"Erm-yes. Terrible insomnia. I don't know how I'm going to get through the day...."

"Perhaps Madam Pomfrey can give you something to--"

"Oh, no, Lily. I'll be all right. It's Saturday, anyway. I can sleep when I like. Well, except for Quidditch practice later....I'm sure I'll be fine."

He sounded like he was protesting too much, but she relented, despite the nagging feeling that there was something he wasn't telling her. She thought of how *real* Remus' voice had sounded in her dream. Yet it was James, not Remus, who was sitting by her bedside. They had very different voices, different accents. And yet-what if it had been James speaking to her while she was asleep, and in her dream she simply mistook the voice for Remus'?

"James," she said suddenly. "When I was asleep-you didn't-you didn't *talk* to me at all, did you?"

"No, Lily. Why?"

She smiled ruefully and shook her head. "No reason." She examined James carefully. It couldn't have been *him*, could it? Had she just imagined it was Remus' voice? Had it really been James? No, that was ridiculous. He was in love with Bonnie....She and James were just friends.

That was a pleasant thought. James was her friend. A friend, a nice uncomplicated friend.

"So," she asked him, "what are you and Sirius going to do during the hols?"

He looked startled. "Oh, um, actually, we've been invited down to Cardiff after Boxing Day, to visit my Great Aunt Othalie. My dad's side of the family."

"What's Cardiff like? My parents' families are from Wales, but so long ago I've never actually been there...."

As they talked, James began to appear more alert, and soon they had each forgotten about Remus and their other concerns. They were just two friends talking and laughing, enjoying each other's company.

At least-that's what Severus Snape hoped, as he watched them from the doorway of the infirmary, carrying a tray with breakfast for him and for Lily. He quietly closed the door again and departed, suddenly no longer hungry for the food he was carrying. His presence had gone completely unnoticed by either James Potter or Lily Evans.

— CHAPTER SIX —

Cataclysm

Saturday, 12 December, 1976

Remus Lupin reminded himself for the tenth time not to twist his robes in his fingers like a frightened first-year. He stood straight, looking Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey in the eye, in turn. Being called up on the carpet was unpleasant and uncomfortable, but it would be far worse to say anything that implicated his friends. When the headmaster had asked to speak to him after lunch, Remus had feared the worst. What he got came very close.

Madam Pomfrey was looking particularly unfriendly. “I can’t believe I trusted you, that I treated you like an adult. And this is how you respond! Gross irresponsibility!” Her voice rose as she spoke; she was very nearly shrieking.

Remus swallowed. “Yes, ma’am,” he said meekly. He looked at the headmaster, who appeared very stern. The wizard was silent, leaning against the wall of the matron’s office, watching with crossed arms.

“I could not believe that I came in here *at* sunset and learned from Miss Evans that you’d been at her bedside mere *minutes* before! Since you’ve shown that you can’t do a simple thing like keep track of time on the nights of the full moon, I will go back to escorting you down to the willow *myself*, as I did when you were in first and second year. If you are going to behave like a large baby, you shall be treated like one. We shall be going well before sunset, too, even if you miss your last class during the winter, so we don’t have you wandering about the castle, getting ready to transform at any moment....”

“Yes, ma’am.” His response was nearly inaudible.

“I mean,” she continued ranting, “think of the people you could have hurt! Miss Evans, for a start—” Remus’ lip shook with the effort of trying not to cry, since he’d already hurt Lily; “and I understand that your friends helped you to get down to the willow in time. What if you’d attacked one of *them*? How would you feel then? Is that any way to repay them for befriending you? Although why they *remained* your friends after finding out that you’re—”

“That’s enough, Poppy,” Professor Dumbledore said, standing up straight suddenly, his voice very firm. His stern gaze was fixed on *her*, now. Remus Lupin had been in the infirmary often enough that he knew that Madam Pomfrey was not a member of the Hogwarts staff who was timid about speaking her mind to the headmaster. He’d heard her disagree with him many a time, while Dumbledore always responded very levelly, whether he was ceding to her wishes or gently telling her off.

“Please excuse us, Poppy. I will walk Remus back to Gryffindor Tower. This afternoon, at three-thirty, he will meet you in the entrance hall and you will escort him to the willow. Since it is Saturday, we don’t have to worry about any missed classes, either. That should be early enough even with the little bit of daylight we get these days. All right?”

She agreed, grudgingly, as though she thought the only sensible thing to do was to toss Remus out of Hogwarts on his ear (or find the nearest silver object and put him out of his misery). They left the office, the headmaster’s arm around his shoulder. When they were in the corridor outside the hospital wing, Dumbledore stepped back and eyed him shrewdly, but also looking far kinder than he had while Madam Pomfrey was speaking to him. “When did your friends find out?” he asked quietly.

“I told them. Years ago. I—I feel very agitated just before the full moon. The day before. They noticed. I—I had to tell them. We all live together. How could I keep that from them? And being missing three nights a month was getting harder and harder to explain. I mean, they were starting to wonder how I could need to be in the hospital wing three nights running, you know? They’re not stupid. And—and they’re the best friends anyone could ever have. They never once—”

Unbidden, the tears leaked slowly out of his eyes, and he drew his sleeve across his face impatiently. Dumbledore nodded at him. "They're good lads. James and Sirius are scamps, of course," he said, his eyes twinkling, and Remus felt a smile pull at the corners of his mouth that, in spite of himself, was starting to make him feel better. "But they're good lads, no doubt about it. They would never turn their backs on a friend."

"I know that, sir. I know how lucky I am," he answered softly.

"I was a little worried about Pettigrew for a while," he admitted.

"Oh, Peter would never tell anyone about me either," Remus said quickly. He remembered how, just the day before, Peter had been the one working hardest to get him out of the infirmary discreetly, while Sirius was uttering a continuous stream of double-entendres and sarcastic asides. He'd had more than one occasion to be grateful for Peter's pragmatism over the last few years.

"I don't mean that. I was as worried about his having friends as you, when you were in first year. His mother had told me how withdrawn he'd been since she remarried, after his father's death. I was relieved to see that those fears were groundless."

"Well, that's largely due to James, sir, to tell the truth," Remus admitted, as he had also been guilty, at times, of wanting to exclude Peter. "He won't have anyone left behind."

Dumbledore smiled knowingly and nodded. "I thought that might be the case, but I didn't want to say." Remus suspected that he might possibly be getting points (although not actual house points) for being honest about his sometimes not wanting to include Peter, but it was hard to tell with Dumbledore sometimes. Even when you thought you were looking into those clear blue eyes and seeing his very soul, he still somehow managed to be inscrutable.

When they eventually reached Gryffindor Tower, Dumbledore turned to him. "I did not think I was making a mistake to take you as a student at Hogwarts five years ago, and I still do not think it was a mistake." Then his voice became low and chilling, very briefly, as he said, "*Do not make me change my mind.*"

Remus swallowed again, nodding. "Yes, sir," he said softly. Dumbledore's smile spread across his face again.

"Good, good. Madam Pomfrey will expect to see you in the entrance hall at three-thirty. *Alone.*"

Remus stopped short, having been about to give the password to the Fat Lady. "Alone?"

"Yes. Madam Pomfrey is the only escort you shall have." Remus looked into Dumbledore's eyes. *How much did he know?*

"Yes. Of course. Yes, sir."

When he was finally in the common room, James and Sirius fell on him, patting his back. Peter hung back, smiling timidly, and Remus, feeling guilty, went out of his way to reach out for Peter's hand to shake it, smiling warmly at him. *His mates.* He'd meant what he'd said to Dumbledore. *The best friends anyone could ever have.* It was true. Who could ever have such good friends?

Then he saw Lily sitting across the room with Cecilia, her foot propped up on a hassock. She had been released from the infirmary early that morning, not long after breakfast. Her leg was mended, although she wasn't to put a lot of stress on it right away, at least not for another twenty-four hours. He longed to stride across the room and take her in his arms, tell her he loved her, as he had in the infirmary. But he knew now that he shouldn't. He shouldn't even ever let her be a "friend" to him before the full moon. *Never again.* He still couldn't quite believe that he'd broken her leg. *It had to stop,* he knew. He was just too dangerous. He was lucky he hadn't broken her neck.

He turned his back to Lily and explained to his friends that Pomfrey was going to be escorting him down to the willow. Sirius shrugged and smirked. "That's fine. The thing is—we'll already be in there. This is almost too easy. If you're going at three-thirty, we'll just go at three. We'll use the Invisibility Cloak, so no one will notice."

"Well—people are bound to notice that the willow's branches stop three times...."

"No, it'll just be twice," Peter said quietly, his eyes narrowed as he thought. "James and I can go first. We can both fit under the Cloak, but three would be pushing it. Then James can go back for Sirius. And all three of us can wait for you in the Shrieking Shack. Pomfrey won't come all that way, you said she never used to when you were younger. And it's the weekend, so we're not going to be missing classes."

James nodded. "Peter's right. There's no reason we can't be with you tonight as usual."

Remus thought he might be on the verge of tears again, but he managed to stifle it this time. "Right," he whispered. "But—"

"We'll stop in the kitchens first," Sirius assured him. "I'll have the elves practically *begging* me to take freshly-slaughtered chickens and joints of beef. We'll have a regular feast tonight!"

"And—" James said, raising his eyebrows.

"And some feed corn for you, of course," Sirius said, rolling his eyes. He often wished that James had an Animagus form that was a carnivore, like him and Peter, but he didn't criticize this often, as his antlers had proven to be effective weapons on more than one occasion. It had been strange to eat raw meat, the first time he'd tried it, in his Animagus form, but he was used to it now, and it was something that seemed strangely separate from his existence as a human. Sometimes he forgot he'd been wandering the night or spending time in the Shrieking Shack with his friends in the form of a dog; he often remembered being with them in human form, even though he knew that wasn't right. But he never imagined he was human when he was eating raw meat as a dog. Instead, he imagined at those times that he *was* a dog, and that the dream was having been human.

The four friends never noticed the way the second-year boys, across the room, watched their every move, and listened attentively for every word they could catch....

* * * * *

Sunday, 13 December, 1976

The wolf's howl rent the night, making Bill sit up in his bed suddenly.

"It's time!" Alex Wood hissed to him soon after.

"Are you sure about this?" Orville Simpson whispered in the darkness.

"Yes. It's after midnight, late enough that no one will question us for being in the sixth-year dorm. Including the sixth-years, as they're not there, anyway."

"Are you sure?" Peregrin Booth asked now, instead of Orville.

"Yes," Alex said adamantly. "And when they return in the morning, we'll be in there, in their beds, pointing at them and saying, 'We know what you are!' And they'll have to admit it!"

There was a silence. Then suddenly, Rembert Leonard's treble voice said softly, "Why?"

"Why?" Alex said scornfully, impatiently. "Why *what*?"

"Why will they have to admit it? Why couldn't they just deny it?"

"Because we'll have them dead to rights, that's why, you prat! Stop asking stupid questions!" But secretly, Bill thought Leonard was right. What was to prevent them from lying? They were just a bunch of second-years, after all. They weren't even old enough to go to Hogsmeade on weekends, if any of the students were ever allowed to go again.

They crept up to the sixth-year dorm, pushing the door open cautiously.

"*Lumos*," Bill said quietly, lighting his wand then holding it high to see around the room.

"Erm," Booth said uncertainly. "Is there any reason we can't just light the candles?"

"Idiot!" Alex sneered. "What if they look up and see a light in the window? They'll know someone is here!"

Bill frowned at him in the wandlight. "They'll know we're here when they find us in their beds in the morning, too."

"Oh, all right—" Alex conceded. Bill pointed his wand at the sconces flanking the doorway; he could see the brackets clearly in the moonlight streaming in the windows. Two candles didn't shed much light on the room, but it was enough that they didn't need the wandlight any more. "And—" Alex said, looking around the room with a smirk on his face now, "we can do a little snooping around before we turn in for the night." He looked eagerly at the trunks sitting at the foot of each bed, and at the wardrobes and the cabinets next to each boy's bed.

Booth wavered, "I don't know. Waiting here to talk to them is one thing. They really won't like it if we go through their stuff. They're in sixth year! Think what they could do to us..."

Orville guffawed. "Yeah, only it's the sixth year *girls* I wouldn't want to cross. Especially Evans. Have you heard those stories about Sirius Black, after he tried to kiss her?" Bill saw Alex look at Orville strangely for a moment, then turn away, reddening for some reason. Bill thought of something then.

"Well, the sixth-year boys are out *there* tonight, aren't they?" Bill reminded them. "Under a *full moon*. They're not exactly to be trifled with. We are *not* taking a chance and touching anything of theirs, do you hear me?"

He looked sternly at the other boys. Alex had been behaving like the one in charge, but Bill didn't care. If Alex wasn't going to be responsible, Bill was going to step in. He remembered the map that he knew the older boys had. He wished he knew whether they had it with them; if they did, and they were using it, it was just possible that they knew the younger boys were in their room. Bill sincerely hoped, as they were probably in no state to be consulting maps, that their presence would go undetected until morning.

Alex stepped up to Bill. "Oh, we're not touching anything, are we?" he said, challenging Bill, who was still grasping his wand. Bill put the tip under Alex's chin and glared back at him.

"That's right, unless you want to look like someone's been trying experimental charms on you," Bill said, trying to keep his voice even. The two friends stared at each other, unblinking, and the other boys held their breaths, waiting. Finally, Alex Wood stepped back from Bill, rubbing his chin.

"All right, all right. Kill all of our fun. See if I care."

"Get into a bed. And *don't* touch anything else."

Bill clambered onto James Potter's bed, although he didn't know it, and Orville and Booth each claimed a bed; that left Rembert Leonard and Alex Wood standing uncertainly, staring at the remaining bed. They dove for it at the same time, Leonard winning by a hair. However, this had no sooner occurred than Alex was grasping the boy's hair in his fingers, trying to pull him off the mattress. "Oh, no you don't! That's *my* bed—" They struggled, Leonard having put his arms around one of the bedposts, holding on for dear life, his eyes practically popping out of his head as Alex pulled on his hair even harder.

"Stop it!" Bill yelled at them, pulling out his wand again. "Enough!" The two boys separated and stood next to the bed, panting, arms at their sides.

Orville shrugged, sitting up in the bed he'd claimed. "I don't mind sharing. You can come on over, Alex. It's pretty big—"

Alex Wood looked tempted for a moment, but, as though he remembered himself, he recoiled in horror. "Are you crazy? What do you think I am?" His eyes were very round and his voice full of derision.

"What do you mean by that?" Orville said, frowning. "What do you think *I* am? I'm just trying to end a fight and get to the sleeping part of the evening. Anything wrong with that?"

"Well, I'm not sharing a bed with anyone." His voice shook. "You can share with Booth," he said, nodding at Leonard. The other boy's face clouded over and he put his pointed nose very close to Alex's.

"Oh, so it's all right for me and Perry—"

Booth's exasperated voice erupted: "Oh, for god's sake, Bert. Just get over here and let Wood have his precious bed. Don't know what he's so panicked about. Even if any of us *did* fancy boys, he'd be lucky if any of us touched him with a ten-foot-broomstick. You can have the bed to yourself, Wood, and do your wanking while thinking about Mary Ann Boxwood all night if you like. Just close the curtains and use a silencing spell, please. Don't treat the rest of us to your noise, for once."

Bill was surprised; this was very daring, for Booth. There was more of an edge to his voice than usual. Alex *had* been giving him a *very* hard time lately. He sounded distinctly like someone who was sick of bullying and wasn't going to take it any more. Bill was starting to get the impression that Alex should be very, very careful around Booth in future. As in the next five minutes.

Alex, however, was looking triumphant about his having won the bed, and climbed in, pulling the covers up to his chin. He had evidently decided to ignore Booth's taunts about Mary Ann Boxwood. All five boys settled down and let sleep steal over them, while the wolves howled in the forest and the moon traveled across the sky....

* * * * *

"*What the hell?*"

Bill shook his head and tried to open his eyes; he saw that the door to the room was open and the four sixth-year boys were standing just inside the doorway, looking both astonished and indignant. He wasn't sure, but it might have been Sirius Black's voice that had uttered the exclamation. Bill was confused; why were the sixth-years barging into their dorm?

Oh, right, he thought. *We're in their dorm.*

Now it was Peter Pettigrew, of all people, who was advancing on them with his wand drawn. Bill was suddenly feeling awake, seeing that, and he scrambled out of the bed and stood before the older boys, standing as straight and tall as possible (he was a good five or six inches taller than Pettigrew) and drawing his own wand.

"Just a minute!" he said loudly, grateful that his voice wasn't cracking. (He really hoped his voice would be done changing soon.) "We're the ones who should be saying 'What the hell?' to *you*. After all, *you've* been out all night. A night with a full moon. A night that was also full of *wolves' howls.*"

The four older boys all froze and looked at one another, and Bill felt his heart leap within him. *They know we know!* he exulted. *We were right!* Alex and Orville and the others climbed out of their beds and came to stand with Bill, presenting a united front.

In a wavering voice, Pettigrew looked up at Bill and said, "I don't know *what* you are talking about."

Bill looked at him, seeing the fear there. "Oh, I think you do. You see, we've figured out what you are."

James was looking at him uncertainly. "Er—who exactly do you mean by 'you'?" He was looking very dodgy, Bill thought. He frowned.

"Who do you think? All of you. We know what you all are."

James looked at the tall boy before him, wondering whether it would be better to pretend that they were all werewolves, as the younger boys seemed to believe, or to deny everything, rather than admit that Remus was the werewolf. James swallowed. "You do, do you? All right, then. What are we?" He had trouble getting the words out.

Sirius gave him a backhanded slap on the arm and James slapped his arm right back. "What the hell do you—" Sirius started hissing at him.

"Shut up," James silenced him, glancing briefly at Remus. He didn't dare do more than that, as he was afraid of Remus' condition catching their eye. Remus had had a very rough night and was a bit wobbly on his feet. He was so tired, he seemed to just want to sleep, instead of going to see Madam Pomfrey to care for his wounds. James turned to Bill again. "All right. Tell us, if you've got it all figured out."

Alex smirked and blurted it out, not waiting for Bill. "You lot are werewolf hunters! Every month, you go down to the forest, or wait under the Whomping Willow and then come out. We've seen you taking raw meat for bait. Although I suppose you use yourselves for bait, as well. Damn risky, but I suppose that's how it's done." Alex grinned, very proud of himself. He had been the one to come up with this idea. After he'd laid it out, only Bill was punching holes in it, and even he eventually came round and decided that it made more sense than his proposal (that the four older boys were themselves werewolves). After all, werewolves were dark creatures. Dumbledore wouldn't let one in the school, surely? Let alone *four*?

Peter collapsed on a trunk and sighed. "It's a fair cop." He looked out of the corner of his eye at the other boys.

Sirius frowned. "What the hell—" he said again, moving toward Peter, who held up his hand.

"They've got us, Sirius. We can't deny it any more." He turned to the younger boys and sighed wearily again. "Yes, we're werewolf hunters. You see—my dad was killed by a werewolf. My stepdad is a werewolf hunter. My mum contacted him to get him to find the one that killed my dad, and that's how they met. He's actually a Muggle, but there *are* Muggles who know about creatures like werewolves and vampires. They don't talk much to other Muggles about this sort of thing. If one of them *tried* to talk to someone about werewolves and vampires, they'd be locked up in a madhouse faster than you could blink."

James watched the faces of the younger boys. *Were they buying it?* he wondered. He motioned to them with his head, looking at Sirius, and Sirius stepped forward now, starting to regale the younger boys with their exploits as werewolf hunters. James knew Sirius was talented enough with make up several dozen convincing-sounding lies to distract them while he did what he needed to do. He stood behind Remus while Sirius went on and on, searching his pockets. All he had were some chicken bones he'd retrieved from the Shrieking Shack, to use in Potions class. He quickly transfigured one of the bones into a long silver-colored sword, and another into a scabbard for it. He stepped out from behind Remus and approached Alex Wood. Drawing the sword, he held it, point up. The younger boys all swallowed, seeing it.

"This is what we use, you know," he said in an eerie voice. "Does the trick cleanly. And then—no more werewolf." He felt rather than saw Remus shudder behind him. "However—if you lot ever breathe one word of this—"

Wood swallowed, and he saw that Booth, Leonard and Simpson also looked petrified. Weasley, on the other hand, was looking at James with narrowed eyes. He seemed unconvinced.

"Don't worry!" Booth cried as the other four boys bolted for the door. "We won't!"

They were gone, elbowing past each other to get out of the dorm. Bill remained, gazing at James' sword shrewdly. He put his hand into his pocket, wrapping his fingers around his wand. The older boys looked at him uncertainly; he could see doubt flickering in their eyes.

"I'm not like them," he said softly, meeting their eyes one at a time, and then landing on Remus Lupin, who, he had just noticed, was looking as though he'd gotten into a fight with the Hogwarts Express and lost. He moved his eyes back to James Potter. "I don't believe you're werewolf hunters. And I don't believe that that's a silver sword." He swiftly pulled his wand out of his pocket and pointed it at the weapon in James' hand. "*Finite incantatem!*"

Immediately, James was revealed to be holding two chicken bones, instead of the gleaming sword the other second-years had seen. He grimaced, dropping the bones and looking at Weasley, who was far too clever for his own good. "If you don't think we're werewolf hunters, what *do* you think

we are?" James asked him softly. Bill looked at Remus again and relaxed his grip on his wand. Remus looked worse, if that was possible, and Bill swallowed. He knew now. The difference between Remus Lupin and the others was very obvious. He looked at James again.

"I think you're good friends," he said quietly. "Very good friends."

Nothing else was said. They nodded at him; a mutual, unspoken understanding was born at that moment. Remus fell to the floor and James and Sirius whirled on him, lifting him up and, staggering with him to one of the beds, heaving him onto the mattress and pulling the covers over him. While they were doing this, Bill walked to the door. His hand was on the knob when Sirius panicked and suddenly said, "Weasley! The others—I mean will you tell them—?"

"Don't worry. I'll tell them not to spread it around that you're werewolf hunters," he said with a lopsided smile. Sirius smiled back at him and nodded.

"Good, good. Just checking."

When he'd gone, James said to Sirius, "He's all right, is Weasley."

Sirius agreed, before collapsing on his own bed. Peter watched James get into bed, too, thinking about this exchange. He didn't trust the second-years—any of them, including Bill Weasley. He also didn't care for how quickly and easily Weasley had insinuated himself into James' and Sirius' good graces. They were *his* friends, even though it was partly because of James insisting that they not exclude him. *Well, Mr. Weasley*, he thought as he climbed into bed himself. *We'll just see how much they like you when you turn out to be more of a rat than I am...*

* * * * *

Friday, 19 March, 1977

Bill was walking back to Gryffindor Tower somewhat late, after losing track of time while working in the library. He was having a dreadful time getting enough written for Binns' History of Magic essay; it was supposed to be three-and-a-half feet, and he had only just cleared twenty-three inches. Madam Pince had finally kicked him out and he was half-way along the third-floor corridor when, up ahead, Mrs. Norris turned the corner and started walking toward him with that slow, deliberate, rolling gait. His heart in his throat, Bill slipped into an empty classroom to avoid running into Filch and getting a detention (the encounter right before the Christmas holiday in his first year was still very fresh in his mind). He listened for Filch's footsteps to recede, his heart in his throat. As he passed, he heard him speaking to his cat.

"What is it, my pet? Is there someone in this corridor who shouldn't be?"

Bill thought he might very well be the first thirteen-year-old on record to die from a heart attack. *Don't come in here*, he thought desperately. *Don't come in here, don't come in here...*

But the footsteps went past the room where he was hiding, causing him to breathe a sigh of relief. After a time, it seemed very quiet in the corridor, and Bill hoped that Filch might be gone.

He *was* gone, but some other people, who might have been the original reason for Filch thinking someone was about, had come out of hiding, and were now standing around a statue of a hump-backed, one-eyed witch. Bill only opened the door a crack, enough to see who was standing there, looking around furtively.

It was Black, Potter, Pettigrew and Lupin. Bill grimaced. *I should have known*, he thought, wishing he were in sixth year, just because the four of them seemed to get into *everything*. He remembered confronting them in their dorm. He'd been frightened at first, and instead wound up wishing that *his* friends were more like the four older boys. What were the four of them up to now? he wondered. The full moon had been almost two weeks earlier. He'd watched them from a window in Gryffindor Tower, every full moon for the previous three months, sneaking down to the willow before Madam Pomfrey came along, escorting Lupin, a disapproving frown on her face. He knew *what* they were doing but not *how* they were doing it. It was obvious that all four of them *weren't* werewolves. He noticed now how Lupin, before the full moon, grew noticeably more hirsute and agitated. Somehow, they'd managed to find a way to be with him. They weren't worried, it seemed, about anything but being discovered. They clearly weren't afraid of their friend, but concerned for him.

Through the crack between the door and the jamb, he watched, fascinated, as James stood behind the statue and touched his wand to the witch's hump, saying, "*Dissendium*." The statue opened up, creating a passage large enough for each boy to pass through, which they did; first Remus and Peter, then Sirius and James. When all four of them had vanished, the hump closed slowly again. Bill was frozen in amazement, and then he was glad of this, because two people he had not expected at all came round the corner, and on top of everything else, they were *Slytherins*.

"I tell you, they came this way!" Snape said sharply to the other boy, who was looking at Snape distastefully, his eyes half-lidded. Bill thought he might be the sixth-year Slytherin prefect.

"Yes, so you said *many times...*"

"Look!" Snape said now, seeing the witch's hump still slightly open. Even as he approached it, the hump slid closed the rest of the way. When he reached it, the statue looked like solid stone again, and Snape ran his fingers over it frantically, poking the nose and the eyes, in case these were buttons that would open the secret chamber. The prefect watched him poke and prod the witch, his mouth twisting with amusement.

"Would you two like to be alone? If I'd known you were planning to bring me along on your *date*, Snape, I'd have brought one of my own," he drawled at the tall, hook-nosed boy.

Snape whirled on him. "Looks to *me* like you have both of your hands with you, *Iggy*," Snape responded snidely, making the prefect swell like a bullfrog. Bill winced; Slytherins did *not* pull any punches. Snape turned back to the statue.

"They use this to get out of the castle, I'm *certain* of it," he hissed at Karkaroff, who stood with his arms crossed, glaring at Snape skeptically.

Down in the tunnel, Remus Lupin stopped and put his hand on the nearest arm and squeezed. It turned out to be Sirius.

"Ouch! What are you trying to do to me, Remus?"

"Don't you hear them?" he asked, loosening his grip; then he realized that of course they couldn't hear the voices.

"Hear who?" Peter asked nervously.

Remus sighed, feeling again the burden of his heightened senses, even when he wasn't a wolf. "Voices, up there in the corridor. One of them said *Iggy*."

"Who?" James asked, mystified.

"I've heard some people call Karkaroff that."

Sirius swore. "Brilliant. Bloody brilliant. What the hell are we going to do now?"

"Give me the map," Peter said suddenly. Without a word, Sirius handed it to him. "Can someone give me a bloody light?" he asked, irritated. James immediately lit his wand and held it over the parchment while Peter activated it. Slowly, the familiar lines spread themselves over the parchment, drawing the map of Hogwarts Castle. Peter moved the parchment under James' wand until the light was directly over their location; then they saw that in the corridor above them there were two dots labeled *Severus Snape* and *Igor Karkaroff*.

"*Snape*," Sirius hissed venomously. "I should have known."

"Fishing expedition," James said, noticing that he hadn't brought just anyone with him but a prefect. "Trying to catch us out." Snape had been very, very annoying since early February, hanging about them and in the corridor outside Gryffindor Tower whenever there was a full moon. Spending those nights with Remus had begun to resemble work more than anything else, because they had to work so hard to avoid Snape, and they'd been champing at the bit to see *something* other than the inside of the castle or the Shrieking Shack. Finally, they'd decided to sneak out and have some fun on an evening that was chosen specifically because there *wasn't* a full moon, so that Remus would be able to join in the fun as well.

"What are we going to do now?" Remus asked, echoing Sirius' earlier words. It was Sirius who answered him.

"What we were going to do all along. Go to Honeydukes, now that they're closed for the night; light the fire so we can go to the Leaky Cauldron, which will be so crowded with Friday night business, no one will notice the four of us going through the street-side door to Muggle London, where we will have ourselves a *night on the town*, as planned. I didn't go through hell and high water to get this Floo powder from McGonagall's office for nothing. I had to make her think I didn't *know* she was standing right there when Aurelia and I started snogging, and then I had to pretend I was upset about the detention, and I had to hope that Peter's diversion would take her out of the office long enough to nick enough Floo powder for all of us to get to London and back. Aurelia's hacked off at me now, too, because McGonagall sent her to Sprout, and Sprout gave her detention as well, for 'creating a public spectacle.' After all that, we are *definitely* going. Look at them," he said, pointing at the parchment; "they're still just standing around the statue. They haven't a clue how it works....We don't have to worry about them. They're too incompetent to be a threat," he said authoritatively.

Peter squinted at the map, noticing another dot besides Snape and Karkaroff and in addition to the moving dot that was Filch, now in the entrance hall. *This* dot was near the door of a classroom that was very close to the humpbacked witch.

"Here, now," he said softly. "Here's someone who's not quite as incompetent as our Slytherin friends...."

He held the map so that the other boys could see what he'd seen. "Weasley!" Sirius spat vehemently. "What's he want to be there for? You don't—you don't think he *saw* us coming down here, do you?" he asked no one in particular.

"I do," Peter said, looking Sirius in the eye. Whose side would he be on, his mate's or the stupid little second-year's?

James glanced at the map. "But look—he's not coming out of hiding and telling the Slytherins what they need to know. If he was snooping around, trying to get the goods on us, wouldn't he have come out of the classroom by now and told them how to open the witch? He's hiding from them too. He's just as worried about being caught."

Peter looked at the dots. "Maybe. Or maybe, if he tells them, Karkaroff will get the credit, since he's a prefect. I bet Weasley would like to be the one who brings us down."

James frowned in the dim light. "That doesn't sound like Weasley. I don't think he—"

"How well do you know him?" Sirius asked, making Peter smirk; he hadn't had to do it himself. "What makes you think he wouldn't sell his grandmother for the chance to get points?"

"He hasn't told anyone about Remus, has he? And if he gets points by putting other Gryffindors into hot water, he'll also be *losing* our house points. That doesn't make any sense," James reasoned.

Remus rolled his eyes. He'd been listening to Snape and Karkaroff above them with half an ear. "Listen, they don't know what they're doing. Let's just go. Is there any point to standing around here all night arguing about this? At least, if anyone's going to turn us in, we can say we've had a time tonight, right?"

Sirius slapped him on the back. "That's the spirit, Remus. I say we go to London, find a taxi driver who can take us directly to the nearest place that has some birds dancing, wearing as little clothing as possible—"

James rolled his eyes and started walking along the passage toward Honeydukes, while the others followed. "Blimey, Sirius, you're not going to be satisfied until you're surrounded by naked girls, are you?" He thought of Bonnie, who, when they were alone together, never actually removed all of her clothes. *And* she'd probably be furious if she knew what he was doing....He shook his head to get her out of it, continuing along the passage.

Sirius ambled along, smirking. "Why should I be?" He laughed out loud, and then his friends finally laughed with him. "Oh, yes, you're all going to complain bitterly if we're surrounded by naked girls...."

Remus felt himself color, thinking of Lily. She hadn't been with him since December. He'd made certain of that. He had managed to hide very effectively each of the ensuing months, so that he wouldn't be anywhere near her the day before the full moon. He'd had the map with him, and once or twice, he'd seen her dot near Severus Snape's dot, and then moving closer together, making his throat feel very tight....

They continued to walk to Honeydukes, to temporary freedom, while, back in the castle, Bill Weasley held his breath and waited for the Slytherins to leave.

Severus Snape continued to prod the statue for a while, but finally gave up. *What am I going to tell Lily?* he wondered.

His relationship with Lily was very confusing. It wasn't common knowledge that they were seeing each other. Certainly they didn't behave like a couple in public. But when he was alone with Lily....He had always thought she was beautiful, and he had discovered that she was even more beautiful when she was filled with passion, giving herself over to it; unfortunately, she had yet to give herself over to it *completely*, and he had been feeling more and more frustrated about this, although he never pressured her in any way. After she would withdraw from him, panting a little and saying, "I think we should stop, Severus," he would immediately nod and accede to her wishes. It was after one such time, almost three months earlier, that she had said, "I just wish I knew where they go when they're sneaking around at night...." They'd both been silent for some time, her head pillowed on his chest as she ran her finger up and down his sternum idly, her hand slipping inside his unbuttoned shirt.

"Who?" he had asked her. She had explained that she was talking about her so-called friends, the ones who were excluding her and sneaking around without her.

"If you ever hear or see anything, you'll tell me, right?" she asked him anxiously.

He had immediately agreed, and since then he'd dedicated a good deal of time to knowing where Potter, Black, Pettigrew and Lupin were whenever they weren't in class. He felt like he had come so close this night, but the statue of the witch just wasn't giving up her secrets, and Karkaroff was making noises about going back to Slytherin house, so Snape was forced to go along. Before he

turned the corner, he looked back at the stone figure.

I'll find out what they're up to if it kills me.

* * * * *

Saturday, 20 March, 1977

They were back in their dorm; it was five o'clock in the morning, and they were all exhausted. It had been quite a night. They'd gone to pubs, they'd gotten a little tipsy, they'd seen quite a lot of bare flesh, and Sirius had very nearly been knocked out by a man who was poncing for a prostitute whom Sirius hadn't *realized* was a prostitute. Peter lay back in his bed, staring at the underside of the canopy, thinking about his plan. *It was perfect.* And *then* we'll see what the others think of Bill Weasley, he thought....

It was almost too easy. He lingered while James, Sirius and Remus went down to breakfast, spending a long time in the showers. When he was dressed and he was fairly certain the dorms were empty, he crept into the second-years' room and poked around until he found Bill Weasley's trunk. He located some old parchments he'd written for various classes, finally deciding on a Potions essay and a Transfiguration exam which were several months old, and pocketing these. He returned to his own dorm and secreted these in his trunk before going down to breakfast.

Later in the day, James and Sirius had gone down to the Quidditch pitch with their brooms, and Remus was napping in the dorm while Peter crept in and carefully collected the parchments from his trunk. After the door closed, Remus looked up in surprise; why should Peter be tiptoeing around the dorm? But then he rolled over, assuming his friend just didn't want to wake him....

Peter found a quiet corner of the library and took out a stylus, tracing over the handwriting on the Transfiguration homework with it so that there was a firm impression of the words on the parchment even after he'd wiped it clean of ink with his wand. He took special care to press hard on Bill Weasley's name. Once the parchment was clean, he took out the other essay and carefully copied Bill Weasley's handwriting, but the words were not Bill's, nor would he see them before Professor McGonagall....

* * * * *

Friday, 16 June, 1977

The sun shone down on the grounds of Hogwarts, gilding the grass and trees, sending sunbeams awash with dust motes streaming through the stained-glass windows of the castle, and taunting the students with its promise. Finally, the exams were over, and the third years and up had a Hogsmeade weekend to look forward to. The headmaster had announced it the previous week. No one had left the castle grounds since Easter, but now the depression that had sat like a dark cloud on the castle, due to the months of deprivation, lifted immediately. Everyone walked through the castle with a spring in their steps, even the first and second years, who would have the run of the place with the older students down in the village.

At least, *most* of the first and second years were cheered by this announcement (as it made it less likely that the no-Hogsmeade-weekend policy would be a permanent one). The five second-year Gryffindor boys, in particular, lounged around the Gryffindor common room, grumbling amongst themselves. Watching the excitement of the older students was practically unbearable and the castle had never felt more like a prison to them.

"It's just not fair," Orville Simpson grumbled. "*Everyone* should get to go. We've *all* been cooped up." He shuffled a deck of cards repeatedly, the rippling cardboard punctuating his words. Alex Wood watched him carefully.

Peregrin Booth sighed. "Yeah. I can't believe we can't go until next year. If only there were some way to sneak out of the castle without anyone knowing...."

Bill saw that Alex had suddenly opened his eyes wide. "Bill!" he said abruptly now. "Orville! I need to talk to you!"

Orville shrugged. "So talk."

Alex looked at Booth and Leonard. "*Not here,*" he said pointedly, clearly not wanting to include the other boys. He rose and started walking toward the portrait hole, Orville behind him. Bill followed, looking over his shoulder for a moment, seeing the hurt expressions on the other boys' faces. When they were in the corridor, Bill frowned at Alex.

"I think you were rude, Alex. Treating Booth and Leonard that way," he said to his friend as soon as the portrait closed. Alex grimaced.

"Oh, come on, Bill. You're always wanting to include them. Worried your mummy and daddy will think they haven't taught you proper etiquette?"

Bill went pink. "No. Just thinking how much *I'd* like to be excluded, which is not at all. Where's the harm?"

"Here's the harm," Alex hissed at him. "Leonard's a little rat, and Booth is learning to be one. I'll bet one of *them* gave that letter to McGonagall about the sixth-years and framed you for it. How easy would it be for one of them to get their hands on a couple of your old parchments?"

Bill frowned; he was still *persona non grata* with the sixth-years in particular because of that incident; everyone thought he'd grassed on Sirius and James. He didn't know who had *really* sent the parchment to McGonagall (who had been able to figure out it was Bill's after peering at the writing that had previously been pressed into the surface) and why they hadn't known about Peter and Remus also being out of the castle that night; he just knew that *all* of the older students thought he was a rat now, and he had been avoiding the common room ever since.

When McGonagall had called him to her office and asked him about the anonymous letter, which was in his handwriting and written over a former Transfiguration assignment of his, she'd thought he was merely being modest when he denied any knowledge of it. Sirius and James had been standing right there, Sirius glowering at him the entire time, James merely looking chagrined. She'd told him not to be worried about retaliation from the older students; she'd see to it that he was safe. Being treated like a baby in need of protection—especially when he hadn't done anything—made him feel even *worse*.

As he was leaving McGonagall's office, James had said softly to Bill, "Thought you said you didn't do this sort of thing." Bill felt his stomach drop into his feet. James Potter was the last person he'd try to get into trouble, and now poor Potter had a week of detentions, and he thought it was Bill's fault.

"If Booth and Leonard find out we're planning to sneak into Hogsmeade tomorrow," Alex continued, "they'll be running to McGonagall faster than—"

"*We're planning to sneak into Hogsmeade tomorrow?*" Orville squeaked. "Since when? We'll be expelled!"

"We will *not* be expelled! We won't even be caught! We'll use that secret passage Bill saw the sixth-years use! It's foolproof!"

Bill wasn't so sure about that. "I didn't show you that so we could—"

"But it's *perfect!*" Alex insisted.

"We don't even know where it *goes!*" Bill said angrily.

Alex started to walk along the corridor. "Well! No time like the present to find out! We'll do our homework first, of course. A practice run. Then we'll be all set for tomorrow!"

"Why can't we just go into Hogsmeade tonight?" Orville asked, jogging to keep up with Alex, who rolled his eyes.

"Because we'd stand out like sore thumbs! Tomorrow the entire village will be swarming with students. No one'll notice us then."

Bill held back. "I've been to Hogsmeade, and it's not that great—"

Alex turned and glared at him. "So have I been to Hogsmeade, Bill. That's not the point. The point is *getting out of the ruddy castle.*"

The three of them looked at each other for a tense moment, then the boys continued walking along the corridor. They went downstairs and around corners until they were half-way along the third-floor corridor, stopping before the statue of the hump-back witch.

"Check the classrooms," Alex told Bill and Orville. They nodded and quietly started creeping into the various rooms lining the corridor. They couldn't find anyone about. The three of them were standing around the statue, their wands drawn. Bill touched the hump and said croakily, "*Dissendium.*"

The witch opened and the passage was revealed. Alex went first, then Orville. Bill was about to climb in when Rembert Leonard and Peregrin Booth suddenly ran around the corner.

"There you are!" Booth cried out, breathless. "Don't go without us!"

Bill frowned. "How did you—"

"Not now! We have to get out of sight, before someone comes!" Booth panted, holding a stitch in his side. He pushed past Bill and slid down the passage, followed by Leonard. Bill grimaced, knowing there was bound to be a row when Wood saw them. Sure enough, he heard an outraged roar from below. Sighing, he slid down after them, finding himself in a dusty, dark space lit only by a slit of light filtering down from the torches in the corridor above. The other boys weren't standing in the light; he could hear grunting coming from the blackness. As the witch's hump slid closed,

that light disappeared, and Bill took out his wand, saying, “*Lumos.*”

He saw immediately, in the dim light, that his friends were locked in combat, the four of them a mass of arms and legs. Alex had Booth in a headlock and Leonard was sitting on Orville while Orville attempted to smack Booth about the legs.

“Break it up!” Bill roared at them in his new, deeper voice; the echo in the tunnel gave it an added ring of authority. They all sat up, looking at him meekly. “Now that we’re all here, we *all* need to be concerned about getting caught. Let’s light wands and try to figure out where this tunnel goes without any more fighting, understand?”

Alex stood shuffling his feet. “I was just trying to get out of Booth which one of them ratted on Black and Potter and made it look like *you’d* done it.”

“We didn’t do that!” Leonard immediately cried.

“Ssshhh!” Bill said quickly. “Not so loud!” He scrutinized Booth and Leonard. “If either one of you *did* do that and I ever find solid evidence, you’re going to be very sorry,” he said softly. “In the meantime, now that you’re here, you’ll be in as much trouble as the rest of us if we get caught, so watch yourselves and don’t say a word about what we’re doing if you know what’s good for you.”

They nodded vigorously. The others lit their wands and they all walked forward for a very long time, sometimes going down, sometimes up, and making numerous turns. When they went up some dusty stairs and discovered they were in the basement of Honeyduke’s, they couldn’t believe their luck.

“All we have to do is wait until the older students have left the castle tomorrow, then come down here and let ourselves into Honeyduke’s. It’ll be like a dream come true,” Alex said in amazement as they went back down to the secret passage. That night Bill could hardly sleep, thinking about what they were going to do tomorrow.

However, he couldn’t help think that he’d have traded a hundred Hogsmeade trips for the chance to clear his name and have the sixth-years trust him again.

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Saturday, 17 June, 1977

Lily rolled over in her sleep, reaching out, but finding her arms empty when she opened her eyes. She sighed. She’d been with Remus again, just two weeks before. She’d had a talk with him a few months before that, explaining to him that she was with Severus, but their relationship wasn’t really physical yet, and she was willing to be a “friend” to Remus occasionally, when he needed some help. *Just a friend.* She said that she knew he hadn’t meant to hurt her when he’d broken her leg. However, if her relationship with Severus ever took on a more physical nature, she would have to stop helping him in this way. He had accepted this, wishing he’d been more vigilant about avoiding her, but over the months, he’d let his guard down, and she had surprised him in the corridor outside the potions dungeon. They hadn’t been together since December, and although he was mad with desire for her, he managed to be very careful, and that day she was uninjured.

She had separated herself from him quickly afterward, fleeing the dungeon room where they’d gone. Crying as she climbed the stairs, she’d taken herself upstairs to a disused girls’ bathroom where she kept having the feeling that someone was watching her. Shuddering, she went back up to Gryffindor Tower, reminding herself that Remus was her friend and would never think of her as anything else, no matter what she thought she dreamed when she was in the infirmary with a broken leg...

Well, she thought, *today is a Hogsmeade weekend.* The first in recent memory. The headmaster had relented; there had been a lull in Death Eater activity, and the Ministry assured him that there would be numerous Aurors in Hogsmeade and the students would be perfectly safe. Lily certainly hoped so, but safety wasn’t really her first concern. She was going to Hogsmeade with Severus. A date, of sorts. But they were going to be careful not to touch—even hold hands—in public, in deference to the rampant anti-Slytherin sentiments in Gryffindor lately, and the rampant anti-Gryffindor sentiments in Slytherin. She sighed deeply; life would have been so much easier if she and Remus—

Stop that, she told herself sternly. Another sigh. Oh, well. She had to stop dreaming and start *living.* Today she was going to Hogsmeade with Severus. That was a big step. She forced herself to get up and dress before she decided to stay at the castle out of sheer nerves. *It will be all right,* she told herself. *Everything will be fine.*

After breakfast, the third-years and up started streaming out of the castle. She walked about a foot from Severus on the path to Hogsmeade; they were surrounded and jostled by so many other people, it was probably unclear that they were actually together. When she turned a little, she saw

behind her in the crowd James Potter walking with his arm around Bonnie Manetti's shoulders, her arm looped around his waist, and Lily felt a pang of jealousy that they could do that, as there weren't any rampant wars going on between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. Then she noticed Remus walking with Peter and Sirius (who had plenty of opportunities to be with girls in the castle, and didn't want a girl along "ruining" his Hogsmeade trip). Remus seemed very pale in the bright June sunshine, his grey hair looking almost white. She met his eye briefly and turned to face forward again. *I will not think about Remus*, she thought fiercely. *I will not think about Remus....*

The people of the village were thrilled to see the students again; they had traditionally counted on them to leave the castle on a regular basis and spend money in the village, but with the moratorium on Hogsmeade weekends, the village merchants were all hurting. Soon Lily found herself laughing beside Severus as they watched a terrible puppet show (the puppets were enchanted) outside Zonko's joke shop, and she took great pleasure in picking out sweets she knew he liked in Honeyduke's. The day was turning out even better than she supposed. When he suddenly reached out, breaking the rules they'd laid down for the day, and took her hand in his as they were leaving Honeyduke's, in full view of Sirius, Peter, Remus, James and Bonnie, who were approaching the shop, her heart turned over and she squeezed his hand back, daring anyone who objected to try anything. Sirius' eyes narrowed as they passed; she glared at him defiantly. Then she saw Remus next to him, appearing rather forlorn, and she swallowed, trying not to think about this, turning away and walking down the High Street, Severus Snape's hand in hers.

They hadn't gone more than fifty feet when the world suddenly exploded.

Lily and Severus were thrown to the ground; he covered her body with his as debris rained down on them, but Lily tried to climb out from under him. Around them, the rest of the people in the street were on the ground also, looking shaken and confused.

"What's going on?" she asked shakily, brushing plaster dust from his black hair. He looked around in a daze.

"I don't know." He squinted back in the direction from which they'd come; she turned also, seeing flames erupting from the sweetshop.

"Oh, no," she gasped. "Remus-James-Bonnie-Sirius-"

Before he could stop her, she was sprinting down the road, holding handfuls of her robes in both hands. He ran after her, and they arrived at the flaming shop just in time to see James Potter, covered in plaster dust, bleeding and with a torn sleeve that revealed a vicious burn on his left arm, carrying Bonnie Manetti from the flaming building, then collapsing in the road with her. Lily went on her knees next to Bonnie and started yelling at her, "Bonnie! Bonnie, can you hear me?"

She felt for a pulse, but the wrist was not throbbing at all, and Bonnie's flesh felt strange to the touch. She moved her hand to Bonnie's neck, to feel for the pulse there, but instead she found a large piece of wood which had been hurled right through her neck, probably killing her instantly. Lily choked back a sob and looked up at James, who had obviously realized before her that it was hopeless. His dusty face was streaked with tears, his eyes liquid blue behind his spectacles. Lily couldn't help the tears flowing down her own cheeks.

"Oh, James! I'm so-so--"

He nodded, cradling Bonnie against him. She remembered the night his parents had died. *It just wasn't fair*, she thought, *that he should lose so many people so young...*

She reached for Severus, beside her, for solace, but he wasn't there; she looked up and he was running toward Honeyduke's. "No!" she screamed. "Severus!"

But he was gone, into the smoke. She started to rise, but James had grabbed her wrist. "No, Lily! It's too dangerous!"

"That's why I have to go! He--"

"Lily!" he cried again, looking at her desperately, with tears running down his face. "I-I couldn't take it if-if--"

Abruptly, she pulled him to her and held him while he cried, unable to prevent the tears gushing from her own eyes. *He doesn't want to lose me, too*. After a minute she separated from him and looked toward the flames.

"Are they--are they all--?" Her voice shook. She couldn't say it. She wondered whether she'd ever see Remus again. Or Sirius, or Peter. Or Severus.

James shuddered, watching. "I-I don't know," he whispered. Then they could see a figure emerging from the smoke, and it was Remus. Lily couldn't bear it any more; she scrambled to her feet and ran to him. He was carrying three people, somehow. Once he was clear of the burning building, he collapsed and dropped them to the ground. He had Sirius, Peter and a small boy with a foxy face, a pointed nose. She threw her arms around Remus and kissed him on the mouth without thinking, then she fell on Sirius and Peter, hugging them too, crying hysterically, feeling completely

irrational.

"You're all right! You're all right!" she choked out, speaking to no one and all of them. The three older boys looked at her, their faces grimy and streaked with sweat, their robes singed and smoking. Remus was out of breath.

"I have to go back in," he said finally managed to say.

"Me too," Sirius chimed in. He didn't seem to appreciate being removed from the building by Remus.

She grabbed their arms as they stood to return to the conflagration. "Why? Haven't you done enough?"

Remus shook his head. "There are more second-years in there. They'll die if someone doesn't go."

He pulled his arm away from her and they were both running back to the fire before she could think. She turned and stared at the boy on the ground before her.

"You *are* a second-year!" she said in surprise. The thin boy raised guilty brown eyes to her. "What's your name?" she demanded. "Who are the others?"

But now the boy was staring at the fire, crying convulsively, unable to speak. She held him against her, feeling motherly suddenly, crying with him. Peter was shaking, but he took out his wand and repaired a cut on the boy's arm, trying to be useful.

"You're Leonard, aren't you?" he said quietly to the boy while he fixed his wound. The boy nodded, still crying.

"Did all five of you come?" Lily whispered, hoping against hope that someone had been left behind at the castle. When the boy nodded again, she met Peter's eyes, seeing the same fear there that she was feeling. *Gone. All gone....*

Aurors had finally come running; they circled the still-burning building, spraying water from their wands to put out the flames, or just freezing them into arcs of brilliant red and orange tinged with blue. Lily saw one of them, a young woman with a kind face and chestnut hair, kneel by James, talking softly to him, finally convincing him to let go of Bonnie's body and let another Auror examine her. Then they conjured a stretcher and moved her onto it, and the body of the seventeen-year-old girl suddenly seemed very small. *The body*, Lily thought. *She isn't even a person any more; now she's a body....*

She turned aimlessly, as Aurors moved about the site of the shop. Finally, she saw a tall, dark figure emerge from the smoke, walking under a frozen arc of flame, followed by two boys staggering, leaning against each other, their arms looped around each other's shoulders. Severus was carrying a boy in his arms; both of their faces were black with soot. From a distance, through the soot, she recognized a bit of the blond hair of Peregryn Booth, and she ran to meet them and the other two boys, who she saw now were Weasley and Wood. It was almost impossible to tell that Weasley had red hair, there was so much ash in it. Severus collapsed on the ground.

"One-didn't-" he gasped.

"You've breathed too much smoke, Severus!" She patted him on the back and pushed his hair out of his face, concerned. He shook his head.

"I'll be fine," he whispered. "Simpson-"

She looked up and Sirius was emerging from the wreckage of Honeyduke's, carrying the Simpson boy. Remus followed him, bearing what seemed to be three adults, who, she was glad to see, were all stirring. Sirius laid the Simpson boy next to Booth, and his head lolled unnaturally; a trickle of blood ran down his face. Lily started to go to him, but Severus put his hand around her wrist, holding it so firmly it hurt. She saw him and Sirius exchange a very grave look, and she knew that, for the first time in their acquaintance, they were agreeing on something. *Neither one of them wanted her getting near Simpson*. She looked at the still boy, an uneasy feeling growing inside her.

"Is he-"

"Lily," Severus said softly, not releasing her wrist. "There's no doubt."

"But how can you be so *sure*?"

Sirius swallowed. "Back of the head," he whispered, with some effort. She noticed that he was looking a bit green. Suddenly, he scrambled to his feet and staggered away from them; he wasn't able to get more than ten feet before he began retching onto the cobblestones, and Lily looked at Severus, understanding what Sirius had meant, finally. *It was blown off*, she realized. *The back of his head....*

She saw that Severus was also looking rather green, and her stomach moved uneasily inside her as well. Then Aurors appeared by their sides suddenly and helped them to stand; all at once, the sixth-years were no longer adults, taking care of the younger children. They were children

themselves again, being hustled out of the way, clucked over and checked for wounds.

They were all transported back to the castle in ambulances, regardless of whether they were hurt. Professor Dumbledore watched the stretchers being carried in, looking very old. Madam Pomfrey obtained some help from mediwizards in setting up a triage center in the Great Hall. Everyone was shaken to the core, looking at each other with wide, stunned eyes. Everyone knew that it was highly unlikely that another Hogsmeade weekend would be scheduled for a very long time.

In spite of efforts to contain the chaos at the castle, no one seemed to be in charge, suddenly; students ran about the corridors visiting one another and the teachers did, too. It was pandemonium, and didn't lessen until eleven at night, when everyone was finally forced to return to their houses, and, ideally, their dorms.

Remus, however, was restless. He had been sitting in the Gryffindor common room, with James and Lily. James was in an armchair by the fire, staring into space, his arm bandaged, Lily sitting on the floor in front of his chair, her legs drawn up to her chest as she gazed at the flames. Sirius and Peter had gone to bed, and the surviving second-years had also gone up the stairs. When he rose to go, no one stopped him.

He wasn't sure where he was going. Perhaps to the infirmary, to see how the wounded students were doing. Perhaps to talk to Dumbledore, or Professor McGonagall; but when he closed the portrait behind him, his ears pricked up; he could hear someone crying, someone not in Gryffindor Tower. He knew that most people would probably not have been able to hear it, but his sensitive werewolf's hearing helped lead him to the sound unerringly. He had to walk up a flight and down a long corridor before he came to a closed classroom door, and then he could smell the person doing the crying, he could smell the soot and ash residue, and knew it was someone who'd been in Honeyduke's. He opened the door and spoke into the dark room.

"Who's there?"

There was silence, of a sort. The boy stopped sobbing and seemed to be holding his breath, hoping Remus would go away, probably. Remus drew his wand and lit it; holding it up, he saw a boy with a young, tear-streaked face and large bloodshot eyes, a nose red from crying.

"Oh, it's you, Wood," he said, pointing his wand at some candles on the wall, which sprang to life. The boy had been sitting in a corner, holding his knees against his chest, but now he stood, wiping his face with his sleeve. "I thought you were in the dorm."

He shook his head, his chin trembling. "I-I can't go there," he whimpered.

"Why not?"

"Because—because it was all my fault!"

Remus strode to him and pulled the boy against him as he started crying again. Wood hesitated at first, then threw his arms around the taller boy, and they rocked back and forth, as Remus' heart ached, wondering what he would have done if, at thirteen he had felt responsible for someone else's death. *I could have been responsible for someone dying, many times....*

"Sssh, sssh," he hissed at the boy, trying to soothe him. "It wasn't your fault. Even though you lot weren't supposed to be there, you didn't blow up the sweetshop...."

The boy's head was just below Remus' chin. His face was still as hairless as a girl's, and tentatively, Remus reached up and smoothed the boy's messy hair with one hand, trying to be a calming influence. However, he could not help but notice that, in the midst of the chaos and fear, it was very comforting to hold another person's body against his, to feel another heart beating against his chest....

Simultaneously, both boys withdrew from each other in horror. Remus swallowed and felt a warmth rising from his neck, while Wood was beet red, putting his hand over the front of his robes, trying to hide what Remus had already felt when the boy had been pressed against him. *Bloody animal*, Remus thought at himself, fighting the urge to hide his own reaction to the boy in a similar fashion. *He's a child still, and in grief....*

"It's—it's all right, Wood," Remus said shakily, even though he wasn't convinced himself. Wood shook his head, biting his lip.

"No. No, it's not. I'm—I'm not *right*. And—and now Orville's dead, because of me."

"Because it was your idea to go into Hogsmeade?"

"That and—and the fact that—"

Remus frowned. "What?"

Wood was still biting his lip. "Well—I've kept your secret. You know, about being a werewolf hunter." Remus tried not to laugh; clearly, Weasley had not told his friends the *true* truth. "So—so do you promise to keep my secret?"

Remus nodded, annoyed with himself for feeling another twinge of desire for the boy. Something

about sharing confidences was terribly *stimulating*....

"Well, I-Orville-I mean, he didn't know. I made the other blokes think I fancied Mary Ann Boxwood. All I had to do was deny it at least once a day. But-but it was really Orville. I fancied him rotten," he finished in a rush.

Remus digested this and nodded slowly. "I see," he said simply, not daring to add anything to this.

"Do you?" Wood said now. "He was killed because of me. Because I-I wanted him. Which is unnatural, so-

Remus frowned and stepped toward him again. "Don't be stupid! Your friend did not die because you had fallen for him. That's superstitious nonsense. And-and plenty of people in the world feel as you do. I mean, men who-who fall in love with men-" he said awkwardly. "A man falling in love with another man doesn't cause the second one to *die*."

"But he wouldn't even have been in Hogsmeade if it weren't for me! I-I wanted him to have a good time," he said tearfully. "I wanted him to-just look at me once with-with this way he has of smiling-*had* of smiling-when-when he was really happy-

He broke down again and Remus gathered him in his arms again, trying to ignore the fact that this was physically stimulating both of them. The boy cried into his robes and Remus rocked him back and forth, hoping Wood would stop hating and blaming himself and realize that he was perfectly normal. *Why can't I feel that way about myself?* he wondered. *I'm such a hypocrite...*

"You wanted to make your friend happy," Remus whispered to him, and he kissed his brow tenderly. "You cared about him and wanted to make him happy. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time and none of you could have foreseen that." His voice was very soft.

Then he realized that the boys had probably taken the Honeyduke's passage into the village, remembering that Bill Weasley knew about this. Remus had been confused about why the letter to McGonagall had just said he'd seen Sirius and James leaving the castle; there was no mention of the secret passage, and no mention of him or Peter. (When she'd called James and Sirius to her office and they still had paper napkins from a Muggle pub in London in their pockets, and five pounds in Muggle money, it had been rather incriminating.) Now he knew; Weasley hadn't mentioned the tunnel so that McGonagall wouldn't find out and block it up. He'd wanted to use it himself at some point....

Wood's fingers clutched at his robes. Remus stroked his hair and held him tightly, his own guilt starting to become overwhelming, while the boy sobbed on him and repeated like a mantra the same words:

"It should have been me....it should have been me...."

* * * * *

Lily and James still sat by the fire in the common room; she wasn't sure where Remus was going, but she felt strongly that it was James who needed her just now. Earlier, before Sirius and Peter had gone up the stairs, Lily accosted each of them, giving Sirius a firm hug and a kiss on the cheek, then Peter. They both looked at her with longing, but she didn't notice this. She looked toward the fireplace, at James.

"I'm going to talk to him," she whispered to the others. "I'm afraid of what he might do...."

Sirius pulled her to him in another hug and kissed her forehead. "Take good care of him, Lil." She looked at him gratefully, feeling somehow that he might finally be growing up, a little. Peter seemed a bit agitated, but followed Sirius up the stairs. After Remus left the common room, she moved to the chair where he'd been sitting. Looking restless, James rose and began to pace before the fire. She watched him going back and forth, finally saying, "You mustn't blame yourself, James. I heard you saying over and over, *It's all my fault*. It's not. You can't go on torturing yourself this way...You'll fall in love again some day...."

He continued to pace the hearthrug, the firelight lighting the underside of his nose and reflecting in his glasses, obscuring his eyes. He rubbed the dark stubble on his cheeks and wrung his hands alternately.

"Oh, Lily, you don't understand...." James took off his glasses and ran his hand over his face. She watched him; he looked very different without his glasses. His eyes seemed so vulnerable, so defenseless. He put them back on before she could think any more about it. "You see-I-I was going to break up with Bonnie today. It-it just wasn't working out...."

Lily covered her mouth in surprise. "Oh! Oh-I had no idea. I thought the two of you were, um, were-

"Sleeping together? Yes; a big mistake. It made her think-it made her think we were somehow incapable of breaking up. As though that meant we were going to be together for the rest of our

lives. I wanted to go slowly, I really did. I'm still not completely clear how it happened...."

Lily turned a bit pink. "Well. You know how it is. Sometimes—these things just—happen." Her voice was very soft. James noticed that she had colored.

"Right." He cleared his throat. "At any rate—we had a row last night. We stopped just *short* of breaking up. Afterward, I wished I *had* broken up with her instead of just storming off. Then she wouldn't have been in Honeyduke's.... She probably thought I'd calm down and come to my senses and we'd be right as rain again, you know?"

"If you don't mind my asking—what were you fighting about?"

He sighed and looked down at his hands. "Something stupid. Because it wasn't going to happen. I *knew* it wasn't going to happen. Ever since the second time we—we slept together, she's been talking as though she's already married to me. Or engaged, at least. She was always saying, *When we have a place of our own*, or, I'll make sure you never forget to shave when you're waking up next to me every day; you'll have to shave before you can give me a kiss. It was getting on my nerves, rather. I mean, I'm only in bloody sixth year! And if I ever decide to marry *anyone*, I'd like to ask them myself. Then, last night, she just—I don't know. She pushed me over the edge. I'd been managing not to lose my temper, but I just couldn't stop myself...."

Lily rose and walked to him, taking him gently by the hand and leading him to a chair, making him sit. She sat on the floor at his feet, his hand still in hers, her cheek on the cushion next to his leg. "It's all right, James. When you're ready," she whispered, seeing fresh anguish and guilt on his face.

He swallowed and nodded, looking down at her, at the way the firelight lapped at her features, the way her green eyes glowed softly, the light reflecting in them. *He could tell Lily*, he knew. *She'd understand.*

"We were arguing about my dad's name," he said finally, after staring at her for some time. Lily noticed him doing this and decided not to say anything; she found that she was staring right back at him, and was glad that he was preoccupied and seemed not to notice this.

"Your dad's name?"

"Well, see, she was doing it again. Talking about our being married and all. She was saying that when he have kids, if we have a boy, we should name him Henry after my dad, and if we have a girl, she should be Elspeth after my mum."

"I see—" Lily said slowly, vertical lines appearing between her brows despite her best efforts not to reveal her confusion over why this had angered James, other than the fact that Bonnie was being presumptuous again.

"No, you probably don't. I—I just lost control of myself completely. I started screaming at her, 'No son of mine is going to be named Henry! If I decide to name my son after my father, his name will be Harry! That's what my father was called! His damn name was Harry!'"

His voice rose hysterically and tears started running down his face as he remembered his father's funeral again, the stupid gits who didn't even *know* him getting up and talking about how much *Henry* had meant to them....

He felt Lily's hand on his knee, patting it sympathetically. He fought the urge to put his hand on her head, to stroke her beautiful hair, to brush some stray strands from her brow. Instead, he put his hand over hers. "And my mum....my dad never called her 'Elspeth.' He would always put his hand under her chin;" unconsciously, James reached down and did this with Lily, her lip trembling as she felt his fingers brush her jaw; "and he would just look at her and say, 'My Rose...' Dad always said there were roses in Mum's face...."

James still held her chin in his hand and Lily looked up at him with moist eyes. Her heart was thudding painfully in her chest. "So," she whispered, "if you had a daughter you'd name her Rose?"

He didn't answer, but looked down at her, his heart pounding in his ears, her skin so soft under his fingers. *He was a terrible, terrible person.* What he wanted to do at this moment more than anything else in the world was to lean down and kiss Lily Evans, to lift up her chin with his fingers and brush his lips against hers, to feel her mouth slowly open under his....

Bonnie was dead. His girlfriend had only just died, and here he was yearning after another girl, one of his best friends, and the girl one of his other best friends loved. He remembered Remus at Lily's bedside, telling her how he loved her. He knew that was why she had wondered whether *he* had spoken while she was sleeping. Some part of her *had* heard Remus. She must not believe it really happened, he thought, if she's really seeing Snape.

"I might," he whispered. "I—I don't especially want to think about it at sixteen, though," he added. They were silent again, looking into each other's eyes, his hand under her chin still as she gazed up at him, trying to figure out how she was feeling.

"You know," she said softly after a while, "there's no reason you couldn't just name a boy Harry."

Her speaking jolted him. "Tell that to Bonnie—" he started to say, then put his hand up to his mouth in horror. "I mean—I *said* that to her, and she argued with me about it. Said that you *couldn't* name a boy plain old 'Harry.' That it wasn't a proper name; it was a nickname. It was what people were called whose *real* names were Henry or Harold or Harrison....she kept saying you couldn't just *name* someone *Harry*. And I kept telling her I didn't care. I wasn't going to name any son of mine Henry and have people calling him the wrong thing all his life. And it was so *stupid* for me to be talking to her about this, when I didn't even want to be thinking about children at all, especially with her, when I just wanted to say to her, *Listen Bonnie, I don't think this is working out...* Instead, I was talking just as if I *also* believed we were going to get married and have kids...."

Lily smiled grimly at him. "She struck a chord, that's all. It's your parents' names. You're not going to take it lightly. Listen, James, just because you had a row before she died...It's not like *you* killed her, after all. Bonnie was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I doubt you would feel less guilty if you *had* broken up with her last night. You might even be feeling worse right now. *You can't blame yourself.*"

She clambered to her feet and then leaned down to kiss his brow. He wished he had the nerve to lift his face and catch her lips with his. A shudder went through him; her lips lingered on his skin. She finally straightened up, her face in shadow. She held her hand out to him and he took it, standing uncertainly. She led him to the circular stairs to the girls' dorms and he stopped in surprise.

"Lily—what—"

"I'm not letting you spend tonight alone, James Potter. That's all there is to it."

He clutched at her hand. *What did she mean?* he wondered. But he followed her up the stairs, not trusting himself to speak, in case a strangled yelp should be all that came out of his mouth. When they reached the sixth-year girls' dorm, she turned the door knob carefully, slowly, creeping into the room after turning to him and putting her finger over her lips. In the light from the torch on the landing, James could see that deep red hangings were pulled around all of the beds in the room but one, near the window. Lily motioned for him to close the door, and when he did, the torchlight was gone and the room was plunged into darkness. Then he felt her hand again, guiding him to the fourth bed. He heard the springs creak as she clambered onto the mattress; he followed her. She was making a rustling noise, and he realized that she was pulling the hangings around her bed so that they would be hidden from sight in the morning.

His heart seemed to be running away with him, it was racing so fast. Then he felt her settle on the mattress next to him in the dark, on top of the coverlet. It was such a strange thing to be doing, to be sharing a bed with someone else, especially Lily (he and Bonnie had never dared to try to spend the night together). He found that she had left plenty of space for him, and that she was lying next to him fully clothed still, her robes over her Muggle clothes, like him. He lay down on his side, only to discover that her hair was in his face. He whispered to her, "Can I move your hair?" He realized that she must have her back to him. She murmured a vague assent, obviously tired and on the verge of sleep. He tentatively reached out and took her hair in his hands, winding it into a rope and gently placing it over her shoulder. After he'd done this, he rested his hand on her shoulder, then ran it down her back, then around her waist, under her arm. He drew nearer to her, spooning her, and she settled back against him as though this were the most natural thing in the world.

James held Lily close and his heart ached within him. He had just lost his girlfriend. He'd carried her dead body in his arms. Publicly, he was obliged to mourn for a respectable amount of time, in spite of the fact that he'd been on the verge of breaking up with Bonnie. It was as though she'd found another way to continue to make him hers. And he *was* sorry she was dead. In most respects, he'd thought she was a great girl. He just didn't think *they* belonged together. And he would have mourned her wholeheartedly, he would have gladly gone through the charade of being the bereaved boyfriend, playing his part, doing what everyone expected of him, if it weren't for one small detail that made playing this role far more difficult and far more distasteful than it would have been otherwise:

James Potter was in love with Lily Evans.

Knowledge

Sunday, 18 June, 1977

Bill Weasley paced the hard, unforgiving flagstone floor in the anteroom just off the Great Hall, sweating in his best robes, his stomach in knots. *I'm going to be expelled, I'm going to be expelled....*

"Bill!" He whirled upon hearing his name uttered by that familiar voice; it was his mother, running toward him and throwing her arms around him. He buried his face in her neck, bending over to do so, feeling a fresh wave of tears threatening to gush forth from his eyes. He tried to master himself and straighten up, but it wasn't easy.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Mum, Dad," he said thickly. His father was holding baby Percy, his forehead lined with concern. "I'm a disgrace to the family. Getting expelled...."

"Expelled!" his mother cried. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"We've just been to see the headmaster and he said you're a hero!" his father exclaimed.

Bill stopped and squinted at his father as though he perhaps hadn't heard the headmaster correctly. Surely he'd said "a heel" or something else bad, not "a hero." Which, in Bill's experience, usually meant something good.

"You must have heard him wrong, Dad—"

"Oh, no, I didn't. I heard him perfectly clearly," his father said cheerfully. "A *hero*. He said you threw yourself on your friend Alex when the explosion occurred, and helped him out of Honeyduke's. Alex told him everything." Bill swallowed as his father looked proudly at him.

"Mind you, you shouldn't have *been* down in the village to begin with," his mother added, a stern edge to her voice momentarily, "but you're not *expelled*. You aren't the one who blew up the sweet shop." Now she looked grim. "Of course, you'll have to wait until you're a fourth year to go to the village now, which seems perfectly appropriate. If there even *are* Hogsmeade weekends at that point. Not," she went on, raising one eyebrow, "that your father or I would have signed the form for you to go during your third year. Not after this. If the headmaster hadn't ruled that you had to wait, we *would* have. But that is to be your only punishment."

"I mean, Bill, why should you and your friends be expelled for venturing into the village without permission just because you had the bad luck to walk into a Death Eater attack?" his father said reasonably.

"If anything, the dear old man seems to blame himself," his mother said, sounding particularly motherly at that point. "Keeps saying he should have known You-Know-Who would get wind of the Hogsmeade weekend and try to make trouble...."

Bill couldn't believe it. He wasn't expelled. He'd been so worried....

His father bounced the baby in his arms some more. Percy was a pale, skinny child, almost a year old, his bright red hair curling over his head, his bright blue eyes snapping. Bill smiled feebly at the baby, who was laughing and clapping his hands.

"I think Perce is trying to cheer up his big brother," his father grinned, bouncing the baby some more. Bill looked at the small boy. *Some example I'm setting for my brothers and sisters*, he thought. *I'm the oldest. I'm supposed to be responsible.*

"Where are the others?" he asked, his throat tight as he let Percy grab his finger and hold it tightly, still gurgling and laughing.

"Charlie's old enough to stay home with the girls for a little while," his father said lightly. "And your Aunt Meg is supposed to be looking in on them by Floo." Bill noticed that his mother was giving a very half-hearted smile; he could tell it made her nervous to be away from them. Charlie would be starting at Hogwarts in September, but Annie was not quite seven and Peggy was months away from turning five. Bill remembered plenty of times when he was only eleven and took care of

Charlie, Annie and Peggy on his own—but his mother had only been an Apparition flight or a Floo trip away, not at Hogwarts, where they couldn't Apparate or use Floo. They would have to return to Hogsmeade before they could Floo home, as they couldn't Apparate with Percy.

They tried to talk for a little longer, while taking a walk on the grounds. They went down the long allee of oak trees that led to the greenhouses and then walked half-way around the lake and back. The talking usually petered out into extended silences. Before leaving, his mother hugged him again and looked in his face.

"Now, Bill. I know how you are. You seem to enjoy carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. Try to think good thoughts. You're safe and sound and not expelled."

"And soon you'll be home with your family for the summer, where we can keep an eye on you," his father winked. Bill tried to smile, but he wasn't feeling very cheerful. *Orville died because of me. I saw the sixth-years using the secret passage....*

At the same time—he had never been so homesick. And seeing the faces of his mates that morning, as they all awoke in the tower room which now had only four beds, had been one of the most excruciating moments of his life. He just knew they were all blaming him. If he hadn't seen what he'd seen and told them about it, Orville would still be alive. He wished now that he *had* grassed on the sixth-years, and that he'd told someone in authority about the tunnel, so it could be sealed and never used by anyone again.

He hadn't done that, though. No one had asked, either. It had been assumed that the second years had simply hidden themselves in the throng of students that had been part of the mass exodus from the castle the previous morning; no one asked about a secret passage, and, to his knowledge, none of the other second years had told any adult about such a passage.

After his parents had gone, Bill returned to the shores of the lake, skipping stones across the surface of the water and trying to focus firmly on that, so that he wouldn't start crying again.

"Oi, Bill!"

He turned abruptly, poised to throw the stone in his hand. He saw Jack Richards walking down the lawn toward him and lowered his arm. He and Orville and Jack had been best mates at the Hogsmeade village school, but he and Orville had grown apart from Jack since Jack had become a Hufflepuff on the first day of their first term.

"Hello," Bill said quietly to the other boy. Jack's grey eyes looked red around the edges and it didn't appear that he'd combed his light-brown hair recently. He picked up a flat stone on the shore of the lake and threw it, counting under his breath as it scudded across the water.

"Choo doing?" Jack asked, bending to look for another stone while Bill threw the one he was holding.

"Nothing," Bill said aimlessly, looking for another stone as Jack stood and threw the one he'd found.

"-four, five, six, seven," Jack chanted softly, watching his stone. "Not bad. Seven." Jack turned to him, and Bill also noticed that his nose was red.

"Can't believe he's gone," Jack said suddenly, plunging his hands into his pockets. "I mean—do you remember how we said before we came to Hogwarts that we'd still be friends, no matter what house we were sorted into? That was obviously a joke," he said, an edge to his voice as he bent over to look for another stone.

Bill grimaced guiltily. "Sorry, Jack. But don't blame Orville. I didn't make an effort to—"

"Oh, I'm not blaming Orville. I'm blaming myself. I could have done something. I'm a bloody Hufflepuff. Supposed to be so damn loyal." Jack threw another stone across the lake. "But—I could see that Orville wanted to be Alex Wood's friend now. He'd moved on. You seemed to, too. And it's not like I don't have new friends. Who was I to judge the pair of you? That's how it generally happens here. You get sorted and you're part of a new family. Your house family." He sighed. Bill nodded and they both bent down to pick up new stones. Suddenly, Bill looked up at his childhood friend and locked eyes with him.

"Jack."

"What?"

"We're—we're only in second year. We can fix this now. There's no reason we have to ignore each other for another five years. We never should have let houses make such a difference. From now on, it's the way it used to be. If you like, I can ask my mum if you can visit for a while this summer. I mean, I'll have to spend a lot of time taking care of my little sisters, and sometimes my baby brother, too. But—if you'd like—"

Jack was grinning ear to ear. "I love it at your house! It was always great whenever my mum and dad said we—I mean I—could go home with you on the bus and stay the weekend! You're right—we

should do that again! And maybe you'll let me—"

"—de-gnome the garden?" Bill asked, smiling slyly. "It always needs it, so of course."

Jack's grin grew wider. They sat on the shores of the lake for the rest of the afternoon, discussing plans for the summer and occasionally dredging up a funny memory of Orville; it was comforting to be able to laugh and think about him at the same time. They were only thirteen; they weren't certain how to go about mourning someone who was their age. And it was still hard to believe he was gone; when Jack was talking about things they used to do and said "we," Bill knew that he meant all three of them, Bill and Jack and Orville, when they used to both stay at his house. It would be a little strange for it just to be Jack coming to visit, but Bill thought it would be better than nothing.

"It'll be just like old times," Bill lied, knowing that it could never be like that again, without Orville joining them. They could, however, acknowledge his absence by remembering him. *We'll never forget you, mate*, he thought at Orville, wherever he was.

The boys threw stones in the lake and talked, making plans and remembering their friend....

* * * * *

Saturday, 5 August, 1977

"For he's a jolly good feh-eh-low! And so say all of us!"

Sirius, Peter and Remus were all grinning and patting James on the back. He sat at the head of the long kitchen table at Ascog Castle, where Sirius' family had lived since reclaiming their clan's castle ruins. After it was rebuilt, they had charmed it, like Hogwarts, to appear to be ruins still, so that Muggles were oblivious to the fact that a family of eight were living in a rebuilt tower house at the edge of Loch Ascog. James looked round at the Black family, who had taken him in without question after his parents had been killed. Sirius' mother was still quite youthful looking, not a bit of grey amidst the shining black hair swept up into a bun at the back of her head, her eyes twinkling at James. Sirius' father was much older than his mother, but even he didn't appear to be very old for sixty; James could imagine Sirius much older, with some wrinkles and white hair, when he saw Mr. Black.

Sirius' oldest sister, Cassiopeia, was regal and forbidding, and her husband was standoffish, but James had found that the other sister, Ursula, was as sprightly and friendly as Cass was stiff and curt, and he got on well with her husband Alan, too.

"Thanks," James said, his throat feeling tight suddenly as he regarded the people gathered round the long refectory table. "Thanks awfully. You really didn't have to go to all this trouble..."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, James. It's not every day you turn seventeen!" Callisto Black beamed at him. James grinned back at Sirius' mother.

"This cake looks fantastic..."

"Ursula made it. Your favorite: chocolate with raspberry fill between the layers and chocolate frosting on the outside."

James' mouth was watering just from the description. "Well, what are we waiting for?" Sirius demanded, laughing. "Get this man a knife so he can cut his cake!"

They cut it up and passed it round, and then there were presents. Sirius handed him a package which turned out to be an assortment of his favorite sweets; Sirius always got him the same thing, purchased from the sweetshop in Diagon Alley this time, instead of from Honeyduke's. However, James hadn't eaten any sweets since the day of the Honeyduke's attack and he looked down at the selection of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Fizzing Whizbies, Sugar Quills and other sweets he normally enjoyed a great deal, trying to think about something other than spewing. He swallowed and thought yet again of Bonnie, and of his tremendous guilt, and wondered whether he'd ever eat another sweet.

James raised his eyes to Sirius', who didn't seem to realize anything was wrong. *Stupid wonderful git. He means well, but...*

"Thanks, mate. Everybody, have some," he said, starting to pass it around the table, hoping that if the others ate enough, perhaps Sirius wouldn't notice that he wasn't partaking.

He would never forget the leaving feast from his sixth year, the tribute that Dumbledore had had the students pay to the victims of the Honeyduke's attack. Every student and teacher in the school had stood and raised their goblets to Bonita Manetti, Orville Simpson and a fourth year Ravenclaw girl named Philippa Tanner. Two adults had also died in the attack.

As the names rumbled through the hall, James had had to put his goblet down and place his hands on the table for support, unable to keep the dizziness from overwhelming him. On either side of him, Lily and Sirius had put their arms around him, and he'd felt the sympathy emanating from

them, the support. He looked up to find the eyes of Severus Snape boring into his from across the hall; Snape being very tall meant it was easy enough to see his hostile expression. James swallowed, wondering what there really was between Snape and Lily (he assumed Lily was the reason for the glare). He surreptitiously glanced around Sirius at Remus, who nodded and smiled sympathetically, obviously bearing him no ill will for Lily comforting him, in stark contrast to Snape. He sighed and looked down at Lily, who smiled feebly and put her head on his shoulder, her arm laced through his. He tried not to think about how right it felt to stand with her, arm in arm, just as he tried frequently not to think about how wonderful it had felt to curl up with her on the night of the attack, holding her as they both drifted off to sleep, hearing her regular, steady breathing in the night when he awoke repeatedly with horrid dreams. He felt acutely what an awful person he was; they were standing to give tribute to Bonnie, among others, and here he was wishing Lily was his girlfriend....

He shook himself, looking round at the people in the kitchen, trying not to be disappointed that Lily hadn't been able to come to his party. It would have meant her leaving her mother in the midst of more radiation treatments. James had tried to convince her before he'd learned about that; he'd written to her and proposed that she just go from her London home to the Leaky Cauldron and take the Floo network to Ascog Castle. (She couldn't have taken the Knight Bus because the castle was on the Isle of Bute and the Knight Bus couldn't cross water.) He had started off congratulating her for being named Head Girl and segued into his invitation to the party. (He had been named Head Boy, for no reason that he could discern except perhaps pity from the other prefects, because his girlfriend had just died.) When she'd written back to explain about her mother, it had been very tempting to write to her again and beg her to reconsider, but he realized that that would have sounded rather odd and desperate, so he didn't do it. (He had the letter all written, but he crumpled it up and threw it into the fire.)

"This came by owl post from your Great-Aunt Othalie," Ursula said now, handing him a package still in its brown paper wrapping, with string going all around to secure it. James used the cake knife to cut the string, getting icing on the brown paper. When he'd peeled the paper back, he found a medium-size wooden box with a tooled leather top bearing a coat of arms (a rampant lion, bearing a crown, flanked by a unicorn and a stag). He knew what the Gaelic legend around the image meant.

"*My race is royal*," James said softly, tracing the ancient words.

"Here now, don't be getting a swelled head or anything. It's not like you're the only member of Clan MacGregor in the world or anything," Sirius said, laughing. James smiled up at him; Sirius was standing before his own clan's coat of arms, with its silver lion on blue.

"I wonder what Aunt Othalie was doing with this," he said musingly. "She's a Potter. Well, by marriage, anyway. It's my mum who was Clan MacGregor. *And*," he added, smirking at Sirius now, "need I remind you that her surname was *King* before she married my dad?"

Sirius threw his head back and laughed while James slowly opened the box. The first thing he found was a letter from his great aunt.

My Dear James,

I hope you have a happy seventeenth birthday. I have been keeping some items safe which I recovered from your parents' cottage in Godric's Hollow after their deaths, and now that you are of age I believe you should have them. I enjoyed having you and your friend come visit me during the Christmas holiday. I am a very old woman; calling me your great-great-aunt is more accurate than great aunt, but you can't be sitting about all day spouting ruddy titles, can you? It was refreshing to have young people about again.

James smiled. He loved his Aunt Othalie. She was ancient (around a hundred-and-forty, he reckoned) but still very spirited. She had led quite a life. She had regaled him and Sirius with late-night stories of how, when she was a Muggle-born witch fresh out of Hogwarts, she had disguised herself as a man and joined the Royal Navy. Then she'd gone to America, helping to smuggle slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad, all the while using magic to thwart their pursuers. She claimed that she was the one who had caused the cigars wrapped round with Confederate battle plans to fall into Union hands, turning the tide of the war. She also claimed that *she* was actually Annie Oakley, the sharp-shooter, that Wild Bill Hickock was a wizard who regularly used magic in his Wild West Show, and that she'd been in San Francisco for the 1906 earthquake, which supposedly convinced her to leave North America. She said she went to Hong Kong from there (running an opium den for wizards) before going down to Australia to be an actress with a wizarding theatre troupe in Sydney. (An affair with the married Australian Minister of Magic caused a dreadful scandal.)

James didn't know whether to believe any of her tall tales (he'd actually caught her in more than one fib, which she'd blamed on a faulty memory), but the stories were all very exciting. If even a

fraction of it were true, she'd been in more wars and had more careers and paramours than anyone he'd ever known, finally settling down with his grandfather's uncle, Jeremy Potter, after the Great War. They'd never had children and he'd never known his great-uncle. (Or great-great-uncle, as he was his great-grandfather's brother.) Jeremy Potter had died in a pub duel in the early thirties. His killer was still in Azkaban, which Aunt Othalie said was one of the few places in the world where she *hadn't* been, and didn't care to, thank you very much.

I thought you should also have the old family Bible. Recorded in it are all of the births and deaths and marriages in the family going back for hundreds of years. Your parents' wedding bands are in the small velvet pouch, as well as the engagement ring your father gave your mother, and his father before that, and so on. I never wore it, since Jeremy's brother had given it to your great-grandmother, but then you know I'm not one for baubles.

I'm sorry I can't give you more, but I'm an old woman and I've tried to give away as much as possible over the years to avoid my possessions being a burden on me. That's why I gave you my Invisibility Cloak years ago. I did tell you it was a gift from my Jeremy, didn't I? Fortunately, I haven't had need of it in years, and haven't missed it. (The next time you visit, I shall have to tell you of my years spent spying on Rommel, when it was very useful.) I hope you are enjoying it.

Happy birthday, and write to your old auntie soon.

Love,

Othalie

James reached into the box, and withdrew a book that looked far too big to fit into the box without its being magically enlarged. He ran his fingers over the hand-tooled leather of the cover, which, oddly enough, bore a pickaxe on the front, as well as the Masonic symbol. He wanted to look at this in private, later, so he replaced the book in the box and closed the lid again.

"Just some old family things she wanted me to have," he said feebly. No one questioned him about it. After the party was over and he had said goodbye to Remus and Peter, who returned to their homes using the sitting room fireplace, James took his presents up to the room he and Sirius shared and put the box away carefully in his wardrobe. He went to the large window seat which overlooked the small castle courtyard and gazed up into the heavens, missing Lily so much his chest ached. She had sent a card and a book for a gift, and returned his congratulations for being Head Boy, but that was all. He wasn't sure what he had expected; she surely thought of him still as a brother. If she thought he would make a physical advance, he was certain she wouldn't have let him sleep in her bed the night Bonnie died. She obviously thought of their sharing the bed as perfectly innocent, and if she'd had a real brother she probably would have done the same thing. It wasn't as though she was ignorant of what went on between men and women, he thought, remembering her breaking her leg. She wasn't a child. *She just doesn't think of me that way...*

He remembered Snape glaring at him during the leaving feast. He'd seen her send tender looks in the direction of the tall Slytherin many times; it was obvious that she cared about him. On the other hand, her sympathetic looks toward Remus had waned, replaced by angry, puzzled frowns. Did she know what he was? James wondered. The thought of her being with Snape made him physically ill. He didn't know whether things had advanced that far, but it *was* possible.

He turned away from the window, trying to evict that image from his mind. He was seventeen today. He was of-age. Suddenly, he felt an incredible need to get out of the constricting walls of Ascog Castle. He needed to run with four hooves through the night, his best friend by his side....

"Sirius," James said suddenly, turning to find his best friend wearing his pajamas and climbing into his four-poster. "Don't let's go to bed yet. Let's go out. I feel like running beneath the moon. Look at her up there," he said, turning to the window again, pointing out the waning moon. "Bright as day. It's too hot to stay here, on the top floor of the castle. We can sleep tomorrow, in the afternoon, when it's sweltering. Tonight let's go out."

Sirius considered this. "All right. But not just running around wild. I'd like to go into Rothesay." Rothesay was the largest town on the Isle of Bute, with a busy port.

"Oh, come on. What will people think if they see a stag wandering around the town?"

"Or walking along the quay!" Sirius laughed. "You git; when we're in town, change back and pretend you're walking your dog."

James grimaced; he almost used the "it's *my* birthday" card, but resisted the temptation. He didn't want to rub it in that Sirius wasn't going to be turning seventeen until late September; James would have almost a whole month of being of-age during the summer holiday, while Sirius would still be punished if he were caught doing magic outside of school. (It was illegal, of course, for them both to be unregistered Animagi.)

Sirius dressed again and they crept down the spiral stairs, which led to the dungeons of the tower house. They froze on the landing outside Sirius' parents' bedroom when his father let out a particularly loud snort in his sleep, making James wish he had brought the Invisibility Cloak. Finally, they were in the dungeons, walking through the torch-lit passages leading to the small cottage which functioned as the entrance to the Black home. While the castle appeared to be ruins when Muggles looked at it, the cottage did not, although it was overgrown with vines and some of the windows were smashed in. It looked like a peasant abode that had been abandoned years earlier, but as a precaution, it carried anti-Muggle charms, like the castle, and these charms caused any Muggles who came too near to suddenly remember urgent appointments and go running off. Fortunately, very few Muggles were interested in the ruins of Ascog Castle, even clan Lamont enthusiasts, who were usually more fascinated by Towart Castle and Ascog House, a large manor on the east coast of the island. Sometimes Muggles came to the loch to do some fly-fishing (Sirius and James enjoyed doing this with his dad and Ursula's husband) but otherwise it was a very quiet place to live.

James and Sirius ascended the rickety stairs that led from the cottage's cellar to the ground floor, and once they were outside they brushed themselves off, as they were covered with old spider webs and other dirt. Most of the time, they all left the castle to go into the wizarding world by Floo (or Apparition, for the older members of the household) and so the dungeon corridors weren't in regular use and had filled with large cobwebs. James and Sirius were usually the only ones who needed to use the cottage to leave the castle.

When James looked up he saw that Sirius had changed into his Animagus form. He smiled, knowing how much his friend loved being an Animagus. There *was* something indescribable about it. Actually becoming another creature was the most amazing thing James had ever experienced. He felt so *alive* when he was in his animal form.

He closed his eyes, concentrating, feeling the change move through him, feeling the wrench in his bones as they changed shape. No matter how much he thought he was prepared for the pain, it always seemed to startle him and take his breath away. Once it was accomplished, he could relax until such time as he changed back again (except that he was actually incredibly alert every second that he was a stag), but there was always that moment of indrawn breath, when the most unimaginable pain pierced him and reminded him that no magical advantage was without its price.

And then there was the beauty of the night seen through a stag's eyes. He looked up, feeling the pull of the moon and hearing the wild animal cries coming from the brush around the castle and loch. He walked to the shore of Loch Ascog and did something he would normally not have done in his human form, bending down to drink the cold water, feeling the *life* there, the movements of the fish living in the loch, the rustling of the grasses near the shore, where small wild rodents were hoping to avoid the claws of the birds of prey who swept down in the moonlight. The night was atwitter with tens of thousands of creatures following their instincts, going through the dance of the life cycle, and James felt an awareness of this in every hair of his hide.

The large black dog trotted beside him; Sirius also drank from the loch, lapping noisily, before diving into the water and paddling out toward the center, then turning round and returning to the shore. When he was on dry land again, he shook vigorously, making drops of water fly in all directions, including onto James' flanks. The water felt like needles striking his hide, and James poked Sirius with his antlers, in retaliation. Sirius barked cheerfully, and James could swear he was smiling mischievously, before running at a gallop toward the road to Rothesay.

They made their way toward the port town through cottage gardens and at the edges of roads. Once, when they were crossing what passed for a motorway on the island, a car began bearing down on them and James turned, fascinated, staring into the bright lights, before he felt Sirius nip him on the leg and push him to the edge of the road, the car *swishing* past them incredibly quickly, making Sirius' tail appear to be moving as fast as the car, caught in its wake. James nudged Sirius' ear with his nose, grateful for the save. He had to be careful of that tendency; it was unnerving when his animal instincts threatened to overwhelm his human common sense.

As they made their way to the port, James occasionally stopped to nibble on choice shrubs and the low-hanging branches of certain trees. He could not begin to imagine eating leaves normally (he wasn't even very fond of salads) but when he was a stag, these leaves tasted incredibly sweet and delicious to him, and he found himself hankering for them almost from the moment of the change. Sirius, on the other hand, made a pest of himself as far as other dogs were concerned. Whenever they came to a garden with a kennel in it, he had to check to see whether the resident dog or dogs had eaten everything in their food dishes. James was tempted to go to a Muggle shop and buy tins of dog food for Sirius for his birthday. Sometimes Sirius actually opined about his favorite dog foods, and on occasional nocturnal excursions such as this, he would turn up his nose at dishes containing food scraps from the owners' dinner tables; those people obviously didn't *care* enough

about their pets to give them proper nutrition. When Sirius ranted about this James tuned it out.

He had long ago concluded that one of the nicest parts of being out with his mates in animal form was the silent companionship; there was no pressure to *talk*, to discuss things, dissect issues, beat topics to death. James loved his friends, but when he wanted someone to talk to, he went to Lily, not to Remus, James or Peter.

Lily. How could he continue to go to her now that he was developing feelings for her? What if she caught on, and felt awkward, and stopped–stopped being there for him? He thought of the tension hovering between her and Remus. They used to be good friends, but James didn't know what they were now that they had been lovers, and he wasn't even clear that they were ex-lovers. There was still *something* there between them, he could tell, but he didn't have a name for it, especially as Snape also seemed to be in the picture now as well.

As much as he had bared his soul to Lily many times and she had cried on him about her mother, and confessed her crush on Sirius, she had never discussed her physical relationship with Remus, even though she knew he knew about it, since he had helped take her to the hospital wing with her broken leg. And she had certainly not discussed Severus Snape with him. He wondered whether he should encourage her to do so; perhaps if she agreed, hearing about her relationships with other boys would wake him up and make it possible for him to regard her as a sister again. Giving her objective, dispassionate advice about her love life might be the very thing to remind him that she was a friend, not a girlfriend, and someone he didn't want to lose. If they dated and it didn't work out, he hated the idea of never being able to talk to her again as he was used to. He knew he would feel incredibly bereft if that happened.

At length, they reached the town proper, and James ducked into the shadows of a large house to change into his human form again, walking with Sirius along the mostly unlit streets, the darkness punctuated occasionally by lights from windows or briefly-opened doors, or shop windows displaying their goods to no one in particular. When they reached the quay, the bright moonlight bathing the open space there was almost blinding in contrast to the dark alleys where its light could not reach. There were a few couples walking hand in hand along the quay, the yachts bobbing gently in the water, which reflected the moon like a mirror. Suddenly, a familiar figure caught James' eye, and he paused, then hid himself behind a tall wooden post wrapped round with a large quantity of heavy rope. Sirius didn't notice and was still trotting along happily, enjoying his outing. James tried to beckon to him.

"Sirius!" he hissed ineffectually. "*Padfoot! Come back here!*"

Then Sirius noticed the figure James had seen, and he stopped, stiffening, a low growl making his entire body shiver. James peered cautiously around the post, trying not to reveal himself.

Severus Snape was striding purposefully around the deck of the nearest yacht; James saw that it bore the name *Patricia*. He wore loose white sailor's trousers, the cuffs turned up a few times, revealing his pale, bony ankles above his deck shoes, and a plain white shirt with long sleeves that had been turned up so that the pale skin of his surprisingly muscled forearms was visible in the moonlight. His hair was pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck and he smiled at the older man who was tossing him some rope, which Snape wound several times around a large cleat on the mast in a complicated pattern that James assumed must be a specific sailing knot of some kind. It seemed almost to be a kind of ritual to Snape, winding the rope just so.

He was a Snape whom James Potter had never seen, laughing and cheerful, lifting his face to the sky as if basking in the moonlight. James saw now that the older man was very handsome; his eyes crinkled up at the young man as he watched him secure the rope.

"What are ye so cheerful about tonight?" the older man said in a lilting Scotch burr. "Was that a laitter from yer lass ye had this afternoon?"

James thought it might be possible Snape was actually blushing, although it was hard to tell in the light from the moon. "It was from Lily," he acknowledged, needlessly continuing to pay attention to the rope. He looked less cheerful.

"Wail? Ain't she yer lass? Och–sorry. *Gairlfraind.*"

James saw Snape stiffen, and then Sirius let out a growl and a bark, and the tall Slytherin swung his head around and glared at the dog on the quay. The older man turned and looked at the dog also before looking back at Snape.

"What is it, Severus? Afraid o' dogs noo, are we?"

Severus Snape shook himself and looked startled. "Er, no Uncle Duncan. I'm not afraid of dogs. But that dog—" he paused, his voice dripping with suspicion. "I know I've seen that dog before—"

"Wail, it cood be a Grim," his uncle said with a lopsided smile. "Cood be fortellin' yer airly demise." There was a hint of barely-suppressed laughter in his voice.

Snape threw a small rag to him, making him react abruptly to catch it. "Don't be stupid. Mother

always said Divination was ridiculous, *especially* omens.” His voice was dripping with disdain, as though he was incapable of discerning that his uncle was just trying to get him wound up. *That* was the Snape James was used to; he was surprised he would speak to his uncle this way, but the older man still seemed highly amused. He tossed the rag into a pail near the edge of the foredeck.

“C’mon, lad. I hear a pint callin’ me. Ef ye behave, there just might be one callin’ yer name as wail,” he grinned, loping down the gangplank onto the quay, his nephew following, swinging his arms, attempting to look carefree. James’ heart was in his throat. *Please behave, Sirius, please behave*, he pleaded silently, hoping his friend wouldn’t go after Snape and his uncle.

But Sirius stayed in place, fur bristling, the growl a constant low buzzing now. Snape turned and looked at the dog over his shoulder for a moment, and James ducked behind the other side of the rope-wrapped post so he wouldn’t be seen. When the uncle and nephew had disappeared inside a pub that was in view of the quay (“The Topsy Bo’sun”) James emerged from his hiding place and said tersely to Sirius, “Come on, you. Nice work, being seen by Snape, of all people. Has he also seen you at school? Is that why he thinks you look familiar? That’s brilliant. He *knows* you live on the island, too. I know you can’t answer right now; I prefer it that way, frankly. Damn stupid of you is all I can say. Now let’s go home before you do something else to get us both into trouble.”

However, at the first opportunity, when they were in deep shadows in an alleyway branching off from the quay, Sirius changed into his human form and grabbed James’ arm. “Didn’t you hear Snape’s uncle?” he hissed at his friend, his breath a blast of hot air in James’ face. “His uncle called Lily *his girlfriend*. That slimy Slytherin! Are we just going to let this happen?”

James shook his arm free and walked away from Sirius, speaking with his back turned so his friend couldn’t see his face. “What do you mean *let this happen*? It’s none of our business, is it? It’s between her and Snape,” he said, his stomach in knots as he thought of Snape touching her, kissing her....He felt like bending over and spewing onto the pavement....

“What do you mean, *what do I mean*? What about our friend? What about *Remus*? Don’t tell me you’re ignorant of all that.”

James stopped in surprise; had Remus told Sirius about him and Lily, or had Sirius figured it out? He faced Sirius, but he was unable to see his friend’s face in the dimness. “No,” he said softly. “I’m not ignorant. But it still doesn’t mean it’s any of our business. Whatever is—or was—between Lily and Remus is their affair, not ours.” He winced then, wishing he hadn’t used the word “affair.”

“Not if Snape is stealing her away from him!” Sirius insisted after James turned and walked on. James didn’t stop.

“Don’t be a prat,” he threw over his shoulder. “You’re just jealous because she got over the crush she had on you and didn’t like the way you made a pass at her. You’re not upset on Remus’ behalf. This is about *you*. I still see you looking at her. You’re as bad as Peter sometimes....”

He had heard Sirius’ footsteps following him as they turned onto a wider street, but now he heard them come to a halt. “All right, all right, Potter. That’s where I draw the line. Comparing me to *Pettigrew*.”

James turned and glared at him; he could see Sirius’ face now in the moonlight. “Cut that out, Sirius. His name is Peter. Although perhaps you’re *not* just like Peter. After all, I think she’d sooner kiss *him* than you, the way you botched it the last time....”

He couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him as he started running flat out, knowing that as soon as he said this Sirius would be after him. They both ran for some distance in their human forms, but when James veered off and jumped over a hedge into a large garden around a grey stone house, he changed in mid-leap into his stag form, building up speed as he did so, eventually hearing the panting of the dog far behind him.

They ran like that all the way back to the castle, and the moment he saw the loch again, James couldn’t resist taking a good long drink, standing at the water’s edge, while his heart pounded rapidly in his chest and the sweat ran down his hide. It was so exhilarating to run as a stag! Sirius hadn’t caught him up yet, but he headed toward the cottage anyway, changing back so he could open the door. In truth, he hadn’t previously said anything to Sirius about his clear crush on Lily because he felt it wasn’t quite fair to tease someone about something from which he also suffered: unrequited love for Lily Evans.

When Sirius hove into sight, he headed straight for James, who laughed and closed the door in the dog’s face, knowing that Sirius would have to become human again to turn the knob. When he did, James was already heading down the steps into the passage leading back to the castle dungeons. He was at least a full flight of stairs ahead of Sirius all the way back up to their room, and had changed into his pajamas and climbed into his bed by the time Sirius had reached the top floor. Sirius glared at him when he entered the room, and undressed in brooding silence before climbing into his own bed and extinguishing the lights.

After they had lain in their beds quietly for some minutes, Sirius said, "I asked the Rothesay harbormaster about her once. The *Patricia*, I mean. He said, It's a yare ship out of Dunoon, captain by the name of MacDermid. They usually tie-up in Rothesay after dark, but they do the odd yacht race.' At *night*, Prongs. Why would they need to sail at night, usually? *Why?*"

James groaned into the darkness. "Are you still on about that? Yes, it's *very* likely that Snape, a seventeen-year-old vampire, is participating in yacht races with his uncle on the Firth of Clyde," he said sarcastically, hoping Sirius would hear how absurd this sounded.

"I don't care what you think; there's something very off about him, even beyond his being a Slytherin. He *definitely* shouldn't be allowed anywhere near Lily."

"Don't you think that's up to Lily to decide?" He secretly agreed with his best friend (not about the vampire silliness), but he couldn't bring himself to admit it, somehow.

Sirius was silent for a minute, fuming into the darkness. James didn't say anything else, hoping he would be able to fall asleep soon, but unable to forget lying in Lily's bed, his body curled around hers....

At length, when he finally was starting to drift off, he wasn't sure he caught the words Sirius was mumbling into the darkness:

"I'm going to get Snape away from Lily if it kills me. Or him."

* * * * *

Monday, 28 August, 1977

"Bill!"

He felt small hands pulling at him. He rolled over, pushing them away.

"Go way. Sleep..."

"*Bill!*" His eyes flew open and he blinked a few times. an orange blur was standing by his bedside. He had to blink a few more times before it ceased to be a blur. It was Peggy. Her eyes were wild and she looked like she'd been crying. He sat up in bed, looking over at Charlie, still snoring and oblivious, and Jack, who was sleeping in a camp bed between the two larger beds. Jack had been with them for a few days and would be leaving for Hogwarts with them. Early morning light was filtering into the room, a color both grey and peach.

Bill rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Wha's wrong, Peg...?"

Her lip trembled. "It's Daddy."

Bill felt wide awake now. He grasped his four-year-old sister's shoulders and held her still. "What? What's happened to Dad?" He had no doubt that whatever Peggy had to tell him, it would be important. He had learned to trust her, even as he had grown increasingly wary of her premonitions. He had also cautioned her against telling just anyone that she *had* premonitions, since there were people who didn't like people like her, people who had the Sight. He was quite certain by now that she was a Seer, and he was afraid for her. However, he had made certain that she knew she could always come to him and tell him anything. Unfortunately, she always seemed to have things to tell him when he was still in bed, asleep, and it was barely sunrise.

He moved over and patted the mattress next to him and she scrambled into the bed, her small thin body feeling oddly cold next to his; he felt almost no body heat emanating from her through his pajamas. He held her in his arms, trying to warm her.

"Tell me about it, Peg," he whispered to her. She looked up at him with large eyes.

"Daddy's killed a man."

Bill looked at her, frozen, unable to say anything. She peered up at him. "Did you hear me, Bill?"

He shook himself. "Ye-yeah. I heard you. You're sure? It's already happened?" She nodded. "Did you know about it-before?" She started crying, nodded.

"I hoped I was wrong," she sobbed. "And now-now Daddy is in trouble-:"

Bill's heart was in his throat. "He is?" But that was stupid; of *course* his father would be in trouble.

He'd killed a man.

Bill knew that his father had gone out on night-raid duty. Informants had given his department information about homes in which there was contraband, and Bill's father's duty was to get warrants and then go on surprise raids, which were the most successful, historically, although also dangerous. His father had gotten into numerous duels and had sustained some bad wounds; he had had more hexes and curses hurled at him than he could count. Bill remembered visiting his father at work and wished that that was all his father ever had to do, boring paperwork. That visit had not shown his children the full extent of the dangers his job held, especially now that so many people were falling in line behind Voldemort.

Bill *thought* his name, but he'd never dared say it; he always said what everyone else said: *You-Know-Who*. Bill hated knowing his dad was going on raids overnight; he always feared the worst, that they would hear, in the morning, that his father's considerable skills as a duelist had failed him, and he'd been killed by a dark wizard.

Little did Bill realize then that there was something else to be feared. His father hadn't been killed. It was *he* who had done the killing, and now he was in trouble. Bill swallowed. What if his father went to prison? What would they all do then?

He looked down at Peggy, who was crying quietly, her head on his chest. He tightened his hold on her and rocked her gently.

"Ssh, Peggy, ssh. It will be all right...."

But he didn't know that. He could only hope.

* * * * *

Lily sighed and closed her trunk, having now packed away all of the school supplies that she would need for the coming year. She had met Cecilia Ratkowski in Diagon Alley on Saturday and bought what she needed, enjoying spending time with her friend without having to compete for her attention with the Hufflepuff girls.

Lily had driven across London in Petunia's car, at their parents' behest, and after reaching the Leaky Cauldron, where she was meeting Cecilia, Petunia climbed into the driver's seat to go back down to Surrey, where she lived with her new husband, the son of the director of the Grunnings drill factory. Her sister had been very snappish about doing this; she seemed to think that, having gotten married in early June, she would no longer be requested to do things like help Lily practice driving, so she could test for her license before returning to school. (She still only had her *provo*.) Petunia was also whinging the entire time about being late for work at the factory; Lily wasn't sure why she needed to worry about tardiness, though, as she was now working for her father-in-law, and her husband would be taking over for his father as soon as the old man retired, in a year or two. Lily thought the only person more vile than old Mr. Dursley was his son, Vernon, and now he was her *brother-in-law*.

Lily hadn't known about the wedding. She'd found out after returning home that Petunia had claimed that she'd sent a letter off to Lily about it, asking whether she minded it being in June, since Lily would still be at school. She'd lied to their parents and claimed that Lily had written back to say that it was fine with her. Lily had had to hide her shock when she learned of the wedding or risk Petunia's wrath. (She had also to put up with her father berating her, asking her why she hadn't wanted to come to the wedding she'd known nothing about.)

Lily wasn't terrifically surprised; she had felt her sister's resentment keenly ever since Professor McGonagall had shown up at the Leicestershire house to tell her she was a witch, but she never imagined that Petunia would do such a despicable thing as purposefully exclude her own sister from her wedding. Truthfully, Lily wasn't upset about not getting to see Petunia marry Vernon Dursley, whom she avoided whenever she could. It was the *principle* of the thing. She was Petunia's *sister*. She should have been there. When she confronted Petunia about this in the lounge at St. Michael's, while they were waiting for their mother to emerge from her chemotherapy (their father was talking to the doctor in his office) Petunia's face had turned red.

"Do you want to know why I didn't want you at my wedding? I'll tell you! I didn't want you to turn it into a circus! I didn't want my flowers changing into slugs; I didn't want the punch to leap out of the bowl; I didn't want the cake to get up and start dancing....I just wanted a nice, *normal* wedding with other nice *normal* people. And for that, you just don't qualify!"

Lily scowled. "Are we going to talk about that again?"

"No, we are not, because *you* evidently don't care enough about our mother to—"

"I *can't*, Petunia! I'm not allowed!"

"You said you're allowed to do—*that*—outside of school now that you're over seventeen!" her sister hissed, her face very close to Lily's. "You could save her life, but you won't!"

"You don't understand. There are other laws besides restrictions on doing—*things*—while under-age."

Lily agonized over her mother. She wished she *could* do something to save her, but she didn't have training with medical magic, and even if she did, she would be breaking the law to perform medical magic on a Muggle. However, breaking the law didn't concern her as much as the possibility of hurting her mother. She knew that if you didn't know what you were doing, you could kill someone from botching up something like trying to remove cancerous cells from a person. *What if I removed her liver, instead?* Lily thought. Petunia had tried telling her that if she couldn't do it herself, she should find someone else who could, but then that would entail talking someone else

into breaking the law.

So, the rift between her and Petunia having grown wider than ever, Lily found herself taking a vicious delight in performing magic when Petunia was around, now that it was legal for her to do so. (And she wasn't technically breaking the law, as Petunia wasn't your average Muggle, but the sister of a witch.) She'd had such a stitch in her side from laughing after her sister had been about to drink some tea at their house one evening (Petunia had stopped by after visiting their mother in hospital, and their father hadn't come home from St. Michael's yet). The cup had turned into a small hamster in her hand. Her sister had thrown the animal violently across the table, screeching deafeningly, and if looks could kill, Lily would have been struck down dead a score of times.

"Careful!" she'd said to her hysterical older sister. "You'll hurt it! I'm sorry," she said, her laughter barely contained. "The other teacups were all dirty, so I did a Transfiguration spell to make another one. I suppose I was still tired and it was a rather sloppy spell; it shouldn't have worn off already...."

Petunia was looking daggers at her. "Even if it *hadn't* worn off, how can you let me drink my tea out of—out of a filthy *rat*?"

"It's not a rat, it's—"

"A *mouse*, then!" she screeched. "I was going to drink my tea from a *mouse*!"

"It's a hamster, actually," Lily told her, about to lose her composure completely. She picked up the small frightened creature, feeling its tiny heart beating rapidly against her fingers. Her sister's bottle-blond hair was a wild halo around her head, and her blouse was spattered with spilled tea, but holding the hamster, Lily found that she was far more sorry that she'd subjected the poor hamster to her sister than the other way round.

When Petunia marched indignantly from the house, Lily pressed her lips together, shaking with mirth, and didn't let herself laugh out loud until she heard Petunia's car door close with an angry *slam!* When she finally let herself laugh freely, she had tears running down her face. It took some time for her to calm down, and she went to sit in the kitchen, on the couch by the fire, stroking the soft fur of the tiny hamster, wishing there was someone else to laugh with her about her little prank. *The lads would appreciate this, no doubt,* she thought. She wished she could have gone to James' birthday party in Scotland, but her mother had been going through a particularly frightful time and she didn't dare ask for permission to go to a party instead of sitting with the rest of the family in the hospital lounge, waiting for her mother to emerge from therapy, shaking and pale and skeletal, with no eyebrows to give her face expression. Oddly, that was one of the things that had struck Lily the most: it was very hard to read her mother's expressions without the eyebrows. She'd never really considered before how much of people's emotions are communicated by those two little stretches of hair growing on the brow.

After closing her trunk, Lily looked around her room and went to her desk, under the window which looked out on the long, narrow city garden, so different from the sprawling wilderness of the garden in Leicestershire they'd left behind when they'd moved to the city. This garden was very prim and formal, with its brick walks and raised flower beds, its evenly-spaced benches and little gurgling fountain spewing water from a pouting dolphin's mouth. She thought about the way it had looked the night before, in the moonlight, when she'd sat at her desk in the dark, staring out over the garden, and the answer to the Remus conundrum had lit up her brain like a wildfire.

The moon. Every time the lads were out with Remus, she had come to realize, it had been *during the full moon.* And every time she had been with Remus, it had been *right before* the full moon. She hadn't wanted it to be true, she had denied it and told herself it was ridiculous. And yet....

She recalled many things about Remus that seemed to point to the truth: the hair growth, for a start. How many teenage boys were that hairy? And he was pale, so pale....

She'd turned on the desk lamp and taken out her Defense Against the Dark Arts book, turning to the last chapter, on werewolves. But the longer she read, the more optimistic she became. *Of course!* How could she have been so stupid! The headmaster would never have let a *werewolf* into the school! She felt ashamed of having been so silly to even briefly think this could be the answer.

She resisted the temptation now to pull the book out of the trunk again and look at the last chapter. The author of the text acknowledged that, over the centuries, many people had been erroneously labeled as werewolves because they suffered from porphyria. It also discussed people who had been erroneously labeled as vampires because of a different version of the disease. Lily couldn't quite believe it, but it seemed that *both* boys she'd fallen for had the same disease! That explained Remus' trips to the hospital wing at odd times, and his moodiness at others. She laughed at herself again for having thought even for a moment that Remus might be a werewolf, but then she remembered that she had also briefly thought Severus might really be a vampire, after he'd kissed her under the oaks.

She decided that when the new term started, she would tell Remus that she knew about the porphyria. Perhaps he wouldn't be so distant with her any more after that. Perhaps they could repair their relationship (perhaps they could *have* a real relationship). She thought of Severus, and having to let him down easily. Sometimes she became fluttery, thinking of being with him, but when she was being completely honest with herself, she knew that her feelings for Remus were stronger and that she should end the relationship with Severus. She wished she hadn't written to him implying otherwise, earlier in the summer, as that would be rather hard to undo now.

Sighing, she closed her eyes and concentrated, thinking, *Wingardium leviosa*. She knew that when she opened her eyes, many of the small objects in the room would be floating in the air. She enjoyed doing this charm as a magical exercise, without her wand, moving the small figurines and desk supplies and her clock about the room in a gentle dance. However, a moment after she performed the charm, she heard a scream come from the doorway. She whirled, finding her brother-in-law standing there, his mouth open in a horrified circle as he stared at the floating fireplace poker before him. Lily screamed as well, and lost her concentration. All of the floating objects crashed to the floor. Vernon Dursley looked at her with wide eyes before turning and bolting.

Lily ran down the stairs after him. He was out of the house by the time she had reached the foot of the stairs. She remembered then that Petunia and Vernon were picking her up to take her to see their mother; their father had stayed the night with her. Vernon had evidently let himself into the house with Petunia's key and, when he hadn't found Lily downstairs, he'd gone up to her room to look for her. Lily closed the front door hurriedly and dashed to the car where Vernon sat, gibbering, while Petunia glared at her sister. Lily reached her hand out and opened the car door, sliding into the back seat, crossing her arms and feeling disagreeable.

Petunia turned to her husband, stroking his shaking shoulders. "What is it, sweetums? What did my nasty sister do?"

Her portly husband looked up at her; Lily thought it possible that he hadn't blinked since he'd left the doorway of her room. "She-she-if I told you, you'd think I was mad!"

Lily sighed impatiently. "Don't tell me you haven't *told* him, Petunia. After all, he's part of the family now. He should *know*." She turned to the shaking, shivering mess of a man before her. "It's very simple. I'm a witch. That's why Petunia didn't want me at the wedding. I can do magic. So, now you know."

Petunia pointed at the car door. "*Out!*" she screeched. "Get out!" Lily looked at her in disbelief, then drew her lips into a line.

"Fine!" she spat in return. "I'll take the tube. I'll see you there!"

She opened the car door again and stood on the pavement; she had no sooner slammed the door than Vernon had floored the accelerator and sped off. Lily felt hot tears prickling behind her eyelids. *What did I ever do to get a sister like Petunia?* she wondered. Sniffing for a moment, she checked her purse to see whether she had the fare for the tube, then closed it and began walking dejectedly toward the nearest station, glad that she would be returning to school in a few days.

* * * * *

The Weasley children and their guest, Jack Richards, were uncharacteristically quiet as they sat round the large kitchen table having their tea. They were all very tense; when Charlie and Jack had awoken that morning, they'd found Peggy curled up with Bill, both of them sleeping peacefully, and when the two of them had been shaken awake, Bill explained what had happened. It turned out that Annie already knew, when they tried to tell her. (Peggy had told her first, and told her to go to Bill.)

All day, the children had moped around the house, waiting for Arthur Weasley to come home.

At breakfast, Bill had asked his mother when their father was returning, and she had been very flustered, responding nervously, "He-your father owed me. He's been detained. I mean-he still has to stay at the office for a bit longer. Because of last night's raids. Don't you worry about your dad."

But while she said this she looked very worried herself. Bill had gone into the living room to report to the others. Annie sat in a chair near the fire, looking very disgruntled. "We'll have to emigrate," she said at last.

"What?" Charlie said scornfully. "Are you daft? Why would we have to emigrate?"

"Because our father is a murderer, stupid, that's why. How is Mum going to support us all once Dad's in prison? No one will give her a job, the wife of a murderer. We'll have to go to Canada or Australia or something."

No one had anything to say to that. They tried to imagine living somewhere else, and specifically, living without their father, and couldn't.

Oblivious to his siblings' worries, Percy toddled over to Peggy, who was sitting cross-legged on

the hearth-rug, and deposited himself comfortably in her lap, as though she was an armchair. He looked up at her and smiled, and she brightened and smiled back, hugging him to her. Then suddenly, Bill saw her jaw go slack and her eyes became vacant and opaque. He felt an irrational apprehension grip him.

"Peggy! Peggy!" he cried. After a few moments, she finally came round, looking up in surprise.

"What?"

"You-you were—" Bill couldn't finish. She smiled at him.

"Oh, Bill! It's all right. It will be all right. Daddy will be home later," she said calmly, rocking back and forth, humming to Percy.

He hesitated. "Are you sure?"

She looked him in the eye and simply and calmly said, "Yes."

But Bill was not feeling very optimistic when they had finished their tea and were helping to clear the table, and Dad *still* was not home. They were all just about to leave the kitchen when a sudden *pop!* was heard near the cooker, and Bill turned to see his father, tired and unshaven, his shabby old work robes looking shabbier than ever. He was taking off his glasses so he could rub his eyes.

"*Dad!*" Bill cried with relief, diving across the room. Charlie followed, then Peggy. He enveloped them in a warm embrace, while Jack stood to one side, smiling shyly.

"Good to see you, Mr. Weasley." Arthur Weasley nodded at the boy.

"It's good to be back, Jack." He laughed then, because he'd rhymed, and picked Peggy up, her thin legs and arms wrapped around him. He held out his hand to Annie. "Where's my other girl? Where's my Annie-girl?" he grinned at her.

Annie looked back at him truculently and his face fell. He swallowed. The cheerful atmosphere suddenly evaporated.

"Er, well. I need to speak to Mum now, everybody. You lot go into the other room, all right? This may take a while."

Bill herded the others into the living room, closing the kitchen door behind him. But once he was in the living room, all he could do was pace nervously. Jack tried to calm him down.

"Sit, Bill. I'm sure it's—"

"No. No," he repeated, wringing his hands. "I-I can't not *know*..."

Jack raised his eyebrows at him. Charlie stood and approached them. His brother motioned toward the door.

"Go on, then. Tell us what they say."

Bill looked at the two of them, then at the girls, playing with Percy on the rug. He nodded grimly.

"All right. But if I get caught, this was my idea and you tried to stop me."

Charlie pushed him toward the door. "Oh, stop being noble for once and just get out there and eavesdrop on our parents." He was grinning at Bill, who grinned back at him. When he was standing in the corridor between the two rooms, he moved tentatively toward the kitchen door, trying not to make a sound, and put his ear to the wood, holding his breath.

"Oh, Arthur!" he heard his mother say. "They didn't!"

"It's all right, love, it's all right. It's—it's not too bad being around dementors for a short time. I'm fine now..." His father's voice was shaking.

"Nonsense! I'm making you some hot chocolate..."

A few moments later, Bill heard his father slurping something. "Mm, that's just right, Molly. Thanks. Alastor fetched me some chocolate at the Ministry, but I suppose I could do with more..."

"Just tell me what happened, Arthur. Your owl was so cryptic."

Bill heard his father sigh noisily. "We received a tip that this large manor house had contraband stashed in the library. So we went—Perkins and Alastor and I—and I showed them the warrant and they were just as shocked as you please. Contraband? Here? Surely not! You know the sort. Innocent as lambs, right up until the point when I find the illegal material..."

"So there I am, searching the library, taking all of these ruddy dusty books off the shelves and flipping through them, to look for book boxes, and Perkins is going through the desk and Alastor is guarding the doorway into the entrance hall. The owner comes to the door and asks whether he can get us anything to drink. Well, you know Alastor; won't drink anything that doesn't come from his hip flask. I was parched and had dust in my throat, but I felt it wiser to turn him down. It may not have been a trick, but if it was, who knows what he might really have been giving us to drink?"

"At any rate, Perkins didn't find anything in the desk and I wasn't finding anything either, and we were starting to wonder whether we were being led on a merry chase. The owner's son came to the door and suggested that someone who didn't like his dad was trying to make him look bad—and then I found something. I tried flipping through a book and found that I couldn't. It was a box. I

broke the locking charm on it and the son started for me, but Alastor held him in check.

"But then I found the mother-lode. A bookcase that wasn't a bookcase at all—it was a door. I was trying to break the charm keeping it closed when the son yelled for his father, who came in blasting away at me. I dodged his first attempt, but his second caught me on the leg..."

"Oh, Arthur! Are you—"

"Molly, calm down. Minor burns. I've been treated. The thing is—he—he stunned Alastor and then—then he—"

Bill thought his father just might be breaking down and crying. He heard his mother crooning to him, and finally, tears in his voice, his father began speaking again.

"It's as bad as they say it is, Molly. Like knives piercing every inch of your body at the same time that you're being burned alive...."

Bill's knees felt weak. He'd read descriptions of what the Cruciatu s Curse felt like, but to imagine his father suffering that was just horrible.

"When he took the curse off me, the first thing I did was to revive Alastor, who went after the son and bound him up good while I disarmed the father. However—there was a problem—"

"What, Arthur?"

His father sighed. "Well, he was trying to curse me again."

His mother gasped in horror. "Not the Cruciatu s *again*?"

"No. This time—" He paused, and Bill waited, his heart in his throat. "This time he wasn't just trying to hurt me. He was aiming to kill."

"Arthur!"

His father sounded like he was crying again. "I had to do it quickly. I would have been dead if I'd waited any longer....His wand came flying toward me, and I caught it. He went flying backwards. The trouble was, he had this collection of armor in the entrance hall. Flew right into it, and this pike came down on him, right through his—right through his neck." Bill covered his mouth in horror. "Other things, too. He was a mess. Bit of a chain reaction, all of those weapons on display, and him barreling right into them...."

He cleared his throat and Bill heard him slurping his hot chocolate. "Well, Alastor and Perkins testified to its being self-defense, of course, but the son was insisting I'd killed his dad in cold blood...."

"How—how old was the lad?"

Bill's father laughed. "Not exactly a lad. Well, not old either. But out of school. Early twenties. He's threatening all kinds of bad publicity now. Fudge was trying to pacify him. I don't know why he was bothering; we probably should lock up the son for attempting to alert his father that we were going to get into that hidden chamber. Trouble is, I don't know when we'll next be able to get in there and look around, and by then, the son will probably have it cleaned out. I've been going through interrogation all day, Molly. I'm so tired I could sleep for a week...."

"Well, I'll tell the children not to disturb you so you can get up bright and early tomorrow morning and go in to—"

"No. I'm, er, suspended for a fortnight."

"*What?*" Bill's mother was indignant.

"Routine. Until the inquiry is over. Crouch is convinced I'll be fine, no charges." He sighed yet again. "I can tell, you, though, Molly, I was very worried for a while there. Kept picturing you having the baby all by yourself—"

"Don't you fret about that. I'm only a month or so along. Well, six weeks. I'm just glad you're not—you're not—"

Then Bill heard something that sounded distinctly like kissing. "I'm fine, Molly. Now that I'm here with you, I'm fine. Young Lucius Malfoy won't trouble us."

Bill heard the chairs scrape on the floor and he quickly crept back to the living room, closing the door quietly. He put his finger before his lips to tell Jack and his siblings to be quiet, and a moment later, his father had come into the room, beaming at them all, but still with a shadow behind his blue eyes.

"So, how was your day?" he asked them, as though they hadn't spent the entire day worried that he was going to prison for murder. Annie stood and stalked to the door. She glared at her father before leaving. Bill wondered whether she still thought they'd have to emigrate. Or whether she considered their father to be a murderer.

As far as he was concerned, he had the best dad in the world. He looked at him with shining eyes.

"Better, now that you're home," he told his father, who pulled Bill to him in a tight hug, tears

flowing down his face. Bill held onto his father, heedless of what Jack and Charlie might think, and was very glad he wasn't going to have to be the man of the family at the age of thirteen.

* * * * *

Monday, 18 September, 1977

"Where are we going, Severus?"

Her boyfriend, in response, pulled her to him and lowered his mouth to hers. She slid her arms up around his neck, feeling her pulse quicken as she responded to the kiss. When he pulled back from her, he said, "It's a surprise."

He took her hand, smiling, and Lily thought he'd never looked happier or handsomer as she tripped after him. *I made the right decision*, she told herself again. *Being with Severus feels right*.

She hadn't been able to wait to talk to Remus at the beginning of the term and she'd gone to see him in the compartment on the Hogwarts Express that he was sharing with Sirius and Peter. He'd looked nervous about it, but he'd gone with her to the compartment she'd been sharing with James; she had asked him whether he could give them some privacy, and James had agreed, although his facial expression was rather odd and didn't seem to match his words.

Once she'd been alone with Remus in the compartment, she'd spilled out her heart to him.

"Remus," she'd begun, sitting next to him, putting her hand on his, where it rested on his knee. "I-I know. About you. I know what your-your illness is." He opened his eyes wide, and she tried to reassure him. "Sssh! It's all right. I'm fine with it. Why shouldn't I be? Severus has the same problem." Now Remus looked as pale as parchment. "But he told me about it himself. Why couldn't you have told me? Why didn't you think I'd understand? Is it because it's hereditary, because your children may have it too? I don't care about that—"

Now Remus was frowning. "Erm, Lily, I don't think you-you *do* quite understand—"

She smiled and put her hands on his shoulders. "I know you don't *think* I do, but that's obviously why you didn't tell me you have porphyria!"

Silence. Everlasting silence.

"What?" Remus finally sputtered. "I-*what*?"

"And I don't care, Remus! I don't! For a minute I thought—no, I can't tell you. You'll think I'm daft if I do..."

She saw him swallow nervously. "W-what? What did you think?"

She laughed and stroked the side of his face. "I actually considered that you might be a werewolf. So stupid! But then I read about people who had porphyria being *mistaken* for werewolves, and I already knew something about it because of Severus, and it all started to make sense..."

And then he gasped as she climbed onto his lap and slid her arms around his neck. "But I want you to know that even though you didn't tell me, I forgive you. I've wanted to tell you this for so long....I was never with you as a friend, Remus," she whispered, her mouth millimeters away from his. "I love you—I have done, for the better part of two years. I love you and nothing you can tell me about yourself can change my mind about that, because I know your secret now, so there's nothing you can use as an excuse for our not being together...."

She spoke quickly, afraid she would lose her nerve, and then she was kissing him and he was making that animal noise in the back of his throat that she loved, and his arms tightened around her and she felt a surge of happiness swell up in her heart so that she thought it would burst. He was kissing her back; he felt the same! She slid the fingers of her right hand into the hair at the back of his head, loving the silkiness of it, loving the taste and feel of him. But then suddenly, his muscles stiffened and he pulled back from her, standing abruptly, making her fall to the floor.

"No-no, Lily. I'm sorry—I can't do this. I can't pretend that—that I feel the same. I would be taking advantage of you. To let you believe—I couldn't do that. When we agreed it was—that we were just friends, it was one thing. But—but I can't—"

She looked up from the floor, feeling her heart shattering. Then she remembered something. "Wait! You're lying! You—you told me you loved me! That *was* you, wasn't it? In the infirmary! I thought it was a dream at first, but I don't think so now....You thought I was asleep and you apologized for hurting me, and told me you loved me...."

Remus looked very open and vulnerable, but then he shook his head adamantly. "No, Lily, you're wrong. That *was* a dream. I-I only think of you as a friend, Lily. A friend who was—who was very accommodating. But if you—if you think you have feelings for me—I don't see how we can—I mean, I would just be leading you on—"

He bolted for the door, and she screamed at him, "Liar!" The tears were streaming down her face. His words had been so hurtful, but the entire time, the look of love on his face had been

unmistakable. How could he stand there, looking like that, and *lying* to her about this? And if he loved her, why wouldn't he want her to feel the same way?

When he slid open the compartment door, he came face to face with Severus Snape; James was standing next to him, trying to pull him away from the door. Remus stopped abruptly, then pushed past the tall Slytherin. Lily scrambled to her feet, wiping her tears from her face hastily, as Severus and James were giving her odd looks.

"Oh, er, Severus. What are you doing here?"

"Well—you said you needed to talk to me about something when we reached Hogwarts. But I couldn't wait." He looked pointedly at James' hand on his upper arm and James removed it, looking reluctant.

Lily saw James swallow before he said, "I think I'll go sit with my mates. So they know being Head Boy hasn't changed me." Lily noticed that he was behaving as strangely as Remus, though; his words also didn't match his facial expression. He looked like the last thing in the world he wanted to do was leave her alone with Severus Snape. In spite of this, he set off in the same direction as Remus. Lily looked nervously at Severus.

"Won't—won't you come in?" she said, her voice shaking. He stepped into the compartment and gave her the same look Remus had given her, the look of love, but somehow Lily didn't think he was going to run away from her if she said she felt the same way. She watched him, thinking, *How could I have been so thick? How could I have thought Remus would want to be with me?* But it was precisely because she knew that look; the real mystery was why he wouldn't admit it, why he was running from her now.

They sat together and Severus took her hands in his, which were wind-roughened from sailing, although there was no hint of a tan.

"What did you want to tell me, Lily?"

She looked into his dark eyes and ached. He cared so for her. She should return that. She should stop being a dolt and see what was right in front of her.

"There's something I haven't said to you, and I've waited so long. I—I just hope you'll forgive me for not doing it sooner..." She swallowed again before saying, in a rush, "I love you, Severus." It was just the opposite of what she'd really been planning to tell him, but it was still true. She *did* love him—just not as much as Remus. She'd been very nervous about breaking it off with Severus, as she didn't want to hurt him. This was far better, she thought. Remus did me a favor....

He smiled then, the deep dimples in his cheeks looking deeper than she'd ever seen them, and she was glad she'd said it, glad she'd made him so happy. As he lowered his mouth to hers, she pushed away the memory of Remus, wondering again what she could have been thinking, trying to forget it had ever happened, that she'd ever been with anyone else....

The day before, on Sunday, Lily had seen that Remus was in misery, the kind of misery she had previously "helped" him with. She made a point of going up to the Owlery and using Calliope to send a note to Severus, asking him to meet her in the Potions dungeon. There they talked and kissed (no one ever went there on Sundays) and made plans to sneak out of their dorms to meet the next evening. Lily knew that if Remus and the others followed their usual pattern, the night after Remus' "problems," they would all be out of Gryffindor Tower, and she could meet with Severus without risking running into any of them. *Remus may not really be a werewolf*, she thought, *but he certainly has an unhealthy attraction to the full moon. Maybe it makes him feel better...*

She had tried to talk to James about it, tried to tell him she knew that Remus had porphyria. His jaw dropped. "No, he doesn't," he said, frowning, then walking away from her, not saying anything else. She didn't know what to think. Was he covering up for Remus still, not realizing Lily knew?

She had watched them leave, after dinner; first the others slipped away when they thought no one was watching, then Madam Pomfrey came to get Remus. *Why would Madam Pomfrey come to get him if he didn't have porphyria?* she thought. She went upstairs to her dorm to take a nap, so she would be wide awake later. When her roommates came to bed, their noise awoke her, but she feigned sleep, waiting for them to settle down before creeping from her bed, fully clothed, and descending the stairs to the common room.

She was going to give herself to Severus completely. She shivered at the thought; it was something she'd been putting off, as she had still been fixated on Remus, but now she felt that she was able to move on and have the kind of relationship with Severus that he'd clearly wanted to have for some time. (He'd never pressured her, but she had been able to tell how frustrated he'd been.)

At twelve-thirty exactly, she opened the portrait and crept from Gryffindor Tower, finding Severus waiting for her in the corridor, where she'd told him to be. He looked surprised to see the portrait swing out from the stone wall, and then the smoldering look he gave her took her breath away. To be so loved and wanted was almost frightening. He was so *intense* sometimes. She reached out her

hand and he enveloped it in his, never taking his eyes from hers.

"Where are we going, Severus?"

After he kissed her, he said, "It's a surprise."

They sped along the corridors, hand in hand, going down to the dungeons and then to a very familiar area, to a particular room, making Lily's brow break out in nervous perspiration, hoping she was wrong about where they were going....

But it was far different than it had been when she'd been here with Remus. Severus had done it over completely, including repairing the door and putting a good locking spell on it. The formerly dusty, cobwebby trysting room was devoid of everything except a beautiful wrought-iron bed with a combination of red and green draperies. And *candles*....There must have been a hundred candles around the room of different sizes and shapes, adding a golden sheen to everything..

And then Severus added the finishing touch, and he pulled a book of music out from underneath the bed; the title proclaimed that it was a series of string quartets, and Lily frowned, hoping he wasn't going to conjure musicians, as she didn't fancy anyone—even conjured people—being present at a time like this. However, he tapped the book with his wand and said, "*Harmonia mundi*," and suddenly, from the pages of the book, the music emerged as though a string quartet really were present, playing soft, romantic melodies, the harmonies intertwining and supporting each other. The book lay on the floor now, open, and as the music progressed, the pages turned of their own accord, slowly flipping as though being moved by an unseen hand.

Lily laughed, watching and listening. "You've thought of everything, Severus," she said, delighted. He stood and looked at her, suddenly very serious, and when she saw that, she stopped laughing.

"I love you, Lily," he said, his eyes burning into hers. She felt like she had stopped breathing for a moment.

"I love you, Severus," she whispered. And if she didn't feel it quite as strongly as him, did it really matter? She *did* feel it, she did want to be with him, especially at this moment. She felt overwhelmed with the need to touch him, and walked toward him tentatively, hoping he wouldn't ask her whether she'd ever been with someone else, because she didn't want to lie to him, but she didn't want him to know the truth, either. *If he just doesn't ask...*

But soon, there was no conversation at all, just the sound of the music and their breathing and occasional gasps and other vocal, but not verbal, reactions. He was holding her and kissing her ravenously, and she was shuddering against him, feeling his desire for her, glad that it was nothing like being with Remus, with his odd snuffling at her neck and hands, the eerie red glow in his eyes....

Severus unbuttoned her robes and slid them from her shoulders and she did the same for him. He started fumbling with her clothes then, but she stopped him. "It's all right," she whispered. "I'll take care of it." She removed her blouse and skirt, her tights and shoes, and stood facing him in nothing but her underwear. She felt slightly ridiculous, as she was so tall and thin, not curvaceous, like other girls. She was suddenly very glad that she and Remus had usually met in darkness, and wished she dared extinguish every candle in the room; they no longer seemed romantic, but as though they were highlighting every physical flaw she possessed.

He had removed everything but his drawers, moving very quickly, and she gasped at the sight of him. "Severus," she whispered in awe. She truly hadn't expected him to be so beautiful; his skin was like alabaster, his calves and thighs strong and muscular, his chest and arms...He was like a sculpture by Michelangelo, he was perfection.

Now she felt more self-conscious than ever, more inadequate than ever. *What does he see in me?* she wondered, putting her hand over her stomach, glancing down at her chest. *I don't even fill my bra cups. I look like an idiot...*

Severus took her in his arms, brushing her hair from her face, and she looked up at him, startled to see the incredible desire there. When his mouth came down on hers, it was with a new kind of hunger, and this was more familiar now; Remus had kissed her like this. *No, no, don't think about Remus!* His mouth traveled down her throat, then further, and she felt his hands behind her, unclasping her bra, gently sliding it down her arms.

When he took her left breast in his mouth, she thought she would melt from the warmth spreading out from her loins, then through her limbs. He knelt before her and she bent over him, his hands on her bottom, gently taking the elastic of her knickers and drawing them down over her hips, her thighs. Then he switched to the other breast, and caressed her, moving his hands here, there, everywhere, constantly surprising her, as though he wanted to touch her everywhere at once and couldn't decide on just one spot.

She gasped and straightened up, moving toward the bed. He watched her, his eyes dilated, and

when he stood and finally removed his drawers, Lily felt so warm she was afraid she'd backed into a candle and set herself on fire. He joined her on the bed, and it was so wonderful to feel his skin on hers, to be able to touch him everywhere, to have the time to explore and experiment....

After a time, he was lying down and she was sitting astride him, and the look in his eyes spoke of such love that Lily couldn't bear it any more. She had to tell him, at least a little. She couldn't pretend she'd never made love before. He'd *know*.

"Severus," she whispered. He put his hand on her cheek and smiled at her.

"Yes, love?" Her heart skipped a beat; he'd never called her that before. She tried not to feel foolish for liking it a great deal.

"I feel I should tell you—I'm not a virgin. I—I made a mistake. *He* was a mistake. He—he said he never loved me. I don't want to say who it was," she added quickly, when he looked like he was going to ask. "I just wanted to be honest with you. I didn't want—I don't want you to think I've never—I mean—"

"Sssh," he said softly, his hand cupping her cheek lovingly. "I don't care. If anything—well, if you have more experience than I do, that's not such a bad thing, is it? You can tell me, er, what you like—"

She bent down and kissed him softly on the lips, then moved her mouth down his throat and onto his chest, gently licking each of his nipples in turn. "Everything you've done so far," she whispered to his shining skin. He moaned under her and then reached down to grasp her hips.

"Could we—do you want to—?" he gasped.

"Are you ready?" she asked him, raising her head. He nodded vigorously.

"God, yes! I've *been* ready!"

She laughed and kissed him again, then shifted her hips and moved down carefully, so that she was engulfing him. He squeezed his eyes shut, and his hands on her hips were almost painful.

"Oh, Lily...."

As she moved above him and he met her movements with upward thrusts of his hips, she guided his hands to her body, showing him where to touch her, and he obliged, soon making her cry out as the sensations rolled through her, so that when she closed her eyes, she saw stars and felt tingling in every nerve ending she had, it seemed. When he could tell she was sated, he held her to him tightly and gently rolled her over, continuing to move above her while they kissed, and soon after that she felt him shuddering too, as she held him to her with her legs, so tightly it felt like she'd made him a part of her, and she gave a small gasp as another, smaller tremor moved through her and left as quickly as it had come.

She smiled up at him, loving the amazed expression on his face, incredibly glad that she had decided to be with him, and also glad that he hadn't been upset that she wasn't a virgin. Who else would take that news as well as he had? she thought. Granted, he was about to stop being a virgin himself, and being upset with her would probably have meant prolonging his sexual inexperience....

She felt him remove himself from her, and he lay down beside her, grasping her around the waist. She began to feel self-conscious about her body again. Severus, however, didn't seem to care; he was gazing at her as though nothing else in the world existed, and she gazed back at him, trying to comprehend how she could be so lucky.

They burrowed under the covers, still unclothed, and Lily wanted to sleep like that always, skin to skin with Severus' arms locked around her possessively. When she awoke hours later, she found him watching her intently, as though he'd been awake for some time, and she felt a hunger such as she had never known overtake her, as she reached for him and made him gasp, and it started all over again....

* * * * *

Tuesday, 19 September, 1977

James crept through the corridors carefully, hidden under the Invisibility Cloak. He was moving ahead of Remus and Peter and Sirius, a one-man advance guard, making sure their way was clear. When he'd seen Filch several times (how did the man get into the places he did so quickly? James had wondered more than once) he'd retreated and gone back to the others, changing their route. Remus was exhausted, being supported by Sirius while Peter trailed behind, and James wasn't so certain they shouldn't be taking him to Madam Pomfrey. He'd insisted, however, that he wanted to go up to his own bed.

He finally reached the corridor outside the Gryffindor common room without running into Filch again, and when he did, he froze, not expecting the sight before him....

The Fat Lady was slumbering in her portrait, snoring softly. Lily and Snape were standing before her, their arms around each other, kissing deeply. James felt an anger boil through him such as he had never felt before. *You get your hands off her!* he raged inside, feeling like sobbing and hexing Snape all at once. He tried not to see how intent Lily was on kissing him back; the idea of her being with him made him feel so odd and hollow inside. *She doesn't love you,* he reminded himself for the millionth time. *You're like a brother to her.* When they broke the kiss, she put her head on Snape's chest, practically humming with contentment, and James both wanted to avert his eyes and gaze at her forever.

After they had been standing there like that for a minute, she raised her head and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"I-oh, Severus, last night was just..." She stopped, clearly at a loss for words, and James thought his head would explode. *Noooo!* he screamed inside. They didn't! They *couldn't!* She-him-

He stood watching them, unseen, his throat tight, trying not to think of them being together. *I'm as bad as Sirius or Peter,* he thought. *Yearning after her, wanting her, when she doesn't want me.*

But trying to talk sense into himself was doing no good. He couldn't take it any more. He whipped off the Invisibility Cloak and stood with his wand pointed at Snape, his face contorted in fury, his mind clouded by hate and rage.

"*Get your hands off her.*" He clenched his jaw shut again after he spoke, breathing through his nose. Lily's eyes widened when she saw him.

"James! Stop that! Put your wand away!" she scolded him.

Lily removed her wand from her robes and pointed it at James, her arm shaking. *How dare he?* she thought. *Just because I treat him like a brother doesn't mean he really is my brother...*

They heard footsteps then, and all three of them turned to see Sirius, Remus and Peter coming round the corner. Remus was clearly utterly exhausted, limping slightly, leaning on Sirius. Pettigrew brought up the rear, looking nervous.

"What's going on?" Lily wanted to know. "Where have the four of you been all night?" *Will I ever get a straight answer about this?* she wondered.

James was incredulous. "What? You're asking us that? When it's obvious that you two..."

"But you do this all the time! And you never-you never talk to me about it-" her face started to crumple, and she swallowed, struggling now to stay in control. "I thought we were friends," she said softly, directing this at James in particular. He squirmed, looked at his three other friends, then back at her.

"I can't tell you Lily. Believe me, you wouldn't want to know..."

Sirius looked defiant. "Anyway, shouldn't he go climb back into his coffin?" he sneered at Snape. "The sun's up."

Snape moved forward and grabbed Sirius, shoved him up against the stone wall, his face a mere inch away from the other black-haired boy. "I'm tired of you, Black," he hissed softly. "Watch your back." Then he shook himself and stepped back from Sirius, still angry. He walked to Lily, put his arms around her and kissed her soundly, then glared at the others and strode away.

Lily watched him go, then turned away from the boys and ran after him. "Severus!" she called down the corridor, heedless of being discovered. "Severus!" She turned a corner and practically plowed into him. She grasped his arms to support herself, looking up at him intently.

"Help me," she said softly.

"Anything," he said to her, meaning it.

She panted, trying to catch her breath still. Then she finally lifted her eyes to his again.

"Help me find out their secret. Help me find out what they do and where they go on the nights of the full moon. *Tonight.* Promise me!"

He looked down at her, wondering why it mattered to her so much. He thought of the look on James Potter's face when he'd taken off the Invisibility Cloak. What was she to Potter? He knew that Pettigrew had a crush on Lily and that Sirius Black had made a pass at her, and he was unsure about what Remus Lupin was to her, but he was fairly certain Lupin also cared a great deal about Lily. Could she be oblivious to all that? he wondered. Did she have no idea how she affected all of them?

"I promise, Lily," he said quietly, kissing her on the brow. She watched him turn and stride away, her heart pounding in her chest. *Soon I'll know,* she thought, trying to be comforted by the idea.

I'll know.

The wan early light cast a misty glow over the objects in the third-year dorm. Bill Weasley rolled over in bed restlessly; he never slept well when the moon was full. The night seemed to be so full of howls....

There seemed to be a great scuffling in the stairwell leading up to the boys' dorms. Bill went to the door of the third-years' dorm and opened it a crack; he saw some black-robed figures on the landing, but could make out no faces in the small opening he had created. He didn't dare open it farther. Then, just as he was closing it, he heard a voice whisper the name, "Sirius." He might have imagined it; it was such a sibillant word, anyone whispering could be mistaken for saying it. At least, Bill might think that a plausible explanation if he didn't then hear Sirius Black's voice say, "Are you all right, Remus?"

Then he heard some more scuffling on the stone flags, and then the sound of the older boys continuing to climb the stairs. Bill opened the door cautiously when he was sure they were gone. He swallowed; Remus' friends had gone out with him under the full moon again. It felt strange being the only other person who knew about it. He hadn't told Charlie, either, although he had warned him that under *no circumstances* was he to leave Gryffindor Tower when the moon was full.

Bill heard a familiar noise just as he was about to go back into his dorm; the creak of the portrait hole opening. He crept down the stairs carefully, wondering who else had been out during the night. When he reached the bottom, he found Lily Evans crossing the common room to go to the stairs to the girls' dorms. He was so still as he stood in the doorway to the boys' stairs that she didn't take any notice of him.

Bill shrugged and went back up the stairs. He reckoned it made sense for Lily to know about Remus Lupin. He wondered briefly why she had come in by herself, instead of with the others, but as he climbed under the covers, this thought left his mind and he closed his eyes again, trying to get a few hours more sleep before breakfast. Now that the moon had set, he felt he could really sleep.

Sometimes he really wished he didn't know that Remus Lupin was a werewolf....

— CHAPTER EIGHT —

The Prank

Tuesday, 19 September, 1977

“Now, none of you may have the Sight—it is *very* rare—but you *can* train your Inner Eye to see what is before you, to gaze into a teacup with spent tea leaves and read a fortune. Reading tea leaves—or *tasseomancy*—has its origin in *oinomancy*, a practice in ancient Rome of reading the sediment left in a wine glass. Please take out your copies of *Unfogging the Future...*”

Professor Trelawney was speaking in the misty voice that Bill had already become accustomed to in not quite three weeks of Divination classes. Now that he was in third year, he had selected Divination for one of his new classes, because Alex and Jack were both taking it, and because it sounded easy. He had hesitated to take Ancient Runes, but was finding that quite fascinating, especially Egyptian hieroglyphics, even though it was very challenging. Divination had turned out to be more work than he anticipated, trying to memorize what dozens of possible shapes in the bottom of a teacup might mean, and Trelawney was also one of the most annoying people he'd ever met. In contrast, Professor el-Madi was a pleasant man with a lilting Moroccan accent that fell easily on the ear, and he was partial to very bad puns which nonetheless kept his students chuckling even as they were groaning. Bill always enjoyed his Runes classes, and dreaded Divination.

The Hufflepuff boy, Geoff, was also in his Divination class. Bill had gotten to know him a little better, since he was one of Jack Richard's roommates. He was very nice, and had a lot of interesting stories about traveling around during the summer while his father performed at one Gilbert and Sullivan festival after another. (G & S shows were a staple of many village fetes around England.) Bill had offered to tutor him in Transfiguration and Charms, which were easily his best classes, but Geoff had politely declined, calling himself a hopeless case. He was always in a good mood, however, and Bill enjoyed hanging about with him and Jack. He'd invited Alex to join them many times, but Alex was going off by himself a great deal since the term had begun, and he hadn't answered any of the owls Bill had sent him over the summer. Whenever Bill said he was worried about him (he thought he was still not over Orville's death, and possibly also blaming Bill for their friend's death) he waved Bill off impatiently, calling him a mother hen and proclaiming that he just wanted to be left alone.

Bill didn't push it, but he felt uneasy about it at the same time, as though Alex were a ticking bomb, or a Howler that was being ignored. Leave it for too long and eventually you would have a very big problem. Yet—he couldn't exactly put Alex into a full-body-bind and force him to talk about the way he was feeling. He'd have to bide his time and just wait for Alex to be ready. Bill was thirteen going on fourteen. He wasn't especially wanting a deep and meaningful talk with Alex about Orville, anyway.

Bill, Jack and Geoff sat at a small table in Trelawney's stifling hot round tower room, the perfumed air making them feel a bit dizzy, drinking what was possibly the most tasteless tea Bill had ever had and preparing to read their fortunes in the tea leaves. A couple of Slytherin girls—Miriam Broadbent and Raisa Czaikowski—were also in the class, sitting together at a small table, drinking their tea. No other Slytherins were present. There were no Ravenclaws present at all; Bill had heard that everyone in Ravenclaw warned the third years off taking classes with Trelawney. Any Ravenclaw who did so would probably be laughed out of their house. Booth and Leonard weren't present, as they were taking Arithmancy. Bill glanced out of the corner of his eye at Alex, who was sitting with Mary Ann Boxwood. Bill suspected he may have gotten over his need to deny that he liked her. They talked a great deal and she seemed to like him quite a lot, also.

Bill, on the other hand, found it very hard not to look at Juliet Hathaway since third year had started. She suddenly seemed much older, and could easily be mistaken for being a fourth or fifth year. Bill couldn't help notice how her golden brown curls were glowing in the candlelight as she

sat with Wallis Cassell, peering into her teacup. Suddenly, Wallis looked up and caught Bill's eye and smiled slyly at him. He widened his eyes in alarm and looked down at his cup again, panicked that she might think he liked *her* instead of Juliet. He'd rather gotten the impression since the beginning of the term that Wallis had a crush on him, and it had been next to impossible to even make innocuous remarks to Juliet with Wallis (her best friend) hovering nearby, batting her eyes at him.

Oh well, he thought. Very few students in third year started pairing off usually, even when there *were* Hogsmeade trips. It wasn't even usual for students in their fourth year to start dating. Most of that didn't start until fifth year, and even then, most fifth year students were consumed with the impending O.W.L.s. If he didn't have a girlfriend for a while yet, Bill thought, he would certainly be in good company.

Trelawney clapped her hands and instructed the students to trade teacups to do their readings. Bill handed his to Geoff, Geoff handed his to Jack and Jack gave his to Bill. Bill peered down into the cup at the dark lump of debris, trying to discern some shape. There were also some scattered damp leaves clinging to the side of the cup. *Am I supposed to make something of those, too?*" he wondered. He frowned into the delicate china cup, unsure what to say, wondering whether he should just make something up.

Jack frowned into Geoff's cup. "I'm not sure what to call this. It's either a shoe or a question mark, depending which way you turn it. What does that mean?"

Geoff blanched. Bill had already seen why he had been sorted into Hufflepuff; he was very hardworking. He seemed to have memorized the entire section on tea leaves in *Unfogging the Future*. "A question mark? Or a shoe? Is that what you said?"

Jack nodded. "I don't see what else it could be...What does it mean?"

Geoff swallowed. "Change. If it's a shoe, it means a change of career. A question mark means a more general sort of uncertainty or change. But they're both similar, so I'm not sure it matters...." His voice had become very soft. "I should have known this would happen..."

Bill and Jack frowned at each other. "What are you talking about?" Bill asked him. "Look in mine. Tell me what my future holds," he said, smirking.

Geoff grimaced. "I see more than one thing. That happens sometimes," he added authoritatively. "A key inside a triangle. The key means that a mystery will be unveiled. The triangle means that an unexpected event will occur."

Jack shrugged. "Nearly any event is unexpected. Life is unpredictable. It probably means that whatever mystery is unveiled, its unveiling was unexpected, right?"

"I suppose..." Bill said shakily. Would it be something about *him* that was revealed, such as his little infatuation with Juliet? Or would *he* be the one to find out something about someone else?

"What's mine say?" Jack wanted to know. Bill stared into the cup, trying to identify some up or down to the collection of leaves, turning the cup round and round, not satisfied. Geoff held out his hand.

"Want me to try?" Bill nodded and handed the cup over to him. "Hmm..." he said, his lips pressed together tightly. "These bits around the sides look like an arrow. That means bad news will come in a letter. The bit in the middle—do you see the way there's this part coming up here, and here, and it looks like you could put your fingers here, if it was a little larger? Looks to me like scissors. That's not good. That means angry words and a family misunderstanding."

Bill nodded. "Maybe that will be the bad news in the letter," he said. "A family misunderstanding."

Jack frowned. "Like two people in my family not getting along? How would that be bad news to me? I'm always here at school, for a start. How would it have anything to do with me?"

Bill shrugged. "I dunno..."

Trelawney swept over to their table and thoroughly enjoyed their predictions of doom and gloom. It seemed to Bill that her eyes glittered unkindly when she glanced at Geoff, but he didn't know what to make of this.

It was a relief to leave the stifling tower room and descend to the Great Hall for lunch. Bill wondered whether he should pay any attention to his tea leaves predicting that a mystery would be solved and an unexpected event would occur. He trusted in Peggy's instincts, but he wasn't sure about Geoff. He strongly suspected something funny about the boy, and he wanted to raise the issue with Jack, but he lived with Geoff in the Hufflepuff dorm, so it was easier for Geoff to talk privately with Jack than for Bill to do so.

However, as they were nearing the entrance hall, Geoff suddenly said, "You two go on. I have to visit the lav. I'll be down." He slipped into a boys' bathroom near the top of the marble stairs descending into the entrance hall, and Bill and Jack shrugged.

"Okay," Jack said casually to his house-mate. He and Bill started walking down the steps along with the other students all beginning to converge on the route to their lunch.

But on a broad landing half a flight up from the bottom, Bill pulled Jack aside and said, "I have a question for you. About Geoff."

Jack looked like he'd been thinking about something else and jerked his head up. "What? Oh, sorry. What did you say?"

"Geoff. I want to ask you something about him."

Jack shrugged. "Like what?"

"Well—have you ever actually seen him do magic? With a wand?"

Jack frowned. "Of course he's done magic. He's in third year. What are you getting at?"

"What I'm getting at is—he says himself that he's hopeless in Transfiguration and Charms. Defense Against the Dark Arts, too, although we don't do much spell-casting there, it's mostly writing essays about banshees and all that rot. Have you ever actually seen him cast a successful *spell*? Or fly a broom?"

Jack frowned more deeply, looking disturbed now. "Come to think of it—I don't think I have. He's good in Potions, though—"

"You don't need to do magic for that."

"—and Herbology and History of Magic and Astronomy—"

"—none of which actually require a person to be *magical*."

Jack stopped and stared at Bill, his eyes wide. "So you think—"

"I do. I think that's why his name wasn't on the list of students to be Sorted when we were in first year. I think he's—"

"Who?"

Bill and Jack jumped; Geoff was now standing at their elbows. He looked back and forth between them guilelessly, but when he noticed how guilty they both looked, a suspicious expression slowly moved over his face and he looked like he knew they'd been talking about him.

"Er—Dumbledore," Bill said suddenly, not knowing why.

"What about Dumbledore?" Geoff said, frowning, looking like he knew Bill was lying.

"Erm, it's just that—" Bill hesitated.

"Do you think he's an Animagus, like McGonagall?" Jack asked in a rush. "I heard that his name is an Old English word for bumblebee.' He could be a bumblebee Animagus. That'd be great, wouldn't it? He could know whatever was going on in the school by flying around as a bee, watching and listening. It's the perfect thing for a headmaster."

Geoff laughed. "A bumblebee Animagus? If Dumbledore were an Animagus, I think he'd be something better than *that*. After all, a person'd have to be deaf not to hear the buzzing of a bee half a mile off. Very sneaky, that. *A bumblebee...*"

Geoff descended the stairs, shaking his head, evidently no longer suspecting them of talking about him behind his back. They laughed feebly along with him and joined him in his descent.

When they were in the Great Hall, Bill parted with Geoff and Jack as they went to the Hufflepuff table and he went to join the other Gryffindors. There was very little space left, so he seated himself between Remus Lupin and Cecilia Ratkowski, who were each talking to the people on their other sides—Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans, respectively. James Potter and Sirius Black were sitting across from Bill, with Booth and Leonard not far from them, talking animatedly, evidently, about their Arithmancy class. It was strange to Bill not to be with all of his Gryffindor room mates in his classes this year, but it was even stranger not to see Orville sitting down to eat at the Gryffindor table....

But soon he was no longer thinking about Orville. As he ate, he noticed that Sirius Black was looking very, very unkindly at Lily, and that she seemed to be aware of this, although she spoke to Cecilia nonchalantly as though nothing were wrong. James Potter also looked at Lily Evans, but Bill thought his expression was different from Sirius'. James seemed to be—sad. Incredibly sad. *Must still be thinking of his dead girlfriend*, Bill thought, his mind turning inexorably back to Orville. Would the wounds the living bore ever truly be healed? he wondered, seeing Alex, at the far end of the table, eating slowly and alone. It felt like they'd all been blown apart in more than one way by the explosion in Honeyduke's. The tension among the seventh years, in particular, was palpable.

Then he noticed Sirius looking somewhere else, and, turning his head, he saw where; he was glaring at Severus Snape, at the Slytherin table. Snape looked back at Black very, very smugly, but also with hatred. Bill turned back to his food and was vaguely aware, out of the corner of his eye, that Sirius was motioning to the doorway of the Great Hall, and soon after, Bill heard footsteps moving in that direction. When he looked up, he saw Snape walking out of the hall, with Black not

far behind. Were they going to duel? he wondered. Whatever was going to happen, it didn't look like it would be a particularly *friendly* meeting...

Across from him, James Potter looked worried, very worried. Next to him, Remus Lupin exuded exhaustion, as though he couldn't be bothered to worry about anything except eating and sleeping. However, Pettigrew also seemed to be taking notice of Black and Snape leaving the hall, his beady eyes following the two of them, his pointed nose twitching as though he smelled something putrid.

Bill shrugged and went back to eating, trying to catch Juliet's eye for a moment and succeeding only in catching Wallis'. He sighed inwardly, trying not to wish for Wallis to turn into a toadstool, in case he performed some accidental magic and it actually happened. He'd done that with a garden gnome once who was giving him an especially difficult time, and he'd received a long lecture from his dad about cruelty to non-humans who were capable of human speech. He resumed eating, hoping that some time, in the next four years, Wallis Cassell might actually give him a chance to *speak* to Juliet Hathaway, but he wasn't completely certain that it wasn't hopeless....

* * * * *

"Well, Black? What is it?" Snape spat. They stood in the dungeon corridor, where they'd gone after leaving the Great Hall. Sirius Black looked like he was up to something, and Severus' hand inched toward his wand, ready to pull it out at a moment's notice. Sirius Black had a half-smile that Severus didn't like one bit. He didn't trust the git as far as he could throw him. He almost wished he'd just try to hex him and get it over with so they could stop fooling around and fight properly.

"You'd like to know what we were up to last night, wouldn't you?" Black said suddenly. Severus' eyes opened wide. Was Black actually going to *tell* him?

But he didn't like the sound of what Black had said, as though the *world* revolved around him, so he answered, "Why should I care what you pillocks get up to together? *I* have Lily, and the last time I checked—well, *you* don't." He crossed his arms, looking smugly at Sirius Black, who was clearly seething at the mention of Lily. "And what did she do when *you* tried to kiss her? Let me see if I remember..." he said, tapping his chin, trying not to laugh at the memory, while Sirius grew redder and redder with rage. Severus finally gave in to his laughter, but then he sobered again and glared at the Gryffindor.

"You think I would actually do something as *stupid* as go where you tell me to, in order to find out what you're all up to?" he sneered. "I'm not *Pettigrew*, for godsake. "But mark my words—I *will* find out what you lot are up to, and you *will* be punished, or even better—expelled. I daresay you're all leaving the castle grounds to go into Hogsmeade. Whatever secret route you have was probably used by those poor second years to go into the village, too, and now one of them is *dead* because of you. Are you proud of yourselves? Are you so pleased that you managed to kill a little boy?"

Suddenly Black had pushed him up against the wall. He was shaking, and Severus could tell he'd hit a nerve. *He feels guilty about the boy*, he knew then, although he'd been floundering about rather aimlessly, unsure what would set Black off. *I did it*, he thought proudly. He'd gotten to Sirius Black and perhaps now he would say something incriminating...

Black's face was very close to his. "Don't you throw that poor boy in my *face*, Snape. He died because of Death Eaters. People like *you*, who were all probably in Slytherin in school. Scheming, ambitious rotters who don't care who they hurt..."

"—*whom* they hurt, you stupid—"

Black banged him against the stone wall again, and Severus tried not to wince when his head struck it painfully. He didn't want to give Black the satisfaction. "Anyway, I thought you just said you don't care what we get up to? Evidently you do. But you're confused about something else: *you're* the one who doesn't care whom you hurt, using Lily the way you are, for a shag whenever you please...."

Now it was Severus' turn to get angry. He turned the tables, and in a matter of moments, Sirius Black was the one with his back against the wall and the front of his robes bunched in Snape's hands. Black eyes stared into black eyes, their own black hair flying about each of their faces. They could almost be brothers—if their names were Cain and Abel. "*You don't talk about her*. You can't face the fact that none of you Gryffindors are *man* enough for her..."

Black shook him off. "Just because you've clouded her judgment doesn't mean she doesn't know what a *real man* is."

Severus sneered at him again. "Yes, a real man sneaks around in the dead of night and doesn't tell someone about it whom he considers to be a close personal friend. *That's* what a real man does."

"No!" Black shouted at him, shaking with anger. "A real man does whatever is necessary to be *there* for a friend in need, even if that means—"

He stopped himself and looked as though he thought he'd said too much. Severus Snape looked at him shrewdly. Black seemed to be talking about a friend *other* than Lily now. What was he going on about? What were they really up to?

Suddenly, Black turned and strode down the corridor, away from Severus, who watched him go, thinking about what he would do that evening. *I need to surprise them, he knew. I need to ambush them.* He had a feeling that Black's original intent had been to ambush *him*, but he was too smart to let that happen.

He was far too smart to let Sirius Black get the better of him.

* * * * *

The sound of several hundred people eating dinner echoed through the great hall, a pleasant hum of conversation accompanied by the clinking of goblets and plates, knives and forks. Overhead, the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall glowed with the beautiful colors of the sunset. The autumnal equinox was very close, and the days and nights were very nearly equal, but the days were still very slightly longer. The previous evening, a full moon had risen as the sun set, but Severus Snape knew it wouldn't rise for nearly an hour after sunset this day, and that it would rise about an hour-and-a-half after sunset on the next day. *They will be able to move about in darkness before the moon rises,* he thought, realizing that this would benefit him, as well, providing him with the cover he would need to catch them at-whatever they were doing.

He watched them while they ate, clustered together at one end of the Gryffindor table, the four of them thick as thieves. And Potter was one of them, their treasured *Head Boy*. That almost made him seethe more than all of Sirius Black's calculated barbs put together. And he, Severus Snape, hadn't even been considered for *prefect*. He glanced at Igor Karkaroff, who was eating in an annoyingly *dainty* manner, nibbling at a chicken leg and then putting it down, licking the tips of his fingers with pursed lips before dabbing his mouth with his napkin. A smudge of grease decorated his silver prefect badge. *Gah. This is what passes for leadership in Slytherin.* He felt a momentary revulsion for his own house and wondered fleetingly whether school friendships were only formed within houses, and if you were sorted into a particular house, you always became friends with the others in your house.

But then he looked at Karkaroff again, and knew this wasn't true. He couldn't stand Igor. And then he saw the Weasley boy get up from the Gryffindor table; he was joined a moment later by two boys coming from the Hufflepuff table, and they all left the hall together. Clearly some people did form friendships across house lines. And then there was Lily, *his Lily*....

Almost as though she knew he was thinking of her and looking at her, she turned round and gave him a small, secretive smile, and he remembered being with her the night before. She had been everything he'd imagined and more. So passionate, so beautiful...Was it *his* fault that she hadn't felt moved to bestow her many graces on a fellow Gryffindor? Sirius Black seemed to think it was.

Then Snape tried to pretend he hadn't been watching the Gryffindor table when Madam Pomfrey appeared and strode over to Remus Lupin, who stood and followed her out of the Great Hall, looking over his shoulder at his friends. *What's that about?* Severus wondered. Perhaps he wasn't going to be with the others this evening. Pomfrey hadn't looked happy. Lupin's friends definitely looked very, very alert suddenly, and Severus saw that they were looking up at the ceiling, which was growing darker and darker above the floating candles. The rainbow of colors in the west was growing fainter as a deep blue crept insidiously from the east and the evening star rose, clear and white and thus far alone in the sky. Severus knew it was really Venus, and that thought drew his eyes back to Lily, and then he was remembering the previous evening again... He turned back to his food, feeling a warmth spread over his face. Nothing in his life had ever been as wonderful as waking up with her in his arms....

He would do as she asked and find out what those gits were up to if it killed him.

* * * * *

Bill, Jack and Geoff settled down at a table near the windows in the library, determined to get their History of Magic essays written before they had to return to their common rooms. Bill found it was easier with others around, and they also knew that Binns didn't even know the students' names very well and hadn't noticed, many, many times, when he'd received identical essays from students (or nearly identical ones). Geoff was writing the "master essay" which Bill and Jack would then cannibalize to create theirs. He didn't mind; being the one of the three who was good at this subject made him feel good, Bill could tell.

While Geoff was chewing his quill and thinking about what to write next, Bill wandered over to the window. There was a sweeping vista down the lawn to the Quidditch pitch, and the wildly flailing Whomping Willow was at the edge of his vision. The setting sun was very low now, sending faint orange light over the shadowy landscape. But suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Bill saw that the branches of the willow had stopped dead. His heart was in his throat; there was only one other time he'd known that to happen. *Lupin*, he thought. *He's going into the tunnel...*

He thought he saw two moving figures near the stilled tree, and he looked over his shoulder at Jack and Geoff. He turned back to the window again, but the figures were gone and the tree branches were whipping the sky again. Bill was glad he'd told Charlie *never* to go out of the castle on the nights of the full moon. Charlie had shrugged and said *all right*, and had agreed to tell the other first years to do the same, as Bill had asked him. Sometimes Charlie tagged along with Bill and his friends, but mostly he hung about with the other first years in Gryffindor, talking Quidditch and enjoying being at Hogwarts at last. Bill hadn't told him about Lupin, not wanting to burden his brother with this information, and hoping that Charlie would simply take him at his word that he shouldn't leave the castle when the moon was full....

* * * * *

Remus Lupin crouched in the tunnel, looking through the tree roots at the glowing night sky, a lump in his throat as he waited for his friends. The moon would rise exactly forty-eight minutes after sunset, he knew. That gave them some time, but not much. He looked up at what he knew were the windows to the Gryffindor common room, far up in the tower, and waited, waited, waited...

James threw down his book (which he'd only been pretending to read) and said to Sirius, trying not to sound ostentatious about it, "Damn. This doesn't have what I need. I have to go down to the library."

"I'll come with you," Sirius said, springing up from a chair.

"I need something from the library, too," Peter said nervously, making Sirius want to smack him. Peter often made Sirius want to smack him.

Lily looked up from the book she'd actually been reading and said, "That's me as well. I need something from—"

"No," Sirius said abruptly. "You can't come." A moment later, he looked like he wished he hadn't said it, but it was too late now. Lily frowned at him.

"What? You think you can keep me from going to the library? You don't *own* it, you know. And for that matter, it's not like you even *spend* much time in the library, so perhaps you should go with someone who *knows the way*," she added snidely.

"Lily," James says, trying to sound reasonable, pulling her aside, trying not to yield to the temptation to never let go of her arm. "Don't you think—well—after last night—" he said quietly in her ear, "—that is—this morning—"

She shivered at the feeling of his warm breath in her ear and pulled back from him. "What are you getting at?" she asked indignantly.

"Well—don't you think you could be a little more tactful? Don't you see how—how difficult it is for him to be around you knowing that—that you and Snape—" he continued in a half-whisper. Lily looked at Sirius for a moment and narrowed her eyes.

"I should be tactful for *his* sake? He wouldn't know tact if it came up and bit him on the—"

James was standing very close to her, his face very earnest, his dark blue eyes boring into hers. She caught her breath, realizing that James wasn't asking her to be tactful for *Sirius'* sake. Not really. Her heart turned over as she looked at him, a moment suspended in time. Finally, she let her breath out and she patted his arm gently.

"I—I'm sorry James. I'm so stupid. I—I'm tired anyway. I think I'll go up to bed."

He nodded, then did something that surprised her. He leaned forward quickly, brushing her cheek with his lips, saying, "Sleep well, Lily." Then he turned and left the common room with Sirius and Peter, glancing at her over his shoulder briefly. She ran up the stairs to her empty dormitory without noticing anything or anyone else in the world, throwing herself onto her bed and staring up at the canopy.

James.

Oh, *James*. She knew that look. She knew that gentle touch on the arm, the brother's kiss on the cheek that so desperately didn't *want* to be a brother's kiss...

Why hadn't she seen it? She recalled the letter she'd received from him, asking her to come to his birthday party. It seemed out of the blue, when she'd never visited any of them during the summer holidays before. It was his seventeenth birthday, true, but still...

She remembered his face that morning, the hurt behind his blazing eyes that she thought was on Remus' behalf, or even Sirius'. But no; it was his own very personal rage that he'd been expressing. She remembered bringing him up to her bed the night Bonnie died, how natural and right it felt to curl up next to him, and the way she'd caught him watching her sleep when she woke the next morning.

James.

She had to *think*. How did she feel about James? *No, no, no*. Did it matter whether she felt *anything*? She was with Severus at last, and he was making her happy. But—he was also making her feel alienated from her friends. *That's just because of their petty anti-Slytherin prejudices*. Perhaps they should be spending their time with other Slytherins when they weren't alone, just the two of them. When they wanted to socialize. They couldn't *all* be bigoted gits who hated Muggle-borns. She had actually laughed with Narcissa Anderssen more than once in Potions class. For a while Lily had worried a bit about Narcissa and Severus; Narcissa was a classic Nordic beauty, very cool and forbidding. Severus, however, had set her straight and informed her that Narcissa was seeing someone a half-dozen years older than her, the young man who'd been Head Boy when they were all first years.

"Oh, you mean Malfoy?" she'd asked him, remembering the strict, uncompromising eighteen-year-old who had repeatedly taken points from her friends in first year for running in the corridors (among other things). Severus had nodded, and Lily had told him with a laugh that Narcissa should make sure she behaved. Severus informed her with a knowing smirk that the *last* thing Lucius Malfoy probably wanted was for his girlfriend to behave herself. Lily felt odd, obliquely discussing other people's sex lives, but she'd laughed along with him.

James.

She tried to think whether he was trying to tell her, in his way, that he hadn't been able to make a go of his relationship with Bonnie because he wasn't in love with Bonnie Manetti, he was in love with *her*, with *Lily Evans*. But suddenly, her train of thought was interrupted by the dormitory door opening and then slamming shut as Moira and Myra Edmunds entered. They were chattering noisily, and Lily pulled out her wand with a grimace, putting a silencing spell on her bed hangings, so their noise wouldn't penetrate to her inner sanctum.

James.

How did she feel about him? *No*. She wasn't supposed to have feelings for him. She wasn't even supposed to think about anyone else. She'd gotten Remus out of her system and now she was with Severus.

James James James.

STOP THAT, she ordered her brain, but her mind bashed on relentlessly, finally letting her rest about half-an-hour later, so that when Professor McGonagall entered to tell her that she might want to visit some people in the hospital wing, she hadn't the heart to wake the peacefully sleeping girl and left again without telling any of her room mates why she'd done such an uncharacteristic thing as to enter the girls' dormitory.

* * * * *

Remus was growing impatient. He checked his watch. The moon would be rising in five minutes. Where the hell were they? It wouldn't be safe to stop the Willow once the moon rose. Were they mad?

He reached through the roots with his wand and touched the knot which froze the branches, then emerged from the tunnel. *I'll go back as soon as I know they're coming*, he thought. *It will be all right.*

He ran quickly up to the front door of the castle, unaware that he was seen by a tall, dark figure lurking around the corner.

As they walked down the stairs, Sirius whispered to Peter, "I have a plan. To get Snape off our backs. Are you in?" James pattered down the stairs ahead of them, not listening. Peter looked suspiciously at Sirius.

"What?" he said quietly.

"I didn't manage to do it tonight, but tomorrow I'm going to try to lure him out to the Willow. If he wants to find out exactly what we're doing every month...."

Peter stopped dead, his eyes wide. "But he'll find out about Remus!"

"Precisely. And it'll be the *last* thing he ever does...."

Sirius didn't think it was possible, but Peter's eyes grew even wider. "But that's—that's—"

Sirius waved his concern away. "Snape's a Slytherin, and probably a Death Eater, like his parents. Why do you think they were killed by Aurors? And Dumbledore can't let it get out unless

he wants to admit that he's had a werewolf at the school. Besides, he won't know we had anything to do with it, and he won't be able to *really* blame Remus. Remus can't help what he does in—that state. It'll look like just what it is—Snape getting too nosy for his own good. No one has to know we have anything to do with it."

Peter looked nervous. "I don't know, Sirius—"

Sirius changed tack. "Well, think about what you saw this morning, Peter. He and Lily spent the *night* together. That's right. He was with her *all night*. His hands were probably all over her. He was *inside* her Peter—"

Peter looked up at Sirius, feeling a hatred well up in him that was alien, and yet—*not* very unfamiliar. Sirius went on and on as they descended the stairs, describing in agonizing, explicit detail with the two had probably done, until he could see that Peter was seething about this as much as he was. Then he added the clincher. "And then—when I was talking to him down in the dungeons and suggested that if he wanted to know what we were up to, I'd tell him, *he* said that he wasn't stupid enough to fall for that, and then he said, *I'm not Pettigrew.*' He did. I am *not* making this up." That was true, Sirius thought. *Completely and utterly true.*

Peter could tell he wasn't lying. Sirius' dark eyes looked into his small brown ones and lit up when Peter, his jaw clenched, said resolutely, "*I'm in.*"

They had reached the entrance hall, and found Remus standing there near the open doors, wild eyed and growing wilder by the minute. "It's about bloody time!" he hissed at them. "Come on!"

* * * * *

Severus Snape's eyes had opened wide when he saw Remus Lupin emerge from the tunnel under the tree. *So that was it!* There was a tunnel to Hogsmeade under the Whomping Willow! He *had* them now! He knew how they were sneaking out....He thought about the witch's statue that he'd thought might conceal a passage, and realized that that was probably just a passage out onto the grounds. *This* must be the passage that *left* the grounds and made their nocturnal wanderings in the village possible. And it also had to be the route by which the second years had left; that was why no one had noticed them in the entrance hall with the crowd of other students going to the village. *They weren't in the entrance hall. They didn't go to Hogsmeade with the other students! They'd used this tunnel!*

Lupin must have grown tired of waiting for the others, he reckoned, and went to fetch them before the moon rose so they could get out of the castle in complete darkness. He crept down near the tree and hid himself in a clump of bushes just out of reach of the Willow's wildly flailing branches. He managed to conceal himself just in time; here they came, the four of them, Lupin looking quite odd and wild, inordinately *hairly*, with an eerie red light in his eyes.

The four of them arrived at the Whomping Willow, and Potter looked about for a long stick which he used to press a knot on the roots. The branches froze, and Snape tried to note where Potter was pressing, but it was hard to see. He had a general idea, anyway. . They'd almost waited too long; the moon was starting to rise. Lupin looked *dreadful*, and Severus shook his head. Pomfrey had come to get him, but he was such a git and so devoted to gallivanting around at night with his friends that he seemed to care nothing for the idea that perhaps he was sick and should be in bed in the hospital wing.. He watched the shaking boy crawl into the tunnel under the branches, followed by Pettigrew. Down in the tunnel, Severus heard Lupin cry out; he must have hit his head, or something. The cry continued, and Snape sneered at what a baby he was being. Finally, his disgust for the four of them knowing no bounds, he could no longer resist, and leapt from his hiding place.

"So! Sneaking off to Hogsmeade in the middle of the night!" He grimaced; that was a stupid thing to say. He *had* originally assumed they'd be going later, and had rehearsed what he was going to say, forgetting to revise it as appropriate. He dove on. "A gang including no less than our Head Boy! What are you all up to? Planning to do a little breaking and entering? Or a little vandalism?" He looked accusingly at Black and Potter, who had panic in their eyes. However, this was replaced a moment later with a lopsided smile on Sirius Black's face, and Severus' stomach clenched. That was the smile of someone who *knew* something. It was the most untrustworthy smile he had ever seen. Severus braced himself to jump clear of a hex if he needed to. *Had he walked into a trap?*

But Black did not pull out his wand. He just kept grinning and said, "No, as a matter of fact—well, you can go see for yourself, Snape. Just come on in and find out..."

Black stooped down to enter, and, after hesitating for a moment, Severus decided he would do the same. After all, Lupin and Pettigrew were already in there, and Black was going before him. He didn't like that Potter was still behind him, though. James Potter's breathing seemed to be irregular for some reason. Severus took his wand out before he went in, approaching the tree cautiously. If he needed to take on all four of them, he was sure he could do it. After all, Lupin wasn't even

particularly well, and Pettigrew couldn't amount to much, so that really only left Potter and Black, and of the two, if he took out Black first, he doubted whether Potter would have the nerve to come after him...

Peter sat, in his rat form, crouched at the bottom of the tunnel, watching as Remus transformed, wincing at his cries of pain. He could see some movement near the mouth of the tunnel and knew that Sirius had done it, that he'd managed to convince Snape to try looking under the Willow's roots. Peter's small heart beat very, very rapidly in his chest as he braced himself to spring, anticipation in every inch of his furry grey hide and his long, pink hairless tail. He and Sirius had discussed how to do it; he would bite Snape first to draw blood, using his sharp teeth on his hand, for instance, and just in case there was any question of Remus going after him (right after he transformed he was sometimes temporarily a little disoriented), the wound would egg him on; it would be like blood in the water to a shark. *And then they would be rid of Snape and no one would ever know what happened to him!* They could leave his bloodied clothes in the Forbidden Forest (that was Peter's clever idea—he'd thought of it as he sat waiting), and when they were found, it would be assumed that he wandered in there and met his fate at the hands of one of the fierce creatures that made the forest their home. Peter could almost taste the sweet feeling of revenge they would be able to exact upon Severus Snape for presuming to believe that he deserved their Lily....

Severus ducked down, putting his head into the tunnel, then started to move on his hands and knees into it, as he'd seen Lupin and Pettigrew and Black do. His heart started beating wildly as he heard a low growl emanating from the depths of the tunnel, as though a wild animal had been wounded. He hesitated for a second. *What was that?*

James watched him start to go into the tunnel. He had watched and listened to Sirius speak in utter disbelief. *He was trying to kill Snape!* This couldn't be happening, he told himself. *It couldn't be....*

The growling grew louder.

James' heart was in his throat. Would Remus be expelled if he killed someone while he was a wolf? Would Sirius? All of them? He thought furiously, trying to figure out what to do. And then he remembered Lily's face as Snape had kissed her goodbye in the morning light....

Oh, god. *Lily.* She would be heartbroken. She actually seemed to be in love with *Snape.* He pictured them again, near the entrance to the Gryffindor common room that morning, before they knew anyone was watching them. The way they'd looked at each other was completely unguarded, and the way they'd kissed....And what if—god forbid—Lily had conceived? What if she had to raise a child by herself because—

Severus Snape suddenly felt something around his foot.

He shook it at first, thinking he'd caught it on a root, but then it tightened and he realized that it was a hand, dragging him away from the tunnel. It was Potter, he realized, grunting with the effort of pulling him backwards. He was surprisingly strong. And then Severus felt a wrenching and heard a loud *snap*, and pain shot up his leg. Severus fell and banged his chin on a tree root as he was extracted from the tunnel. Then Potter hit a knot on the roots with his wand, making the branches flail about again. Unfortunately, they hadn't gotten clear yet, so Severus Snape and James Potter were each struck by the Whomping Willow numerous times. Severus had a gash on his forehead and a bloody nose; Potter had a lump on his temple. The terrible growling was very loud now, and Severus turned to look back at the tree. What appeared to be an enormous wolf was straining to get out of the tunnel, trapped by the branches across the entrance and the other limbs doing their frantic, macabre dance. The wolf was red-eyed and salivating, and as he looked at him, Snape knew the answer to everything. *Everything!*

Remus Lupin was a werewolf.

The wolf seemed to be trapped in the tunnel, and Severus realized that that must be why the Willow was planted to begin with—to provide Lupin with a place to spend the full moon. That meant that *Dumbledore knew!* He'd even *arranged* for Lupin to be at the school. Severus just *knew* it!

However, he couldn't continue this train of thought any longer; the pain coming from his ankle was too great, and somehow seemed to feel all the worse for the additional pain of betrayal he felt, the betrayal of his own headmaster, the man who was supposed to be *protecting* all of the students at the school, not showing special favor to his *pets*, the *Gryffindors*. He was doubled up on the ground and blood was running into his left eye, which he squeezed shut. He glared at Potter—the damn *Head Boy*, no less—with his good right eye. "Damn, you Potter," he growled. "You broke my ankle!"

Potter was lying flat on the ground, trying to get out of range of the tree's reach before standing. "Broke your ankle? Saved your life, more like!"

The two of them glared at each other. The growling continued.

"What about them?" Severus suddenly said to Potter, still feeling snappish. Potter looked nervous, as though he was afraid of giving too much away.

"They'll be fine. They're used to it."

"Used to being bitten by a werewolf?"

"No, you git!" Potter stood now, holding his arms out. "Look at me; the moon is up and I'm not a werewolf, am I?"

Severus looked suspiciously back at the growling, snarling animal still trying to get out of the tunnel. "But how—"

"Can't you just be glad to be alive? Listen; we both need to go to the hospital wing, and you probably can't walk without my help. Here," he said, extending a hand. Severus looked up at him, feeling a raw hatred that warred with the knowledge that he owed his life to Potter.

Finally, reluctantly, he took the hand Potter was offering and grunted as he stood. James Potter pulled Severus Snape's arm across his shoulders and put his arm around the Slytherin's waist. Severus had to hop on his right foot, holding his left knee bent to avoid putting weight on the broken ankle.

It seemed to take forever to reach the castle, and then to hop up the marble stairs leading to the infirmary. When they burst through the door, Madam Pomfrey was shocked to see them, bloodied and broken as they were.

"And what mischief have the pair of you been up to, then?" she said tartly, helping Snape to a bed.

James grimaced, not sure where to start. However, before he could manufacture a satisfactory story, Snape had burst out, "Potter and Sirius Black tried to set Lupin on me! He's a werewolf! Potter finally pulled me from the tunnel under the Whomping Willow, but the tree managed to get a few blows in...Potter broke my ankle, too..."

Madam Pomfrey blanched. She turned abruptly to James, noting the blows he'd taken from the Willow. *No more than he deserves, if he did what Severus Snape said he did.*

"You!" she barked at him. "Can you walk all right?" James nodded vigorously. "Then go to fetch the Headmaster! I can treat you when you get back. And enjoy knowing the password to his office while you can," she added a bit snidely, "as you may not be Head Boy for much longer!"

James swallowed, then, and bolted from the room. *I'm going to be expelled,* he thought as he raced up the stairs, his head aching from being hit by the Willow. *And Sirius and Peter and Remus, too. We're all going to be outcasts in the wizarding world...*

He reached the gargoyles that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office and gave the password. His mind was in a fog as he went up the rising spiral stairs, and when he knocked on the door, his hand was shaking. *Time to face the music,* he thought as he waited. He put his hand on the knob and turned it the moment he heard the voice say, "Come." As he pushed the door open, he saw the look of surprise on the headmaster's face, and then the look of sadness that replaced it as James told him why he'd come.

When he was done speaking, Albus Dumbledore looked at him with an expression of the deepest disappointment. James wanted to sink into a hole and die. He waited and waited for the headmaster to say something, but the blue eyes looked harder than he'd ever seen them, and the lined face was stern and uncompromising. Finally he said slowly, "You should go back to the hospital wing and let Madam Pomfrey treat your wounds. I believe I shall deal with you and with your friends in the morning, when you can all be present."

His voice was terrible, low and steady, and James felt that he could no longer swallow, listening to it. He didn't scream at him and he didn't say how disappointed he was in the Head Boy, but James could see it in his eyes. *Oh, how awful his eyes looked...*

James left and returned to the hospital wing, feeling for the first time since it had happened that he was glad his parents hadn't lived to see him in such disgrace as he surely would be. The *Prophet* would probably pick up on it. *HOGWARTS HEAD BOY EXPELLED.* It didn't happen every day. Perhaps it had never happened. There had probably never been a Head Boy as dreadful as James Potter. *Hell,* he thought, *a Slytherin like Igor Karkaroff probably wouldn't even have gotten into as much trouble as I'm in.*

He returned to the hospital wing, where Snape was sleeping, having been given a draught by Pomfrey. She dressed James' wounds brusquely, and he winced occasionally; she was making no effort to be gentle. With a disapproving sniff, she also gave him a sleeping draught. It was the only truly nice thing she did for him, in that it let him sleep dreamlessly until morning, without even a nagging conscience to bother him..

Wednesday, 20 September, 1977

Lily stretched and yawned, sat up groggily. She pushed the curtains aside to greet the day and very nearly screamed in surprise when she saw her head of house sitting in a chair by her bedside. The sun was shining and it looked like it would be a lovely nearly-autumn day, but Professor McGonagall did *not* look very cheerful in spite of this, and Lily had never known her to come into the dorms. Something dreadful must have happened....

"What is it?" she said apprehensively.

McGonagall's lips became even thinner than they had been. "I understand that you and Mr. Snape have been—seeing each other?"

Lily felt a warmth rise from her neck. "He's—he's my boyfriend," she said softly, more than a little embarrassed to be talking about this with her Transfiguration professor.

"Well," she said, not looking like she altogether approved of the pairing, "you might be interested to know that he is in the hospital wing. And so is James Potter," she added. Lily frowned.

"Were they fighting?" she asked, remembering James with his wand drawn only about twenty-four hours earlier.

McGonagall looked surprised at that. "Not exactly. Why don't you get dressed and come to the hospital wing?" she said gently. "Mr. Snape was asking for you last night, but when I came to get you—you didn't respond to my calling to you. When I checked to make certain you were all right, you were sleeping so peacefully, I didn't want to disturb you—"

"Oh!" Lily said in distress. "I wish you had!" Then she remembered the spell she'd put on her bedhangings, and realized that she wouldn't have heard a word. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, feeling like biting her tongue; it sounded like she was criticizing.

McGonagall didn't seem to mind. "Just get dressed and go to the infirmary. I'm glad to know," she added, with a raised eyebrow, "that at least the Head Girl isn't out at all hours..."

Lily looked down and away from McGonagall, thinking of how she had spent the previous night with Severus. Did McGonagall suspect something? She couldn't tell.

"Yes, Professor. I'll be right there."

McGonagall nodded and left. Lily dressed quickly. Cecilia and the Edmunds twins seemed to be sleeping still. Lily couldn't tell whether they had heard anything McGonagall had said or not. She didn't have time to worry about that, however, as she hurriedly pulled on her clothes and robes.

As she dashed out of the portrait hole, she thought she heard a strange noise in the corridor, and a scream froze in her throat when she saw the grey rat scuffling along the stone wall. She kept an eye on it for a moment before bolting toward the hospital wing.

Mere moments after she was out of sight, the rat became a small teenage boy again, his small eyes darting around cautiously. "Come on!" he said to Remus and Sirius, who were hiding in an alcove behind a statue of a vampire; Peter was their vanguard, as he could creep along and go places without being noticed, for the most part. They were all within sight of the portrait hole now. *Home sweet home*, Remus thought wearily. He leaned heavily on Sirius. He was very angry with him for what he'd done the evening before, but he was too exhausted now to ream him out. That would have to wait.

However, before any of them could utter the password to the Fat Lady, the portrait started swinging open. Peter immediately changed into a rat again, skittering behind what looked like an elongated baptismal font, which functioned as a torch. Sirius and Remus stood face to face with Professor McGonagall, who was no less surprised to see them. Her lips went very, very thin and her eyes blazed. Then she saw the condition Remus was in, the dark circles under his eyes, and her expression softened a little bit. She nodded at Sirius.

"You should take him to the hospital wing, don't you think, Mr. Black?" she said, looking over those square-rimmed spectacles at him. "And—I believe the headmaster wishes to have a word with you. *More than a few words.*"

Bill heard this ominous statement just before he plowed into Professor McGonagall from behind. He was meeting Geoff and Jack in the Great Hall early, to go over their essays before breakfast. He saw how awful Remus Lupin looked, and instinctively said, "Crikey! You all right, Lupin? Oh, excuse me, Professor," he added hurriedly to Professor McGonagall. *She didn't usually come in here*, he thought. She pursed her lips at him.

"Crikey yourself, Mr. Weasley. Mr. Lupin is going to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey will attend to him."

She looked with deep disapproval at Sirius and Remus, turning to close the portrait, but just before she did, a rat leapt into the breach and disappeared into the Gryffindor common room. Bill jumped a few inches.

"Oy, Professor! A rat just got into Gryffindor Tower!"

She made a noise like "hmmph!" and then said, "There are more rats in this castle than you know, Mr. Weasley. If you are concerned, just set one of the cats on it and the problem will be solved."

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin looked at each other with wide eyes. Bill frowned at them. "What's wrong with you? Are you part of some rodent protection society or something?"

Sirius swallowed and Remus looked even whiter than he had before. McGonagall clapped her hands at them. "Off with the pair of you, now! Hospital wing! Shoo!" she added. They turned to hobble off, but Bill ran past them, clutching his parchment. Now that he knew Remus Lupin was a werewolf, it didn't seem all that important. Still, he didn't fancy telling Geoff and Jack about it; he liked being the only one who knew.

Lily had finally reached the hospital wing, which was every bit as sun-filled as Gryffindor Tower; she almost started to feel that the sun was mocking her this morning, making the world look so relentlessly cheerful that she wanted to scream in frustration. In a trice, she saw that Severus and James were the only two patients, and James was still asleep. Severus was fingering the bandage on his forehead and glaring at the boy in the bed next to his when she entered. Her heart leapt into her throat when she saw the condition he was in, and she ran to his bedside.

"Oh! This morning, McGonagall said—Oh, Severus, are you all right?" She took his hand, looking at his bandaged face, then down at his ankle, still sporting another bandage to protect the boneset salve that would soon mend it.

He nodded at her, looking like he had a lump in his throat.

"What was it? You said—you said you would find out for me what they'd been doing. Did you?"

He nodded again, then said quietly, "They've been covering up for Lupin. He's a werewolf."

She felt her heart drop into her stomach. *A werewolf!* But—but she'd thought Dumbledore would never—

And then she remembered being with him, the first time they slept together, the way he *sniffed* her, and how strong he was—

In truth, she wasn't shocked, but she tried to look surprised so that Severus wouldn't suspect that she'd actually considered this possibility and abandoned it as far too unlikely...

"A werewolf?" she said, almost inaudibly. "But how? Wouldn't they be in danger themselves?" That was one of the reasons she'd abandoned the idea; James, Sirius and Peter were obviously *with* Remus on the nights of the full moon. How could they do that, and not get hurt, if he was a werewolf? *They* didn't show any signs of also being werewolves. They weren't especially strong, nor did they have remarkable senses of smell and hearing. She remembered now all of the things she'd known Remus to do which no ordinary wizard could do—nor ordinary human—

I should have realized. But I didn't want to.

"I don't know how they avoid him attacking them," Severus said bitterly. "But Black was going to let it—him—kill me, until Potter..."

She turned to look toward James' bed, her eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

Severus grimaced, she saw out of the corner of her eye. He seemed to be unwilling to give James any credit for doing anything right. He swallowed. "Until Potter pulled me out of the way."

She turned to look at James again, who was awake now, looking back at her. He seemed very calm.

"Hello, Lily," he said simply. She felt like she was seeing him for the first time. *James saved him. But—I thought James might be in love with me...this doesn't make any sense...he could have gotten Severus out of the way...*

"You—you—" she struggled. "You saved Severus' life."

He looked embarrassed. "Yes, well—if he had died, it would have made you sad," he said softly. He looked into her eyes earnestly, a pleading expression that was unmistakably full of love. Lily caught her breath, recognizing it, and looking frightened of it at the same time. *Oh*, she thought. *That's why he saved Severus.* His expression of love was replaced by one of misery, as he closed his eyes, turning over on his side, away from them.

She looked nervously at Severus, who, she felt sure, had seen the look they'd exchanged. He looked markedly disturbed by it; there was a hunted, threatened expression about his eyes. Lily stood next to his bed and bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

"Get some rest. I'll be back later," she whispered, unable to speak more loudly. He nodded at her silently. She turned again to James' bed, an odd sensation in her stomach. *James.* James hadn't wanted to put her through what he'd gone through when his parents had died.... She put her hand on his shoulder, trying not to jump at the spark that jumped from his body to hers. "I'll bring you

your notes and homework assignments, all right James?" She was having trouble drawing breath, and her stomach felt light and floaty.

He turned over, giving her *that* look again. "Thank you, Lily."

She shivered under his gaze for a second, and then she moved toward the door, trying not to run, glancing over her shoulder just before she left.

But she felt her gaze drawn to James Potter, not Severus Snape.

Once she was in the corridor again, she leaned heavily against the door, feeling like her heart was torn in two different directions. On the one hand, Severus had risked his life to find out what she asked him to find out. (She never would have asked him if she had known it would be so dangerous.) On the other hand, James had saved someone he hated, because *she* cared about him. She didn't know what to do.

I'm with Severus, she reminded herself. *I'm with Severus*.

So why did she see James Potter's face in her mind's eye, lying in his hospital bed, gazing at her adoringly?

* * * * *

The door to the hospital wing swung open noisily, striking the wall. Sirius stood there, supporting Remus. He helped Remus to a bed while Snape glared at them. James sat up straight and didn't wait for Remus to get settled before crying out, "What were you playing at, Sirius? Thanks to you, we're all probably going to get expelled!"

Snape smirked. "Speak for yourself, Potter."

James glared at him. "I *am*, you sodding git. If it weren't for you sneaking around and sticking your big nose where it doesn't belong, I wouldn't have needed to save your sorry arse!"

James heard Sirius start to laugh, and James turned his attention to his best friend now. "You!" he roared. "I can't believe you did—what you did!" he said, unwilling to put it into words. "Would that really have been worth it? Making Remus a murderer and becoming as good as—or I should say, as bad as—a murderer yourself? At the age of sixteen? You're about to turn seventeen, finally, and is that how you want to spend your birthday? In Azkaban? I know you can't stand him, none of us can, but—"

It was Sirius' turn to lose his temper. "Oh, is that why you saved him? Because you can't stand him? I can't believe you did that! Now he'll tell everyone about Remus, and then—"

"No, he won't, Mr. Black," said a solemn voice near the door. When Sirius and Remus had entered, they'd left the door to the infirmary open, and none of them had heard the headmaster approach. They were all silent now. Dumbledore's voice was as terrible as it had been the previous night in his office, and James tried to look properly deferential now, even though there was probably nothing he could do to prevent his expulsion now.

Dumbledore nodded at Severus Snape and gave him a very meaningful look. "Mr. Snape is not going to say a word about this to anyone, if he knows *what is good for him*," Dumbledore said, with one eyebrow raised. Snape's jaw dropped.

"But—but—"

Dumbledore nodded at him again and raised his hand to forestall further protests. "I know, I know. But despite the fact that you could have lost your life—" he glared at Sirius very hard; "that would punish *Remus*, who had no control over what transpired between you and Mr. Black. Everything that I have heard seems to indicate that this was all Mr. Black's idea."

Sirius felt a cold weight in his stomach, like a glacier, and as he looked back into the eyes of the formidable old man, he knew that his days at Hogwarts were numbered.

"And *you*," Dumbledore said suddenly to James, looking even sterner now. "While it is good to hear that you can chastise someone regardless of whether he is your best friend, it's a bit late now, isn't it? Where was that Head Boy leadership quality when you had the chance to prevent your best friend from doing something horribly *stupid* to begin with, eh?" Dumbledore's voice was louder, and James had never heard it with quite the edge it had now. "As a prefect and then Head Boy, you were and are one of the students in this school I rely upon to be my eyes and ears when I cannot be present!" The crescendo in his voice continued, until James wondered whether the windows would shatter. "I am very, very disappointed in you," he finished, surprisingly quietly, and James wanted to weep for making that expression appear on the old man's face. He'd felt horrid the night before; now he felt a hundred times worse, and it was only through a super-human effort that he did not break down crying and throw himself on the headmaster's mercy.

Albus Dumbledore looked back and forth between the four boys, who all regarded him with trepidation. Finally, he passed sentence.

"Severus; you shall not tell a soul about Remus if you wish to remain at this school," he said without emotion. Snape's jaw dropped, but he clamped it shut again, his indignance showing in his eyes. "And," he continued, "I will not tolerate being told that this is grossly unfair. So is being bitten by a werewolf when you are a small child," he said testily. "You are to be grateful that James saved your life and that is that.

"Remus; you shall not blame yourself for what almost occurred," he said surprisingly kindly. "I know that the last thing you would want to have happen is for anyone to experience what you have."

Now his eyes glittered again as he regarded James and Sirius.

"As for the pair of you. One hundred points shall be taken from Gryffindor for what you did, Sirius," he said crisply, while Sirius looked very guilty and bowed his head. "However," he added, "fifty points shall be *awarded* to Gryffindor for what *you* did, James." James felt like heaving a noisy sigh of relief, but he did not yet. There had to be something else. "But—the fact remains that only *one* of you had any business being out on the grounds last night. Two of you know how very dangerous that was, and now you also know, Severus. For being out of the castle after dark, I am taking fifty points from Slytherin and one-hundred more points from Gryffindor." Snape frowned. Dumbledore turned to James and Sirius again.

"And you two—you still don't understand the full ramifications of what would have occurred had Severus had contact with Remus last night, do you? The best outcome, I suppose, would have been Severus surviving an attack by Remus and becoming a werewolf himself. You know how dreadful the monthly change is for one of your best friends. Would you wish that horror upon even your worst enemy? I suppose we know the answer to that now: *Yes*. However, would you wish on one of your best friends the knowledge that he had done that to another human being? Hadn't thought about that, had you, Sirius? How did you think Remus would feel about all this? Did that cross your mind *once*?" he said quite loudly now, his voice echoing around the chamber, as the boys listened to him, transfixed and stilled by fear.

"And Remus!" he continued, louder, but seeming to expend no additional effort in creating the increased volume. He was still addressing Sirius, despite having said Remus' name. "Do you know what would have happened to him had you succeeded in getting Severus killed by him in his wolf form?" Sirius swallowed and shook his head. "He would have been removed from the school by the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, that's what. He might have received a hearing, of a sort. The sort that is really a perfunctory prelude to the executioner using the whetstone on his special *silver-tipped werewolf-killing axe*. Do you think that Remus is considered to be a human being in the wizarding world, Sirius? Because he is not. While we normally do not use the death penalty, we *do* sometimes let convicted criminals receive the dementor's kiss, which is arguably worse. Since that is not an option for a werewolf, he would simply have been destroyed. *Destroyed*. Do you understand? You were not just stupidly risking Severus' life, but the life of one of your best friends." His voice had become very soft, but the intensity and vituperation in it had, if possible, increased.

He had fire in his eyes as he glanced back and forth between James and Sirius. "Now—while I appreciate your desire to be with your friend when he experiences the horrible change brought by the full moon, and I can admire the ingenuity that evidently led you to learn magicks that would allow you to do this without being at risk yourselves, I cannot allow this to be just a matter of deducted house points, or even detentions. You are both suspended from school, effective immediately. You will spend the next fortnight at Ascog Castle. I have contacted your parents, Sirius," he said, nodding at him, "and they should be arriving in a little while to collect the pair of you. Any assignments or examinations for your classes will *not* be made up when you return. You will simply receive zeros for your marks during your absence. You will, however, be expected to be up-to-date in your studies, so do pack your texts and remember—" he said to Sirius, an ominous note in his voice, "that you cannot do magic away from school until your seventeenth birthday, Sirius. That is only two days from now, but still—if you step one toe out of line, you will be *very* sorry indeed."

There was no compromise in that voice, no arguing. James' heart felt like it was racing; he had no question in his mind as to why Dumbledore had been able to defeat Grindelwald, or why he had heard that the only other wizard Voldemort feared was their headmaster. His countenance was terrible to behold, like an avenging angel, and James felt himself lucky to still be Head Boy, and not expelled. He was glad that Peter wasn't there and that Dumbledore didn't seem to know he went with them on the nights of the full moon; he'd probably add on punishments for their corrupting Peter, if he knew.

He saw that Sirius was visibly shaking as he nodded deferentially to Dumbledore, who waved them to the door with a vague flick of his hand, saying in an oddly nonchalant voice now, "So run along and pack. You will be ready and in the entrance hall in thirty minutes. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison. They couldn't leave the infirmary quickly enough. As he left,

James looked over his shoulder at Remus, mouthing the word *sorry* at him. Remus gave him a small nod, as if to say, *It's not you who needs to apologize.*

James watched Sirius' profile as they climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower; he looked like he'd gone into mourning, and James decided that he'd said enough for the moment, especially considering the way Dumbledore had laid into him. He still had a few things to say to his best friend and almost-brother, but it could wait. They had a whole fortnight to talk.

When they reached their dormitory, they discovered Peter, just finishing dressing. He stopped and quaked when he saw them.

"I'm-I'm sorry I ran when McGonagall came out of the portrait hole," he said hurriedly to Sirius. "I-I panicked--"

Sirius waved him away. "S'all right, Wormtail. I think she just would have been angrier if she thought we were all in on it." He sat on his trunk and sighed. "We have to pack. We're suspended for a fortnight. My parents are coming to get us soon."

"*Suspended!*" Peter said in awe. None of them had ever known a student to be suspended. They knew it was possible, but in practice it was rarely done.

"Right. So we need you to owl us our assignments, as we're supposed to stay up-to-date," James said. He smiled ruefully and put his hand on Peter's thin shoulder. "No harm, Pete. If Dumbledore knew about you, he'd just be able to take more house points, anyway. We'd have lost another fifty."

Peter swallowed and tried to help, getting robes from Sirius' wardrobe to put into his trunk. "Another fifty? How many did he take?"

"One hundred-fifty for me," Sirius said miserably. "One hundred for trying to get Snape killed and fifty more just for being out after dark. James had fifty deducted for being out after dark, too, but he was awarded fifty points for saving Snape, so it cancels out."

Peter thought for a minute. "So we lost one-fifty . Could have been worse."

Sirius grinned. "And Snape lost fifty too, also for being out after dark."

James glared at him. "Do you think this is funny, Sirius? Any of it?"

Sirius grimaced. "What, I'm not allowed to see the bright side to the situation?"

"The bright side is that we weren't expelled," James informed him authoritatively. "Be grateful you won't end up like *Filch*."

Sirius shuddered at the thought. "Right."

They finished packing and said goodbye to Peter. James couldn't help glaring at Sirius the entire time they were taking their trunks down the stairs. This, he thought, was going to be a very long fortnight.

* * * * *

Friday, 9 December, 1977

"How long is yours?" asked Claudine Gaillard.

Lily took out a ruler and measured her parchment. "Twenty-seven and a half. I'm getting close."

"What did you say about the poison antidotes?" Narcissa Anderssen asked next.

Lily shrugged. "That wasn't difficult. Look under *Mandragora*' in the Herbology text; there are loads of references to antidotes that use it, something like two dozen. We only need to mention five. Here are the ones I used, so you can all select different ones, to make it less conspicuous..."

Diana O'Sullivan nodded and flipped open her Herbology text. Lily leant over her parchment, working contentedly on her Potions essay. In the time since she and Severus had learned of Remus' lycanthropy, she had spent very little time in Gryffindor Tower. She felt utterly betrayed by her friends, alienated from Remus for never having told her the real reason he "needed" her on the nights before the full moon, distant from her roommates, who wouldn't talk to her after they found out she was actually seeing Severus. And James. When she was around James, she felt—she felt like she wanted to be around him far too much for someone who already had a boyfriend, and the only response she'd been able to formulate was to flee, to very specifically avoid being around him as much as possible.

She'd found, oddly enough, that it had been relatively easy, in Potions class, to strike up a friendship with some of the girls from Slytherin. She had a feeling that they would agree to spend time with her if she basically let them copy her work, and she was right. Part of her protested against this, her rigid stand against copying during the entire previous six years of school thrown out the window, but part of her said, *We're in seventh year now. What does it matter? They still have to take the N.E.W.T.s on their own.*

And some of them were even curious about what life had been like for her in the Muggle world, before she found out she was a witch. Only Narcissa Anderssen evinced any real anti-Muggle

tendencies, and each time she said something tactlessly bigoted, she immediately followed it up with, "Oh, but I know *you're* all right, Lily," as though that had lessened the offensiveness, somehow. Lily bit her tongue at these times and forced herself to smile at the immaculate blonde girl. Tact was definitely not her strong suit.

But lately, she'd found that she needed to do more than just share her notes and homework. Narcissa had very pruriently started asking questions about her relationship with Severus, wanting to know how far they'd gone.

"I mean—you're not one of those sweet little virgins, are you? At seventeen?" Sophia Porter sneered. Lily knew that no one would confuse Sophia for a "sweet little virgin."

Narcissa rolled her eyes. "Typical *Gryffindor*..."

Lily bristled. "Actually, I haven't been since fifth year, for your information. You don't know what people get up to in the Gryffindor common room late at night..."

A moment later, she wanted to bite her tongue. *I shouldn't have said that.*

Narcissa had a lascivious lop-sided smile on her face. "Oooh. Details, details. What do the randy Gryffindors get up to? Like—*Sirius Black*?"

Lily laughed. "Not him, silly. Not with me, anyway. Don't you remember what I did when he made a pass at me?"

Diana sniffed. "Why ever do you think everyone thought you were a virgin? Didn't even want to be *kissed*. By *Sirius Black*. I mean—*really*."

Lily swallowed. "Well, I don't want to talk about—about that other boy because—we were never officially going out and it ended rather badly..."

Claudine sat up straight, her eyes shining. "Ooh—just clandestine shagging. How *dirty*. But you can tell us about Severus Snape. What's he like?"

Lily frowned. "What do you mean?"

Narcissa sighed and seemed to be restraining herself from saying *typical Gryffindor* again. "What do you think she means? In *bed*."

Lily felt herself blush. "Oh..." Then she shook herself, annoyed. *Oh, bother. They think I'm an innocent little shrinking violet and they'll just laugh in my face if I refuse to say anything.* So she cleared her throat and began to talk about some rather small things, the other girls hanging on her every word, and soon Lily found more and more details spilling out of her, until she noticed that Narcissa was looking behind her with very wide eyes.

Lily turned, seeing Severus standing directly behind her. Judging from the stormy look on his face, he'd been standing there for quite some time and had heard what she'd been saying to the Slytherin girls. Sophia batted her lashes at him and Claudine's eyes were moving shamelessly over his black-robed form as though trying to picture the fine physique Lily had described. As the moments passed, she felt her cheeks grow redder and redder, until finally, his face angrier than she'd ever seen it, he stormed out of the library, his long strides moving him along quickly.

She knew that if she went bolting after him, the other girls would laugh themselves silly, so she forced herself to stay where she was, and managed to change the subject. It was the hardest thing she'd ever done. After dinner in the Great Hall, she managed to waylay him as he was leaving, seeing again the furious expression on his face.

"Oh, um, Severus. I—I wondered whether you—whether you—" she couldn't quite finish. She'd never actually proposed their going off together before. He always left her little notes about time and place in her Potions text when they worked together; she'd never initiated a meeting and suddenly felt at a loss for how to do this. She felt irritated with herself. *Don't be stupid. Just do it.*

"How are you?" she said stupidly, wanting to kick herself. He looked coldly at her, and she felt as though she'd swallowed an icicle.

"Feeling ready to retire for the evening. I'll see you tomorrow, Lily," he said stiffly and formally before going down the stairs to the dungeon. Lily hurried after him, looking over her shoulder to see whether anyone had noticed.

"Do you mean, then, that we're meeting—*downstairs*?" she whispered, meaning the room where they'd first gone to be alone together, where Severus had worked a miracle on the debris and cobwebs. He glared at her, and now she saw the hurt in his eyes.

"No. I mean that I am retiring. To my dormitory. Good night," he said pointedly, walking away from her. She watched his retreating back, her stomach clenching. She felt like a failure.

There was no way to deny that things had changed since they had both learned that Remus was a werewolf. She had been on the verge of confessing to him many times that Remus was the other boy she'd slept with, but she couldn't bear to tell him that. He'd looked like he'd started to suspect the true identity of her first lover, and was waiting for her to come clean. The longer she put it off,

the harder it was, but she still had not managed it.

And then, when James and Sirius had returned after their suspension, she'd been so glad to see James! Something had leapt up in her heart when she saw him walk in those doors, and she'd run forward and hugged him, turning in shock to see a very angry Severus Snape standing at the top of the dungeon stairs, glaring at the two of them. She'd stepped back from James, flustered and trying to get her stomach to stop doing flip-flops. Severus had looked pointedly away from them and strode into the Great Hall as though they didn't exist.

And now she had stupidly said far too much to the idiot Slytherin girls....Severus would never forgive her....

* * * * *

Thursday, 22 December, 1977

Severus Snape paced the cold stone of the observation deck atop the Astronomy Tower, waiting for Lily. It had to be done. There was no doubt about it. There was absolutely no way he could tolerate the situation any longer....

When Black and Potter had returned from their suspension, there was The Hug. That had been bad enough, seeing that innocent look of pleasure in her eyes upon seeing Potter again. But then he had overheard a conversation between Black and Lupin that had turned his blood cold. He'd been in the Quidditch changing rooms after a practice, and Black and Lupin had come in to look for one of Black's knee pads, which he'd accidentally dropped. Black was idly swinging his Beater's bat while he walked, glancing around for the errant pad.

"I don't see how you can stand seeing them together," Black was saying to Lupin. Severus ducked behind an open locker door. He had a feeling they were talking about him and Lily.

"I told you, Sirius, it's over between me and Lily. Although technically, it never got started...."

Snape felt bile rise in his throat. *Was Lupin the other boy Lily spoke of, when she'd confessed that she wasn't a virgin?*

"But you were in love with her!"

"Sirius—"

"Don't lie about it, Remus. I could tell. And she was in love with you, too. If you didn't tell her you were—what you are—what happened?"

"That's what happened. I didn't tell her, so she kept pushing and pushing, wanting to know. But I—I hurt her, Sirius. *Physically*. Our first time together—I *bit* her, for pete's sake. And bruised her, badly. And I'm the one who broke her leg. Do you think I wanted to go on hurting her?"

Sirius Black heaved a sigh, apparently forgetting that he was supposed to be looking for his kneepad. "Did you ever *tell* her you loved her?"

Lupin said, "No," very softly. "She—she told me. Finally. On the train to school in September. But—but I told her I only thought of her as a friend."

On the train! Severus thought, feeling as though his heart had stopped. *Lily told me she loved me on the train—after Lupin rejected her!*

"You lied, in other words."

"Of course I lied! I'm not fit to be with anyone, Sirius, and you won't convince me otherwise. Yes, I loved Lily, and I still do, but that's beside the point. I'm no good for her. She's with Snape now. I suppose that's a sort of poetic justice, since I nearly killed him—"

"No thanks to me—" Sirius Black added quietly. "I'm sorry, Remus. I never wanted to put you at risk."

No, Severus thought. *You just wanted to see me cut to ribbons.*

"I know, Sirius. Sometimes you just don't—*think*." Severus heard an edge to the werewolf's voice.

"Oh!" Black said suddenly, giving no indication of having heard Lupin's last comment. "Here it is. Let's go to dinner now." He evidently wasn't going to acknowledge what Lupin had said.

Severus Snape listened to them go, sinking down onto a bench, feeling his heart breaking. *Lily had been in love with Remus Lupin, had slept with him, probably while she was flirting and snogging with me, and only told me she loved me after he rejected her....*

The wind was bitterly cold on top of the Astronomy Tower. It suited his mood. Severus turned up the collar of his cloak and squinted into the cold gusts, pacing the cold stones some more, looking out onto the frost-touched grounds. The world looked dead and lifeless. There was old brown bracken by the lake, a multitude of leafless skeletons of trees thrusting up toward the sky in the Forbidden Forest, and even the fir trees looked sad and limp, some of them browning, as though they were dying of a disease, or root-rot. The lake was a still grey mirror, reflecting the flat white sky, which smelled of snow.

It was only days until Christmas, but Severus Snape hadn't looked forward to the holiday since his parents had died. His uncle didn't make any effort to decorate their austere flat above the apothecary, and they exchanged perfunctory gifts, things like gloves and jumpers and potions books. They had no Christmas goose, no Christmas crackers or flaming pudding, just a prosaic joint of roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, some over-boiled vegetables (Scottish style) and short-bread afterward with some brandy (which Severus was only allowed to have in small quantities).

The only slightly uplifting thing they did was attend the Christmas Eve service at the stoic, grey-stoned wizarding kirk, where Muggle-repelling charms convinced wayward would-be Christmas church-goers who were not magical to try the other Presbyterian church down the street. Severus enjoyed listening to the children's choir warbling their carols, although he would never admit this to anyone. Back in Oxford, before his parents died, he had, for a time, been a boy soprano, before his voice had changed to an alto, then tenor, and finally, a baritone.

He had actually envisioned himself marrying Lily in that kirk, he remembered bitterly now, wearing a Campbell kilt instead of wizarding robes, his uncle standing at his side while Lily walked down the aisle, a vision in white, with a length of tartan draped around her shoulders. He'd fantasized about their going to hear their own children warbling in the choir on Christmas Eve, beaming at them proudly, then tucking them into bed later while snow fell on the roof and they dreamed of the presents they would find under the tree on Christmas morning....

He turned abruptly when he heard the trap door open. Lily emerged, a red and gold Gryffindor scarf tied around her head against the cold. Her teeth were clacking as she said, "*Se-se-se-severus!* Why did you want to meet me up here? It's f-f-freezing!"

He tried to swallow, but his mouth was utterly dry. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her, tell her he loved her, but he couldn't, because he also hated her. How can a person love someone and hate them at the same time? he wondered. But he did; he hated her for making him love her when she had only ever pretended to love him, when she said things to others that made him a laughingstock, when she had slept with *Lupin*, of all people....

"I know," he said, keeping his voice steady. "I thought it appropriate."

"Appropriate?" she said, shivering, pulling her cloak around her body more closely. "Appropriate for what?"

He took a deep breath in through his nose; he had to just go ahead and do it. "Lily," he said resolutely, "it isn't working."

She squinted at him. "What are you talking about? What isn't working?"

She didn't know. She really had no idea how miserable he was, the ribbing he'd been enduring from the Slytherin girls—and then others, as the stories spread—who were so proud of themselves for tricking her into revealing intimate information about what they did together. Narcissa Anderssen was particularly intolerable. At first he had been indignant on Lily's behalf when Narcissa had laughed with a snort, saying, "She actually believed we wanted to be her friends! Her! A Mudblood!" And she'd gone off with her gang of bitches, laughing fit to kill, all of them. But then he remembered that *she'd* only pretended to love him, and decided that, as much as he disliked Narcissa and the others, Lily had gotten what she deserved. The trouble was—he'd been a victim as well.

"We aren't working," he said above the whistling of the wind, which was making the skin on his cheeks ache, it was so cold. "I asked you up here to end it."

"End it?" she seemed to be saying, but it wasn't very loud, and the wind whipped the sound away, so that he could only go by the way her lips had moved.

"Yes. It's over," he said clearly, his voice sounding too loud to him now, the wind having died down a bit. He took in the shock on her face, but he couldn't enjoy it. He knew he was hurting her, but he was hurting too. It was just too painful to continue the charade...

"Over?" She seemed intent on just repeating the last thing he said each time she spoke. He nodded at her.

"I'm sorry, Lily. I—I suppose we never should have expected it to work, after all. A Gryffindor and a Slytherin."

She frowned at him. "You—you're breaking up with me? And because I'm a Gryffindor? I don't understand, Severus....I thought we were happy...."

Now he felt a fury rise up in him, which helped him keep his resolve and not take her in his arms. "*Happy!*" he spat. "You think I was happy being made a laughingstock!"

Her face crumpled; he saw cold tears leaking from her eyes, being whipped away almost immediately by the harsh, scouring wind. "I—I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't realize—Narcissa and the others—they were just pretending to be my friends. I feel so stupid. I don't know why, but I've never had a great deal of success being friends with girls. Maybe it comes from having a sister who's so horrid, I don't know...."

He curled his lip into a sneer at her rationalization, but it was somewhat forced. "Don't make excuses. Although perhaps that *would* explain how you don't seem to have any problem making friends with *boys*. Like Remus Lupin, for instance." He glared at her; her eyes opened wide, and he could tell that she knew *he* knew. "Or James Potter," he couldn't resist adding, although he knew he risked looking petty and jealous now. And yet—her eyes widened further. *Good God*, he thought. *Has she been getting up to something with Potter?* He'd seen her looking at him in confusion; he'd seen her smiles sent his way, the easy affection she showered on him, the warmth in her eyes when she regarded him.....

She looked down now, unable to meet his eyes, and he knew without a doubt that he'd made the right decision. *If I'd let this go on longer, she'd have been sneaking around behind my back with Potter, and then I'd have been an even greater laughingstock.* But it wasn't being a laughingstock he minded the most, although that was a great blow to his pride. It was her being with him while only pretending to love him.

"Good-bye, Lily," he said tersely, turning to leave.

As he opened the trap door, suddenly she pulled on his arm, crying into the wind, "No! Don't, Severus. I'm sorry! You have no idea how sorry!"

She was crying in earnest. It was possible, he thought, that she had actually deluded herself into thinking she loved him. But he was not so deluded. With more willpower than he ever knew he possessed, he peeled her hands from his arm and said, "It's no good, Lily. It's over."

He couldn't seem to find another way to express it; he kept just saying the same words over and over. He felt as though they were stuck in some kind of time loop, as though they would be standing at the top of this tower for an eternity, whipped by the wind and saying, "*It's over*," and then, "*No, Severus!*" and "*It's over*," again and again and again.

He virtually ran down the steps, slamming the door after him. He had to get away from her; he couldn't stay any longer or he'd crack. He ran and ran, down one corridor and up strange stairs, until he wasn't even sure where he was. He ducked into a dusty, disused classroom, where the desks and chairs were pushed against the walls and someone had long ago written a rude limerick on the blackboard, which had never been erased. He didn't laugh at the limerick though; he sank down onto the filthy floor and cried, cried for the first time since he was a small child, cried as he hadn't cried when his own parents had been killed and the overriding emotion he'd felt was rage. He cried until he could cry no more, and all the while telling himself that it was for the best, it was for the best and he was better off without her.

But he didn't believe it.

* * * * *

Friday, 23 December, 1977

Lily stood in the entrance hall, her trunk beside her as she waited for the horseless carriage that would take her down to the village to get the train home for the Christmas holiday. She felt odd and empty inside ever since Severus had broken up with her the day before. She had stayed up on top of the Astronomy Tower, crying into the wind, and finally had to go see Madam Pomfrey for Pepper-Up Potion, because being up there had made her nose congested, and she'd developed a cough.

When she returned to Gryffindor Tower, her ears still smoking from the potion, she explained where she'd been, and James and the others had assumed that she looked drawn and tired because she was ill. She didn't tell any of them that Severus had ended their relationship. She went straight to bed and didn't eat dinner, and no one checked on her, no one seemed to care at all whether she lived or died. She wallowed in self-pity and relived the conversation over and over, thinking of what she should have said, but it was too late—she always thought of those things *too late*. At four in the morning, she awoke, unable to sleep. She'd gone down to the common room with a quill and some parchment, and worked for over three hours on a letter to Severus. She'd gone through more than seven drafts.

After classes, she had packed her trunk and gone down into the entrance hall with the other students who were getting the train home for the holiday. They were laughing and talking animatedly about what their holiday was going to hold, and no one seemed to notice that Hogwarts' Head Girl looked like death on toast. *I don't have any friends*, she thought miserably, thinking of Cecilia, who was in the Hufflepuff common room visiting with her friends there; they would all be staying at the castle for the holiday. She remembered the Slytherin girls slyly fooling her into telling them things she never should have told anyone. She'd been a complete and utter fool, she knew. And now Severus had left her...

She climbed into a horseless carriage to go to the station, and before she could close the door, some third years climbed in. She recognized Bill Weasley from her own house, along with some

Hufflepuffs he'd been going around with since September. She wondered why he wasn't with the other third-year Gryffindor students much anymore.

"Oh, hello," he said pleasantly. She forced herself to smile at him.

"Hello."

"Is it all right for us to ride in this carriage, then?"

She shrugged. "Why wouldn't it be?"

One of the Hufflepuffs had very wide eyes. "Because you're the Head Girl."

She smiled at the boys. "It's perfectly all right. Settle in. I suppose you're all looking forward to seeing your families again."

Weasley nodded vigorously. "Oh, yeah. My mum's expecting another baby in the spring, and she could really use my help with my little sisters and my baby brother."

Lily regarded him with a sentimental half-smile. "Aren't you sweet..." she said, making his ears turn red. She noticed, however, that one of the other boys was clutching a worn-looking letter in his hand and looking miserable.

"Are you all right? What's your name?"

"Jack. No, not really all right, exactly." He waved the letter half-heartedly. "My mum and dad are splitting up, and neither one of them wants me for the holiday, so I'm going to my aunt's."

Lily was surprised; she'd never heard of divorce in the wizarding world. "Oh—I'm sorry. That's dreadful."

The boy shrugged and fingered the letter some more. "I've known for a while now. They wrote me a couple of months ago. But when I'm at school, I don't really have to deal with it, do I? When I'm not..."

She nodded sympathetically and put her hand over his. "I understand what you mean," she said earnestly. Jack looked dazed, staring down at their touching hands.

Then the other boy pointed to the floor of the carriage, saying, "You dropped something." Lily bent to pick it up, her face reddening. The nameless boy looked suspicious. "What's that?" he wanted to know.

"Geoff!" Weasley chastised him for his nosiness. Lily smiled ruefully.

"It's all right. It's a letter I wrote. To my boyfriend."

Weasley frowned. "But I thought the Slytherin Keeper was your boyfriend. Why do you need to write him a letter before even leaving the castle?"

She felt herself redden and said, "Well, technically, he isn't my boyfriend anymore. But—I was hoping that I could change his mind...."

All three boys' jaws dropped, and Weasley said, "You mean he *broke up* with you? Is he daft?"

Lily smiled at him more broadly than before. "I'll take that as a compliment. Yes," she said more softly, her smile fading. "He broke up with me yesterday."

Jack was shaking his head and Geoff was looking incredulous. Weasley spoke again. "I can't believe someone broke up with *you*. And you wrote him a letter?"

"Well-being Head Girl doesn't mean that you're perfect. I did something horrid, and I'm begging him to forgive me. It's not simple."

They rode on in silence, and when they reached the station, Bill put his hand on her arm and said, "Good luck."

He grinned broadly at her, his freckles standing out on his pale skin. She smiled back at him.

"Thank you. And if I don't see you—Happy Christmas."

"You too. Happy Christmas."

She watched the boys walk off to find a compartment together, their easy friendship inducing a pang of jealousy in her. She'd never had a bond quite like that with anyone, not really. The closest she had come was with James, and even he hadn't told her about Remus. However—she remembered now that he'd said it wasn't his secret to tell. *That was James*, she thought. *Honorable to the last*. It no longer annoyed her, though. He was a good Head Boy, she knew, despite his having been sneaking around with Remus and the others at the full moon. He'd saved Severus' life. She started to get a lump in her throat as she thought of Severus, putting her hand in her cloak pocket, touching the folded parchment there.

In the letter, she apologized to Severus for all of the dreadful things she'd done, telling him what she loved about him, begging him to reconsider....She had decided to give it to him on the train. She'd seen his face as he'd fled from her the day before and knew that he was only breaking up with her because of his pride; she could tell that he still loved her. If she put it to him right, she felt convinced, he'd surely reconsider. After all, after she'd screamed at him for taking the courage potion in order to kiss her, he *had* shown up under the oaks at the appointed time.

She looked in each compartment on the train starting at the beginning, searching for him. She finally found him, sitting alone in a compartment, staring out the window at the castle. "Severus," she choked, making his head whip around. He looked trapped, but she simply held out the parchment to him, and he took it. "I'm sorry, Severus, so sorry. Please—please just read this. Please reconsider."

She turned and fled, going back several compartments, where she'd seen James and the other boys. They'd tried to get her to join them, and she'd said she would after she'd done something important. When she returned, they made room for her between James and Peter, while Remus and Sirius sat opposite. She watched the landscape start to slip by, barely listening to the boys' conversation, her stomach in knots as she wondered what Severus would say to the letter.

Lily wasn't certain how long the train had been moving when their compartment door slammed open. Severus stood there, holding her letter. She gazed hopefully at him, but, looking right back at her, a steely glint in the dark eyes, he tore the parchment into small bits, tossed them into the air, and then set them afire with his wand, before sneering at them all and slamming the compartment door shut again with a final *BANG!*

The boys were all alarmed when Lily suddenly burst into tears, burying her face in her hands; she'd had such hope that, after having the opportunity to really think about what to say, it would make a difference. But it hadn't. He didn't want to be with her anymore. He hated her.

"Clear off, all of you!" James hissed suddenly. She heard the other boys scramble for the door, and when she lifted her head, she and James were alone. He gathered her to him, his arms warm and sure around her, and as she sobbed into his shoulder, he muttered, "*There, there,*" and smoothed her hair and patted her back and stroked her cheek. When she was done, he dried her tears and kissed her brow, and she went to sleep with his arm around her shoulders as the cold, wintry landscape of Scotland and England sped by.

— CHAPTER NINE —

Epiphanies

Monday, 26 December, 1977

Lily felt strange putting on her robes to go out in London, but they were covered up by her long cloak, so no one would be the wiser. Petunia and Vernon had gone to his sister Marge's for Christmas, so the Evans family was going down to Little Whinging, in Surrey, for Boxing Day, to see Petunia and her husband. Lily was not pleased to hear about this, telling her parents that she had expected to see her sister and brother-in-law on Christmas and had made plans to see some friends in London on Boxing Day. To avoid a day of Lily and Petunia sniping at each other, they'd agreed to let her abstain from the Surrey trip.

It wasn't strictly true, though, that she was seeing friends in London. It was one friend: James. And it wasn't in London, exactly....After falling asleep in James' arms, on the train, she'd felt rather self-conscious waking in his embrace to find him staring down at her, his eyes very blue behind his spectacles, his look one of grave concern and—something else. She was a bit frightened for a moment, and swallowed, blinking sleepily. He had gently asked her whether she was ready to talk about it, and assured her that she didn't have to. Instead, she asked him point-blank how he and the others stayed with Remus during the full moon. He took a deep breath and said to her, "We're Animagi."

She had been speechless, and asked him how they'd done it, and what animals they became when they transfigured themselves. Now that all of the secrets were out, he spoke freely, telling her about the pain, the sneaking around, the question of whether they would all be able to do it, the thrill of finally accomplishing their goal. She, in turn, had talked about how stupid she felt to trust the Slytherin girls, how she didn't really blame Severus for having enough self-respect to not want to be mistreated by her any longer..

James held her again and tutted softly, and she'd quieted and looked into his eyes for what felt like a very long time. Finally, he backed away a little, turning bright red, and asked whether she wanted to come to Ascog Castle on Boxing Day. She could use the Floo network to come from the Leaky Cauldron in London. She'd accepted the invitation and she and James spent the rest of the trip alone together, talking endlessly.

Lily rode the tube to the Leaky Cauldron with a flutter in her chest. She'd never done anything like this before; she'd be traveling clear across the country by herself, to a different country, technically. It was hardly the same thing as traveling to Scotland on the school train, with hundreds of other students. When she reached the wizarding pub, she went to the bar and asked Old Tom whether she could buy some Floo powder from him; the five Sickles he charged her seemed a bit steep until she considered that she'd be traveling quite far on those five Sickles, and that James would have some Floo powder for her to get back, so she didn't have to buy enough to cover a return trip. She also knew that it was probably cheaper to buy somewhere in Diagon Alley, but Tom was charging partially for convenience.

James had assured her that it was perfectly safe; she'd never done it before. He explained how to throw the powder into the fire, step into the green flames, speak clearly, and hold your elbows in. He'd given her a funny demonstration in their train compartment, pantomiming spinning through the network, then falling out of the "fire" with aplomb, looking rather like a gymnast who was trying to "stick" a landing after dismounting from the parallel bars or horse. When she'd said this, he'd had no idea what she was talking about, of course ("Don't you dismount from a horse with a mounting block?"), and they'd laughed about that too, as she tried to explain men's and women's gymnastics and the Olympics, and other things Muggles did for amusement.

Tom accompanied her to the fireplace and held out the pouch to her; when she pinched some powder between her thumb and forefinger, she imagined she must have looked somewhat appre-

hensive, because he said skeptically to her, "You sure you know what you're doin'?"

Lily swallowed and nodded, took a deep breath, and threw the powder into the fire, saying loudly and clearly, "*Ascog Castle!*"

She stepped into the green flames and immediately felt herself whirling. Trying to keep her elbows in and yet also deal with her hair whipping in her face, she saw grate after grate whirling past, and sometimes she had glimpses of people, witches and wizards she'd never met, homes she'd never visit. Finally, she felt as though someone were pushing her out, and she stumbled forward, hitting something warm and solid which kept her from falling.

It was James Potter.

His arms were around her and he grinned down at her as she looked back at him, wide-eyed from her first Floo trip. She felt herself flush and straightened up and away from him. Her chest had been crushed against him, and their bodies hadn't had a sliver of air between. They'd hugged before, many times, and each had comforted the other in times of distress, but somehow—this was different. She shifted her weight from foot to foot awkwardly, while his smile became equally embarrassed-looking and he said with a croak in his throat, "You didn't stick the landing." He was trying to sound teasing, but there was something funny about the way his eyes looked....

"Hello, Lily," said a familiar voice nearby. Lily jumped, not having noticed another person standing in the doorway of the comfortable sitting room. Remembering the way she and James had been pressed together from knee to shoulder just moments before, she felt a warmth rise from her neck. However, as soon as she realized who was speaking, she felt warm from rage instead; somehow she had forgotten that James was living at Ascog because that was where Sirius lived.

"Well!" she said tersely to James. "It was nice seeing you, James. I'll just be going now. Where do you keep your Floo powder?" She turned and searched the high mantle with her eyes.

"Lily!" James said pleadingly. "Don't! I just—I just wish you two would *talk*. Please end this feud."

"Feud! You call this a *feud!*" Lily exploded, turning around. "I call it refusing to consort with an attempted murderer. Not to mention *Remus* also would have died if he'd had *his* way."

"I never wanted that!" Sirius cried plaintively, striding into the room.

She threw her hands up and rolled her eyes. "So that makes it all right? You're as bad as those animals who blew up Honeyduke's!" As soon as she said it, she wished she hadn't; the stricken look on his face, the unshed tears suspended in his dark eyes told her that her sharp words had hit their mark, and now she wished like anything that she had missed. "Oh! I—I'm sorry, Sirius," she found herself saying softly. "You're—you're not like a Death Eater....What you did was just—just so *stupid* and *thoughtless*—"

He nodded, looking thoroughly miserable. "I know, Lily. I know. I should have been expelled, I should have gone to prison...."

She looked at him, feeling dreadful. She had thought these things herself, there was no denying it. But it would hardly be sporting to tell him so when he was saying this himself. Then she remembered Severus again, and Remus....

"What am I *doing?*" she suddenly asked no one in particular. "Why am I apologizing to *you?*" He looked at her, the blazing green eyes and hair still wild from traveling by Floo, and she could see in the eyes looking back at her that he still cared about her, that he would take anything she had to dish out, without complaint. James looked back and forth between the two of them, his mouth drawn into a line.

"Listen, Lily. I wasn't trying to trick you or anything. I thought—I thought it would be nice to have you come visit during the holiday. But I also thought that maybe—maybe you and Sirius could at least come to some sort of understanding, so we can all go on? I—I care about the two of you too much for you to be cross at each other all the time like this. It's been *months*, and you still aren't getting along. I'm going to leave the room; can you at least *try* to talk? For me?"

Lily could see that James was reddening ever so slightly, and she thought about his words: *I care about the two of you too much*. She had known that James cared about her, in an oblique sort of way, for years, but hearing him say it was different. When they didn't protest, he turned and left, leaving Lily and Sirius standing in the middle of the room, awkwardly looking about (but not at each other). Finally, evidently remembering that this was his home, Sirius waved a hand at one of the squashy couches around the fire and said, "Have a seat?"

Lily positioned herself on the edge of a cushion, primly folding her hands on her lap as though she were waiting to perform in a piano recital. She looked at Sirius expectantly. He was sitting on the other couch, perpendicular to hers, cracking his knuckles compulsively, making Lily flinch. Finally, she said, "I think you might be the one to start, especially since if you keep that up I'm going to hex your fingers so they'll be in a permanent knot and you won't be able to do that any more."

Sirius swallowed and then cleared his throat, crossing his arms in attempt to keep his hands apart, and then just sitting on his hands instead. "I-I don't know what to say, Lily," he began, his voice cracking with emotion. "Any name you want to call me, any curse you want to put on me, I'd deserve it, because—because if Remus had—had hurt Snape, it would have ended up hurting *you*, and you're the last person in the world I ever want to—"

"Stop!" she cried. She had never felt so embarrassed in her life. "Please stop, Sirius. Don't—don't *grovel*. I—oh, I don't want to go on being on the outs with you." Her voice had grown very soft, and she realized as soon as she said it that it was true. She'd begun to treasure her resentment of Sirius; to let it go would be to release something comfortable and familiar, a constant companion since the incident in September, a poor replacement for having friends in her own house, but still....She felt a shivering begin in the pit of her stomach as she contemplated just letting it go; it was both terrifying and—something she'd longed for without realizing how much. She felt *tired*—so tired of actively nurturing this grudge, and the thought of releasing it was both frightening and liberating. "I-I hate what you did but—but you're James and Remus' best friend, and I don't want—what I mean is—I got into a rut, these past few months. Once I started being nasty and cold to you, I didn't know how to *stop*—"

"So—why were you nasty to Snape, too?" he asked. She looked at him, aghast.

"Could—could everyone tell? *I* couldn't even see it, not right away. I've—I've been thinking of almost nothing else for the last few days..." When she wasn't thinking of James...She smiled ruefully. "It wasn't even just the things he brought up when he was breaking up with me...There were a lot of little things that accumulated, one on top of another, until—until he broke. And *I* broke him...Oh—it's a wonder he put up with me as long as he did...I was so thoughtless. He was almost killed, and then I—"

"That's not why you were like that to him. Well, not entirely."

She stopped. "You seem to know quite a lot. Care to enlighten me?"

"You didn't really want to be with him any more. He finally figured it out, or accepted it, as the case may be. He could tell you wanted to be with someone else. I could too."

She raised her eyebrows at him. *So, we're back to that again. He thinks I'm still not over him.* "Oh, really? Well, let me remind you that you rather miscalculated and thought I wanted to be with *you* before I hexed you; afterward I didn't speak to you for a time. Did you think that was my way of saying, 'Come and get it'?"

"No, no. I didn't mean *me*. I meant James, of course."

"James!"

"Yes, James." Sirius looked her in the eye, and she could see that, despite the fact that he was trying to call her attention to James Potter, he still cared about her a great deal. *He's making it very hard to be cross with him*, she thought, realizing that she'd somehow *known* that he would, if she'd allowed him to actually talk to her, which was why she'd avoided it for three months. He was looking at her now with those puppy-dog eyes. And then she remembered that James had told her that Sirius' Animagus form was a large black dog, and she laughed at the thought. He frowned.

"What's so funny?"

She drew her mouth into a line in an attempt to refrain from further laughter. "Nothing. You were—*what* were you saying, exactly?"

Sirius took a deep breath and looked at the fire now. "I saw the way you looked at him after he saved Snape. When we came back after our suspension was over. And I know that you wrote to him while he was back here. Every few days."

She looked down at her hands. "I was—I was keeping him apprised of what was going on at school. I'm Head Girl. He's Head Boy."

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "So those owls were just business, were they? They why wouldn't James show any of them to me?"

She felt warm again. "I don't know," she said softly. When she'd written to him, she'd seen him in her mind's eye, lying in the bed in the infirmary, looking at her with that clear, honest expression of love on his face, after stating that he'd saved Snape to spare her unhappiness. Not the best reason to save someone's life, to be sure, but certainly honest. He didn't pretend that he was doing it on principle, as some people might. Except that James *was* the sort of person who'd do it on principle, and then try to cover it up, make excuses....

Lily also found herself wondering repeatedly whether Severus would do the same thing, whether he would save James, Sirius, Remus or Peter from a certain death. She thought and thought about it. It probably occupied her mind more than the fact that James *had* saved *Severus*. She wasn't sure when she had decided, *No, Severus would probably never do that...* but she had a nagging feeling that it was sometime after that that she began being less-than-loving to Severus, that she

started making careless remarks about him and even joined in with other students making vampire jokes. She'd tried to forget his furious face when she'd done this, she reminded him that she knew better, knew that it was the porphyria, and it was all in fun—but was it? Didn't he have a right to expect his girlfriend to stick up for him, to show a little more loyalty than that, to refrain from laughing at him? Was she really behaving as a loving girlfriend should when she did these things?

She looked up at Sirius. "Don't expect miracles," she said quietly. "I think—I think I can be civil to you for James' sake. You're like a brother to him. But if you pull one tiny stunt when we're back at school, I will *not* hesitate to give you detention...."

He grinned and hugged her quickly; she could tell he was reluctant to let her go, but he did. He held her shoulders now, though. "And James? How do you feel about him?"

She looked at him shrewdly. "Has he *told* you something? Is he really putting us in the same room to make up, or so you can convince me that I want James to be my new boyfriend?"

Sirius smiled ruefully. "James wants us to make up. I want you to see that James is the bloke for you."

She narrowed her eyes, watching his ardent, animated face. "Why? Are you saying you're not interested in me anymore?" She knew she sounded suspicious—and she was.

Sirius reddened. "No. I'll be completely honest with you Lily—there's no way I'd turn you down right now if you wanted to kiss me. Or anything else. But—I know that's not going to happen. And I think the one you *do* want to be with that way is James, and I can tell that he wants to be with you. I want you both to be happy; it's like James said, only it's me this time: I care too much about you both. I want you both to be happy." He shook his head, giving her a lopsided smile. "This is so perfect it's almost scary, Lily. And even if you decided that you two don't want this—I will *still* do anything for both of you. You have a willing slave for life. I'd crawl over broken glass for miles. I'd—"

Lily held up her hand. "I get it, I get it." He looked at her, that expression of both love and hopelessness in the dark, glistening eyes again. She sighed. "All right, Sirius. We'll call a truce. That doesn't mean I forgive you for what you almost did to both Severus and Remus, but it means I think we can go on anyway. Put it behind us." Her voice had become very quiet. "Did Remus—did Remus ever tell you about us?"

He looked embarrassed and glanced away from her. "I figured it out on my own. I was a little jealous at first, but then—then I thought—Remus deserved some happiness. And then the stupid git decides that he *doesn't* deserve it at all, that he shouldn't be with anyone because he's not fit, and—and he basically throws it out the window."

She nodded. "I told him I loved him and he claimed he didn't love me back, that he just thought of me as a friend, but—but he looked so odd. Like he was going to be sick any moment. He didn't look like even *he* believed what he was saying," she told him softly. "But I had to accept it at face value. He clearly wasn't going to change his mind...."

Sirius shook his head. "He loved you—loves you still, Lily. Is there any chance you still love him, rather than James? Is that—is that why you've been so hesitant about James?"

She was the one shaking her head now. "No. I care what happens to Remus, but I don't feel the same way about him anymore. Something changed in me when I found out that he was a werewolf...."

Sirius stood, frowning. "What? Are you one of those bigots who—"

"Calm down, will you?" she said quickly. "I didn't mean that like it sounded. I don't hold anything against him for just being a werewolf. But I'm possibly always going to be upset with him for not telling me himself. For not being honest with me." She looked at the fire, trying to will herself not to cry. "And for not taking a chance and admitting that he loved me, letting me into his world, letting me help him cope. I could have been as supportive as any of you if he'd only *let* me." She looked up at Sirius again, no longer feeling like she was going to cry. "But as long as he's not convinced he deserves to be loved, there's nothing I or anyone else can do to help him."

She spoke very quietly, but she could tell that he caught every word, as he was nodding in silent agreement the entire time she was speaking. "All right," he said, "so why is it you're hesitant about James when you don't have any interest in me or Remus? I'm assuming it's not because you've decided you fancy Peter."

She tried not to laugh. "No, I don't fancy Peter. He can be very sweet to me sometimes, but—I don't know. He *fawns* a bit much. No; the reason why I'm not rushing out of the room and into James' arms is—I don't know that I want to at all."

Sirius looked rather upset at this. "What? Why? James is the best! Honestly, Lily, you could never possibly find anyone better in the entire world—"

She nodded. "I know, I know. That's one reason why."

Sirius frowned, coming to a dead stop. "Huh?" was all the response he could muster.

She plucked at her robes nervously. "I haven't had a great track-record with boys so far, have I? I crushed on you, changed my mind just as you realized I existed, fell for another good friend, Remus, who decided not to tell me a very, very important detail about himself, then right on the heels of Remus rejecting me, I run into Severus' arms. I don't want to do that again. If—and I emphasize *if*—I have another boyfriend—*any* boyfriend—while I am still in school, it won't be for a couple of months, at least. I need to recover from this whole thing with Severus. I need to try to think through some things, like whether I want to risk losing James as a friend if we try to be together and it doesn't work out. I don't think I could take that..."

Sirius nodded. "Fair enough."

"And—oh, Sirius! I'm so young! And so is James. And—I just—he's the sort of boy who—" She sighed, frustrated at not being able to say what she meant. "All right. Let me see if I can explain this. To me, James isn't the sort of boy you just date in school and he's your school boyfriend, and then you each finish school and go off into the world and put all that behind you. James isn't the sort of person you *break up* with. He's the sort—" Her voice caught. "He's the sort of boy—*man*—that you *marry*. I just—I don't know. I feel like if I were to start seeing James—that would be it for me. For the rest of my life. And I wonder whether I'd feel restless when I'm older, because I didn't see a lot of people before him...I don't want to resent him, ever. And I don't want him to resent me. He's only had Bonnie. Is that usual for boys? How many girlfriends have you had?"

Sirius frowned, thinking. "This year?"

She threw up her hands. "My point exactly. For me, being with James right now is—scary. It would be a very thorough step into adulthood. He's not like the rest of the boys at school. Yes, he clowns around with you, but—somehow, he's still different. His integrity is different, his authority is different, his—" She stopped, embarrassed.

Sirius smiled at her. "You're not able to hide how you feel about him. All right, all right, I understand why it's scary for you to be with James when you're so young, and since you don't want to lose him as a friend. Fine. You'll be single for a while. If you like, I can *pretend* to be your boyfriend sometimes, if you want to ward off other blokes..."

Lily laughed. "Oh, right, and give you an excuse to suddenly snog me, as a cover story. What's so wrong with me just saying to the world, I don't want a boyfriend for at least a couple of months.' Does that make me unforgivably weird?"

"No, it doesn't make you weird at all," James said from the doorway. Lily felt herself flush, wondering how much James had heard. "Thought I'd check on you two, assess the damage. All limbs in the right place?" He grinned at them.

"Lily was just saying that I shouldn't be trying to date her just yet, as she wants some time to get over Snape," Sirius said laconically, draping an arm around Lily's shoulders. She promptly took it from around her and spun, so that now the arm was twisted behind Sirius' back. He grunted. "I mean—unh!—just saying that she—damn, Lily! That hurts!"

James laughed. "That's all right." He looked at her, his gentle eyes very understanding. "I still haven't had another girlfriend, since Bonnie died. Nothing wrong with being unattached."

She nodded, still unsure of how much of what Sirius had said had been discussed between the two of them in advance. *If James Potter ever does want to pursue me, she thought grumpily, he'd damn well better do it himself instead of just having Sirius spend all day singing his praises.*

She let go of Sirius' arm and stepped away from him. He flexed his arm, grimacing slightly. "You're fast," he said, impressed.

"Older sister I detest. You learn things."

Twisting his arm behind his back didn't seem to dampen Sirius' feelings for her one iota; now that he wasn't in pain anymore, he seemed to be thinking about something else entirely, and he suddenly clapped his hands together. "Oi! I know what we could do! The pool!"

Lily frowned. "Pool?" She glanced out the windows to the courtyard; the flagstones were frosted and drifts of snow softened the corners. "Um, are you mad?"

They both laughed. "Hardly," James said. "And you could probably wear this bathing outfit Ursula bought that she won't be using any time soon. She wanted to do some slimming first, but—well, she's going to have a baby. So she doesn't expect to use it. She'll have even *more* slimming to do after having the baby..."

Lily grinned at Sirius. "You're going to be an uncle! Congratulations!"

Sirius grinned. "Yeah, I'll be that disreputable uncle every kid loves to have about..."

James hit his arm with the back of his hand. "Just go up to Ursula and Alan's room and get it so Lily can go swimming."

"Actually, you should come with me, Lily, and then you can use Ursula and Alan's en suite bath

to change. James and I are on the top floor. Then we'll meet you back down in the entrance hall—

"But—but—" she sputtered. "You still haven't explained how we're to tolerate the cold. Spells?"

"You'll see. It's downstairs; paradise in a dungeon."

Lily had previously thought that was what Severus had created for her, their first night together, but she didn't say so. "That sounds like an oxymoron."

Sirius stepped in front of James. "Are you calling my best friend a moron?" he demanded only half-seriously.

James shooed him from the room. "Oh, get on with you. Come on, Lily. The stairs are this way." She followed them out into a rather small hall lined with hooks and benches for cloaks and boots; the only decoration was a series of mounted fish high above the hooks. The curving stone stairs reminded her of the Tower of London, and of more than a few Hogwarts stairs. When they reached the landing with Ursula and Alan's room, Sirius and James casually opened the door and let themselves in. She saw a generously proportioned bedroom with a large semi-circular bay window thrusting out over the courtyard, but not obscuring it. There were warm tapestries and hangings on the walls and the four-poster bed, and a beautifully carved walnut armoire, desk and bureau. Sirius went rummaging in the bureau and came up with a bag from a Muggle shop in London, from which he pulled a rather modest one-piece bathing outfit in sapphire blue. Lily was relieved to see that it could hardly be called daring, and that it was real, not created from magic that could give out eventually, leaving her wearing nothing at all. At least she was *fairly* certain it was real....

After they'd gone, she let herself into the large bath that adjoined the room and, after first saying, "*Finite Incantatum*" over it in case it *did* carry any spells, she donned the bathing outfit, marveling that it fit her so well, and complemented her coloring, and didn't reveal anything she didn't *want* to reveal. She felt a little self-conscious about being so pale and freckled (redhead's curse) but there was no help for that. She put her robes over the bathing outfit to look a little more respectable until they reached the pool and went back down the circular stairs.

When she reached the entrance hall, she stopped in shock; Sirius and James were waiting for her in their swimming trunks, towels slung over their shoulders. She realized that she'd never seen either one of them with so little on, and she reddened, attempting to both avert her eyes and sneak peaks at the same time. She was *not* prepared for this. *I'm going to be unattached for a while, I'm going to be unattached for a while...* she chanted in her head, trying not to look at James' shoulders (or back, or arms, or legs...) as he walked before her down the stairs to the dungeons.

When they reached the pool room, Lily stopped, gawping at it, enthralled. The room had an arched ceiling like the Great Hall at Hogwarts and was also enchanted to look like the sky. There was a moving mural on the walls which depicted a garden, complete with birds, squirrels and gnomes. The interior of the pool was painted turquoise blue, so that the water also appeared to be turquoise. She felt like she was getting surprise after surprise, and laughed out loud, turning her head to look at all of it at once, unable to keep from smiling.

"No wonder you came back from your fortnight suspension looking so well rested," she said to the boys, watching as a garden gnome on the wall waved to her, then ran under a shrub, which continued to shiver after the gnome disappeared from sight.

Sirius smiled ruefully; she tried to look at his face and not his body, as well. He was every bit as distracting as James. "Oh, we weren't allowed in the pool while we were suspended. My mum reamed me out good, and even though she didn't ream James out, we were both basically confined to our room except for meals. A fortnight of being cooped up with *him*," he said, jerking his thumb at James. "It's a wonder I didn't wind up in St. Mun—"

Grinning mischievously, James suddenly gave Sirius a push, and, after windmilling his arms for a moment, his best friend fell forward into the water with a tremendous *splash!* that threw water onto Lily's robes and onto a good deal of the walkway around the pool. Sirius surfaced, shaking his head to clear his wet hair from his eyes. "All right, Potter. Now you've done it. My towel's all wet!" He brandished the damp cloth that had been draped around his shoulders before he'd fallen in.

James relented. "All right, give it here. I'll hang it up to dry." But when Sirius was certain James had a good hold on it, he pulled and James came tumbling into the pool, his towel also still around his neck. Lily couldn't prevent the laughter that escaped her.

James surfaced, shaking his hair out of his face, as Sirius had done. His glasses were still on, but covered in water. "You bloody sod!" he said to Sirius. He walked to the side of the pool and put his now-soaking towel on the walkway, as well as his useless glasses. Then he turned and Lily saw a glint in his blue eyes that told her Sirius was in deep trouble. Sure enough, James suddenly dove under the water and swam toward Sirius' legs, and it was the work of a moment for him to yank Sirius—who was flailing his arms again—under the surface. James then swam underwater toward

the end of the pool where Lily was still standing, clad in her robes. He surfaced right in front of her, pushing his hair out of his face instead of shaking it, so he wouldn't get her wet, saying, "Well, are you just going to stand there, or are you going to come in?"

She had managed to stop laughing and stood above him, her arms crossed on her chest while she tried to keep a straight face. "Oh, I thought I'd just watch the pair of you behaving like ten-year-olds for a while." But she couldn't prevent a smile from stretching across her face, and she uncrossed her arms. "Be prepared. I've been swimming since I could walk, you know."

She opened the robes and turned to hang them on a hook on the wall, not realizing the effect she was having on the boys behind her. *Blimey* was all that came into James' mind, and he didn't need his glasses to follow the line of her long legs up from her feet to her knees to her—

Splash!

Lily had leapt into the pool suddenly, then surfaced, laughing, her long red hair darkened by the water and suddenly sleek and cohesive. She didn't see the looks the boys had had when they'd first seen her without her robes, as they were now both wiping water from their eyes. She grinned and laid back on the surface, looking at the imitation sky and lazily doing a backstroke. "This is lovely," she said, not looking at either one of them. "It's a good thing, too, that your mum didn't let you down here during your suspension, Sirius. That would hardly be a punishment."

"Still, I was hoping she wouldn't think of it. Unfortunately—"

"—unfortunately, your mum isn't *daft*," James finished, splashing water in Sirius' face. Sirius splashed back, and soon there was a cloud of mist hovering above the surface from the furious splash war going on, which Lily, shedding her need to appear to be the "mature" one, happily joined. They raced and splashed and dove for Knuts, and by lunchtime were thoroughly exhausted, lounging by the side of the pool, idly watching the garden gnomes, who were shooting them cheeky grins.

"This is nice," James said, lying between Lily and Sirius. "The three of us, all getting along again." He turned to look at Lily, who had tipped her head back and closed her eyes. He followed the line of her long neck down, down...*She's so beautiful...* But he remembered what he'd heard her say to Sirius: *What's so wrong with me just saying to the world, I don't want a boyfriend for at least a couple of months.' Does that make me unforgivably weird?* She was still wounded, wounded by Severus Snape. James had fought the urge to get a ferry up to Dunoon, hunt down Snape and wring his neck with his bare hands. She had sobbed so, cradled against him, on the train. She had attacked herself, said how much she deserved it, and he had contradicted her every time....Seeing her now, with so little on, he was at a complete loss; how could Snape have let her go? When he was being realistic he knew she wasn't *completely* perfect. He knew her faults, after being her friend for more than six years. But if anything, those faults made him love her more. *He doesn't know you, and he never will*, James thought, his eyes moving back to her face. He saw, with alarm, that her eyes were open now, and that she was looking back at him. *She knows I was gawping at her*, he thought, feeling himself flush.

She didn't speak. She had opened her eyes to see James looking at her body in a frankly admiring way, and she'd been unprepared for that. First, she didn't think much of her body—she thought she was too thin and gawky. Second, *this was James*. She couldn't recall a single time he'd ever looked at her that way. Except—except when she'd broken her leg. Before he'd helped her don her dressing gown over her night dress, he'd been looking at her strangely, and she wondered how much he could see through the night dress. *It was rather thin....*She swallowed, allowing her eyes to move over his body now. She didn't imagine that Quidditch alone was responsible for those arms and legs, for that stomach and those shoulders....She shook herself. *Stop it*. He probably kept fit swimming in the pool during the holidays....Sirius, too....

It was so odd to her that they were all so grown up now. She suddenly had a very vivid memory of their Sorting, over six years earlier....

A storm struck up while they were crossing the lake, and she clung to the side of the fragile little boat, terrified. Two of the other children in the boat with her were equally pale and drawn, occasionally whimpering in fright as the wind whipped the surface of the lake into fearsome swells. One boy, though, didn't seem to mind. Even though he was the smallest of the four of them, with black hair that stood on end even while damp from the rain and smudged glasses that sat crookedly on his thin face, he held on tightly to the edge of the boat and grinned at his traveling companions.

"S'all right, don't worry," he piped in a charming alto voice that carried a hint of Wales. "Nothing bad can happen to you here. We're at Hogwarts! Or as good as!"

He gave them a brilliant, crooked-toothed smile and Lily did suddenly feel that it was going to be all right. If this slip of a boy could be so brave, so could she. When she

discovered that the ceiling of the Great Hall reflected the stormy sky outside, she gazed at it in awe, and then at the floating candles and the long tables stretching down the enormous space, the head table with its regal-looking witches and wizards, the professors who would try to pound knowledge into their heads for seven years.

When she turned to a boy beside her to see what someone else thought of all this, she thought her knees just might buckle. He was the most beautiful boy she'd ever seen, glittering black eyes and smooth dark hair sweeping back from his brow, his even white teeth visible when he flashed a blinding smile, and even a dimple in his chin that made her think of her dad teasing her mum about an actor she liked who had a cleft chin—what was his name? Kirk Douglas. That was it. He had a chin just like Kirk Douglas. All thoughts of Hawthorn, her previous crush at her Muggle school, fled from her brain as she beheld the boy beside her.

Then she realized that she was rather staring, and that he looked almost like he expected girls to stare at him, and she pulled her eyes away, feeling foolish. They all marched forward when they were told, Lily trying not to stare at the beautiful boy. He was one of the first to be Sorted. Lily had recognized Professor McGonagall when she'd greeted them in the entrance hall, and after a couple of other students had been Sorted, McGonagall read from a scroll in her hands, "Sirius Black!"

Lily saw him step forward; he was one the tallest of the first years, moving with a confidence unlike that of most eleven-year-olds. She remembered the name:

Sirius Black.

He sat on the stool and McGonagall placed the hat on him; it was a matter of perhaps ten seconds before it cried, "GRYFFINDOR!"

He leapt up, looking almost smug, as though this is what he expected, and the students at the Gryffindor table whooped and hollered and generally made a racket. Lily didn't know anything about the house system, and hadn't been paying much attention when the Sorting Hat had been singing its song about the four houses, but she knew that Gryffindor certainly sounded like the best house to her now. She only had to wait for a half-dozen or so other students to be sorted before Professor McGonagall read her name from the scroll:

"Lily Evans."

Her heart thudding in her ears, she managed to walk forward without tripping over her robes. McGonagall placed the hat on her and it slid down to her shoulders, plunging her into darkness. What was going to happen now?

And then she heard the voice: "Ah, it's you. I've been waiting for you...."

Lily swallowed. "Er, me?" she thought back at it. Somehow she instinctively knew that she didn't need to speak aloud. She knew that she was hearing the voice with her mind and not her ears.

"Yes, you," it answered her in a gruff sort of voice.

"Er, why?" She felt that she was being a very poor conversationalist, but she hadn't previously realized that making conversation was required for the Sorting. Until several minutes before she'd entered the Great Hall, she hadn't even heard of Sorting or a Sorting Hat. No one she'd met on the train had had a clue, as she'd only managed to sit with other first-year Muggle-born witches and wizards. The older students all tended to band together with their friends, and new students of wizarding background did the same.

"Why? Because you will be famous, my girl, beyond your wildest imaginings. If you choose. But fame will come at a price. And today is one of the days when you will make a choice that will affect you for the rest of your life."

"I will? But I thought you chose which house was right for us."

"You're different. For one thing, you have many gifts. You are fiercely loyal and very hardworking; you could be a Hufflepuff. You also have a sharp, astute mind that would be at home in Ravenclaw. But you have other traits as well. Your ambition and cunning could making you a Slytherin no one will soon forget. You're a natural leader, and a Slytherin leader is a force to contend with indeed. The impact you could have on the world is great. But—but your bravery, ah, your bravery and your capacity to love....that's what could make you a Gryffindor."

"Me? Brave?"

"My girl, your love and bravery could change the world, if you choose. But you must choose."

She thought of the beautiful boy who had already been sorted into Gryffindor; but suddenly she felt as though she were being tempted, and as though it would be wicked to choose Gryffindor based just on that. "Tell me what else Gryffindors do. I don't remember what you sang."

The hat said some very grand things about fighting for others, and saving even your enemies, laying down your life for a good cause. She felt very small. "And you have the capacity to do all of those things," it said, though she doubted it. "You also share characteristics associated with the other houses, as I said. But I think you would do best in Slytherin or Gryffindor."

"And I have to choose?"

"Yes."

She hadn't realized this. She thought of all of the great and noble things Gryffindors did and felt rather humbled. Is that really me? she thought. And what about what it said before, about me becoming famous, if I choose? Which choice will lead to that? Do I even want to be famous, and what will I be famous for? These thoughts whirled around her head, until finally, she said, "All right. You can't give me the least little hint?"

"You choose. However—let me help you. You have a sister, do you not?"

"Y—yes."

"And if she was hurt, would you help her?"

"Of course."

"But you do not like your sister."

"What does that matter? If anyone were hurt, I'd help them if I could, whether I knew them or not. What reason would I have for not helping them?"

The hat paused. "What if they killed your parents?"

She stopped, not expecting this. I'm only eleven, she wanted to say. Why do I suddenly feel that the weight of the world is being placed on me? But after considering the hat's question, she finally answered. "I would help the person but make sure he was turned in to the police, so that justice could be served. It wouldn't be justice for me to let him die; I'd be no better than a vigilante then."

"You have chosen," it told her.

"I have?" she said, bewildered.

"Another one for GRYFFINDOR!" it suddenly bellowed, and she knew now that she should remove the hat and proceed to the Gryffindor table, where the stunning boy named Sirius Black was already sitting, surrounded by older students. She blinked when she emerged from the dark hat, the bright candles hurting her eyes. She only stumbled once on her way to the cheering Gryffindor table, coloring deeply, wondering about some of the things the hat had said to her...

Finally, the little boy who'd been in the same boat with her was walking forward to be Sorted; she didn't catch his name when McGonagall read it. She had noticed that when the students whose surnames began with F were being Sorted, it was far faster than her Sorting. Every now and then the hat would take a little longer to do someone, but it still didn't seem very long to her. Perhaps it had only seemed to her that she had had the hat on for a rather long time? When McGonagall lowered the hat over the head of the boy from the boat, it was the fastest Sorting she'd yet seen. Before it had even completely obscured his face, it was crying out, "GRYFFINDOR!"

An enormous smile split his face as McGonagall removed the hat from him and he raced to their table amid the requisite cheering; Lily laughed while she clapped along with her other fellow Gryffindors; she'd never seen anyone look so thoroughly thrilled in all her life. He slid into a space next to Sirius Black and the taller boy slapped him on the back. The two of them were sitting across the table from Lily. She saw that the small boy with the messy hair and the glasses also had round blue eyes that were excitedly taking everything in. He grinned at Lily and said, "Hullo! I'm James Potter and this is my best friend, Sirius Black! You were in my boat, weren't you? What's your name?"

She couldn't help but smile back at the happy boy, who had made her feel better when they'd been crossing the choppy lake.

"I'm Lily Evans."

She lifted her eyes to his face again and discovered that he was still looking right back at her. *He knows I was looking at his body*, she thought with deep embarrassment. There was an incredibly awkward moment when they were each looking into each other's eyes, silent, but suddenly, Sirius *thwacked!* James in the back of the head with a wet towel, saying, "Time for lunch! I'll get us some dry towels from the changing rooms. Hang on."

Sirius disappeared, and James scrambled to his feet, then held out a hand to her, helping her stand. He didn't let go of her hand right away. When Sirius returned with the towels, they each draped one around their waists, and one around their shoulders. Shrouded thusly, they made their way up to the kitchen, Lily in the rear, remembering what she'd said to Sirius:

James isn't the sort of person you break up with....He's the sort of boy-man-that you marry.

The thought made her chest hitch, made her stomach flop in fear. But she pushed this thought away. *The future isn't today*, she reminded herself. *The future is still-in the future*. And so, with that thought instead, she made sandwiches with the boys, and they talked and laughed around the kitchen table, and managed not to grow up even a little bit more that day, to Lily's enormous relief.

* * * * *

"Aaaah!"

They all screamed in delight when Jack's eyebrows became singed. He had been the only one in their game of Exploding Snap to remain unburnt, and now his luck had run out. Bill, Alex, Jack, Geoff and Charlie sat around the kitchen table, smoke drifting upward from each of them now, as they laughed and continued playing.

The holiday so far had been wonderful, in Bill's opinion. He'd received bonafide Christmas presents, with a promise that when he was back at school in January he'd receive a completely *separate* birthday present; Charlie and Annie weren't attacking each other constantly (Annie actually seemed to have missed him); it was wonderful to see how Peggy and Percy had grown; and he never quite remembered how much he missed his parents until he saw them again, beaming at him and Charlie as they stepped off the train, making him get that warm feeling in the pit of his stomach that said, *I'm home*. He wasn't at the Burrow yet, but all he really needed in the world to feel at home was to see his mum and dad. *They* were his home. And his brothers and sisters. It didn't matter how tumble-down their house was, Bill felt, as long as they had each other.

His mum and dad had let him invite his mates for Boxing Day, and he'd even managed to talk Alex into coming. Alex said that his parents had Wood relatives coming over to their house, his father's side of the family, whom he'd rather avoid, anyway. Bill had asked him whether he'd be missed, but Alex had said, "Nah. They're really coming to see the baby, anyway. I mean, Oliver is all right, I suppose. He'll entertain them. No one will miss me."

Bill had wondered at the dejected note in his friend's voice, and wondered also whether he and Geoff and Jack should have made more of an effort to include him in their activities during the autumn term. Perhaps he assumed that they hadn't missed him, either. As he watched Alex play cards, it seemed to Bill that he was more like his old self, laughing, making off-color remarks (except when Bill's mother was in the room) and winking cheekily at Annie when she poked her head around the kitchen doorway, making her blue eyes widen and her thin, freckled face grow even paler than it had already been before it disappeared abruptly again. Charlie chuckled when he saw this.

"*Someone* has a crush on you..." he couldn't resist saying, and Bill had a feeling that this would be a new way for Charlie to torture Annie while he was at home.

Alex scowled, wishing he hadn't instinctively tried to amuse the little girl. "She's seven! She is seven, right Bill?"

Bill grinned. "Yeah. But I think Charlie may be right. She's never looked that way at any of my other friends."

Alex shook his head, glaring at the cards in his hand. "*Bleeding seven-year-old*," he muttered. *Right*, he thought. *I appeal to seven-year-old girls, and grandmas who love to pinch my cheek, and I don't even fancy girls at all. Lucky me.*

But none of his friends knew this about him yet, and he wasn't prepared to tell them. Only Remus Lupin knew, and he felt, somehow, that he could trust him to keep this information to himself—if he even remembered that he knew. Lupin was a seventh year, and probably too preoccupied about his N.E.W.T.s to remember having once comforted a second year in an empty classroom....

Alex wondered whether Lupin realized that he sometimes followed him with his eyes; he'd been alarmed, worried that Lupin would look up and find him looking back, but it had never happened. It was almost as though Alex didn't exist at all. He tried not to think about the older boy, who'd been so understanding when he'd needed it, but at night, lying in his bed alone, it was impossible to tame his dreams....

"Who'd like some hot chocolate?" Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, bustling into the kitchen, her rather pregnant belly under a loud flowered apron she'd wrapped around her robes, as if to emphasize her condition (which was somewhat redundant). All of the boys answered in the affirmative, and when they'd laid aside their cards to drink from the steaming mugs, Bill's mother beamed at them all affectionately, patting her own boys on the head before leaving the room. Alex could tell she really loved being a mother. Which made sense, as she was about to have her sixth baby in a few months. She was cheerful about being pregnant too, as his mother had not been when she was expecting Oliver. Everyone had had to steer a wide path around her and her hormonal rages for nine months. He was glad he'd been at school some of that time. He shook his head and grinned at

Bill.

"You're lucky your mum *likes* expecting a baby. My mum was a holy terror."

Bill looked fondly at the doorway where his mother had just disappeared. "Oh, she has her moments. But mostly—yeah. She's looking forward to having another baby. A playmate for Percy, she and Dad say. That's why Charlie and I are only about two years apart, and Peggy and Annie, too. We've each got a partner in crime this way," he said, grinning at his brother.

"Right!" Charlie agreed. "So why is it that Annie and I are always going at it, and you and Peggy are always making us break it up?"

"Because that's just what brothers and sisters do," Bill said, shrugging. "Well, some brothers and sisters."

"So what if Percy's partner in crime is a sister, and not a brother?" Alex asked.

Bill shrugged. "I reckon they'll still do a lot together, being so close in age. Especially since they'll be the youngest. Mum and Dad have both said they're stopping after this. They reckon seven living here is pushing it as is, and that's even with some magic to hold up the new addition upstairs."

Charlie nodded. "I think six kids is *plenty*. Since we're the two oldest, we get to take care of the little blighters when Mum and Dad aren't around, after all."

"Charlie!" Bill said, clearly upset with him. Charlie grimaced.

"Sorry. You know what I mean. I wasn't—well, you know. Anyway, sorry." He stood and put his cards down on the table. "I think I'll quit while I still have some hair on my head that's not burnt. You blokes have fun, though."

Jack, who'd known Charlie the longest, other than Bill, laughed knowingly. "You have fun, too, teasing your sister about Alex." Charlie's round freckled face was bisected by his wicked grin.

"Too right!" he said, before leaving the room. Bill turned to see Alex frowning at his cards while sipping his hot chocolate, as though he was trying to ignore what had just been said.

"Whose turn is it?" Jack asked, picking up his cards again.

"Geoff's," Bill said immediately, as the one who kept track of these things. Geoff nodded, staring at his cards, trying to decide what to do. Then he looked up at the wizarding house, at the wireless on the kitchen mantel, blaring Christmas carols, at the pots and pans which were lazily washing themselves in the sink, and at the faces of the other boys around the table, boys who thought he was like *them*, who didn't suspect a thing. They were all *normal*. They didn't have any deep dark secrets that could make them outcasts in wizarding society....How much longer could he scrape by at Hogwarts before they kicked him out? He was lucky Dumbledore had had him Sorted when he'd arrived. Or was he? Perhaps he should have asked to be taken home again (or the caravan that passed for his home), not tried to do everything these boys could do, be what he could never be....

"What's wrong, Geoff?" Jack said suddenly, having noticed the boy's lip shaking. Bill scrutinized him; his eyes were glistening as though he was going to burst into tears any moment.

"I'm going to be kicked out of Hogwarts!" he said suddenly, shocking them all.

"What?" Bill said, frowning. "Why?" But as soon as he said it, he knew. *I was right*, he thought, but not happily. *Poor Geoff*.

Jack was peering in his friend's face as though he'd never seen him before. "Why would you say that, Geoff?" But he flicked his eyes over at Bill, and Bill thought, *He remembers what I said, that I thought he might be—*

"A Squib," Geoff said, as though finishing Bill's thought. "I'm a Squib." He swallowed and looked up at the other boys; only Alex looked shocked, but then, he didn't know Geoff very well. He could tell from Bill and Jack's faces that they'd suspected something before this. "You two knew, didn't you?"

Bill and Jack looked sheepishly at him. Bill started to say, "Well—yeah. We wondered a little about—"

"—about why I was so bloody useless with a wand? About why the only classes where I get good marks are the ones that don't really require magic? About why you've never seen me successfully do a spell, or fly a broom?" Bill and Jack nodded grimly, while Alex just continued to look dumbly at him.

"So," Jack said at last; "why do you say you're being kicked out of Hogwarts? Sprout or Dumbledore tell you not to come back after the holiday?"

He shook his head. "No; but the work's getting harder now that we're almost half-way through third year. I don't know for how much longer the teachers will let me slide, just writing essays and taking exams and not actually being able to do *magic*. Something has to give, eventually. I mean, how could I possibly hope to pass the O.W.L.s?"

"Well," Bill said uncertainly, not sure what he was going to say; "you'd probably get one easily in

Divination. And Potions. Then there's History of Magic, and Astronomy. That's already four. And probably Muggle Studies and Herbology. That's six. Plenty of people get six; nothing to be ashamed of. Perfectly respectable."

He shook his head. "If you don't get at least one among Charms, Transfiguration or Defense Against the Dark Arts, you either have to do fifth year over or you just leave the school. I've seen the old school records; I did my research. It doesn't happen often. In the fifties, some bloke who always overslept missed his Dark Arts *and* his Transfiguration exams, and just wasn't much good at Charms, so he had to do fifth year over. And there was a witch in the sixties who had a rotten memory and failed all three of those exams and didn't want to be a fifth year again, so she left. But they—they were just *lazy*. They *could* have passed if they'd cared enough. No amount of studying will get me through those tests, or the damn difficult ones we're likely to have at the end of third year, either. It's just going to get worse and worse, harder and harder for me to hide my problem. And it's not like I can just go to a Muggle school if I leave; I might not mind that, actually, if I could go to just *one*. But the way my mum and dad move around, I'd be changing schools every month, if not more often. I *love* Hogwarts. I've never felt that any place was like home to me until I went there. But it's just a matter of time before I have to leave..."

There was a catch in his voice, and he wiped impatiently at the tears that started to leak out of his eyes, especially in front of the other boys. Alex looked at Jack and Bill, who had stopped looking shocked and instead looked quite sympathetic. He was the first to speak.

"How did you get that letter?" Alex asked softly. "Your Hogwarts letter?"

"It wasn't sent to me by the school," Geoff said, no longer crying. "It was my mum's old letter. I found out last year. I should have known something was up when she said I should make sure I had it with me during the Sorting. No one *else* had their letter in their pocket, I'm pretty sure. I reckon she put my first name in there in place of hers, so it no longer said Bronwen Davies' but Geoffrey Davies.' Easier to do than replacing the whole name. She said it was sent to me with that name instead of Geoffrey Rottenham' because she and my dad had never married and they assumed at the school that I had my mum's name. She said wizards and Muggles do it differently when two people who aren't married have a kid—wizards give the kid the mum's name."

Jack frowned. "I never heard that."

Geoff sighed. "Something *else* she made up, I reckon. But that's why I sometimes don't answer right away when someone calls me Davies.' I'm not used to being called that. Well, I'm getting more used to it, after over two years. But it's still strange to me."

Alex's eyebrows flew up. "Your mum and dad never married? And she told you like *that*?"

"What? No, I always knew that." He shrugged. "It was just never important to them. They didn't feel like going through the mess of getting fake papers for my mum, so she could exist' in the Muggle world. Said they *felt* married, and that's all that mattered and the rest of the world could go to hell if they were going to criticize. Besides, we never really lived in one place long enough for people to find out details about my parents, especially about my mum being a witch. They liked it that way. It was just the three of us, on the road, we didn't need nobody else." He sighed and looked down. "Well, they didn't need no one else. I wouldn't have minded a sister or brother, or a mate. Never lived in one place long enough to make friends with someone. And even if I had made a friend, I'd have left him about five minutes later, wouldn't I? Fat lot of good *that* would do." He looked at the other boys. "You blokes are the first mates I've ever really had."

It was that that undid Alex. He fought down the lump in his throat and stood up, his face set stubbornly. He didn't know this boy well, but Geoff knew what it felt like to be on the outside looking in, like Alex. He knew what it was like to worry about his deepest darkest secret coming out, and being rejected by the world because of it.

He knew how Alex felt every day of his life.

"You're not leaving Hogwarts," Alex said suddenly, surprising them all. They stared at him. Bill frowned; Alex knew that Bill usually liked to be in charge (probably force of habit, as the eldest in a large family). But this time, someone else had spoken first, and he wasn't going to let Bill talk him out of this.

"What?" was the only response he received; all three boys spoke at once.

"I said, you are bloody well *not* going to leave Hogwarts. How do you know you're a Squib? You could still show some magical ability later in your life. You never know. Just because you haven't yet means—means you might be a late bloomer. I heard about this Muggle-born witch who didn't start doing magic until she was thirty. It happens. You want to come back to Hogwarts when you're thirty? Might as well learn now, while you're young, with other witches and wizards your age, and later—when you've started showing some magic—you'll have the education and credentials you need. And you won't have to live in the Muggle world after you finish school, unless you want to, that is."

"You—you really think I'll turn out to be magical eventually?"

Alex shrugged. "Even if you aren't—we won't stop being your friends." Jack and Bill agreed loudly, Bill slapping him on the back, making Geoff look sheepish. But then he looked worried again.

"But—but what if they *make* me leave? When it becomes painfully clear what I *am*?"

Alex pounded his palms on the table and leaned forward, peering into the other boys' faces. "*We'll help you stay in school.* When you're in a class where you have to do magic, one of us will help you! We'll give you pre-charmed objects and we'll levitate things from the doorway of the classroom, hidden from the teacher; we'll help you brew potions that will shrink a cat when you're supposed to be doing it with magic—whatever it takes."

Geoff's jaw dropped. "You mean—you'd help me *cheat*?"

Alex straightened up and gave him a lop-sided grin. "Yes." He nodded at Bill. "Bill's the best bloke in our year at wandless magic. He can do spells without a lot of wand-waving, so the teachers won't suspect it when he's the one helping you. Jack's in your house, so if Bill or I can't be on hand for a test, Jack will be. And I've seen Muggle magicians do really amazing things with sleight-of-hand. I can read up on how they manage it without doing magic, and then I can teach you, so you can swap a transfigured teapot for the one you were supposed to be doing, and McGonagall won't suspect a thing. You don't have to worry. We're on the job. *No one's* going to kick you out of Hogwarts."

Geoff looked stunned. "That—that sounds grand. You'd—you'd all do that?" He noticed that Bill and Jack still looked somewhat surprised by Alex's outburst, and the plan he'd outlined, but they hurriedly agreed. Then Geoff was frowning. "Yeah, the only problem is—I haven't done well at magic up until now. Won't the teachers notice if I'm suddenly a lot better? Won't it look odd?"

Bill shrugged. "Maybe they'll just reckon you—you had a magical growth spurt. They usually happen when witches and wizards are young, but sometimes they happen later. Peggy's just had one; she can fly a broomstick now. We have a special one Mum and Dad bought for me when I was about four; it can't fly more than a few feet off the ground."

Geoff sighed. "Even your five-year-old sister can fly a broom and *I* can't."

Alex frowned. "Let me work on that. A broom that's responding to someone *else's* magic that you can *seem* to be flying. In fact—I'll bet Bill can come up with a charm for that. He's tops in the year in Charms."

Bill looked bashful now, but also a bit doubtful. "I don't know. That might be a bit beyond me just yet."

Alex shrugged. "So you have a goal. It's a worthwhile one, don't you think?"

Bill considered this; the seventh-year boys probably learned a *lot* of interesting magic to be able to create that map of theirs, and to be able to stay with a werewolf during the full moon without being in danger themselves. Perhaps the most important things you learned in school *weren't* learned in the classroom. He looked at Geoff. *And maybe the best possible reason to try to learn a bit of complicated magic is to help a friend.*

"I'm in," Bill said suddenly, grinning at Geoff.

"I'm in," echoed Jack, putting his hand on his housemate's shoulder.

Geoff looked round at them all, clearly moved. He looked as though he couldn't speak for a minute, but he finally said, "You won't be sorry. I promise you." Then he shook his head. "I never thought I'd have any mates at all, let alone the best ones in the world."

He beamed at the three of them and Alex saw how touched he was, and thought, *Yes. It's the right thing to do. No one should be shut out of the world he was born into just because—because he's different.*

No one.

* * * * *

Saturday, 31 December, 1977

Severus Snape's head felt like it was going to explode. He glanced round at the merry crowd of Slytherins around him, as they cut a swath through Diagon Alley on the last day of the year. The world looked a bit bleary to him; he wasn't sure whether that was Narcissa Anderssen walking on his right or Claudine Gaillard. Not too surprising, as he had already had four swigs of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey from someone's hip flask and seemed destined to have one hell of a hangover the next day.

Gah. Karkaroff was blithering on about something again, his arm thrown around Claudine Gaillard's shoulders. That must mean the one to his right was Anderssen. All of the other seventh-year Slytherins were present as well, having hatched a plan to crash a New Year's Eve party. Severus

was starting to doubt the wisdom of coming along on this jaunt, but as he'd had a miserable holiday so far, he had decided that it certainly couldn't get *worse*.

The first night he'd been back with his uncle, he'd snuck out to a wizarding pub he knew in Dunoon and had sat by himself in the corner, drinking shot after shot of Old Ogden's. The barkeep hadn't questioned him about his age. His Uncle Duncan had come looking for him, somehow suspecting he'd be there, and half-dragged him home.

"Och, lad, if ye're lewking to git drunk, at least do it at hame," his uncle had chided him. "Then I don't haff t'drag ye back here like the town sot."

His uncle put him fully clothed into the tub and turned the shower on him full blast, ice cold water striking him like so many needles. He wanted to spring out of it and run, but he couldn't get his arms and legs to work quite properly, and finally he had to just wipe the water from his face and moan, "Enough, already. Stop the damn water."

"Why should I?" his uncle demanded.

"Because I'm going to be sick now," he informed his mother's brother, ever dignified, before leaning over the edge of the tub and spewing onto the tiled floor—and his uncle's boots. Duncan MacDermid swore and muttered something under his breath that sounded like, "I shoulda known..." as he cleaned his boots and the floor, leaving Severus in the tub while he did it—but he did finally turn off the water.

His uncle helped him dry off and get to bed that night, and didn't wake him the next morning. When Severus finally opened his eyes, he felt like a house was sitting on his skull, and who the hell told the sun it could be that bright? Didn't it know it was bleeding December?

His uncle gave him a hangover remedy when he stumbled into the kitchen at two in the afternoon. Severus gulped it down, even though the first taste was vile; after a little bit, he became accustomed to it, or his taste buds had numbed. That night he drank too much again, after dinner, and sat through the Christmas Eve service in a stupor, the trilling notes of the children's choir sounding warped and misshapen in his abused brain.

He wasn't sure whether his uncle knew he was drunk again until they reached the flat afterward and Duncan said to him, "Do ye think ye can reach the loo before yer sick this time, lad?" He nodded, holding his hand before his mouth, and sprinted up the steep stairs leading to the flat, then down the corridor. He knelt in front of the toilet, heaving, and when his uncle entered, he vaguely remembered him leaning against the doorway, stroking his beard.

"Would ye like to taill me why ye suddenly feel the need to be stinkin' drunk all the time, Saiverus? It can't be that ye've gotten in the habit at skewl. They'd naiver allow it. And I think ye'd be exceedin' some kind of spewing quota, as wail," he added with a mischievous grin. His nephew wished he'd managed to be sick on his uncle's boots again.

When Severus was fairly certain he was done heaving, he leaned heavily against the cold tiled wall and said, "I've lost her."

"Her? Yer lass? Och, I'm sorry lad. I'd no idea....Whain did she taill ye to bugger off?"

Severus shook his head. "I did it. I broke up with her."

"You! But ye're damn miserable, man! Are ye daft? Why the hail'd ye do that?"

Severus just shook his head, staring at the pattern of the tiles on the floor, unable to explain. His uncle helped him into bed again, this time clucking sympathetically.

The next evening they'd exchanged perfunctory gifts and eaten their Christmas joint with a remarkable lack of joy. Afterward, his uncle surprised him by pouring him a shot of whiskey. Severus looked up at him, startled.

"Well, ye've already tried it on yer own. I reckon I ought to teach ye the proper way to drink, oughtn't I? Fairst—ye make sure ye've had a proper meal. I shoulda noticed that ye didn't eat much o' anythin' the last two nights. Saicont—don't go overboard. Ef ye want to drink t' forgait, ye don't need to down the whole bottle, lad."

Severus nodded and knocked back the shot he'd been poured. He pulled his lips back from his teeth and gasped as it burned his throat, even though he knew he would feel this sensation. His uncle nodded at him. "There. That's enough fer now. Moderation. Yer still probably a wee bit drunk from the last two nights anyway. Gait some raist now, lad. I'll see ye in the mornin', and ye can hailp me in the shop."

But being in his uncle's apothecary on Boxing Day was a disaster. He was supposed to be overseeing a very delicate beauty potion his uncle was brewing while Duncan went to the front to wait on a customer, and instead he knocked a vial of something—he had no idea what—off a shelf. The vial broke on the edge of the cauldron and some of its contents dripped into the potion. There was an immediate bad reaction. The noise and smell caused his uncle to come running back to the laboratory, where he started swearing at Severus loudly, pointing his wand to clean up the glass

shards. Then he looked at his nephew and sighed.

"Ye're only goin' to be trouble round here, in yer current state, lad. Why don't ye go doon ta Diagon Alley, see whaither ye can meet up with some o'yer mates from skewl."

Severus looked at him dully. He wanted to say "What mates?" But he could tell that his uncle wanted to get rid of him, so he agreed.

After stepping out of the fire at the Leaky Cauldron, he had half a mind to just spend the rest of the day drinking there, but he knew that all he'd be able to get out of old Tom was butterbeer; he was under no delusions about Severus' age, as the barkeep at the local pub had been. So he wandered into Diagon Alley, past the shops still bearing their festive holiday decorations, thronged with other Hogwarts students on holiday who were meeting friends for a day out.

He was gazing into the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies, idly thinking that a new broomstick would be nice but was very unlikely, when Karkaroff had run into him.

"Snape! You look like hell. Had a rotten Christmas, eh?"

Severus sneered at him, "Happy Boxing Day to you too, Iggy."

For once Karkaroff ignored the hated nickname. "I heard about you and Evans. Rotten luck, that. She must have been a good shag, too, am I right?" Severus clenched and unclenched his fists, resisting the urge to smash his arrogant little face in. "I mean," Karkaroff went on, "being dumped by a Mudblood—"

"She didn't," he said abruptly, setting the record straight. "I'm the one who ended it. She even begged me to take her back."

"What?" Karkaroff goggled. "I thought someone had said that, but I assumed they'd got it backwards. You really did?"

Severus tried to shrug nonchalantly. "I grew bored with her. She had her uses, of course," he added, attempting to sound as callous as possible. Karkaroff smirked and nudged him with his elbow.

"I'll wager she did, I'll just wager she did," he said winking. Severus thought he looked like a fool. "I just—I thought you couldn't be daft enough to send her packing, when, any time you wanted, you had the Head Girl giving you a piece of—"

"Do you have a point, Karkaroff?" Severus was growing impatient. The smaller boy peered at him, as though assessing his potential. Being observed in this way was making Severus uncomfortable. Finally, the other boy spoke.

"I'm meeting up with the other seventh-years in about half-an-hour. Slytherins that is, of course. We—we didn't think *you'd* be interested, what with having a *Gryffindor* girlfriend and all. But, if she was just a temporary amusement—you're welcome to come along."

Severus looked at him suspiciously. What was the catch? Well, he thought, only one way to find out. He'd just have to make certain he was on his guard the entire time.

"Fine," he said, nodding. And so he spent the rest of the holiday meeting up with the other seventh-year Slytherins in Diagon Alley every day. His uncle took heart from this; it seemed that his nephew had friends at last. To his uncle, he pretended to be having a better time than he really was. Severus discovered that he had to withstand a certain amount of vampire ribbing, but he also sent some well-aimed jinxes in the direction of the jokers a few times, causing the others to laugh at them, rather than him.

"Got you good, Karkaroff!" Diana O'Sullivan had crowed when boils had sprouted on his face. The Slytherins did this with each other all the time; you couldn't turn your back on anyone, or you risked being caught out, the target of a hex. They were all of-age, so they no longer had to worry about doing magic outside of school.

When, on the thirtieth, Karkaroff had come running into the Leaky Cauldron, where they were having tea laced with the rum from Narcissa Anderssen's delicate ladies' flask, and told them all that some Gryffindors were having a New Year's Eve party they could crash, it seemed like a wonderful prank to play—a gang of Slytherins showing up at a *Gryffindor* party. Evidently, all of the seventh years who were *not* in Slytherin had been invited, as well as a number of sixth years from the other (non-Slytherin) houses. Severus looked at his housemates; he could tell that they were all feeling the snub, even though they would have thrown an invitation from a Gryffindor in the host's face.

"We'll show them what a *real* party is like, eh, Snape?" Narcissa said to him, a mischievous glint in her eye, as she lifted tea that was probably less tea and more rum to her lips and drank, her eyes boring into his over the edge of the cup. He licked his lips nervously and nodded, his head buzzing. He wasn't certain that he'd been sober for twenty-four hours straight since getting off the train from Hogwarts.

When, on New Year's eve, Karkaroff had handed him some Floo powder and told him to say, "Ascog Castle!" before stepping into the fire at the Leaky Cauldron, he couldn't help thinking,

That sounds familiar. But then he was whirling through the Floo network, and before long, he was stumbling out of a large stone fireplace in a rather crowded room where too-loud music was blaring from a Wizarding Wireless, and scattered teacups which were on every horizontal surface. The other Slytherins who'd preceded him were already starting to make the party more "interesting." Someone was levitating a table, delicate bone-china cups skittering across its surface before they crashed to the floor in a heap of shards and dust, and someone else was turning up the wireless to a deafening level, so that it started to make the windows rattle in their frames. Severus shook his head at the juvenile antics, striding from the room, thinking, *I need a drink.*

He paused in what appeared to be an entrance hall, narrow and crowded though it was. *This is a castle?* he thought. If so, it was a small, mean castle. It was certainly no Hogwarts. More like a tower house, he thought. He turned right, walking into a kitchen with a large refectory table and a tapestry on the far wall that bore a prancing lion in blue and silver. *Hmm,* he thought. *That looks familiar. I should know that....* But just as he couldn't remember where he'd heard Ascog Castle, he couldn't place the blue-and-silver lion. There were too many people in the house for him to count, the kitchen as crowded as the sitting room, and he couldn't tell who (if anyone) was in charge. Karkaroff had come in here too, looking at Severus with an evil grin as he poured a bottle of something into the punch bowl sitting on the table, which was surrounded by more of the delicate china tea cups. Severus strode over to him and, after seeing Karkaroff help himself to the spiked punch (so he knew that it wasn't something that Karkaroff was avoiding) he ladled some into a cup; as he lifted it to his face, his nose told him before the taste even reached his mouth that it was now adequately alcoholic.

Karkaroff disappeared. Severus grabbed what seemed to be a ham sandwich from a platter near the punch and wandered from the room. It didn't seem to be a very big house (he was damned if he was going to call the thing a castle'). He idly began to climb the winding stone stairs; on each upper level there were two bedrooms, and each one was occupied by a different panting couple, judging from the sounds seeping from the closed doors; the landings were populated by other teenagers waiting their turns, whether for mere snogging or all-out shagging he didn't know and he didn't care.

On the top floor, he heard the sound of someone retching, and a familiar voice saying soothing words to the sick person. Severus crept closer; the sounds were coming from a bathroom that was reached through one of the bedrooms. Thankfully, this bedroom did not have any rutting teenagers in it, but through the open door of the bath, he saw immediately that it *did* have—

Lily Evans, Sirius Black and James Potter.

He backed away immediately, before they saw him, ducking behind the door, listening, his heart going very fast. He was still holding a bite of the ham sandwich in one hand, and he stuffed this into his mouth, trying to chew quietly.

"There, there, Sirius, you're going to be all right," Lily was telling him gently. When he'd glimpsed them briefly through the doorway, he'd seen that Lily was crouched on the floor rubbing Sirius' back, while Black was positioned before the toilet, heaving, and Potter leaned against an adjacent wall, coolly surveying the two while he ate a sandwich. He'd seen that look very quickly, but was it—was he jealous of Lily and *Black*? Could she possibly be getting involved with that bastard? Severus felt a rage well up in him as he considered this.

"Didn't-know-whether-you-were-coming—" Black choked out. "Waited and waited..."

"So you sat around all day drinking?" Lily scolded him.

"I think it's Peter's fault," Potter offered. "He brought some vodka to put in the punch, but I wouldn't let him." Severus smirked; too late, he thought, remembering Karkaroff. That punch was definitely alcoholic *now*. "Remus wouldn't drink any, so Peter dared Sirius to have a shot. And another, and another. I don't know what either one of them was thinking."

"Well, obviously *not very much*," Lily answered acidly. "I'll have to give Peter a piece of my mind later. I mean, I know Sirius has had alcohol before, but he's obviously not used to *this* kind of drinking. Did you eat anything at all?" she said, evidently addressing Black. There was a kind of choking sound, and then Severus assumed that Black was heaving into the toilet again. He winced; he'd stopped retching after the third day of his holiday, learning how to drink just enough to anesthetize himself from the pain of not having *her* any more, but not so much that he was going to be found by his uncle lying face-down in a pile of his own sick.

"I'm sorry I was so much later than I said I'd be," Lily was saying softly to him. Severus' heart ached, hearing her speaking so gently to the boy who'd tried to kill him. Somehow, he still felt that that gentle tone of voice belonged to *him*, that *he* was the only one who deserved to have her speaking to him that way....

"Are you going to be much longer?" Potter asked. Severus wasn't sure whether he was speaking

to his best friend or Lily or both. He sounded irked and impatient.

"Why?" Lily asked, sounded irked herself.

"I heard some—some people who weren't invited might try to crash the party and thought I'd check around to make sure no one had. We also need to make sure everyone's out of the house and everything cleaned up by the time your parents and sisters are back, Sirius, and you're clearly not going to be in any condition to help us with that." Ah, it was Black and Potter's party. Severus was fascinated; Potter sounded more than a little put-out by his friend. Were the perfect Gryffindors having problems?

Severus crept away from the room before Potter discovered him; he went back down the curving stairs, not pausing on the ground floor landing. He just continued down, down, until he found himself in the dungeons. *Hmph. Dungeons*, he thought. *Maybe it is a castle after all. Of a sort.* He wandered down a torch-lit corridor, hearing familiar voices and laughter ahead of him. The Slytherins had gravitated to their customary territory, the dungeons, and made their own party, evidently.

He was shocked when he entered a room with a large pool and a sky that looked like the night sky outdoors, glittering with stars. There were also some torches around the room, lending a flickering, other-worldly radiance to the space, the flames reflecting from the shivering surface of the large pool. Severus whirled, thinking he heard something behind him, but all he could see was a shuddering shrub, part of the mural lining the room. There seemed to be numerous night-sounds and murmurs coming from the mural of a garden; he wasn't sure he liked this. It made him nervous. And then he became even more nervous when he realized that the bodies swimming in the pool weren't wearing anything; boys and girls alike, his fellow Slytherins had stripped and jumped into the pool, splashing and laughing, shining breasts and shoulders and buttocks making him swallow and hesitate on the threshold. Narcissa Anderssen swam up to the edge closest to where he was standing, her long blonde hair clinging sleekly to her head, making her sharp cheekbones and nose stand out even more than usual.

"Coming in, Snape?" she asked slyly. "Show us what you've got," she added with a laugh, throwing herself backwards into the water, floating on the surface for a moment, showing him—everything *she* had. *Gah.* All of them were in there, he could see. Every one. If he didn't do this—he'd just be a laughing stock again. He hesitated for a moment, then turned away to remove his robes and other clothing, trying to ignore some of the girls whistling behind him. *It's just swimming*, he told himself. He turned quickly, before anyone could get a good look at him, and jumped into the water, narrowly missing a lip-locked couple. When he surfaced, pushing his hair out of his eyes, he saw that the couple was a pair of boys, and some of the girls were watching them with admiration. He found himself staring at the girls, instead, wondering what about this fascinated them so, since they were clearly not being welcomed.

Then, before he knew what was happening, a soft, feminine body was pressing up against his back, breasts crushed against him, long legs wrapping around his waist, making him gasp. He pulled away and turned around to find out who it was.

Narcissa Anderssen.

He swallowed. "I—I thought you had a boyfriend. Malfoy," he said quietly. He knew this was a rather stupid thing to say when you are in pool with a girl and neither of you has anything on, but it was all he could think of.

She shrugged. "So what? What he doesn't know—can't hurt *you*. The bastard had to be somewhere else tonight, if you can believe it. Business, he called it. If he's going to leave me stranded on New Year's Eve, I think I deserve to have a little fun on my own, don't you?"

As she spoke she slid her slippery arms up around his neck, her fingers twining in his wet hair, and pulled his face down to hers; she deliberately pushed her stomach against his, making him jump from the contact. He knew she could feel the purely physical effect she was having on him; she smiled against his mouth as she kissed him. He tasted the alcohol she'd had on her tongue. Then she reached down and wrapped her hand around him, and he moaned into her mouth for a moment before breaking the kiss and pulling her hand away.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, looking around tentatively at the other Slytherins. But he didn't have the audience he'd feared; the others were quite preoccupied with similar pursuits. Two of the girls were being surveyed by Karkaroff now, who seemed to be quite enjoying what they were doing to each other, and other couples, both mixed-gender and same-gender, were engaged in various sex-acts and near sex-acts that were making Severus more and more nervous. He turned back to Narcissa, raking his eyes over her exposed body, surprised to find the thought *Why not?* in his brain. But—he didn't want spectators.

"Not here," he told her tersely. She smiled wantonly.

"All right. Follow me."

She climbed out of the pool, and, hesitating for a moment, he followed her, but no one seemed to be watching, so he didn't have to worry about feeling odd walking about in front of the others with nothing on. Narcissa certainly didn't seem to have a self-conscious bone in her body as she walked before him, her hips swaying, her wet skin glistening in the torchlight. She led him to an adjacent room; as soon as he closed the door behind them, she was all over him, and he allowed himself to lose himself in her, to find forgetfulness in her body. He'd never known that the other Slytherins did things like this, went skinny-dipping and had what amounted to orgies....He probably should have known, but he was so on the fringes, and it had never occurred to him. Or was this a special occasion?

She pulled away from him, watching him from under her lashes, a smile curling at the corner of her mouth. "Evans wasn't making things up, obviously. Pity she left you."

"I left her," he growled, irritated. Why didn't she shut up and just get to it?

She traced her finger down his left arm, humming to herself, as though he hadn't said anything. "I see you don't have it yet," she said, tapping the skin just below the crook of his elbow.

"Have what?" he said, before taking her breast in his mouth. She gasped, holding his head in place. "The Mark. Didn't you see Igor's? I think Lucius' is very sexy. I can talk to him about you, if you like. Put in a good word. He doesn't want me to get it. He says I can serve the Dark Lord by serving *him*. Get it? *Serve?*" She waited for a reaction; Severus moved his mouth up to her neck and put his hands under her bottom, lifting her up. How did she go on chattering while he was moving his hands and mouth over her? Was she not noticing? "It's meant to be a double entendre," she went on. "*Serve*. Get it?"

"You mean sex. I get it," he snapped at her. "Speaking of which—" he said, lifting her higher, with a grunt.

And then he had her up against the wall, her legs wrapped around him, her arms around his neck, while he thrust up into her, and she stopped talking about Lucius Malfoy and Marks and instead whispered throatily into his ear, "*Bite me.*"

He was momentarily distracted again, which he did not appreciate. Was she ever going to shut up? "What?" he spat.

"Bite me. I have—a vampire fantasy I want you to fulfill—"

He thought he heard some muffled shouting from the pool room. *They must really be going at it in there*, he thought. He froze, staring at her, an evil light in her eyes, and he saw that she was looking over his shoulder, not at him, and he thought he felt a breeze on his back. *Has someone opened the door?* he wondered. Then he heard an inarticulate cry and two sets of footsteps running from the room. He turned, but saw no one, and she turned his head back to her with her hand on his jaw.

"Finish what you started," she breathed. "I'll go first, if you like."

"What?" he said again, his head thrumming, wondering who had run out of the room.

"With the biting. I'll bite you first."

He decided to shut her up once and for all by clamping his mouth over hers, then resumed his previous activity, but when he was close he finally did what she wanted, and brought his mouth down on her neck, biting. At first, his teeth weren't quite sharp enough to do more than bruise her, but then one of his canines did manage to break the skin ever so slightly, and he tasted some coppery blood on his tongue. When she realized that he'd succeeded in biting her, she shuddered in ecstasy just before he stopped, unfulfilled, feeling like he was going to be ill. He pulled away from her, wishing he was anywhere else on the planet. She leaned against the wall, her chest heaving, looking like he had given her just what she'd wanted. He shook his head. *Malfoy can have her*, he thought. *Twisted bitch.*

He strode from the room, without a word to her, and she *laughed*, the sound echoing in the underground cavern. He was surprised to find the pool empty; he threw on his clothes and left the dungeons as quickly as he could, then made his way through the bodies in the sitting room, going back to the fire. He threw some Floo Powder into the flames and, just as he was whirling out of sight, he saw James Potter and Sirius Black come running at the fire, screaming, "*Snape, you bastard!*"

And then they were gone, and he was whirling his way home, home to the depressing flat above the apothecary, home to his uncle, who would never know how he had debauched himself and how ashamed he felt. Worst of all—

He knew that he was still in love with Lily. And there was absolutely nothing that he could do about it.

* * * * *

Friday, 10 February, 1978

Lily paced her room. She had to break it to him gently. She had to explain to him that she only thought of him as a friend and didn't want him to be more without him giving her that *look* she knew so well, the look that could make her lose her resolve and say the opposite of how she felt, just to spare his feelings.

No. No chickening out, she told herself sternly. You can do this.

She thought back to the New Year's Eve Party, and the planning for it. They'd thought of it on Boxing Day. Or rather, Sirius had remembered that his parents and older sisters and their husbands were all invited to a party on New Year's Eve, and that he and James would have the house to themselves. "And the great thing is, we haven't any servants, not even house-elves. And no wizarding neighbors, just Muggles miles away who don't even know this is a *house*, and not a ruin. No one to tell! We can invite all of the seventh-years—well, maybe all of the seventh-years except the Slytherins. Of course, that's only about thirty people. All right, the sixth-years who aren't Slytherins, too..."

Lily frowned. "As much as I admire your mother for doing her own housework and not using house-elves, that also means that you don't have any help getting ready for a party. You can't just do this with no planning. You need to have food and drink, and—"

"Drink! Excellent. All right, we'll need some whiskey, some vodka, some gin—"

"*I meant*," Lily said loudly, "punch or egg nog or butterbeer. Something like that. *No alcohol*." Sirius pleaded with her with his eyes. That usually worked. But not this time. "No. Absolutely not. And I expect you to back me up on this, James."

James saluted her as though she was a general. "Right. No alcohol." Sirius scowled at the pair of them.

"Aw, having the Head Girl and Head Boy help me plan this party is *no fun at all*..."

But actually, it had been. They'd planned it completely in a couple of days, and sent out the invitations using post owls from the post office in Diagon Alley. Lily was glad to have something to do to keep busy, and something to look forward to. It helped keep her mind off Severus. Most of the time.

Then, on the day of the party, she'd very nearly forgotten that her mother was supposed to have some tests that day, to ascertain whether she was still in remission. Lily had had to sit in the hospital lounge for hours with Petunia and Vernon and her father, all pretending to be civil to each other. Because of the holiday, there was a shortage of people working in the lab, processing the results, and the time seemed to stretch on for an eternity. Lily had checked her watch repeatedly, very impatient. She had told Sirius and James she would come and help them get ready at noon; although his family would still be there, they could surreptitiously work on making sandwiches in the guest room where Lily would spend the night.

Instead, she didn't show up until after seven. She and her parents finally returned home at six, and then she had to change her clothes and tell her parents where she was going (the Leaky Cauldron, which wasn't completely untrue). When she finally stumbled out of the fireplace at Ascog Castle, the party was in full swing and she couldn't find Sirius and James anywhere.

She shouldered her way through the crowd, hanging her robes in the entrance hall, she'd worn them over her jeans and cardigan in order not to look out of place in the Leaky Cauldron. She climbed the stairs, hearing what was going on behind the bedroom doors as she ascended through the house, wondering where on earth James and Sirius could be.

She finally found them in their en suite bath. Sirius was getting sick into the toilet while James stood nearby, looking strangely unsympathetic, and oddly enough, managing somehow to eat a sandwich while Sirius was ejecting the contents of his stomach. When James looked up and saw her, however, he stepped forward, grinning, saying her name affectionately and hugging her tightly. She held him close to her for an agonizing half minute, before stepping back nervously.

"What's going on? What's wrong with Sirius?"

James looked at her grimly. "He's pissed. Three sheets to the wind."

She rounded on him, crouched on the floor as he was. "Sirius! I thought we'd agreed, no alcohol! Oh, never mind..." she amended herself, crouching down next to him and putting her hand on his sweating brow. He was the color of parchment, and looked mortally embarrassed for her to see him in this state, but very quickly, he had no choice but to thrust his head over the commode again.

Lily wasn't sure how long this went on. Sirius would stop for a while, sitting back on his haunches, talking to her, trying to make jokes about his condition, then he would start looking

green around the edges and lunge for the toilet again. Lily never left his side, and they shoed numerous amorous couples away from their bedroom, sending them off grumbling. *We planned this party*, thought Lily with worry, thinking of Sirius' family returning home after their own party; *and who knows what all of these people are even doing to the house? We haven't been downstairs in hours, they might have dismantled all the furniture, or transfigured it into farm animals...*

Remus showed up at one point, saying, "There you all are," but he immediately turned green and had to leave; he couldn't be around someone spewing without wanting to do it himself. Peter showed up after that, also clearly inebriated, but not as bad as Sirius, and when Lily immediately started yelling at him, he ran off.

When Sirius finally seemed to be all right, they tucked him into bed. Lily kissed his brow tenderly, and he grasped her hand briefly, his eyes boring into hers. "Thank you, Lily," he rasped, before letting her go. She nodded grimly and left the room with James. She checked her watch; eleven-thirty. They found Remus and Peter, but only Remus was still conscious. With his help, they roused the couples out of the bedrooms and worked their way downstairs. In the kitchen, they discovered the spiked punch and dumped in the sink. Each taking a room, they waved their wands, repairing and cleaning things as they went, to make less work later. Then a sixth-year girl from Ravenclaw grabbed Lily's arm in the entrance hall and said, "A Slytherin spiked the punch. I saw him and the other Slytherins show up, but no one knew where you and Potter were," she said suggestively, looking at the stairs leading up to the bedrooms.

"Where are they now?" James demanded, appearing at Lily's elbow. The sixth-year pointed at the stairs to the dungeons. "They went down there."

James and Lily hurried down the stairs, and once they were in the corridor, they immediately heard the echoes of the Slytherins coming from the pool room. They ran forward, wands out and at the ready, and Lily thought, *I should have known something like this would happen...*

When they reached the pool room, she couldn't believe her eyes. James gasped and immediately spun her around. She shook him off, irritated.

"For pete's sake, James, I'm not a child!" She turned round and started shooting sparks at the pairs and trios of Slytherins in various combinations around the room, making them spring apart. When they saw that it was the Head Girl and Head Boy interrupting them, they merely laughed. "Get out!" Lily cried, her voice echoing against the walls and ceiling. "All of you! Party crashers!" She was furious, and all they did was slowly and lazily start to move apart and find their clothes.

James tried not to stare at the girls, especially as they were Slytherins, but he'd never seen so many nude people in one place at one time. He noticed Lily giving him a sideways glance with her eyebrow raised, and he cleared his throat, sending sparks up to the ceiling.

"Faster! Now! You are uninvited guests! Get the hell out of here!"

Finally, they were dressed, still moving at their own leisurely pace. As they were leaving, Karkaroff leered at Lily. "There's still two more in there," he said, pointing with his thumb at the changing room door. James and Lily moved toward the door and she opened it, immediately wishing she could wipe the memory from her brain.

He was in there, with nothing on, and he had Narcissa Anderssen up against a wall, her legs wrapped around his waist as he moved within her, his sleek black hair touching his shoulders, shivering with each thrust. Lily gasped, and Narcissa caught her eye over his shoulder, a knowing smile on her face, one of her generous breasts just visible past his muscular arm. There was no mistaking who was shagging her; Lily had come to know his body very well.

With a cry, she ran from the room. James Potter stood frozen for a second, still watching them, but then he realized that he should go after Lily. She was probably devastated. *Slytherin bastard*, he thought, not for the first time. He chased her up to the entrance hall, then up to the next landing; he turned her to face him. "Lily! Lily, say something!" He looked in her face, worried. She seemed distant, disconnected from the world.

"He always told me he hated her," she finally said softly at last. "That he didn't think she was the least bit attractive," she continued, her voice oddly high-pitched. She seemed to be looking at some distant point that he couldn't see. Sirius stumbled down the stairs, running his hand through his hair. James was momentarily distracted by this.

"Sirius! What are you doing out of bed?"

Sirius yawned and stretched. "Not tired. Feeling much better. Brushed my teeth and everything. See?" he said displaying his scrubbed dental work. "Didn't want to have bad breath at midnight, you know. No one would want to kiss me."

James rolled his eyes. "I don't give a damn if anyone wants to kiss you. We just found Snape in the changing room next to the pool, shagging Anderssen."

"We?" Sirius frowned.

James gestured with his head at Lily. "We."

Then Sirius saw the zombie-like state that Lily was in and he realized, even through his haze, what James meant.

"Where the hell is he?" Sirius growled.

"You sit here and wait for us, Lily," James said gently, helping her down onto one of the steps. "We'll be right back."

They hurried down the stairs, seeing Snape entering the sitting room when they were still half a flight up from the bottom. They practically leapt to the floor of the entrance hall, but when they entered the sitting room, the jostling bodies got in their way, and they had trouble forcing their way across the room. Just as Severus Snape was stepping into the green flames, they lunged at him, both crying out, "*Snape, you bastard!*" before he was whisked away. James checked his watch, his chest heaving. It was only three minutes before midnight. He and Sirius left the room again, going back up the stairs, finding Lily looking oddly composed, gazing out the window that looked onto the courtyard. She seemed to be staring up at the stars.

"It's almost midnight," she said quietly, as though she hadn't seen her former boyfriend shagging another girl. The boys came and stood on either side of her, also looking out the window. Then, suddenly, color blossomed in the sky, like exotic flowers, and Lily said, "Oh! They're setting off fireworks over the port. It must be midnight. Happy new year."

"Happy new year," Sirius whispered to her. The strains of *Auld Lang Syne* drifted up the stairs from the party guests one flight down. She looked up at him and he leaned down, brushing his lips against hers briefly. As he pulled away she saw a look in his dark eyes that made her catch her breath.

"Happy new year, Lily," James said now. She turned to him, trying to discern the expression behind his blue eyes.

"Happy new year, James." She stood on her toes and brushed her lips lightly against his. He seemed momentarily startled, then met the pressure briefly, before straightening up again.

She looked out the window once more. It was as though Severus was dead to her. But now....Now she had to deal with Sirius and James. She looked up at each of them, her heart racing within her, wondering what was happening....

After they'd roused all of the guests out of the house at one o'clock and put things back the way they'd been, they'd climbed wearily to the top floor and bade each other good night. Lily hadn't really thought to bring anything in which to sleep, so she simply climbed into the bed in the guest room in her underwear, wondering what she would do if one of the boys came into her bedroom during the night. She lay on her side, facing the door, wondering who she would *prefer* to come in, if one of them were to do that. She didn't have any idea. She hadn't expected to fall for Sirius all over again. He'd been an unexpected revelation during the holiday, warm and friendly, hugging her each time he greeted her or said goodbye to her. And then he had been drinking because he was uncertain whether she was coming to the party, and when she'd arrived to find him terribly sick from that, he seemed to *need* her so, and something in her responded to that...What was going on here? she had wondered. She'd meant what she'd said to Sirius; being with someone like James so young was frightening, scarily *permanent*. Sirius gave off an aura of fun, of carefree adventure. Perhaps that's what she still needed—one last chance to be young and *alive*.

Lily was still unsure how she felt when they returned to school; she was glad she'd told both boys that she didn't want to have a boyfriend for a while, especially as she was feeling incredibly torn. Sirius seemed to have turned over a new leaf; he was finishing his homework without being prodded, running errands for Lily in the castle, and generally being helpful and attentive. On the other hand, he and James didn't seem to be getting along. She remembered James staying in the bathroom with them when Sirius was sick. Had he been chaperoning them? she wondered. Strange time to feel threatened, she thought. She still hadn't been able to work out how he had been able to *eat* while Sirius was spewing his guts out.

As time went on, Sirius became more and more tempting, and she tried to work out *what* was so tempting about him. She finally realized that no one would mistake Sirius for a boy you don't break up with, a man you marry, as she'd described James. *That's it*, she decided. *I'm just scared. But who wouldn't be? I'm young. Maybe at this age I should be with the fun' boy, instead of in a serious' relationship.* She no longer cared about him trying to hurt Severus, not after seeing him with Narcissa....

But then she remembered Severus breaking up with her, and remembered how it felt when she saw him with that Slytherin slut; she realized that the very same thing could happen to her and Sirius. And worst of all, in addition to putting herself through all that again, she would be essentially saying to James, "Oh, can you just wait a bit while I dally with your best friend? I have

some more wild oats to sow. But I'll be with you presently. You're next on the list." Yes, he'd really go for *that*.

Finally, just after the beginning of February, they confronted her in the corridor, after Transfiguration, when the other students had already gone ahead of them to the Great Hall, for lunch.

"Lily," Sirius had said, looking very nervous. "Do you—do you like us both?"

She looked back and forth between the two of them. "Oh, of course I do!"

James looked at her levelly. "No, not in general. As—as a potential boyfriend," he finished quietly.

"Which I know you don't want yet," Sirius said hurriedly, looking sideways at James. "You said you wanted to wait and all—"

"—but it feels a bit as if you're—we—well, like—" James struggled.

"It feels like I've been leading on the pair of you," she finished for him. James grimaced, his expression confirming what she'd said. She sighed. She had hoped to have more time to work out her feelings. She had looked back and forth between the two of them, finding so many good points in each of them that she didn't know what she thought any more.

"Well," James suggested, "maybe you should go out with each of us. Go on the sleigh ride with Sirius this Saturday, and with me next Saturday." To alleviate the students' restlessness, especially as there were no Hogsmeade weekends still, Dumbledore and McGonagall had transfigured the horseless carriages into horseless sleighs, and there had been sleigh rides across the large castle grounds each Saturday since the new year.

She nodded. "All right. That makes sense." She looked back and forth between them. "I may—I may just decide to remain friends with you both. Can you each handle that?" She looked in their eyes anxiously. They glanced at each other for a moment before nodding.

She'd had an odd feeling in her chest when she left James sitting in the Gryffindor common room, reading, to go on the sleigh ride with Sirius. Sirius led her out of the portrait hole, and she looked over her shoulder at James, whose eyes met hers and didn't leave them. Then Sirius was pulling her into the corridor, and she immediately felt, somehow, that this was wrong, that she shouldn't have agreed to it.

Sirius' arms were warm around her inside the sleigh, as it *whooshed* across the grounds amidst the other sleighs, bells jingling. She'd been in a real horse-drawn sleigh when she was younger, and it was very odd not to see a team before them, prancing through the snow. She tried to start conversations as they rode, but they always seemed to peter out. At one point, Sirius turned to her and lowered his mouth to hers; she lifted her head to meet him, trying not to think of the kiss in fourth year. This one was a nice enough kiss, as he wasn't being presumptuous, but she ended up feeling that it was very mechanical, very calculated. She pulled away first, putting her head on his shoulder, sensing his disappointment. There was no spark, no urge in her to throw her arms around his neck and kiss him madly. Her heart ached within her. *Oh, James*, she thought. *I wish you were here...*

She avoided Sirius in the week after their sleigh ride, but finally, the day before she was to go on the sleigh ride with James, she felt she could avoid him no longer. She had to tell him. He had to know. She stopped pacing her room and squared her shoulders. She knew what she wanted at last. She didn't just want a good time; she also wanted stability and love and a future. At night, when she closed her eyes, she saw a face in her dreams, and it was the face of the man, she now admitted freely to herself, whom she loved.

James Potter.

Putting her hand on the knob, she opened the door, stopping short when she saw Sirius standing there. "Oh! Sirius! What—what are you—"

He strode impatiently into the room. "You said you had something to tell me, Lily," he said hopefully. She could tell that he thought she'd picked him, and that she wanted to talk to him before her sleigh ride with James so that he'd know he had nothing to fear, that she was just going through the motions. She ached inside; she didn't want to hurt him, not really. She just—didn't want to be with him, either.

The words spilled out of her in a rush. He listened silently, a spark going out of his eyes as he began to understand the meaning of her words. He nodded when she was done, then leaned forward to kiss her cheek.

"I meant what I said before, Lily. James is the best. So I suppose you decided that you agree with that." Her stomach dropped at the tone in his voice. She'd hurt him.

"Sirius!" she said softly as he turned and left. She stared at the closed door, sighing. Finally, she went downstairs to the common room; Sirius wasn't there, but James was sitting before the fire. He sat up attentively when he saw her and she walked over to him.

"Did he tell you?" she asked, wondering. James shook his head.

"Tell me what? Do you mean Sirius? He came down from your dorm, and then went up to ours. Didn't say a word."

She sat in one of the other armchairs and looked at James very seriously. "I-I told him that I only think of him as a friend, and that I can't imagine thinking of him as more."

James looked at the fire again and nodded, swallowing. "Okay. That explains it," he said softly. Why doesn't he look happier about this? she wondered. You'd think he—but wait, she thought. What if he's changed his mind and doesn't want me anymore? She thought about Sirius. Would she tell him she'd changed her mind? No, she decided it was better to be alone. She'd already done that with Remus and Severus, run to the second when the first rejected her. That was the sort of mess she'd been hoping to avoid this time around. She sighed and rose. *The best laid plans...*

"Anyway," she said quietly. "I thought you should know." James looked up at her dispassionately again. She felt her heart constrict. *Has he decided he doesn't want me just as I decide I do want him?* She went up to her dorm before she began to cry. And in the morning, they were supposed to go on their sleigh ride together. He would have to tolerate her presence the entire time, obviously wanting no part of this. Brilliant.

He watched her go, thinking, *That's it, then. She doesn't want either one of us.*

He'd listened to her words about Sirius, hearing, *I don't want either of you. I just want you both to be friends.* She was just trying to be nice, telling him what she told Sirius, but not saying, *Do you get the hint? I don't want to be with you either.* He stared at the jumping flames. *I never should have gotten my hopes up,* he thought. There aren't exactly dozens of girls trying to get me to date them, after all. Sirius is usually dripping with girls. (The fact that he'd been with *no one* since the new term had begun was a detail that had not gone unnoticed by the female population of Hogwarts.) But me? I had Bonnie, and that didn't exactly go swimmingly. In fact, Lily probably doesn't want to be with me because of what I told her about me and Bonnie. Fabulous.

He was feeling now that everything he'd gone through in the last month had been for nothing. Unbeknownst to Lily, he and Sirius had been spending a huge amount of time together, but it was because their chief goal was to make sure neither of them had any time alone with Lily. He'd been watching his best friend during the holiday, the best friend who had told him that he'd told Lily how wonderful James Potter was. Now he wondered whether Lily had ended up thinking that he couldn't speak for himself....

On New Year's Eve, after they'd said goodnight to her, they'd gone to their own room, and James didn't sleep until nearly four in the morning, because he was lying awake, forcing himself not to sleep, so that he would be able to hear if Sirius left the room. Sirius' breathing sounded strange, and he suspected that his friend was doing the very same thing, listening and waiting for James to make a move.

He wondered whether she was trying to get out of the sleigh ride with him tomorrow; that must be why she came downstairs, explaining to him what she'd said to Sirius, as though she was talking to a four-year-old, saying, *Do you get it yet? What I'm saying is I don't want you either.*

He eventually fell asleep in the chair, and didn't wake until he heard footsteps on the stairs. He rubbed his eyes under his glasses and tried to open them. He thought he might be dreaming; Lily had come down the stairs from the girls' dorm, her dressing gown over her nightdress; she went to sit on the window seat past the tables where they did their schoolwork and played games, watching a new fall of snow cover the grounds. She pulled her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs.

She smiled at the falling snow. She'd dreamt that it had snowed, and James was in her dream, smiling at her. Suddenly, her fears and doubts had dropped away, and she knew somehow that it was all going to be all right. She loved watching falling snow, and decided to come down to the common room to get a better view.

James tried to figure out whether he could leave without her hearing him, but the second he moved, the frame of the chair creaked, and she turned her head in surprise. "Oh, James! Are you still up? Well, I should talk. I couldn't sleep. I'm so excited about tomorrow. And look! We have a fresh snow for our sleigh ride together."

She smiled at him and he was shocked to see the love in her eyes. What was going on? he wondered. She turned back to the window, hugging her legs to her chest, a small smile on her lips as she watched the gently falling snow. He rose and walked to her, trying to work it all out. "But—but you said—" he stammered. "You said that you talked to Sirius and told him you just want to be friends."

She turned to him, her brow furrowed. "Yes. I did."

"But—but I thought that you meant—you meant to say, without saying it, that—that you felt the same way about me. That I didn't have a chance." His head was spinning. Surely he couldn't have

been wrong? The opposite was too much to hope for....

Now she looked even more puzzled. "Why would you think that? I'd have said, if that's what I meant."

And then suddenly the full meaning of her words washed over him. "You mean—you mean—"

She grinned at him now, swinging her legs down to the floor. "*That's* why you seemed so odd when I told you. I thought that was a rather funny way of being happy."

He shook his head, feeling incredibly thick. "You weren't just trying to spare my feelings. You were—"

"I was being incredibly shy about—about saying that I'm very much looking forward to going on this sleigh ride with you tomorrow. And many more," she added softly, standing and walking toward him. She put her hands on his arms tentatively, but soon there was no hesitation from either one of them; his arms went around her slim waist and she slid her hands up behind his neck. When his lips touched hers she had most intense feeling of coming home, of knowing where she belonged in the world, of *fitting* in a way she never had before. He deepened the kiss, holding her face up to him now, and she pressed against him, wondering how they had stayed apart for so long, but remembering how she had feared losing him as a friend. Somehow, that fear seemed stupid and inconsequential now, as he drank her in and she gave up all of her previous resistance. *James*. She was with James at last, and nothing had ever felt so right.

They broke the kiss at the same time and looked in each other's eyes, seeing the same love there. He leaned over and kissed her on the nose, and she smiled before twining her fingers in his and leading him back to the window seat.

"Watch the snow with me," she whispered.

They sat together, Lily leaning on James' chest, his arms around her and his cheek on her hair, as they gazed out the window at the crystalline miracles covering everything in sight, making the world new and clean and perfect.

The Prophecy

Saturday, 11 February, 1978

Lily opened her eyes suddenly.

Where am I?

Then she remembered; she was in the common room, sitting on the window seat with James, watching the snow. But she hadn't been watching for some time; she'd fallen asleep in his arms. *What is this—the third time?* she wondered, thinking of taking him up to her bed after Bonnie had died, and falling asleep on the train, after crying on him. *It was nice to sleep with James,* she thought. And although she really was thinking literally of *sleeping*, this made her think of what people usually meant when they spoke of people sleeping together, and she felt a shiver run through her. It was both *odd* to consider James that way, after so many years, and something that quickened her pulse, too. She turned her head just a little, to see if he was still asleep, and found him watching her lovingly, his blue eyes dark in the dimness of the pre-dawn, his pupils enlarged to the point where it seemed they were the same color as Severus' or Sirius'.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," he whispered to her, kissing her brow.

She smiled up at him. "Trying to make me conceited? If I'm 'Sleeping Beauty', we'll have to start calling Cecilia 'Queen of the Universe'."

He shook his head. "Nah. She can't compare to you."

Lily grinned. "I think you may be biased."

His arms tightened around her. "Yes and no. I'm biased in your favor on any number of things you want to name. But I contend that this opinion is a fair and objective assessment."

She turned to face him, putting her hand on his cheek. "You're such a sweet-talker, it's a wonder you haven't had even more girlfriends than Sirius."

He moved his face closer to hers. "I'm more selective than Sirius," he whispered a millimeter from her lips, before brushing his mouth against hers; her lips felt even more sensitive than usual, and she slowly opened them very slightly, feeling him do the same. His tongue slowly traced her lips, making a tremor shiver through her, and finally, she couldn't stand the teasing any more and opened her mouth wider, tilting her head to the right, her lips meeting his fully and their breaths co-mingled in what was now one cavity...

James couldn't believe this was happening. This was Lily, kissing him passionately, returning his feelings, all of it. He remembered when he'd seen her on the hearth rug with Remus in fifth year, the way she'd thrown back her head in rapture, the sounds she'd made....

He drank her in, his hands laced in her hair to hold her head in place. At length, he drew back, kissing her lips tenderly and repeatedly as he did so, then trailing small kisses down her chin, under her chin, down that long column of white neck, into the V of her nightdress....

Lily's breath hitched as his lips slid along her skin. She turned her head, finding his ear right near her mouth, so she breathed warmly into it, feeling the jolt move through him, making her feel-wonderful.

James James James.

She ached for him. She had had no trouble waiting for him; was it almost two months since she had last been with Severus? More like three, she thought, as they hadn't slept together during the last month before he broke up with her. It might even have been four. She hadn't kept track, and she hadn't missed it, but suddenly, being with James like this...This was entirely different. There was always a certain element of *guilt* involved with Severus. He was a Slytherin. Her friends all hated him, and he hated them. And the times with Remus had, if possible, been worse; furtive and sometimes bordering on violent, never spoken of, a liaison never acknowledged.

She found his left hand and moved her fingers in his palm, then over the back, tracing over the skin, again and again, hearing a small groan in his throat in reaction to the sensation, even as he lavished more attention on her neck. Finally, getting up her nerve, she guided the hand to her chest and placed it gently over her right breast.

He froze for a second, feeling what she'd done, but he went on sucking on her neck, and now he also cupped her breast carefully through the fabric, moving his thumb slowly, feeling the tip harden under the repeated strokes, feeling her push her breast into his palm...

Lily gasped, wondering whether their relationship was going to see the quickest consummation in Hogwarts history. *We're not even going on our "date" until later*, she thought. *Although*, she remembered ruefully, *Remus and I never went on any dates at all...*

He switched hands, and now her left breast was being held and caressed tenderly through her nightdress. She drew his mouth to hers again, and he didn't protest. They drank each other in greedily, having waited almost seven years for each other. His left hand found her foot, then her calf, then he was drawing a soft line up her thigh, and her chest hitched with anticipation, but he merely continued to caress the soft skin on her thighs, over and over, until she thought she'd melt into a puddle from wanting him so much....

"James? Lily?"

They both jumped, and James fell backward off the window seat, onto the hard floor. They both looked up, finding Sirius standing at the foot of the stairs in his dressing gown, staring at them, his jaw open in shock.

"Er, I mean—I'll leave you two alone now—"

He was gone again. Lily and James looked at each other, red-faced. Then a slow grin crept across James' face as he regarded her, sitting on the window seat still, the rising sun behind her making her hair glow like an aura. "You're amazing," he whispered. She really was; Bonnie had seemed-dutiful. Like she thought a good girlfriend was supposed to do certain things for a good boyfriend, which James was. Lily didn't seem to be going through the motions, fulfilling an obligation. He felt truly wanted, which he never had with Bonnie.

Lily was, however, nothing if not practical. She looked nervously at the doorway to the boys' stairs. "Oh, god. Was that incredibly gauche of us? I mean—I just told him yesterday that—I mean, it was practically like breaking up with him, even though we never—"

James looked at her quizzically. "Why *did* you consider going out with him, Lily? I thought you'd gotten over him."

She reddened again and looked down at her hands. "I was frightened, and I'm ashamed that I was so cowardly. I very quickly saw the light. It was—a reaction. A fearful reaction to the possibility of being in a relationship that—" She stopped short, not sure they were ready to have this conversation yet.

But James thought he knew what she meant. "It's okay, Lily. I think, in a way, that that's what I did with Bonnie. That's why I was rather taken aback by her talking about children and all. I wasn't dating her because I thought we were eventually going to settle down and get married. She *did* think that."

Lily definitely thought it wasn't the time to tell him what she'd told Sirius, about how she thought of him as the sort of man that you married. *How to make your new boyfriend run screaming away from you at top speed*, she thought. *Especially when his old girlfriend did essentially the same thing.*

She tried to force a laugh. "At any rate, this really isn't the most private place in the world, especially as the sun is coming up and people are getting out of bed and moving about."

James nodded. "And Sirius has a nasty habit of changing into his you-know-what form and using his highly-sensitive hearing to EAVESDROP ON PEOPLE!" James bellowed suddenly, getting up and going to the doorway of the stairs to the boys' dorms. A large black dog came barreling down the stairs and leapt on him, knocking him onto his back. Lily gasped when he changed back into his human form, sitting on James' legs and holding his hands over his ears.

"What the hell are you trying to do, Potter? Make me go deaf?"

But then Lily and James were laughing uproariously. "Serves you right," James said, pushing Sirius off him and standing. Lily was shaking her head.

"Do you really think you—you should *do* that here? In case someone sees you?"

Sirius smiled at her. "Everyone else is still in bed. But you know, Lily, it's nice that you know. James told me that he told you. I don't—I mean—I'm glad that we don't have secrets from you anymore," he said softly, looking into her eyes. Lily felt a pang of guilt; she had let him think she was truly interested in him again, when it was merely panic that had driven her to consider dating him.

"I may be the Head Girl," she said quietly, "but I know how to keep a secret."

She stood and walked to James and put her hands on his arms. "You should go up and change your clothes. I'm going upstairs to change into some warm things for the sleigh ride."

James looked down appreciatively at her thin nightdress; her dressing gown was open over it. "Must you?" he asked, a hitch in his voice and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Suddenly, he moved to the side jerkily; Sirius had pulled on his arm, hauling him toward the stairs.

"Come on, you. Don't you know it's rude to undress your date with your eyes before you even arrive to pick her up? Not to mention you've already done your end-of-date snogging. Everything out of order! What am I going to do with you, Potter?" she heard, as they disappeared up the stairs. She couldn't help laughing and shaking her head as she went to the girls' stairs. Somehow, she knew that Sirius was going to be all right. He was on their side and clearly didn't hold against either one of them that *he* wasn't her new boyfriend.

When she was dressed in two jumpers and some thick corduroy trousers, over which she'd buttoned winter wizarding robes and a heavy grey wool winter cloak, she went back down to the common room, finding James waiting for her. He hugged her tightly and she also wrapped her arms around him; he seemed to be wearing just a jumper and trousers with wizarding robes. As he embraced her, he patted her back tentatively. "Are you in there, somewhere?" He seemed stymied by the many layers.

She backed up and stuck her tongue out at him. "Very funny."

His facial expression changed drastically. He gazed at her with a funny look about the eyes. "Do that again," he breathed.

"What?" She frowned.

"Stick out your tongue..."

She dropped her jaw in mock horror. "James Potter! I'm surprised at you."

He drew her to him again. "Surprises are good," he said simply, lowering his mouth to hers. She responded for a split second before she remembered that there were other people in the common room now. She pulled back and looked around, seeing the shocked expressions on the faces of at least half the students in Gryffindor House. The Head Girl and Head Boy were *kissing*. Then, even more surprising to her, a round of applause suddenly went up from everyone gathered. Some of the other students were standing on the furniture, whistling while they clapped. She felt a heat rise from her neck, and James grinned down at her.

"You're a devil," she whispered to him.

Grinning down at her, he said, "Yes, but I'm the devil you know."

She laughed at that, and they all left the common room to eat breakfast and enjoy a morning of sleighing in the soft new fallen snow.

* * * * *

The sleigh ride with James was completely different from the sleigh ride with Sirius. She snuggled down under a blanket that he'd tucked around both of them, he whistled to the horseless sleigh to move, and soon they were gliding across the snow along with the rest of the students. The high sides of the sleigh hid them from the view of anyone who wasn't looking at them head on, and almost immediately, James looked down at her lovingly and leaned in for a kiss. She responded, his hands on her back and her arms around his neck. She wished she hadn't dressed quite so warmly; she felt like James was raising her internal temperature to the point where she could have gone out in her underwear and still not feel the cold.

At length, they brought the sleigh to a stop behind Hagrid's hut and remained there for a while, kissing, before a snowball landed on top of James' head, making him kneel and look over the back of the sleigh, to see who had thrown it. They saw no one, but after he was sitting and facing forward again, James looked at the snow behind the hut with narrowed eyes; two sets of footprints were being created in the snow by unseen persons.

He put his finger to his lips to keep Lily silent, then slowly pulled out his wand, keeping it hidden under the blanket draped across their laps. The footprints were coming nearer; suddenly, James pulled his wand out from the blanket and pointed it, crying, "*Accio Invisibility Cloak!*"

The silvery cloth went flying through the air into his hands, and Remus and Sirius were immediately revealed. However, they were poised with snowballs in their hands, and immediately began throwing them. James stuffed the cloak down under the blanket and began to wave his wand at the snow around them. A cloud of snowballs rose up and began pelting Remus and Sirius, and they looked so comical trying to avoid them, Lily couldn't help but laugh; soon she was laughing so hard there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

She and James left the shelter of the sleigh and were soon running about in the snow like their two ambushers, sometimes making and throwing snowballs by hand, sometimes using magic. And then Peter leapt out from around the corner of Hagrid's hut and joined in the fray. After a time, they were all breathless, lying on the snowy ground, smiling at each other, and Lily couldn't think of a time in her life when she'd been happier. She had James, she had good friends, and she had a new snowfall. For now, that was enough.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 14 February, 1978

"For he's a jolly good fe-eh-low! And so say all of us!"

Charlie grinned at his brother and friends and stood up to lean over the cake his mother had sent in the post, blowing out the twelve candles on the chocolate frosting. Hagrid's voice had boomed over all the rest during the singing, and now he slapped Charlie on the back so hard he almost wound up with his face in the cake (or with a couple of candles in his eyes).

Hagrid's small abode was cheerful and warm on this winter's day, filled as it was with both Bill and Charlie's friends and colorful streamers and the brightly wrapped presents waiting in a pile for Charlie to unwrap. A huge log crackled merrily in the oversized fireplace and Hagrid's oil lamps were sending a comforting glow into the single room.

The candles were removed and the cake sliced up, and soon the only sounds were moans of delight as they all devoured Molly Weasley's delicious handiwork. When he was finished, Hagrid held his hand before his mouth, his burp echoing throughout the room despite this, and said, "Blimey! I should take up bakin'. Be brilliant to be able to make sommat like that whenever I please..."

"You shudd, Agrid, you definite'y shudd," Charlie agreed, his mouth full. He swallowed and said, "The house smells fantastic when Mum's baking, too."

"Well! That settles it, then. I have me a new hobby," Hagrid decided, helping himself to more cake. Suddenly, the door of the cabin flew open, and five more bodies tried to cram themselves into the room.

"Surprise!" yelled Sirius Black and James Potter. Bill laughed.

"This wasn't a surprise party," he told them. "But have some cake; there's plenty."

"Don't mind if I do," Sirius said, accepting a large wedge.

"We knew it wasn't a surprise party," Lily said, taking a wrapped package from Remus and Peter that they'd been carrying. "The surprise is *this*."

She placed before Charlie something long, bound with brown paper and string. Something in the unmistakable shape of a broom. Charlie lifted awed eyes to the five seventh-years.

"Gosh! You don't mean it! I mean—I've been saving my pocket money, hoping I might be able to get a broom later this year, before September—"

James laughed. "What, when you've got this one right here? I just wish you could have been on the team this year. We could have used you."

Charlie shrugged. "Can't. First year. Which means—I can't even have this broom, can I? I mean—it is a broom?"

"Open it, you git!" Remus grinned at him, and Charlie lost no time in tearing the paper apart. A gleaming new Comet sat in the torn wrappings; Charlie gazed rapturously at it, speechless.

"And no, technically you can't own that, as a first year. However...if it's kept here at Hagrid's..."

Bill stepped up to admire it. "And you have to let me try it, of course," he said, grinning at his brother. "And I'll pack it with my things when we go home for Easter. It'll be brilliant, having this to fly around the orchard at home, won't it?"

Charlie nodded, still without words, his eyes never leaving the broom. Bill had known all along about the seventh-years' plan; James Potter had been woefully disappointed that he couldn't have Charlie on the Gryffindor team after he saw him flying rings around the other first years in flying class (as Head Boy, he'd substituted for Madam Hooch when she was under the weather for a few days). He'd never seen a natural flyer quite like Charlie, and when another student had dropped a pet toad out of his pocket during a flying mishap wherein the other boy wound up clinging to his broom upside down, Charlie had swooped under him immediately, catching the poor toad before it met an untimely death a hundred feet below. James had started lobbing small stones at Charlie ("For fun," he'd said.), charmed to float to the ground slowly, like Quaffles, and he was itching to try Charlie with an actual Snitch. No matter what, Charlie had the falling object in question in his clutches in moments, it seemed. It appeared utterly effortless for him, which James knew was the

mark of a born Seeker. Unfortunately, he already had a Seeker for the Gryffindor team, and while she wasn't too bad, she made James' stomach leap about with constant worry during matches. He wanted someone who was more of a sure thing, someone like Charlie Weasley. But until he reached second year, Charlie was ineligible, so it probably wasn't even worth asking McGonagall for permission to bend the rules a bit....

Bill grinned at James Potter now, gratified to see that he smiled back. He'd been so relieved when James had approached him, after finding out about the party planned for Charlie, and asked whether he thought Charlie might like a broom, to get ready for being on the Gryffindor team the next year.

"And," James had also said, "I don't think you grassed on us that time. I'm fairly sure it was Snape or Karkaroff." He looked contritely at the younger boy. "Sorry we all came down on you a bit."

Bill drew his mouth into a line to hide his emotions; he didn't want the older boy to think he was going to fall apart because he'd received an apology. "That's okay," he said stoically. "Thanks."

James nodded at him; he felt Weasley was all right, and his brother, too. Good, solid Gryffindor material. And even though Bill knew about Remus being a werewolf, he hadn't told anyone. That just didn't seem like something he would do if he'd ratted on them. Plus, Lily had told him that he'd *better* apologize to Bill and stop treating him like a pariah. But he didn't tell Bill that. Sirius was already starting to call him hen-pecked. It wasn't that so much as he trusted Lily's judgment more than his own on certain things. After he'd apologized, he knew she was right about Weasley.

The party started to draw to a close, and Bill and the other third years took responsibility for the clearing-up. While Alex Wood and Geoff Davies threw wrapping paper into the fire and Jack Richards and Mary Ann Boxwood swept the crumbs off Hagrid's huge table, Bill waved his wand to move the plates into Hagrid's stone sink, and Juliet Hathaway heated some water that was in the pitcher on the shelf and then caused it to pour over the dirty dishes. She grinned at Bill, and he looked happily back at her. For once Wallis wasn't around. Lily glanced at James before they left, then gestured to Bill and Juliet with a sly smile and a nod of her head before taking his hand and leading him outside. Remus, Sirius and Peter had already left for the castle.

After they'd closed Hagrid's door, James pulled Lily into a deep kiss. When she broke it, she leaned her forehead on James' chin, a secret smile pulling at her mouth.

"Aren't they cute together?" she whispered.

"Weasley and Hathaway? And he's only fancied her for-what? A year or two? Moves fast, he does."

"Oh, you," she said, hitting his shoulder lightly. "You should talk."

He held her more tightly. "What? I've got you now, haven't I?"

"Not completely," she breathed against his mouth. "Not yet," she added, before pulling his mouth down to hers again. She could feel the tenseness move through his body as he processed her words. When he pulled his mouth away from hers slowly, she was looking up at him with an expression that made her meaning abundantly clear.

"How about Saturday night?" he asked, hardly able to get the words out. "I-I know a good place. Private. Comfortable..."

She nodded, looking down at the clasp on his cloak. Her chest felt tight with wanting him; she looked up at his dear, dear face, hardly daring to think about how much she loved him, how happy she was that they'd finally found their way to each other. "I trust you," she said simply, not knowing how affecting those simple words were to him.

I trust you.

He couldn't ever remember anyone having such simple, unfettered faith in him before. Even his best friends, when they'd been learning to be Animagi, had constantly bombarded him with questions and doubts. If Remus bit them when they were in animal form, would they *really* be safe? Could they hold their animal forms, guaranteed, without reverting to their human forms if Remus scared them or otherwise made them lose concentration in some way? They'd all been in it together, but when doubts were felt, they were expressed, not held in. They trusted each other for the most part, but they also each had an inherent skepticism that was healthy, in that it had protected them all thus far.

But Lily—her simple *I trust you*, crept into his heart and made him feel that he must never, ever do anything to violate that trust. He kissed her soundly, then, arms wrapped around each other, they walked back to the castle in the soft snow, each looking forward to the weekend.

* * * * *

Saturday, 18 February, 1978

"Where are we going?" Lily whispered. They were walking through the corridors under James' Invisibility Cloak; it was nearly midnight, and Lily had a jumpy feeling in her stomach. *Here's the Head Girl, sneaking out late at night again. With the Head Boy, this time.* She was glad of James' cloak, but she was still a bit nervous about Filch. She had never liked him—but then, she didn't know of a single student who felt the opposite....

"We're here," James whispered. They were standing before a tapestry, which James was lifting out of the way now, revealing a stone wall.

"*Amanuensis*," he said softly, and the stones dissolved, revealing an opening in the wall through which they crept. Lily started to remove the cloak from them, but he stopped her. "*Not yet*," he breathed against her ear. She shook from head to toe when he did this, then looked at him in the torchlight filtering through the cloak; his eyes were dark with passion.

She nodded, since he clearly knew what he was doing, and, his arm around her waist, he guided them down a torch-lit corridor with doors on either side, every twenty or thirty feet. They made a few turnings before he came to the door he wanted. He took out his wand and said quietly, "*Alohomora!*"

The door swung open slowly, and they pushed it open more, closing it firmly behind them. Lily heard James put a locking charm on it, and then a silencing charm. She turned to gaze at the room; it was dim in the moonlight from the windows, there were sheets draped over the furniture as though it hadn't been used in a very long time. There were clearly cobwebs to be seen on the chandelier hanging above the middle of the room, on the andirons standing before the firebox, and connecting some of the furniture.

James removed the cloak from them now and waved his wand at some torches on the wall, and then at the fire. Flames sprung up, but they merely served to illumine the room's air of shabby desolation. Lily raised an eyebrow at him.

"Just give us a sec," he said quickly.

"Us?" Lily said, starting to smile.

James shrugged. "Mum always said that. Dad teased her about it. Like the royal 'we'."

Lily swallowed, remembering afresh his grief over his parents' deaths. "They loved each other very much, didn't they?"

He nodded, gazing at her, then turned and waved his wand again, saying, "*Finite incantatem.*"

And then Lily saw what a sort of shielding charm or illusion charm had kept her from seeing before: the room as it really was. The air before her seemed to shimmer and dance for a few moments, and then she saw a table with two chairs before the fire, laid with pristine white cloth, and a scrumptious chocolate mousse waiting to be eaten. A music box was playing her favorite tune (*Für Elise*) while the firelight played over the lush carpet in front of the hearth, and over the beautiful carved furniture, including a huge four-poster bed in the corner with deep purple damask hangings and a matching coverlet. There wasn't a cobweb in sight, nor a white sheet. She turned to James and laughed.

"Tried to make me think you'd brought me to some dreadful place, did you?" She couldn't stop smiling if she'd wanted to. He took her in his arms.

"If I had, would you have stayed?"

She nodded. "This is nice, but in a way, it doesn't really matter. It's you I want to be with, not a pile of furniture. But—where *are* we, anyway? I've definitely never been in this part of the castle."

"It's the staff wing. No one's been using these rooms for ages. I snuck in here in my Invisibility Cloak to fix it up, and then I put the charm on it yesterday to make it still look disused, just in case someone came in here anyway. The Invisibility Cloak was also useful for finding the staff wing in the first place, not to mention lurking near the entrance, to hear one of the teachers saying the password to enter..."

He trailed off, suddenly unable to remember what he'd been talking about. All he could do was gaze into Lily's eyes, her beautiful green eyes, and tilt her head up to his for a kiss. He wasn't certain how long they'd been kissing when Lily pulled back from him, then took his hand and walked slowly toward the bed. He followed her, shaking. *This is actually going to happen. I'm with Lily. Me. James Potter. Lily Evans. What's wrong with this picture?* he thought.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked him, turning, her fingers doing something down his front.

"You," he whispered. Even though he knew no one could hear them, he felt like whispering. "I'm just—I can't believe we're here. The two of us. I can't believe you want to be with *me*."

She shook her head at him. "Silly James. We've hardly been apart for the past *week*. You didn't think I've wanted to be with you?" she laughed. "Could you ever before imagine me, in the corner of the common room, kissing a boy while sitting on his lap in an armchair?" She blushed to think of it. She and James had been together in the common room every spare moment since

the sleigh ride. Sirius had sometimes thrown cushions at them and told them to get a room (with a slightly disturbed look behind his eyes). And even though they'd turned the chair to face the corner, more than once when she'd stood and emerged from their lair, she'd been greeted with whistles and catcalls and cries of, "*Good going, Potter!*" And she'd borne it with just a bit of blushing, unable to reprimand or take house points or give detentions because she was just too *happy*. She hadn't known she would feel this way, like nothing else mattered in the world.... "*I can't believe you want to be with me,*" she told him, pushing his robes from his shoulders; they felt to the floor behind him.

Oh, he thought. She was unbuttoning my robes. He felt mentally deficient suddenly, unable to remember what he should do next. Then his fingers seemed to be moving of their own accord, a sensory memory that evidently lived in his digits, not in his brain. When her robes were unbuttoned and also in a puddle on the floor, she took one of his fingers and drew it into her mouth, gazing up at him with those *eyes*....

He drew in his breath, wishing he'd learnt a spell for removing all of their clothes more efficiently, but Lily seemed intent on a leisurely pace, so he went along with her, as she unbuttoned his shirt and drew it off his arms, and he unbuttoned her blouse. When she was standing before him, clad only in her bra from the waist up, he remembered her in the pool at Ascog, and started to wonder whether he'd be able to keep up the leisurely pace....

She kissed his chest while working at his trouser fastenings with her hands, and his stomach clenched, remembering the way Bonnie had recoiled at the reality of his sex. She'd actually looked like she was going to retch the first time, and he waited apprehensively for Lily's reaction. She drew his trousers down and helped him step out of them, and he grew more and more anxious, as the evidence of his desire for her was unmistakable now, straining against his drawers.

She smiled up at him, then stood. "Well," she said against his chest, her tongue reaching out suddenly to lap at his nipple. "I won't ask you whether you're sure about this. You seem pretty sure to me," she joked softly, still smiling. James was shocked, and his face must have shown it. Now she looked alarmed. "What's wrong? Oh, god, you—you must think I'm—that I'm a—"

She turned away from him, her face crumpling, and sat on the edge of the bed, tears falling down her cheeks and dripping from the end of her nose. James was baffled. "I wish I could turn back the clock, I really do. You probably would like for me to be a virgin," she sobbed; "a blushing little virgin who's never been with anyone else. I'm sorry, James, but that's not who I am....And I know about plenty of girls here who've been around a lot more than I have, so good luck finding your little innocent—"

"Lily!" he said, interrupting her, his eyes wide, not having expected this reaction. "What are you going on about? Hell, I'm *glad* you have more experience than me! I don't—I don't think I probably knew what the hell I was doing with Bonnie, frankly, and it wasn't as though she ever let me figure things out. She always wanted everything to be over with quickly. I feel like a complete dunce about this sort of thing, and I was hoping that—that you'd help me out a bit when it comes to—to what you like. I don't give a damn that I'm not the first bloke you've ever been with, Lily. I just hope—" he paused, swallowing. "I just—I hope that I'm the *last*—" he finished softly. Her eyes widened as his meaning sank in.

"Oh, James," she said simply, standing and sliding her arms up around his neck. The bare skin of their stomachs met, and James couldn't believe the warmth emanating from her body as she pressed against him. Their mouths were fused together, they were drinking each other in hungrily. The rest of the clothing removal went rather quickly after that, and soon they were lying on the bed, side-by-side, nothing to hide from each other any longer.

He tried to let go of his expectations, forget his earlier disappointing sexual experiences, just revel in her body and her reactions, and to enjoy the unfamiliar sensation of her willingly moving her hands and mouth over him, trying to arouse him (not that he needed much help), which was new and different and wonderful. He was sometimes more tentative than she wanted him to be, he could tell, and he tried to move past this, shed his doubts. He tried not to expect the reprimand that he'd received from Bonnie when he'd moved his mouth down her body and tried to make her feel as good as she made him feel. Instead, Lily gently took his hands in hers and guided him to the place he sought, then gasped and threw her head back, moaning continuously when he'd found it, and when she finally shuddered all over and cried out his name repeatedly, he felt incredibly powerful and like the luckiest man in the world.

He moved up her body again, kissing everything along the way, and when he reached her mouth, she surprised him by pulling him down hungrily, her tongue tracing his lower teeth, her hands moving down his body, until she curled her fingers around him and made his head reel. He felt her legs wrapping around him even as she continued to move her hand, and then there was no Lily and no James, but a new person, one being consisting of pleasure, of firelight lapping at rosy-hued

skin, and rocking hips and kisses and finally, of molten pleasure that rolled through them both indiscriminately, leaving them tired but sated and thoroughly at peace.

Lily felt too warm to be under the coverlet; she lay with her head on James' chest, her leg thrown over his hip, her lips idly kissing his chest occasionally. She felt lazy and indolent and utterly content. James stroked her hair, then followed the line of it down her back and tentatively brushed his fingers along the curves of her lovely bottom. She snuggled closer to him, a small sigh telling him the caresses were welcome, and he kept on, wanting to hear her make that little noise of approval again.

"We still have chocolate mousse, remember," he whispered to her after a while as she traced the palm of his left hand with her fingertip.

"Hmm," she murmured contentedly. "I wonder how you would taste with chocolate mousse..." She smiled against his chest as he groaned from the implication her words carried, and she laughed, tickling his ribs mercilessly, just where she knew he was most sensitive.

"You little—" he started to say, laughing, tickling her back. Soon he had her on her back, screaming for mercy as he pinned her legs between his and moved his hands over *her* ribs. But then they both sobered and he moved his hands up to her breasts instead, cupping them in his hands, feeling the tips harden....

Eventually, he put his hands on either side of her and leaned down to kiss her, growing aroused again. Just before his mouth made contact with hers, she spoke softly to him, her eyes full of love and desire.

"I wasn't kidding about the chocolate mousse."

* * * * *

Wednesday, 5 April, 1978

Lily walked into the Leaky Cauldron, her heart thrumming with anticipation. She had to promise to be home by six, so she could celebrate her birthday with her family, but James was taking her shopping in Diagon Alley and then to lunch anywhere she wanted to go in Muggle London. She had been floored.

"You mean a *real* restaurant, with—"

"—real waiters, and no floating food or puddings that make faces at you before you eat them or elves clearing the table between courses—"

She had laughed. Sometimes she *did* miss the way things were done in the Muggle world. The one person to whom she would never admit this, of course, was her sister, as Petunia would point and say, "Aha! Even you think they're freaks!"

Recently, Petunia seemed to reconsider her position on magic very slightly. She had started bombarding Lily with questions while they were waiting at the hospital for their mum to come out of her chemotherapy treatments. This was not exactly the way Lily had envisioned spending her Easter holiday: trapped with her sister and brother-in-law in a hospital lounge. Although, given the way her Christmas holiday had gone, perhaps she *should* have expected it.

"Didn't you say once that—the sort of people at your school—" Petunia had said furtively, looking around at the other people in the lounge; "—live longer than—other types of people?"

Lily had swallowed and answered cautiously, "*Yehss—*" wondering, *Where is this going?*

"—and they have certain *treatments* that other people do not?" Lily made a noncommittal noise, not looking at her sister, but at the magazine she was reading.

"So couldn't you probably, you know," Petunia said, dropping her voice still more, "*do something about Mum's situation?*"

Lily grimaced at Petunia's ignorance. "Not me personally, no. I don't have the proper training. There's a particular hospital where training for that sort of medicine takes place. And it doesn't take—patients like Mum—" she whispered back to her sister.

Now Lily glanced with distaste at her brother-in-law, sitting next to Petunia. Vernon Dursley was looking very much like his father these days; he had recently taken over the Grunnings drill plant from the old man and Petunia was no longer working as his secretary but staying at home, keeping house, as she put it, which Lily strongly suspected consisted in large part of gossiping about her neighbors. Petunia had found Vernon a competent young man to be his clerk, rather than a young woman. Lily shuddered to think of the screening process; Petunia had personally taken in hand the task of finding her replacement. No twenty-year-old would-be models with long blonde hair and legs all the way down to the floor, not for her Vernon. Petunia did *not* want competition. Lily had been biting her tongue painfully; she had shown remarkable restraint in *not* telling her sister that

Vernon Dursley was the last man in the world who was going to be pursued by supermodels (who would not be caught dead clerking at the Grunnings drill plant in Surrey).

Petunia had turned up her nose at Lily upon hearing her cryptic answer to Petunia's cryptic question, and muttered, not for the last time, "*Freaks. Every last one of you...*"

Lily entered Diagon Alley from the yard behind the pub and worked her way toward the bookstore, where James was meeting her. She was a few minutes early and she had an enjoyable time window shopping on the way to Flourish & Blotts. Then, while standing outside the apothecary, admiring a set of solid gold weights with intricate etchings, something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. It was just a flick of a robe; a second later, it was gone. Lily turned slowly, still pretending to be checking something in the window of the shop; the apothecary had a bay window for display at the front, and standing to the side of it now, looking in one of the angled windows, Lily saw the man who had ducked out of sight down a narrow passage between two shops on the other side of the alley. She didn't see him directly; he didn't seem to realize that she could see him reflected in the glass before her. He was in a hooded cloak and what was unmistakably a mask. She drew in her breath. *Was he a Death Eater? Was he about to do something dreadful?*

She felt uneasy about the person being behind her, and started to snake her hand into her cloak pocket, reaching for her wand. Since her seventeenth birthday, she always had her wand with her in the wizarding world. Holding it down at her side, the wand hidden in the folds of her cloak, she turned her left side ever so slightly toward the lurking, masked man, and suddenly, she saw that he was looking at a large auburn-haired man standing abnormally still before the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies. From his hiding place, the masked man was raising his wand, she saw, and pointing it at the auburn-haired man. She caught this in the angled shop window; she wasn't looking directly at him, so he evidently didn't think anyone had noticed him.

She stopped watching the masked man now and strode forward purposefully, greeting the targeted man with a hug and tugging him away from where he would still have been in the masked man's line of sight.

"There you are!" she cried with mock enthusiasm, as though she knew him. "What took you so long?"

The man looked flustered and not a little annoyed. "What the hell?" he said, frowning, just as red sparks hit the window of the Quidditch supplies store, exactly where he'd been standing a moment before. He looked very alert suddenly, and pulled out his wand.

The masked wizard jumped out from the niche where he'd been hiding and aimed at the auburn-haired man again, but Lily raised her wand and cried, "*Stupefy!*"

Her spell hit him squarely and he toppled over, but then another person whom she hadn't noticed before turned toward them; he'd been feigning interest in the window of a shop selling second-hand robes. He aimed at the auburn-haired man, too, and this time he was prepared, sending a spell into the air with amazing precision. It exactly intercepted the line of crackling light heading toward him, making it deflect and bounce off of some cauldrons sitting before a shop. While he used his right hand for this, he used his left hand to pull Lily behind him, which she was finding rather annoying as she had already stunned one of *his* attackers. He had grabbed her right arm to do this and she struggled to free her wand arm as he focused on the remaining Death Eater, beginning to pronounce the spell to stun him. Suddenly, with a *pop*, the second attacker was gone, and the shoppers in the vicinity, looking askance in their direction, muttered to themselves as they went on with their shopping, cynical and jaded in this age of Voldemort. The first man still laid on the cobblestones, stunned. Shoppers were stepping over him, unconcerned.

Lily had finally managed to shake off the hand he had wrapped around her upper arm, and was faced with a rather irate-looking man in his mid-twenties.

"Thanks a lot!" he said, frowning at her. "Thanks to you—"

"—you're still alive and in one piece!" she finished for him. He did not yet put his wand away.

"I was *going* to say, you screwed up everything!" he responded, turning a bit red in the face.

"Well, he wouldn't have gotten away if you hadn't dragged me behind you!" she answered his accusation hotly. "I could have stunned him while he was aiming at you!"

"When I need the help of a civilian, I'll let you know!" he practically growled at her, looking critically at her robes, which were open over her Muggle skirt and blouse. "And a Muggle-born one at that, by the look of you."

Lily bristled. "If you're an Auror—"

"Sssh!" he said, putting his hand over her mouth. "Shut up!" he hissed at her, dragging her into the bookshop and down aisle after narrow aisle, finally ending up near the back of the shop, where they were surrounded by dusty stacks that appeared to have been untouched for decades.

She extracted her wrist from his clutches, rubbing it (although she was mostly indignant, not

really in pain) and glaring at him. Positioning himself against the wall and looking warily down the aisle, he said out of the corner of his mouth, "Yeah, I'm an Auror. I was trying to bring those two out into the open and make them think I wanted to capture them. We knew that they were given an assignment—to capture *me* and get certain information from me. It was all a plant, a set up. I was *supposed* to let myself get captured, so I could give them some bad information after letting them torture me for a while. And then *you* had to go and save' me..."

Her jaw dropped. "Well—well why couldn't you still have let yourself be taken, if that was the plan?" She was shocked that the plan included his *intention* to be tortured.

He sighed. "Because a civilian became involved. They could have taken you at the same time as me. Then it would have been *you* they would have tortured to get me to talk. I'll put myself in that position, but not another person, especially a civilian. And I didn't want you to get hurt trying to do something heroic to save me, either. By the way, he could have had a clean shot at you when you hugged me back there. Not too bright."

She shrugged. "I knew I wasn't his target. I could see that you were. And forgive me if I don't normally think of that as a *good* thing."

He started to say something, then changed his mind and said something else. "Wait—how did you know he was targeting me?"

"I saw his reflection in the apothecary's window. He didn't know he'd been seen because I wasn't facing him. And I think that unless you're standing in a very specific spot, the place where he was hiding can't be seen very well. One of the few ways to see where he was is by looking at the reflections in that one side of the shop window..."

He nodded. "Right, right." He looked at her shrewdly now, evidently not angry with her anymore. She regarded him carefully too.

"You look familiar..." she said slowly. "Are you allowed to tell me your name? When did you finish Hogwarts?"

He evidently hadn't forgotten all of his manners and extended his hand to her now. "Sam Bell. I finished in seventy-two."

"Ooooh!" she said slowly now. "That's why you look familiar. You were the seventh year prefect when I was a first year. In Gryffindor, that is, obviously..." she added, feeling foolish.

He squinted at her and shook his head. "And you are—"

"Lily Evans," she said quietly, not expecting him to remember. But his face lit up now with recognition.

"You're Lily Evans? But you were this little skinny—"

She smirked. "Thanks ever so much."

He had the good grace to redden. "Sorry. I'm being very rude. I just—well, you've changed rather a lot, haven't you?" Lily was surprised by how boldly his eyes raked over her. She wondered whether he was a bit of a rogue with women or just not very well-versed in manners.

"That will happen between the ages of eleven and eighteen," she informed him archly. He looked more friendly now and gave her a sunny grin that made it very hard to remain angry with him.

"Good point," he conceded. "I heard you were made Head Girl. Congratulations."

"Thank you," she answered, having been more comfortable with the slightly antagonistic Sam Bell than she was with the friendly version. She remembered that he was six years older than her, and that they were standing in the back of Flourish & Blotts, hidden in a stack of moldering old books well away from any of the other shop patrons. She felt very self-conscious about this suddenly.

"And isn't Potter Head Boy now? I couldn't believe that when I heard it. Potter! That little scrawny—"

"—boyfriend of the girl you've decided to corner in the back of the bookshop," came a familiar voice to Lily's left. She turned and saw with relief that James was striding toward them, his robes billowing out behind him, and, she was gratified to see, looking distinctly *non-scrawny*.

Sam Bell looking unflatteringly flabbergasted. "Potter! Well I'll be—how are you?"

"Fine. And you are—?"

"Erm," Lily jumped in, trying to sound as natural as possible. "You remember Sam Bell, don't you, James? Seventh year when we were in first?"

James Potter stood looking at Sam Bell appraisingly. Lily could see that Sam recognized James' attitude as hostile and just a bit jealous. Sam grinned ingratiatingly at him and extended his hand. James took it, reluctantly.

"I hear you're Head Boy, now. And Quidditch captain. I was captain my seventh year. Prefect, too, but not Head Boy."

James disconnected his hand after they shook. "Yeah, Quidditch captain," he echoed, still eyeing Sam hostilely.

"Erm," Sam said awkwardly, "listen. Don't really have time to catch up right now. Nice to run into you both. Ta."

And then, with a soft *pop!* he was gone. James looked at Lily with a raised eyebrow.

"And why were you back here with *him?*" he wanted to know. She crossed her arms and glared at him.

"I'll tell you over lunch. It's probably best discussed once we're well away from other wizards."

So when they were eating her birthday lunch at the Ritz, she explained to him about Sam being an Auror and "saving" him. She didn't mention that he'd been *trying* to get captured; somehow, something in her made her glance around and think *security nightmare* as she considered what to tell James. She didn't think of it as lying to him, but protecting him (and Sam).

James looked a little disgruntled. "Well, I hope he thanked you properly. What's the world coming to when an eighteen-year-old girl has to save an Auror's arse!"

"Sssh!" Lily said quickly, looking around at the Muggle patrons of the restaurant. "Watch what you say here," she said, *sotto voce*, her eyes shifting around. James laughed.

"You're acting like *you're* some kind of spy now, Lily," he said, smirking, as though this was the most ridiculous idea in the world. But Lily remembered Sam asking her how she'd known he was under attack, and the impressed tone in his voice after she'd told him. Was it so ridiculous? she thought. She still hadn't figured out what she was going to do after she left school. Perhaps she had something she should consider now....

"What are you thinking?" he asked her cheerfully, taking a sip of water. She bit her lip, wondering whether she should tell him. *Lily Evans, Auror.*

Instead, she decided to change the subject. "Come with me tonight," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"You—you've never met my parents. Oh, do come. Petunia won't be there. You know her; she claims she has a prior engagement. So it'll be just me and Mum and Dad. I want them to meet you. To—to like you," she finished softly. James' eyes opened very wide and he took another sip of water.

"All—all right," he said swallowing. She smiled at him, knowing that he was no longer thinking about Aurors but instead busy panicking about meeting her parents. It was sneaky of her, to distract him this way, and yet—she really did want him to meet them. And vice versa. She looked at James again as she ate her lunch. She had meant what she'd said to Sirius about James, and she felt like this was another step in her future being finalized. Lily felt a trifle overwhelmed for a moment; in one day, she'd decided that she just might want to be an Auror and had taken another step toward James being part of her family. It was a landmark birthday indeed.

* * * * *

Friday, 2 June, 1978

"That was brilliant," Jack said as he and Geoff left their Transfiguration exam. Bill and Alex were waiting for them in the corridor. The two Gryffindors fell into step beside their Hufflepuff friends as they strode down the corridor, anxiously awaiting the news.

"So? It went all right? And McGon—I mean, *she* didn't suspect a thing?" Alex asked in an anxious whisper.

Geoff grinned at his friends. "She had no idea. It helped that you two were outside the window, flying about, so that Jack could say, Oi! What's Weasley up to?' and that sort of thing. Worked every time."

Bill shrugged. "I borrowed Charlie's broom. The school brooms are hopelessly poky."

They all felt a rush of freedom through their chests; the Hufflepuff Transfiguration exam—written and practical—was the last examination any of the four of them had to withstand until Monday morning, when the Gryffindors still had Potions (all morning) and History of Magic to get through (all afternoon). The schedule was reversed for the Hufflepuffs: History first, then Potions. More importantly, the Transfiguration exam was the last one that had a practical portion which Geoff needed help with. After this, they could all just concentrate on revision and quizzing each other on potions ingredients and Goblin rebellions. Or at least—they could do that after the Quidditch final, in the morning.

"Think Gryffindor'll win tomorrow?" Jack asked Bill and Alex. "I hate to think of Slytherin winning..."

Geoff nodded in hearty agreement. "*Everyone* hates to think of that happening. I don't know a single person in our house who won't be cheering for Gryffindor."

"Right," Jack agreed. "Oh, Bill, is your mum coming and bringing the twins?"

Bill shook his head. "Dad sent an owl yesterday; they're all staying home after all. The twins are being colicky, Percy's teething again, Peggy fell from a tree, has her arm in a sling, and the bones won't be done mending until Sunday, and Annie's just being a general pain in the arse and is confined to her room all weekend. Something about nicking Mum's wand when she was napping and Transfiguring Peggy's favorite doll. You know: the usual chaos at my house. But Dad said they'll try to come to the first match Gryffindor plays this autumn, especially if Charlie makes the team."

"If?" Alex said, appalled. "Has he no more confidence in his son that *that*?"

The others laughed, then sobered. "It might be a bit rough tomorrow," Jack said, a warning in his voice. "I heard that Snape really has it in for Potter, ever since Potter stole Evans from him."

Alex shrugged. "If there's one person Potter's not afraid of, it's Snape," he said confidently. "And it's Snape broke up with Evans, remember? If he's upset about her being with Potter, he's no one to blame but himself."

"I know," Jack answered. "I didn't mean it that way. I just mean—well, he does seem pretty upset about their being together. I thought he was good at giving the Evil Eye before. It's even *worse* now."

"It probably doesn't help that Potter's just made it onto the English team as a reserve Chaser, after they lost Wellington in that match against Finland. *And* that it looks like England might be in the final of the World Cup, in August. Wouldn't that be brilliant, if we knew someone who won the World Cup?" Jack said in awe.

"Well," Bill cautioned; "he's a reserve. He might not play, even if England *does* win."

Jack shrugged. "Still—"

The four boys failed to see a shadowy figure about to emerge from a boys' bathroom as they passed, chattering animatedly. His lank dark hair hung down on either side of his sallow cheeks; he no longer bothered to pull it back into a ponytail. Who cared what he looked like? If he wasn't careful, if he looked anything less than repulsive, Narcissa Anderssen might try to shag him again....

Severus Snape shuddered at the very idea. Then he thought of the boys' words. *Wouldn't that be brilliant, if we knew someone who won the World Cup?* James Potter, playing Quidditch for England. It was enough to make him *sick*, the first time he'd heard about it. And Lily was with him now....

It was clear, on the morning of February nineteenth (he would always remember the date) that Potter had slept with her. The way she was gazing at him was unmistakable. The thing was—he remembered when she'd looked at *him* that way. When he was the one looking down into her softly glowing face, seeing that expression of amazement. He'd been unable to eat anything that day, torturing himself by imagining them together....Even swooping over the Quidditch pitch on his broom, getting some of the Slytherin Chasers to give him some practice keeping the Quaffle out of the goals wasn't enough to thoroughly distract him from his thoughts of Lily.

And then, not a month later, he'd heard them in the library, heard the unmistakable sounds of *kissing* and sighing, and he hadn't had to look to know whose sighs they were; he recognized Lily's sounds anywhere. He was ashamed of himself for peeking through the books to see them kissing; when he thought one of them had turned toward him, he quickly strode out. After that, it seemed that he was practically falling over them, time after time. Everywhere he went, he seemed to find James and Lily, Lily and James. It was almost as though *they* were following *him*. And yet, from what he could tell, they were actually oblivious to the rest of the world, as though they were the only two people in it.

It happened again in late May, when he was doing revision for the N.E.W.T.s in the library. The kissing and sighing behind the stacks....

"James," she whispered, "I need to talk to you." Severus' ears pricked up; he knew that tone of voice. She was being very serious. Potter, however, wasn't paying attention to her. Severus continued to hear kissing noises.

"*James*," she said sternly. Severus knew that tone of voice as well. The noises stopped.

"Yes, Lily. What is it?"

"I—I have to tell you something..." Severus strained to hear them, wondering what could be making her sound like that.

"Yes, yes. You said. What is it?"

"Well—" she hesitated. "I wrote a letter to Sam Bell."

Severus frowned. *Who?*

"Who?" Potter was having the same reaction.

"Sam Bell. You know, that Auror I saved on my birthday."

Auror? Lily saved an Auror on her birthday?

"Oh, right. Why would you write to him?"

"Well, you know how I-I hadn't made any plans yet for what to do after I'm finished school..."

"There's no rush, Lily. And-wait. What do you mean '*hadn't* made any plans'?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Sam came here to Hogwarts, to talk with me. Just sending post back and forth wouldn't have been very secure...."

"What are you talking about?" Potter sounded antagonistic, and Severus wasn't sure he blamed him. *Who the hell is this Auror?*

"What I'm talking about is-what we talked about is-what it's like to be an Auror. And whether I'd be any good at it."

What?

"*What?* Are you mad?"

Severus heard some rustling and thought that Lily might be extricating herself from James Potter's embrace.

"There's a lovely reaction. I've finally worked out what I want to do, and that's what you have to say?"

There was a tense silence. Severus resisted the urge to move closer to them to hear better.

Potter sighed. "I'm sorry, Lily. I just-I wasn't expecting this. So. You-you're going to be an Auror?" His voice sounded a bit choked.

"Well," she hesitated. "I'm going to take the tests to be admitted for training. I'd have to pass those with high marks. And even if I do, there's the training itself. I'd have to make it through. But, yes. I'm going to attempt to become an Auror," she said very quietly.

"Come here," Potter said gently, and Severus heard rustling and sighing again; it seemed that Lily had returned to his embrace. "I'm glad that you finally worked out what you want to do, I really am. It's just-well, rather dangerous. I'm allowed to be worried about you, aren't I?"

Lily paused before answering. "So, you're not going to try to stop me?"

Potter gave a small laugh. "As if I could. As if anyone could. No, I'm not going to try to stop you. You certainly didn't try to stop me from trying out for the English team." He heaved a great sigh. "My Lily, an Auror. I admit, I'm having trouble picturing it..."

She laughed ruefully. "So am I, a bit. But Sam says I have good instincts, and the training I'll get will teach me all of the tricks of the trade."

"Oh, *Sam* says, does he?" Potter *definitely* sounded jealous now.

"Yes, *Sam* says. You're *jealous*, aren't you? You were jealous the first time you saw him."

Potter made a huffing noise. "Well-look at him. With his-his muscles. And-his-his being an Auror-"

Lily laughed. "Stop being silly. He's *married*, you prat. He showed me a lovely photo of his wife. And they're expecting a baby, in December. Sam's over the moon about it. Can't wait for the day his son or daughter can ride a broomstick and learn to play Quidditch."

"Oh," was all that Potter said. Severus grimaced; he'd been having the same reaction to Lily mentioning Sam. But somehow it didn't reassure him to know that this Sam Bell was married and about to become a father....

He leaned against the stone wall outside the boys' bathroom, listening to the footsteps of the third years receding down the corridor. In the morning, he was playing against James Potter for the Quidditch Cup. Three times as many people would be cheering for Gryffindor as for Slytherin. Both Gryffindor and Slytherin were undefeated, having won matches against Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Slytherin had a boy who was arguably the finest Seeker the school had seen in years; however, Gryffindor had James Potter playing Chaser, James Potter who was a reserve Chaser for England.

Gryffindor had won both of their previous matches because of Potter, not their little Seeker. Potter had made the score so lopsided before the Snitch was caught (four-hundred to twenty in the match against Hufflepuff, three-hundred-thirty to forty against Ravenclaw) that the Seekers were almost beside the point. When the Snitch was seen by the Hufflepuff Seeker in that match, he had hesitated, knowing how the score stood, and the Gryffindor Seeker had swooped past him and claimed it. The Ravenclaw Seeker had had her pride, however, and raced to catch it before the girl from Gryffindor, even knowing that Ravenclaw would only have one hundred ninety points. They would lose the match, but at least she could say she caught the Snitch.

Severus knew it was up to him, as the Keeper, to control the game, to prevent Potter from unbalancing the score and virtually taking the Seekers out of the equation. Slytherin was trailing Gryffindor by two-hundred points in the race for the Cup. *I will show Potter no mercy and win this match if it's the last thing I do at Hogwarts*, he thought, striding down the corridor, catching up with the third-year boys. He barreled through the center of the group, making them scatter like tenpins,

hearing their grunts of indignation with a smug satisfaction. With trepidation, they watched his dark figure storm down the castle corridor away from them, his robe flapping behind him like the wings of a bat.

* * * * *

Saturday, 3 June, 1978

Severus Snape flung the Quaffle as hard as he could to the nearest Slytherin Chaser, O'Brien. *He actually caught it*, Severus thought with an unbecoming smirk. But he was scowling again not twenty seconds later when Sirius Black hit a Bludger which blasted through O'Brien's broom twigs, leaving him with barely a piece of straw on the end of his broom. The jolt made him lose hold of the Quaffle, and before Severus knew it, James Potter had grabbed it out of the air and was zipping back toward the Slytherin goal posts with it. *If those idiots could keep the Quaffle away from him, or if the Beaters would hit a Bludger at his head, my job would be a hell of a lot easier...*

James Potter paused momentarily, a lopsided grin on his face; most of the other players were still at the other end of the pitch and hadn't reached the Slytherin end, as he had. He feinted toward the center goal, then the left hoop, and finally zipped past Severus Snape to put the Quaffle through the far right hoop.

"GRYFFINDOR, ONE-TWENTY, SLYTHERIN, ZERO!" cried the fourth-year Ravenclaw boy who was doing the announcing. Cheers went up from seventy-five percent of the crowd, boos from the Slytherins. Some players sporting green and silver scarves started throwing butterbeer bottles onto the pitch, barely missing the girl who was the Gryffindor Seeker, and Madam Hooch blew her whistle and called for Filch to eject the students; she didn't call a time-out, though, as it wasn't a foul committed by players, and the game continued.

The same thing kept happening repeatedly, until Severus started to wonder whether he was in some kind of time loop. One-thirty to zero. The Quaffle sailing past him again, through the center hoop. One forty to zero. The crowd was chanting *Potter! Potter! Potter!*

At last, when he threw the Quaffle to his Chasers after a Gryffindor score, they actually caught it and started zooming toward the other end of the pitch. He watched the two Seekers; the Gryffindor girl wasn't especially good, but it hardly seemed to matter with Potter playing for them. The Slytherin Seeker, on the other hand, was a boy from a long line of excellent Seekers. His dad still played for the Pride of Portree, and his grandfather had won the 1946 World Cup for Scotland. He knew they were very lucky to have Craighead on their team, and now his heart was in his throat as he saw that the boy had seen the Snitch, and was zooming toward it. It was near the Gryffindor goal posts, not a foot off the ground. Severus' heart was beating a mile a minute. *Gryffindor only has one-forty. If Craighead catches it, we'll have one-fifty and win!* But then he realized that they still wouldn't win the Quidditch cup, as that would only give them ten more points, and they were behind Gryffindor by two-hundred. He felt bile rise in his throat. *It just wasn't fair!*

A roar went up from the crowd; he'd let his mind wander and Potter had scored on him again! *Gah*, he thought, retrieving the Quaffle from its slow free-fall and hurling it toward a Slytherin player before noticing that he was a Beater. *Damn!* The beater instinctively hit the oncoming orb with his bat before realizing that it wasn't a Bludger, which sent the Quaffle neatly into the hands of James Potter yet again. The Slytherin Seeker was still hurtling toward the Snitch and the announcer was saying, "THAT'S GRYFFINDOR ONE-FIF—OH!"

Severus had tried to block Potter again, but he miscalculated and the Quaffle zipped past him through the hoop. And still the Slytherin Seeker did not know what was going on behind him, at the other end of the pitch. Severus didn't even bother trying to retrieve the Quaffle; he watched with a lump in his stomach, watched the inevitable happen as Craighead grabbed the Snitch and held it up triumphantly, thinking he'd won the match, flying past the Slytherin spectators, grinning. Then the grin faded from his face. They weren't cheering, as he expected, and Severus Snape felt badly for the boy; he really was a brilliant Seeker. It wasn't his fault that the team had a pillock for a Keeper, who couldn't keep James Potter from scoring again and again....

Everyone seemed to be stunned, including the announcer, who finally said, "THE GAME IS OVER AND GRYFFINDOR WINS, ONE-SIXTY TO ONE-FIFTY! GRYFFINDOR HAS WON THE QUIDDITCH CUP!"

Severus Snape descended to the ground near the Slytherin goals, feeling empty inside. He pushed at his hair in irritation, wishing he'd decided to pull it back, as he used to. His face felt rough and he realized that he'd forgotten to shave that morning. Well, who cared what he looked like? Lily certainly didn't....

There she was now, making her way through the throng surrounding the Gryffindor team, grinning at James Potter and finally throwing her arms around his neck, as he gathered her to him and

kissed her thoroughly, while people continued to pat him on the back. He heard one or two shouts of, "Get a room!" as their kiss continued. Lily resurfaced then, turning red, still unable to stop smiling, and she and Potter walked back to the castle with their arms around each other, jostled by the crowd, and yet somehow, carving their own private space out of it.

James Potter and Lily Evans, the sort of couple no one would question. Both Gryffindors and excellent students (even Severus had to admit). Head Girl and Head Boy. They seemed to be made for each other. Why had he never seen that Sirius Black wasn't the real threat, nor even Remus Lupin? It was Potter all along. When they'd been together, she'd mentioned his name far too often for his liking. *James said this and James said that. James James James.* And then Potter had to go and save his life. That's when he first thought he might have cause to worry about Potter, but stopping it was like stopping gravity, or the march of time....

Gah.

Severus looked down at his hand; there were red blisters on the back. "Damn," he muttered softly to himself. "Missed a spot..." He had to prepare so carefully for Quidditch, especially at this time of year, when even in northern Scotland the sun was beginning to get quite strong. He took a small tube out of a pocket in his robes and rubbed a salve onto the inflamed skin, mentally cursing his porphyria. As he did so he watched the throng of Gryffindor supporters making their way to the castle; there were still some subdued Slytherin supporters on the pitch, but they were avoiding Snape. His eyes slid furtively over his teammates, then he picked up his broom and walked toward the greenhouses. He didn't want to see anyone just now...

He reached the shelter of the oaks and after walking a few yards away from the entrance to the corridor of trees, stopped and leaned against one of them, staring into space. He remembered being here with Lily, telling her he loved her, kissing her....

Then he heard a step on the path, twigs and fallen leaves being trod on, and he turned to see a young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, walking into the oak allécuttee toward him. Snape wasn't sure who he was, but something about him looked familiar...

"Tough luck, Snape," the young man drawled. He had cornsilk-light hair and a pointed face, grey eyes that betrayed no emotion. Severus looked toward him, silent, wishing he would just disappear. Now he remembered: Lucius Malfoy. Narcissa Anderssen's boyfriend. *Brilliant, Severus thought. Just what I need right now. A jealous boyfriend come to hex me. That was five months ago! As if I wanted his whore of a girlfriend anyway....*

"Remember me?" Malfoy asked, as though anyone could ever forget him. Severus spoke carefully, with almost no inflection in his voice.

"Malfoy. Seventh year when I was in first. Sorry you wasted your time coming today." *I didn't want Anderssen, I didn't want Anderssen. Leave me the hell alone.*

Lucius Malfoy smiled ominously. "Oh, it would have been nice to see a Slytherin victory, that's true. But I definitely did not waste my time coming."

Severus did not look at him, in case he saw something in his eyes that looked remotely like guilt. *I do not feel guilty about what happened at that party,* he thought stubbornly. But he knew that wasn't true. However, it wasn't because Anderssen had a boyfriend that he felt guilty; it was because of Lily.

To look busy, and so he wouldn't have to look him in the eye, he took out his tube of salve and rubbed some into the back of his hand again. He watched Malfoy out of the corner of his eye. The blond man was smirking. "Is that what you do? To stay out in the sun? I wondered. It's pretty bright today; you must be glad to get away from it again." Severus lifted his face to Malfoy's now, looking at him now with narrowed eyes. *The vampire thing again.* He remembered Anderssen's little "kink," the way she'd asked him to bite her. Malfoy approached him and was now standing about a foot away from Severus, who was feeling very uncomfortable. *What next? Is he going to ask me to bite him now? What a warped pair they make...* He decided to try to put a stop to it, scare him off.

He swallowed first, then said softly, "Careful. Better not come too close. I get rather peaked after a match." He tried to keep his own face as impassive as possible while scanning Malfoy's face to see whether this had intimidated him.

It hadn't, not in the slightest. Instead, Malfoy laughed. "I brought insurance," he informed him, pulling a necklace with a head of garlic out of his robes. Severus immediately recoiled, backing up and putting his hand over his mouth and nose. Malfoy laughed again. "I wondered whether people were putting me on about that. I can see now they weren't." *"People" being Narcissa Anderssen,* Severus thought. "Of course, I should have known; you obviously haven't looked in a mirror in quite a while." Severus flinched at the insult, but said nothing. "I just want to talk to you. Can I talk to you?"

Severus doubted that it would be that simple. "About what?" *About your girlfriend's vampire*

fantasy? Don't blame me because she's sick.

"What are your plans for when you're done school?"

Severus felt that Malfoy was not to be trusted. He said in a cautious, flat voice, "Working in my uncle's apothecary in Dunoon."

"Ah, Dunoon. The Firth of Clyde is quite beautiful, isn't it?" Malfoy was waxing rhapsodic now. "Of course, I like Dunoon because of its bloody history....So. Uncle in Dunoon. Is he Scottish?"

He nodded. "My mother's brother."

"Mother's side. Hmmm. Dunoon. What's your uncle's name?"

"MacDermid."

"Ah, Clan Campbell. Good. Not Clan Lamont. Weaklings. Of course, in Dunoon, chances are you're going to be one or the other. In all of Argyllshire, for that matter. Although anyone with sense agrees that the Campbells had it all over the Lamonts centuries ago; they let the Muggles in their clan take over much sooner than the Campbells. I'm Clan Campbell as well, on my mother's side. She's a Bannatyne. Glorious, bloody history, Clan Campbell. My father's French family has almost as bloody a history—always managed to be on the winning side, whether it was the revolution, or the reversals that followed, or the Vichy regime...but no one can really touch the Scots for bloodiness, eh?"

Severus stared at him. *Where is this going? When is he going to accuse me of sleeping with his girlfriend?* He did not answer. Malfoy continued, clearly enjoying hearing the sound of his own voice.

"You know what my favorite bloody story is? Takes place in Dunoon; you made me remember. The Massacre of 1646. After the Campbells hit the Lamont castles of Towart and Ascog with all they had, and the Lamonts surrendered. Our clan gave them a written guarantee of liberty. Of course the idiots believed that. They were taken to Dunoon in boats and sentenced to death in the church. Only a little over a hundred survivors. The histories say they were all shot or stabbed to death, but we wizards know it was really the killing curse did them in, except for the thirty-six special gentlemen' who were hanged from a tree in the churchyard—I think they were half-wizard and half-Muggle. And then there was the Chief and his brothers. They were prisoners for a number of years; why they didn't kill them, I don't know. Of course, at that time, the Chief was still a wizard. Might have been because of that. The almost-dead were buried in the same pits as the dead. Think of it! Wish I'd have been there..."

"Why are you telling me this?" *Is that what he has planned for me? And for my uncle too? Wipe our family from the face of the earth?*

"Because I think we're kindred spirits, Snape. Same house. Same Clan. And I'm hoping—same desire to serve the Dark Lord."

Severus' eyes widened only a little, trying to hide his surprise. He remembered Anderssen poking at his arm, saying something about a mark, and putting a good word in for him with Malfoy. Perhaps Malfoy really didn't know about the incident at Ascog and this was proof that she was keeping her word. Not that he'd wanted her to. "Is that what this is about?" he asked, still cautious.

Malfoy stepped toward him again; Severus backed up instinctively and found himself against a tree. "I have a job to offer you."

"I told you; I have a job lined up," Severus said, internally cursing himself for the shake in his voice. *Never show fear.*

Malfoy stepped back, his smile in place again. "It's not a full-time job, although it's an important one. You'll still have plenty of time to—work in your uncle's apothecary," he said with a patronizing sneer.

"What is it?" he spat.

"Do you know the boy who's the fifth-year prefect in Ravenclaw?"

Severus thought about this. *Fifth-year Ravenclaw prefect.* He pictured the boy now. "I don't really know him. I know what he looks like. Blond boy." It was a darker, yellower blond than Malfoy, who was white-blond. The Ravenclaw had hair the color of dirty straw.

"Yes. Do you know who his father is?" Severus shook his head. "Well, his father is a very important man. His father works very hard. He puts dark wizards in Azkaban. He's always working. And his son hates him for that, among other things. His son is just looking for a way to get back at his father. But he's only in fifth year; he's young, doesn't know any of the right people. That's where you come in."

"How?" He hadn't meant to show interest, but the word just popped out.

"You will get to know him, before school is out for the summer. Become his friend. Write letters to each other, invite him to visit you in Dunoon during holidays. I want you to become the big

brother he never had. A father figure, for a boy whose father has written him off. He needs someone like you, and you can be there for him. And you have time; it will be two years before he's done school. I expect by that time, he will be ready."

"Ready? For what?"

"For one of these." Malfoy pulled up his sleeve, showing Severus what Anderssen had been talking about: something that appeared to be a tattoo was on the pale skin there, the image of a skull with a snake for a long, eerie tongue. Severus drew in his breath between his teeth; he couldn't help it. Malfoy seemed glad that he'd impressed him. "You won't get yours until then, also. Don't want to tip off young Mr. Crouch too early. Until then you'll be strictly an unofficial Death Eater..."

Severus swallowed. *Had he said Crouch?* "Crouch? Do you mean—Barty Crouch's son?"

"Yes. Barty Crouch, Jr. We fully expect him to be very useful. But we need you to—cultivate him. Make him ripe for the picking. You have two years. Should be enough, don't you think?"

Severus' head was swimming. This couldn't be happening. "But—his father! If I approach Barty Crouch's son and suggest that he become a Death Eater, what makes you think he won't report me to his father?"

Malfoy smiled. "He won't. Not if you do your job and make him trust you completely. He's looking for a way to get back at his father as much as we are; and we've decided that using his own son will work very nicely."

Severus swallowed. There had to be a way out of this. "What if I refuse?"

Malfoy stepped toward him with his wand out now. "Then I will have to kill you. Fortunately, wands happen to be little pointy sticks made of wood," he said bringing it ominously close to Severus' heart, then pulling back. "Of course, I could just alter your memory, but that's no fun. You'd still be walking around. I thought that a dark creature like yourself would welcome the opportunity to serve the Dark Lord."

Severus Snape swallowed once, twice, never taking his eyes off Malfoy. "All right." He wasn't sure what he was doing, but suddenly, as soon as he said it, his voice no longer shook. He remembered hearing Lily saying that she was going to train to be an Auror. *That's what good little Gryffindors are supposed to do, aren't they? And what are Slytherins supposed to do? This, evidently.* He felt odd, like a purpose for his life had suddenly been restored to him, a purpose that had been missing since he'd ended it with Lily.

Malfoy removed a stoppered vial from a pocket in his robes. "Here," he said, tossing it to Severus, who caught it reflexively. He stared at the viscous red liquid inside, recognizing it, then looked back at Lucius Malfoy's face in disbelief. As his hand wrapped around the thin glass he could feel that it was still warm.

"A gift," Malfoy told him. He turned and walked out of the grove. Severus held the vial of blood, looking at it intently. *He really thinks I'm a vampire.* He looked up, but Malfoy was gone. *Well, let him believe I'm a dark creature. It will probably only be to my benefit.*

But as he walked back to the school, under the oaks, he felt like doing something violent, something destructive, and he gripped the vial in his hand tightly before throwing it so that it broke against one of the larger tree trunks, shattering, splattering the blood. He walked on, feeling only a small release from the violent action, wondering what someone would think of the blood-spattered tree when it was discovered, wondering whose blood it was....

I'm going to be a Death Eater, he thought. And Lily's going to be an Auror.

It was official. They were enemies. There was no turning back.

* * * * *

Saturday, 4 November, 1978

They were a happy group trooping back up to the castle; Charlie was bouncing along jauntily, bursting with his first Quidditch victory. As he walked along holding once of Peggy's hands and his father the other, Bill grinned at his brother. Charlie had been brilliant, swooping down on the Snitch before the Slytherin Seeker knew what was happening, and that was saying something, since Craighead was the most brilliant Seeker at the school. *Was, Bill thought smugly, remembering the shocked look on the third-year's face as Charlie looped around him, plucking the Snitch out of the air when the Slytherin's hand was only inches away from it.*

Amazingly, Annie seemed to be the most struck by her brother's Quidditch prowess. Although they were normally combatants in a war that had begun on the day she was born, today she had asked permission to carry his broom for him after the game, and Bill and his dad exchanged smiles over her head. Annie was clearly idolizing her brother, although she wasn't saying anything outright,

and Bill felt this boded well for the future. She would be a first year when Charlie was a fifth year and Bill was in his last year, and Bill was looking forward to it, three of them going to Hogwarts at the same time. The only thing that made him a bit sad was that he would be out of school by the time Peggy started, but he was glad that she would have Annie and Charlie to show her the ropes, and then she and Annie would be in fifth and seventh years when Percy started and could be *his* guides. Peggy and Percy would later help the twins, Fred and George.

Bill shook his head as he walked; his dad, holding Peggy's other hand so they could swing her between them every few steps, asked him why.

"Oh, I was just thinking about when Percy's ready to start school and Annie and Peggy can help him out, like Charlie and I can help Annie when she starts. It must be hard to come without having any brothers or sisters to show you the ropes."

Arthur Weasley smiled affectionately at his eldest son. "You did," he reminded him, as they swung Peggy over a puddle, making her whoop and giggle.

"Yeah, but I was lucky. On my first train ride, I was taken in by three prefects. I told you about two of them—James Potter and Lily Evans."

"Last year's Head Boy and Head Girl? Right, I remember. Well, that's what prefects are for, aren't they? Among other things...."

Bill squinted at his dad. "Were you a prefect, when you were in school?"

His father looked abashed and reddened slightly. "Actually, I was. I don't like to brag, but—"

Bill grinned at him. "You're allowed to brag to your kids, a little. Until we tell you to stop, anyway," Bill laughed.

Arthur regarded Bill fondly again; at nearly-fifteen, he was almost six feet tall, and if it weren't for his thin build he might routinely be taken for an older student. "I brag to Peggy all the time, don't I Pegs?"

She beamed up at her father, red braids flying as they swung her between them again. "It's not bragging if it's the truth, Daddy." She turned and looked up at Bill. "Daddy's the most brilliant wizard at the Ministry. He's going to be the Minister of Magic someday, you know."

Bill started to laugh, then remembered that this was *Peggy* saying this. Peggy who seemed to have the Sight. He sobered and looked down at her. "Really, Peg? You're sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," she said cheerfully. "I asked for it for my birthday present, on Wednesday, and Daddy promised he would do it someday, and Daddy doesn't break his promises."

"Ooooh," Bill said in understanding. It wasn't one of those things she'd Seen; it was a promise from their dad. "Well, then I'm sure he shall be Minister of Magic, as he's made you a birthday promise. How does it feel to be six?"

"It feels like more swinging!" she crowed, leaping into the air between them and trusting that they would pull up on her arms and prevent her from winding up in her knees in the mud that inevitably marked the path from the Quidditch pitch back to the castle at this time of year. They didn't disappoint her, and she was once more suspended between her father and brother, laughing merrily.

Charlie caught up with them and was walking beside his brother now. "Too bad Mum couldn't come," he said. Bill saw that he was disappointed about this, although he was putting a good face on it. Bill knew he'd worried about coming to school last year and leaving Mum to manage without him to help keep the younger children in order. Although he didn't always take well to caretaker duties—hence his rows with Annie—he didn't like the idea of their mum being more burdened.

Their dad sighed. "She wanted to, but your Aunt Meg was invited to a wedding and couldn't baby-sit for Percy and the twins, and you know how she is—she doesn't really trust anyone else. I suggested she bring the younger boys, but she said she'd just be managing them the entire time, trying to keep them quiet, and she was probably right."

He grinned at Charlie, trying to comfort him, and Charlie gave him a grateful half-smile. "'S'okay, Dad. I understand."

"Tell you what; next time I'll take care of all five younger kids and let you mum come see you play. And then she can have a nice visit with her two older boys here, without any babies to fret over. Won't that be nice?"

"Without *us*?" Peggy said in real distress. Her father gave her a slightly stern look.

"Mum needs a break every so often, Peggy. It's not nice to begrudge her that."

Properly chastised, Peggy looked down at her muddy boots as she walked and mumbled, "Yes, Daddy."

Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew walked along behind the Weasleys, trying to find the least-muddy places to put their feet. Remus dug his hands deep into his pockets and breathed in deeply

the autumnal scent of Hogwarts. It was so strange to be back here and not a student; he'd been rather at loose ends since they'd finished school in June, and was still living at home with his parents. He'd answered a few advertisements in the *Daily Prophet*, but no one had hired him. He didn't have a very good plan for what to do, not like James and Lily. He couldn't believe that Lily was off training to be an Auror; it seemed like such an adult thing to do. He'd been very supportive of her and James' relationship since February, but there were still times—especially before the full moon—when he still ached for her, and not just physically.

James had tried talking to him about it once, but Remus had put him off, telling him that he was very happy for them and not to worry about him. James had looked like he was feeling a bit guilty, as though he'd stolen Lily from him. Remus had found out why James was being like this when, on their last morning at Hogwarts, before getting the train home, James announced that he had asked Lily to marry him and she had accepted. Sirius had hugged them both enthusiastically, and Remus had shaken James' hand and tentatively hugged Lily, ever mindful of his werewolf strength. She had looked in his eyes searchingly and said softly, "*Are you all right, Remus?*"

The idea that she was worried about him made his heart turn over. He'd nodded through his unshed tears and told her that he was looking forward to their wedding. However, since James was playing for England until the end of the summer, and after that he was going to be trying for a position with a team in the League, and since Lily was going to be off doing something mysterious from September to January, they weren't going to be having the wedding until the following June. Lily in particular looked very relieved about this.

"A whole year to plan!" she said. "Mum and I will need it."

Sirius was as aimless as Remus, also still living with his parents, but to Remus' knowledge he hadn't even tried to apply for any jobs, as Remus had. Still, for some reason, when Peter had come by asking whether he wanted to come to Hogwarts for the first Gryffindor game and Remus had asked Sirius to join them, Sirius had declined, pleading a prior commitment. Remus had thought this very odd; what prior commitment could Sirius possibly have on a Saturday morning? But then Remus thought about Sirius' dating habits in school, and assumed it must be a girl. So that left him stuck with just Peter for company.

He glanced sideways at Peter, whose mother had gotten him a job at the *Prophet*, in the research-and-fact-checking department. He spent his days sending owls to people to verify quotes, or correcting the spelling of names with the wave of a wand. It was fairly undemanding work, and Remus had almost been tempted to ask whether there was another opening, but the idea of doing the same thing as Peter was slightly depressing, and he decided that he'd rather say he just hadn't found the right job for him yet.

"You sure we should go back to the castle for lunch, instead of going to the pub in the village?" Remus asked Peter. Peter shrugged.

"I only suggested it because I didn't think you had much in the way of money. We won't be trying to sit at the Gryffindor table or anything; I thought we'd just nip down to the kitchens and see what the house-elves would like to part with. You know how they are."

Remus nodded; it was never a chore to get food from the elves, and he *was* rather short of funds. He put his gloved hand in his pocket and felt the five Sickles there, all he had in the world until his father gave him his allowance on Monday. *Allowance.*

I'm eighteen years old, I've had seven years of magical education, and I'm living with my mum and dad and getting an allowance.

"Yeah, I know how the elves are," he answered Peter, unable to not notice the slightly smug expression on Peter's face. *He knows I can't afford to go to a pub and have a nice meal any time I like.*

He thought of the Hogwarts meals he'd enjoyed for seven years, then tried to forget about them again as his stomach moved within him. He hadn't had breakfast and was looking forward to a good lunch. He was especially hungry because the moon would be rising full that night; he wasn't going through the sexual mania, though, because he'd discovered a werewolf pub in North Yorkshire where he had traveled the night before (and used up some Muggle money he'd converted from wizarding currency), and met up with a girl there who was also a werewolf. She was a Muggle, as were most of the pub's patrons. He hadn't told her he was also a wizard.

She had helped him ease his carnal desires as he had helped her with hers, but there had been a middle-aged man across the room who had been giving Remus this *look*, and he'd almost abandoned her for the older man. He'd never known this was a possibility before, a pub like this, and was very, very grateful that he had a way of being around people just before the full moon now. Otherwise, he would have told Peter to go to the match alone; there was no way he could have withstood sitting with the other spectators, watching the match, if he hadn't had a sexual release with Luna, the

night before.

He'd asked her whether that was her real name, and she'd said, "Of course not! It's my werewolf name. I'd never tell anyone here my real name. What's your werewolf name?"

"Erm," he'd stuttered, "Remus Lupin." She'd snorted into her drink.

"How original. You know how many Remuses there are in this place tonight? Of course, there's a load of Lunas, too...."

But then the conversation had been cut short and they'd gone up the stairs to one of the rooms set aside for this particular purpose, not caring about names any more, not caring about anything but their physical needs....

It made sense, when Remus thought about it. He didn't need to worry as much about hurting another werewolf, someone who was as strong as he was. But he'd felt a bit lonely and empty, lying in the grotty bed afterward (who knew the last time the sheets had been washed?) thinking of the first time he'd been with Lily. In spite of biting her, there had been a different feeling about the whole encounter. She was his friend, she'd had feelings for him, and she didn't run off afterward. She didn't give a false name and laugh at his *real* name. He hadn't been able to continue this train of thought, however, as some other couple was pounding on the door, waiting (but not patiently) to use the same room.

Remus smiled at Peter, glad that he'd been able to come to the match; he particularly missed the three of them hanging about with him during the full moon, and wasn't sure how to contact them and say, "You know how you all became Animagi to be with me...well, can we keep that up even though we're out of school?" Now that they weren't living with him, the three of them seemed to have forgotten about him. Once, during the summer, James and Sirius had invited him to visit them at Ascog, but it was a pure coincidence that it fell during the full moon.

They finally reached the entrance hall; there weren't many other students coming down to lunch yet, as it was early. Nonetheless, Remus' nose was already picking up on the heavenly aromas emanating from the kitchens, thinking of the willing elves who would give them as much food as they wanted.

The only other people in the hall were the Weasleys and—Remus felt like rubbing his eyes—Professor Trelawney, who was coming down the marble stairs, staring eerily at Bill Weasley's youngest sister. Soon Trelawney was crouching before the girl, whose hair was as red as her brothers' and father's, and the girl looked transfixed, staring back, as though she couldn't tear her eyes away if she'd tried.

Bill frowned; he hated Trelawney and hadn't thought about what might happen if Peggy came to visit him at school. It certainly never occurred to him that Trelawney would come down out of her tower. She *never* did that.

But now, crouching before the six-year-old girl, her large owlish eyes magnified by her ridiculous glasses, she whispered mistily, "*I could feel that you were here.*"

As though this was some kind of trigger, Peggy froze and then, still staring, started to speak in a strange voice that did not sound like it was coming from her:

"In days to come the Dark Lord's fall is split by silver into gold. A triangle, each time, his bane.

"One corner is a lion tall, of good intent, named for the coal; twice hidden, both a beast and man.

"One corner comes from blood of yore, child of the silver moon so cold; Dark Lord's servant and lion's mate.

"Last comes a flame-haired daughter of war, caught between silver and the gold; one of two and one of many.

"The lion loves the daughter bright, as does the child of silver moon; but the Dark Lord's servant shall betray.

"What though they flee before their fate, three shall bring forth the days of doom, and love shall end the Dark Lord's reign."

On the last word, Peggy collapsed in a heap on the stone floor.

The Moonchild

Saturday, 4 November, 1978

Bill and his father were at Peggy's side in a trice, while Annie and Charlie backed up in fear. Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew pressed themselves against the wall, glancing at each other every so often. Remus didn't know what to think. He saw that Peter was pale as parchment, and he was visibly shaking. Yes, thought Remus; it *was* a disturbing thing to see a child go into a trance like that and start speaking so strangely. But Peter looked positively petrified.

Child of the silver moon so cold....

Is she talking about me? both Remus and Peter wondered, afraid to speak, eyeing each other warily.

Remus thought of one of the people he'd met at the werewolf pub, a man who used "Moonchild" for his werewolf name. For obvious reasons. *What has just happened here?* Remus wondered. The fact that the girl had mentioned the moon repeatedly was making his blood run cold; he felt as though everyone in the hall knew he was a werewolf. *Did the girl know, somehow?* Had she been talking about *him*?

Peter watched Mr. Weasley scoop his daughter up into his arms and carry her up the marble stairs, his brow knit with worry. The other children followed. Peter heard the voice echoing in his head again:

The lion loves the daughter bright, as does the child of silver moon....

He glanced at Remus, wishing he could read his mind. *Why does he look like that?* Peter wondered.

Remus assumed Mr. Weasley was taking the girl to the hospital wing. Trelawney was still in the entrance hall, standing transfixed at the foot of the stairs, watching the Weasleys go. Then she seemed to be staring into space, moving her lips soundlessly, and Remus panicked and thought she might be trying to jinx them, even though she wasn't looking at them, so he grabbed Peter's arm and pulled him outdoors again. Peter didn't seem to want to go; he struggled against him, but Remus' strength gave him no choice but to go along.

"What do you reckon *that* was all about?" Remus said to Peter when they were outside the castle doors again. Peter looked back, and Remus saw again the clear terror in his gaze.

For his part, Peter wondered what Remus' expression could possibly mean. *No, Remus couldn't know about the dreams*, he thought. Peter hadn't told anyone. *But—what if some werewolf sense he has is telling him—something about me?*

The two young men looked at each other as though they were strangers, as though they hadn't lived in the same dorm for seven years.

Is he afraid of me? Remus wondered.

Does he suspect me? Peter worried.

Remus tried not to dwell on the moon references in what the girl had said, but the words kept coming back to him.

"I d-don't know what that was about," Peter stuttered. "Is the girl—a Seer?" His voice sounded oddly high-pitched to Remus.

Remus shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. "I never heard Weasley mention it. She might be. If that's what I *think* it was." Peter nodded absently, not looking at Remus. "I reckon," Remus said, "we should just be going back to the village for lunch...." He thought of his meager funds again. But suddenly, he wanted to get as far as he could from the castle. It no longer felt like a place of shelter and refuge for him, apart from the free food they could possibly get from the house elves....

Peter didn't seem to be paying any attention to him; he continued to stare at the castle doors. "Yeah, fine. See you." He started to move back toward the doors.

"Where are you going?" Remus said, trying to waken him from his trance. Peter looked blankly at him.

"Visiting with McGonagall," he said after a moment's hesitation. "See you tomorrow..."

Remus nodded, frowning. That didn't make any sense; Peter had never been particularly close to McGonagall in school. Until he finally mastered the Animagus Transfiguration, she had been rather hard on him at times, too. After that, being able to transfigure himself into a rat at will had given him a measure of confidence in her class that he'd lacked before, and he improved greatly. Still, he wasn't as quick as James and Sirius, and his transfigurations generally lacked Remus' artistic flair (he prided himself on that). *What's he going to talk to McGonagall about?* he wondered, hearing the girl's words in his mind again.

Remus walked back to the village, carrying his gloves in his left hand and putting his right hand back in his pocket with his money; he immediately pulled it hand out when the silver Sickles burnt his bare fingers, and put his gloves on again, sighing. *Why* did wizards have to continue to use *real* silver for their money? he thought irritably. As it was, the wizarding idea of how to manage werewolves involved locking them up in cells at the Ministry during the full moon; he was due to turn up at the Ministry at three o'clock, so there'd be no risk of his being out after the sun set and the moon rose. He sighed, longing for the days when he could roam free with his best friends. Unfortunately, they were too busy for him now, and he had to do this instead...

* * * * *

Peter hesitated before opening the heavy oaken door again; it had been over a week since he'd last had one of the dreams, but they were all very, very vivid in his mind. They had started near the end of the summer term, when he'd been preparing for his N.E.W.T.s. He hadn't been sleeping very much; Lily had the five of them working constantly on revision for the tests. He was certain that if it wasn't for her, he would have greatly disappointed his mother. As it was, he had the lowest marks of the five of them, but among the seventh years in general, his marks were perfectly respectable and he in fact had the tenth-best marks in the year.

When he had managed to sleep during this time, he found himself falling immediately into his dreams without having to be unconscious for a long time. And while the dreams started off as the standard test-panic variety (falling asleep and missing all of the N.E.W.T.s, for instance, or sitting down to take them and discovering that he'd learnt all the wrong things or that the questions were all in Russian), they gradually evolved into other types of dreams.

In one, he stood in a circle of tall, dark hooded figures while a taller, dark hooded figure addressed him in a hypnotic voice.

"*We have here—the Moonchild.*"

And the hooded figures all repeated, as though in a trance, *Moonchild moonchild moonchild moonchild.*

Then a pain greater than any he'd ever known pressed itself into his left arm, making him awake, gasping, holding his left arm with his right hand.

His arm ached all day after that.

Another recurring dream wasn't much better: He was at a funeral, and approaching the casket in a long line of mourners. When he finally reached the casket, he learned whom the funeral was for.

He tried to back away, but something was drawing him on. He saw in horror the way her long red hair was spread out over the pink satin pillow slip, the way her long, thin white fingers were closed over the stem of a single white lily on her breast. He felt the tears cascading down his cheeks as he looked and looked at her, and then felt as though his heart were going to leap from his own chest as she suddenly sat up and opened her eyes, which were no longer green but solid orbs of obsidian. She opened her mouth to speak, but it was his own voice that he heard coming from her.

Why, Peter? Why?

That was even worse than the other; each time he had that one, he awoke screaming. Sometimes there were variations on the two, such as a dream where the two dreams seemed to be overlapping. Sometimes the church in which the funeral was taking place had no other mourners, just a hall of chairs arranged in neat rows before the casket; each row was roped off and bore a sign on the rope saying, *No Moonchildren.* He found himself going from row to row, working his way toward the front, looking for one that said *Moonchild.* Except that once he was near the front again, she sat up with those dark eyes and asked him again, *Why, Peter? Why?*

He didn't know what any of it meant. After James and Lily had announced their engagement,

he'd thought that it had something to do with anxiety about that, perhaps. And though the dreams had started before their engagement, he might simply have been anticipating it. But there were other odd things; wouldn't he be imagining *James* dead if that were the reason for the dreams? he wondered. Unless—he felt that Lily was as out of reach to him now as though she were dead. That must be it, he reasoned. But why was she asking him *why*? And what was the circle of dark, hooded figures? Why was he being called Moonchild there, and at the dream-funeral, and why did his arm hurt?

He had arrived home from his final year in school on the day before his eighteenth birthday; he'd had a different dream that night, a dream where a tall red-haired woman whose face he could not see was leading him through corridor after misty corridor, saying, "*We're almost there, Peter, we'll be there soon.*" And he followed along, trying to jog a little to catch up with her, so he could see her face. It was frustrating, because no matter what he did, he could not glimpse her visage. Finally, she approached a door; before opening it, she said to him, "*Do you know who is in the ninth circle? For whom the ninth circle is reserved?*" She opened the door and a fiery blast seemed to emanate from it, and before he could stop her, he felt her hand reach out and grab him, hurling him through the open door, into the furnace.

As he fell, screaming, "*Lil-eeeeeeee,*" he saw that the red-haired guide was a skeleton, and as he slowly descended, the bones collapsed into a heap, and he awoke in his bed, sweaty sheets wrapped around him...

His hand fell from the door handle; he couldn't bring himself to enter, to find out what was happening. Instead, he ran down the castle steps again and round to the Quidditch pitch once more. It was deserted, and he was relieved to see no one. He pushed on, to the forest, the forest he'd learned about so intimately when he was a student. After he'd gone in far enough that he knew no one outside the stand of trees could see him, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the change, wincing at the pain, feeling himself become small and furry, feeling the long pink tail trail out behind him. He could feel the whiskers quivering on the tip of his pointed nose, and his animal's instincts pricked up, telling him whether he needed to fear any predators, or whether any choice morsels of food might be nearby.

Unfortunately, there was no escaping the echoes of his dreams; although he was in a different form, the words still rang through his mind...

Moonchild moonchild moonchild moonchild.

And then his ears and another, more primal, animal sense pricked up, and he sat in the shadow of a log, very, very still. He listened intently for he knew not how many minutes as two creatures drew nearer. They were not *very* near to him, but they weren't far enough away for his comfort, either. He raised his eyes tentatively, seeing two Centaurs stepping into a clearing about twenty feet ahead of him. *Centaur!* James had said he'd seen Centaurs in the forest, but Peter had never been swift enough to see what James and Sirius had seen; a stag and a large dog do not have such small legs, so many steps necessary to cover even a small distance. They had the advantage of long, swift strides. James could leap and run even faster than Sirius when he was in his Animagus form. But an advantage that Peter *did* have was his *size*; he could be still and unobtrusive and blend into the background, unnoticed. At least, he hoped he could blend in, that he hadn't been noticed. He tried not to shake with fear as he watched the Centaurs from his hiding place.

One was nodding at the other. "It has occurred," he was saying. "What we have seen in the stars is now known by men."

The other Centaur shook his head. "No; they will not know what it means. They do not know how to read the signs, even when they are right before them."

"That is not our concern; we merely observe the affairs of men."

"The events foretold will affect all, eventually," the other Centaur cautioned him.

"We will think on that when it is time," the first Centaur informed him, before marching off haughtily. The other Centaur turned and started to walk off in the other direction, but turned his head suddenly.

He's looking right at me! Peter thought in panic. *Do Centaurs know when humans are in animal form?* He felt frozen, unsure of what he should do if he was discovered.

But the Centaur blinked and turned away from him again, galloping back through the trees, the hoofbeats receding with distance until even the echo had finally faded and the forest was very quiet.

The Centaurs gave Peter an odd feeling; he didn't have any doubt that they were speaking of what the girl had said. They had ways of knowing things, Centaurs did. No one understood it, but they just did. *She's a Seer*, he thought. There could be no doubt. And what she'd said...it must have been a prophecy, something that the Centaurs had already seen in the stars. He didn't like the Centaurs, he'd decided; he wasn't sure whether they were friends, foes, or amused spectators

who would look on humans being killed as a kind of entertainment. Peter ran out of the forest again but did not change from his rat form. Remembering that he hadn't eaten, he scurried back to the castle, and found a chink that he remembered between two large stones in the foundation; pushing through, he found that he was still able to get into the castle this way, as he had many times before. He was in a dungeon corridor, high up, and he gathered his courage to leap to the floor, his small rat's heart beating even more rapidly than usual.

He found his way to the kitchens, remembering a shortcut he'd discovered when in his rat form before. He knew of even more secret passages than his mates because of his ability to travel through the castle this way. When he finally reached the kitchens, he turned up his nose at the food baiting the rat traps that sat under the large stone sinks along one wall, under windows that looked out upon the extensive grounds; he found his way down to the root cellar and located a nice potato; this small amount of food was oddly satisfying when he was a rat.

They can't get me here, he thought, chewing his potato with satisfaction. *The dark, hooded men can't get me here. I'll be safe.*

He still couldn't get over the feeling that the little girl, Weasley's sister, had been speaking directly to him, telling him his fate, his destiny. *No*, he thought stubbornly. He wasn't a brilliant Quidditch player like James, nor an Auror, which Lily would be when she completed her training. He wasn't popular like Sirius (especially with women) nor a stronger-than-human werewolf like Remus. He was just Peter; ordinary Peter. The only thing that had made him special before was being one of the Marauders. He was the friend of James, Sirius and Remus—they'd included *him*. He'd longed *always* to be *extraordinary* on his own merits, but had never thought what the cost might be. Now he knew. Now he knew....

He would find a way to write to his mother in the morning, tell her he was safe and well-fed, but would not be home for a while. It shouldn't be too difficult to get his hands on some parchment and a quill, and take a letter up to the Owlery. He would also send a letter to the *Prophet*, resigning from his job.

I'm not what she said I was, he insisted to himself, remembering the dream. *This is not how I want to be extraordinary....*

He heard her voice again, the red-haired woman in his dream:

"Do you know who is in the ninth circle?"

Peter knew.

He tried not to think about it, but instead chewed his potato and looked around him at a few other rats who were scuttling about, who would help him blend in. He felt safe and sheltered, and thought that if he stayed here, as a rat, the world was far more likely to be safe and sheltered from *him*, as well.

And so he hid in the depths of Hogwarts, and watched and waited.

* * * * *

Bill stood next to Peggy's bed, biting the inside of his cheek with worry, until he had a welt that would bother him for more than a week. He looked at the door to Madam Pomfrey's office, where his father was speaking to the matron. Bill reached into the bowl on the table beside her bed and withdrew a warm cloth, wringing it out before placing it gently on Peggy's forehead. On the other side of the bed Charlie and Annie stood, looking anxious, and now Bill noticed that Annie had reached for Charlie's hand as they looked at their sister, and Charlie grasped it, looking down at her, trying to send some reassurance her way.

The three of them had been looking at each other somewhat guiltily since Peggy had been brought into the infirmary by their father; all of them had seen evidence of Peggy's unusual gifts at some time or another. None of them had said anything to an adult about it. Now the feeling of guilt permeating the room was almost palpable. But what *should* we have done? Bill wondered. *Oh, Mum and Dad, by the way, I think Peggy has the Sight. Can I have a new broomstick?* How did one talk about this sort of thing?

Suddenly, the door leading out to the corridor opened and the last person Bill wanted to see entered: Professor Trelawney. He tried not to scowl, but it was difficult; somehow, he felt that her being in the entrance hall triggered something in Peggy and caused her to have the fit. He tried not to think about what Peggy had said; it was the ranting of a little girl, surely? But he had a strange feeling at the back of his mind, a feeling that that was just wishful thinking. And now—Trelawney.

"Where is she?" Trelawney said, coming into the room with her wispy robes floating around her like dozens of scarves. Considering that the rest of the infirmary was empty, Bill thought this a remarkably stupid question. Peggy was the only patient, and he, Charlie and Annie were standing around her bed. How hard was this to figure out?

But Trelawney clearly didn't think her question was daft; she seemed to *glide* over to Peggy's bed, and stood at the foot, looking down at her, a small touch of resentment in her expression. It seemed to Bill that she was fighting to hide this. He was startled when the door to the office opened and his father emerged; Madam Pomfrey did not.

His dad looked startled to see Professor Trelawney, and he stopped dead. She ignored the fact that he looked less than thrilled to see her.

"You are the girl's father, I assume?" she said in her misty voice. He nodded, surveying her suspiciously. "I am Sibyll Trelawney, professor of Divination. Since you are her father, I need to speak with you on a quite urgent matter. Privately," she added, glancing at the three of them still standing about Peggy's bed.

Bill looked at Peggy, whose expression when she was regarding Professor Trelawney wasn't any friendlier than Trelawney's when she'd been looking at the six-year-old. All Bill could think was, *This is really weird.*

Arthur Weasley looked imperiously at the woman with the owlish eyes and misty voice. "Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of all of my children. The ones who are here, at any rate. Can you—can you tell me anything about what happened to my daughter downstairs?"

"Yes," she said immediately. "Your daughter went into a trance and gave a Prophecy. It mentioned the fall of the Dark Lord, so I suspect that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named will know of it before long. That is why I need to speak to you in private."

Bill's father looked very alarmed. "What?" he said simply, staring at the strange woman in disbelief.

"What do you know about the Emperor Tiberius?" she said suddenly. Bill noticed his father swallow, remembering. Thanks to his dad, Bill knew all about this too, and he recalled how it was considered to be treason for a fortune-teller to predict the death of the emperor. Would You-Know-Who be the same way? Was he going to try to kill Peggy now? He put his hand over the warm cloth on her brow and looked down at her little face, seeing the fear behind the clear blue eyes. She looked up at him with love and trust, and Bill's heart felt like it had been put in a vise; she trusted him, her big brother, as she trusted Charlie and their mum and dad, and probably even Annie. But who were *they*? How could they stand up to a great dark wizard if he really wanted to get at Peggy?

His father nodded at Trelawney, and she went on. "He takes prophecies concerning him very seriously indeed. Your daughter could be in great danger if he learns that she has done this. I don't believe that the Prophecy itself can be kept secret—I was unable to see who all was in the entrance hall and who left immediately afterward. But there *is* a way to—*deflect* attention from your daughter..."

Arthur Weasley suddenly didn't care anymore that his son called this woman the biggest crackpot in the school; he was willing to entertain any suggestions she might have for keeping Peggy safe. He looked at her very alertly. "I will take credit for giving the Prophecy," she went on, lifting her chin, eyes glittering behind the large lenses. "Using some self-hypnosis I will be able to recall what she said and reproduce it precisely. None of these children here will tell anyone what really happened, and in fact, your sons will need to propagate the rumor that I am the one who gave the Prophecy."

Bill looked at his father, surprised to see him looking back, as though soliciting his opinion on this. Bill swallowed; he was almost fifteen, but this was a level of responsibility he wasn't sure he was ready for. He widened his eyes while looking at his father and gave a very small shrug, as though to say *What's the harm?* If Voldemort was likely to target whoever gave the Prophecy—why not say it was Trelawney?

Bill wondered whether she had an ulterior motive, though. She had a terrible reputation as a fraud; perhaps she thought the Prophecy had a good chance of being true, and hoped to finally take credit for doing something right. Bill glanced down at Peggy again, thinking that it might not be such a bad thing to help Trelawney feed her ego if it meant Peggy would be safe.

"We'll all say it was you who did it, Professor," Bill said now, looking at her, hoping she thought his expression was deferential. She nodded to him.

"Very good. It's for the best. But still—" She looked at Peggy, and her eyes widened. "Keep an eye on her," she finished ominously. Bill shivered; even though Trelawney was inordinately fond of predicting her students' deaths (and loved it when they predicted their own) this had a different feel to it. Peggy probably really *was* at risk if anyone ever found out that she'd given the Prophecy.

"And I'll write to the others who were in the entrance hall," Bill added. "There weren't that many people besides us. Just two, and I know them both. They were seventh years in Gryffindor last term. I'll take care of it. I'm sure they'll understand why—why no one can know about Peggy."

Arthur Weasley looked at his eldest son; he felt very old suddenly, and Bill wasn't helping, appearing so mature and responsible. At the same time, his heart swelled with pride, seeing what

a fine young man his eldest son had become. He worried sometimes, when his job took him into dangerous situations. More and more, when he and Perkins had gone on raids, they encountered rather belligerent witches and wizards, more than one of whom seemed to be connected to You-Know-Who. He worried about how Molly would manage if anything happened to him, but seeing Bill standing by Peggy's bedside made him feel for the first time that there was someone to step in and help Molly should the worst happen. He turned to face Pomfrey's office door, wiping an errant tear from his eye as he did so, knowing that Bill would be dreadfully embarrassed if he knew his dad was tearing up because he was proud of him.

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey emerged from the office and stopped short when she saw Trelawney standing near Peggy's bed.

"Sibyll," she said shortly, her lips pursed. *It's official*, Bill thought, trying very hard not to smile. *No one around here likes her. That must be why she never comes downstairs.*

Trelawney nodded to the matron. "Poppy," she said quickly, snipping it off; it was the least-misty thing Bill had ever heard her say. The enmity was mutual.

Pomfrey crossed her arms. "Forgive me, Sibyll, but I'm not overly fond of having a guest in my infirmary whose favorite pastime is predicting others' deaths. I have a patient to tend to, so if you don't mind..."

Trelawney narrowed her eyes at Madam Pomfrey, but said nothing, just turned on her heel and left. She no longer seemed to glide; every slapping footstep sounded to Bill like a seal's tail on water. When she was gone, it was as though the room had been infused with a fresh supply of oxygen, and they all breathed easier.

Bill looked down at Peggy again, refreshing the warm cloth on her brow. All that mattered was that she would be safe. He didn't care if Trelawney puffed herself up or if Voldemort came after their Divination professor. For a moment, *knowing* that he didn't care what happened to Trelawney frightened him, and he felt a flicker of doubt.... He was glad that no one would know about Peggy, though. He reckoned that was how the Death Eaters operated; you might do anything to protect someone you loved, so they would discover who mattered to you and threaten them....

In his case, he hoped he never attracted the attention of the Death Eaters, as there were far too many people who mattered to him, mostly in his own family. If someone came after Trelawney—well, it had been her idea to take credit for the Prophecy, no one else's. It was her own lookout, or perhaps Professor Dumbledore's, as her headmaster. But certainly *his* conscience was clear. His obligation was to his family and friends. He would do whatever was necessary to protect them. *Whatever* was necessary.

If I have to strike a deal with the devil to protect Peggy, he thought, picturing Professor Trelawney with a pair of horns; *then strike a deal with the devil I will.*

* * * * *

Saturday, 23 December, 1978

Remus rolled over groggily and found that his hand didn't come into contact with another person, as he'd expected. His head on the pillow, he looked up, finding his companion of the night before on the other side of the room, buttoning robes, brushing them down fastidiously, making Remus smile. Those beautiful brown eyes then met Remus' before looking down and away, and a flush colored the skin below the eyes. Remus thought the shyness, even after they'd just spent the night together, was adorable. Until this relationship, he'd never slept with anyone when it wasn't the eve of the full moon, (he'd never had a real relationship, for that matter) and he had learned that that wasn't the only time he desired men. He also learned that he wasn't as strong and aggressive during sex when it wasn't the eve of the full moon, that he was capable of being a gentle and considerate lover, that his partner didn't always have to end up bitten and bleeding, or with broken limbs.

He could hardly believe how his life had changed in less than two months. After he'd fled Hogwarts on the day of the Quidditch match, he'd gone back to London through the Floo network, hoping he could cadge a little money from Old Tom, at the Leaky Cauldron, or at least convince him to extend him a little credit. However, when he arrived, the pub had been strangely full and boisterous, as the Wimbourne Wasps were celebrating another Quidditch victory there, with Ludo Bagman, their famous Beater, the center of attention.

Bagman was effusive, buying round after round for everyone in the house, and food too, so that Remus needed neither credit nor a loan. He sat at a corner table, trying to deny the envy gnawing away at him as he watched Bagman at the bar, bragging about the way he'd hit a Bludger right at the opposing team's Seeker as he was poised to catch the Snitch, which meant that the Wasps' Seeker had been able to swoop in and grab it instead, while the other Seeker plummeted to the ground.

"Be in hospital a good month, he will!" one of Bagman's teammates crowed, slapping Bagman on his yellow and black striped back. Remus shook his head as he drank his stout; he wasn't above getting a free drink—and a meat pie—from a braggart, but he couldn't believe the other Wasps being so cavalier about the other Seeker's injuries. It was the nature of Quidditch that people were injured by Bludgers, and that it was the *job* of the Beaters to hit the Bludgers at people. (When Remus thought about it, he realized that this amounted to a kind of legal foul, and thought it ironic that something that could kill you if done just right was legal, whereas an elbow in the ribs was not.) It was a built-in danger, part of the territory if you played Quidditch. Bagman had been doing his job and doing it well. Because of him, Remus had some stout to help take the edge off the panic he'd felt when Weasley's little sister had said *child of the moon*...

Suddenly, through the crowd, Remus had seen a face looking back at him, a familiar face. The other face smirked; a hand raised a glass to Remus. Remus nodded and continued to gaze at the familiar face, trying to place it.

Hufflepuff, he finally decided. *Our year. Twin sister is a Slytherin.*

That was it. He was one of the two stranger people in their year: Emil Gaillard. His twin sister, Claudine, was one of the Slytherin girls who'd made Lily think she was her friend. But Remus had always liked Emil; they'd worked together in Herbology sometimes, and Remus found himself strangely transfixed now by the other young man's waving dark hair, his ironic, very Gallic smile, his shining dark eyes.

Suddenly, Remus realized that the other young man had risen from his chair and was making his way across the room, stepping cautiously around the various celebrating members of the Wimbourne team, until he was standing at Remus' table, looking down at him.

"Remus Lupin, right?" he'd asked cheerfully. He too was the beneficiary of Bagman's largesse, so it stood to reason he'd be in good spirits about the free food and drink. The Gaillards, despite their name, had no French accents, as they had grown up in England. Remus caught his breath; he remembered feeling oddly mesmerized by Gaillard when he was in school, especially before the full moon. Remus wasn't certain why he suddenly found the young man so compelling all over again. It could have been the nearness of the full moon, or the fact that Emil had a slight shadow on his face, as though he hadn't shaved that day, which gave him a slightly feral appearance whose appeal Remus couldn't deny.

Whatever the reason, Remus suddenly found himself feeling a bit flustered, realizing that the odds that Emil would be interested in him were astronomical (*Not that I want him to be.*), and that he'd probably only walked across to him to be polite. There was also the fact that Remus was clearly just about the only option a person in the Leaky Cauldron had if they didn't want to have a conversation about how wonderful the Wimbourne Wasps were, and Ludo Bagman in particular. Everyone else in the pub was rather single-mindedly worshipping the victorious team and its star Beater. Remus decided not to mention that one of his best friends, James Potter, had been on the English team that had lost the World Cup just a few months earlier.

"Right. And you are—don't tell me—" Remus said, even though he remembered. He didn't want to seem too eager. *If he was interested in me, what would I do? Probably die of shock.*

"Emil Gaillard," he said, grinning and holding out his hand. Remus shook it while trying not to melt into a puddle under his chair. *Damn, he thought. Dimples. Forgot about them. Stop grinning already and get rid of those dimples!*

But Gaillard had not stopped grinning. He waved his glass at the assembled revelers, saying, "Do you believe this? You'd think they had won the World Cup, or done something that was actually *important*.." He seemed unconcerned about a Wimbourne supporter hearing him and accusing him of blasphemy. If he didn't have his werewolf hearing, Remus would have had to strain to hear him over the noisy crowd. Taking a deep breath, Remus waved his hand as casually as possible at a chair next to his.

"Join me?"

"Thanks," Emil said briefly, putting down his glass and pulling out the chair. When he was seated, he took another sip of his drink and then looked at Remus.

"You look all right. In school you used to look tired quite a lot. What're you doing these days?"

I'm busy denying that I'm in a prophecy concerning the biggest dark wizard bastard to come along in thirty-odd years. You?

Remus shook himself, irritated, trying to get the girl out of his head. He thought Emil was probably referring to the fact that he was remarkably calm for once, despite the full moon coming in a matter of hours. He knew that he was relaxed because of Luna and the outlet she'd given him. That and the stout. But suddenly, sitting next to Emil, knowing that if he moved his leg a mere six inches to the left he'd bump the other man's leg, he wondered what would have happened if he'd

gone off with the man he'd seen eyeing him from the end of the bar at the werewolf pub....

"Not much. Still looking for work. You?"

"Ministry hack, of course. Thanks to my dad. Pushing a lot of papers about. Counting blades of grass is probably more stimulating," he laughed, taking a swig of his drink. Remus fought down a cough and also took a drink; somehow the word "stimulating" had had a stimulating effect on *him*, and he felt acutely embarrassed now.

"Erm, sorry. I think I'd rather be a Ministry hack than jobless. Maybe something will open up in another department and you can transfer. Where are you now?"

He sighed. "International Magical Cooperation."

"Ah," Remus said, having no idea what working in that department would entail, so he couldn't even think of any halfway intelligent questions to ask about it. "Do you ever see anyone from other departments?"

"Sure. Especially in the commissary. But everyone knows everyone else, and even my dad says he can't spend all day introducing me to everyone he knows, so when I go to lunch, I'm alone in this room full of people talking to each other, all of these conversations I can't join. It's a mess. *I'm* a mess, and I feel completely stupid and useless." He sighed. "Sorry. Didn't mean to lay this on you. Tell you what—if I hear of any openings at the Ministry, I'll owl you, all right? Since you're looking for work." He stopped and laughed. "Now that I've made it sound so appealing and all."

Remus laughed now too; Emil was engaging and funny and attractive and *oh hell, what do you think you're doing? Most women would kill to have him ask them out; he'd never go for blokes in a million years.* I don't go for blokes either, Remus reminded himself abruptly. And then, *Not usually.* Followed by: *Do I?*

He felt very confused suddenly; when he'd been attracted to boys before, it was always during his pre-full-moon mania. Or so he'd told himself. Now that being with Luna had calmed him down, his attraction to men should have waned. Shouldn't it? He looked at the young man sitting with him, drinking his stout with a smile, and then he realized that Emil had put his heavy glass down and that they were looking in each other's eyes intently. The other man wasn't looking away.

Oh my god, Remus thought. I must be dreaming....

Emil swallowed his drink and cleared his throat a little. "Erm, listen Remus. I-I wasn't really very open about this at school for—for obvious reasons—" He looked furtively around at the raucous crowd; no one seemed to be paying them any heed. "But, er, I was wondering whether—whether you'd like to get a drink sometime...."

Remus smiled at him and laughed, raising his own stout. "Like this?" he said mischievously. Emil slapped one hand over his eyes.

"Oh, god, I'm so stupid. You must think I'm the biggest—"

"No," Remus said adamantly, putting his hand over the one Emil wasn't using to hold his drink, then guiltily pulling his hand back again, looking around to see whether anyone had noticed the brief contact their fingers had made.

Emil looked at him, wide-eyed. "I-I was never sure about anyone in school. You don't like to ask, do you? I-I thought I saw you—saw you looking at—at someone once, and the way you—you looked at him made me think—just maybe—"

Remus surveyed the bottom of his glass. "Just out of curiosity—who did you see me looking at?"

"Virgil. Virgil Clifton. Or rather—he said something about it later, in our dorm. He said, Was Lupin ogling me during Herbology today?' Sounded a bit upset. I was glad I'd never let on that I'd ogled him, too. We did share a dorm for seven years. It wasn't like I had a choice of what to see sometimes. I suppose I was able to be a bit more subtle. I didn't really fancy him, mind you. I thought he was a pillock."

Remus looked around furtively again. "So did I. I don't remember it, the ogling, but it's possible that it happened. That my—mind could have wandered. I certainly remember Virgil and—and what he looked like."

Emil nodded and an adorable lopsided smile appeared on his face. Remus tried very hard to control himself when he saw that. "Pillock or not, Virgil had no idea how good he looked when—" He stopped and reddened. "Sorry. So—what about a drink sometime? As in some other time?" he added hopefully.

Remus nodded, checking his watch. "Yeah. Unfortunately—I've got somewhere to be very soon. Appointment at the Ministry," he added, in case Emil wanted to follow him. It was true.

"Oh! Job interview? Odd for it to be on the weekend, isn't it?"

Remus shrugged. "Not really what I'd call an interview." That was the truth. He sighed inwardly. This was hard enough, making a connection with another man—which he hadn't even been aware

of wanting to do until he'd met Emil's eyes across the room—without the added complication of his lycanthropy. He knew that he would have to tell anyone he wanted to date, male or female, especially after the horrid reaction Lily had had to finding out that he'd kept it from her, but somehow he felt like he wanted to put off telling Emil just a *little* longer. At least until they weren't in a crowd of Quidditch revelers who might hear what the reason for Emil's bad reaction was—if he *had* a bad reaction. They were all keyed up and drunk, and while Remus was strong, he had a healthy fear of the mob mentality and didn't want to know what this crowd was capable of if they suddenly learned that there was a werewolf in their midst, with the full moon due to rise within two hours....

"Oh," Emil said, looking a little disappointed. "You, erm, doing anything tonight?"

"Yes," Remus said reluctantly. "For the next three nights I'm booked. I'm free after that, though. Why don't I owl you?"

Emil looked like he was unconvinced this would happen, like Remus was just letting him down easy. "Sure," he said carelessly, running his fingers through his wavy dark hair. Remus felt a lump in his throat; he longed to reach out suddenly and do the same with his own hand, comb his fingers through the dark hair...

He took a bite of meat pie to quell the rebellious thoughts he was having; in two bites, it was gone, and he stood to go. "Sorry I have to run. At least he," he said, nodding toward Bagman, "is good for something. I needed a drink and a meal, but I didn't need to be broke afterward, you know?" He grinned at Emil and was gratified this time when he saw the dimples reappear, rather than terror-struck.

When the three nights in Ministry lock-up were over, Remus practically raced to the post office in Diagon Alley so he could send an owl to Emil. He'd arranged for his mail to go there while he was in Ministry custody, and there were two letters waiting for him, one from Peter, and one from Bill Weasley, of all people. Peter's letter was very short:

Dear Remus,

I'm going away for a little while. It may be months, actually. I've quit my job at the Prophet if you want it. I've told mum I'm going away, but if you could look in on her occasionally and make sure she's all right, I'd appreciate it. I'm writing to the others, too. Sorry this is so sudden. Thanks for meeting me to see the Quidditch game. If I don't see you before the end of the year, Happy Christmas and New Year.

—Peter

It was a decidedly odd letter, but then he read Bill's, which, if anything, was slightly odder still.

To: Remus Lupin

From: Bill Weasley

I know you must think it peculiar for me to be writing to you, but it's kind of important. I told my dad I'd take care of contacting you. It's about what happened in the entrance hall at school on the day of the Quidditch match. We have all agreed that PROFESSOR TRELAWNEY said THOSE THINGS in the entrance hall and no one else. If you decide you want to talk about what happened that day with anyone, you should make certain that you are clear that it was PROFESSOR TRELAWNEY. It may not be the best idea to talk about it at all, come to that.

Oh, and something weird happened when I tried to write to Peter Pettigrew about the same thing. The owl turned right around and came back. I must have tried ten times. Have you ever heard of that? So I don't know how to contact him and tell him the same. Since he's your friend, can you tell him when you see him?

Thanks,

Bill Weasley

Remus thought that perhaps Peter had gone far enough away on his trip that the owl knew even before leaving that he or she couldn't manage such a long trip, so it didn't even bother. He thought then about the request in the letter, to say that Trelawney had said "those things," not Weasley's sister. Frankly, while he was in the Ministry lock-up, he'd put Weasley's sister out of his mind, forgetting everything but Emil, and he shrugged and did it again now. Fine. If anyone asked—he'd say he heard Trelawney saying the strange words in the entrance hall. Not that he wanted to think about the words, either.

Child of the moon.

He shook himself and thought about Emil again, a much happier thought. He began cheerfully to write a letter on one of the desks in the post office, and went to the window to pay for a good

fast post-owl to deliver it for him. He left the post office with a skip in his step; he'd never felt this way before, had never known he could have this kind of optimism welling up from inside him, making him positively giddy. It was almost like being drunk, and Remus couldn't believe it when Emil Apparated to his parents' house that evening after work, so that they could discuss plans to go out. Thoughts of Peter, the Weasleys and pretty much the rest of the world fled his brain.

Two days later they went out again. And three days after that. They were soon seeing each other three or four times a week. The first time, he'd told Emil that he didn't have his Apparition license, and he hadn't questioned it; they traveled by Floo wherever they needed to go. Not every witch or wizard felt comfortable with the idea of Apparating, and Emil didn't try to talk Remus into learning, so Remus didn't have to explain (yet) that he was a werewolf and *couldn't* Apparate.

They usually went to a wizarding pub in Brighton where the clientele just happened to be all gay witches and wizards. It was a very subdued place, where Remus had the feeling that they were all waiting for the other shoe to drop. Some of the couples held hands occasionally, but even that was a very open display of affection for that establishment. It was hardly a hotbed of wizards meeting wizards and witches meeting witches; it largely seemed to be people who were already in couples patronizing the place.

Remus decided he didn't want Peter's old job after applying and being turned down because he told the manager at the *Prophet* that he'd rather not give them his medical records. He managed instead to get a job doing manual labor for a Muggle businessman in Manchester, moving boxes in a warehouse. As he was very strong, he found it to be easy work. The man was paying him on the sly, off the books. Remus didn't care that it wasn't legal; he didn't have much choice. He didn't technically exist in the Muggle world, but with a little more money, he could possibly contact one of the many wizard businesses that produced forged Muggle documents to allow a wizard to have an official identity as a citizen of Britain. It was starting to look like his prospects of getting a job in the wizarding world were very dim. His medical records, required for any job worth having, stated very clearly that he was a lycanthrope, and there were a number of people to whom he didn't want to give this information, as he strongly suspected that they wouldn't hire him if they knew about it. And then they'd know his secret, on top of not having hired him. He was especially glad he hadn't given this information to anyone at the newspaper office.

In the meantime, he took his pounds to Gringotts, converting the slips of paper into wizarding money and wincing at the exchange rate. He was actually able to treat Emil to a couple of dinners. They repeatedly returned to the Brighton pub by Floo, but Remus was starting to tire of the place, and after two weeks of seeing nothing with Emil but the inside of that establishment, he asked him whether they could just go for a walk in Brighton proper, get some fresh air.

It was on the cold beach at Brighton that they kissed properly for the first time, two weeks after they'd started seeing each other. Remus had kissed Emil on the cheek after their first date, and similar exchanges had occurred since then, but nothing more other than some hugging. They were both very tentative with each other still. They transfigured their robes so that they looked like Muggle overcoats and went to see Brighton Pavilion. Remus threw his head back, taking it all in.

"Pretty unbelievable, eh?" Emil said, putting his arm around his shoulder as they gazed at the huge central onion dome, the curling minarets that mimicked a sultan's palace. "You look cold," he whispered. "Here," he added, drawing out his wand and holding it to Remus' chest, muttering a soft spell Remus couldn't hear. Immediately, a warmth started to suffuse Remus' body. Emil put his wand away and tightened his arm around Remus, who looked up at him nervously. It was after dark and very few people were around, as it was just past mid-November. A cold wind swept in off the sea, but Remus wanted to go down to the ocean and really see what it was like. The only other time he'd been at the seaside before was that cold winter's day when James had scattered his parents' ashes at Penarth Promenade, and he wasn't sure whether to admit this to Emil and seem hopelessly provincial.

The warmth stayed with him as they walked on the hard-packed sand, their arms around each other, the smell of the salt water in the air filling Remus' nostrils in a way nothing ever had before; he felt like he was *in* the sea, surrounded by it. Not all of the smells were good; there was seaweed and rotting fish and old shellfish and waterlogged wood. But the way it all combined with the salt water and the neutral smell of the sand, all that sand, created a picture in Remus' mind of the sea which he would never forget. No matter how many times he went to the seaside for the rest of his life, he would remember the impression he had of it that first time, and a cold November night in Brighton would *be* what the seaside was for him.

Emil stopped suddenly and looked down at him; there was no moon tonight, or rather, it was the new moon. Remus felt calmer and more collected at this time of month than at any other. He thought the stars shone more brightly with no competition, and he pointed out the evening star to Emil, pulsing brightly in the eastern sky.

"That's actually Venus," Emil said, his face very close to Remus', and then Remus didn't know anything else but the thrill of finally running his hands through Emil's hair, holding his head in place by lacing his fingers through those wonderfully soft curls while they kissed properly for the first time, after two weeks of tentatively coming very, very close—but never quite making it.

Emil pulled back and looked down at Remus, who found it odd to not need to attack the other man. He wanted him, it was true—but during the new moon, it didn't feel like a desperation had taken hold of him. He remembered that Lily had once kissed him during the new moon, in a castle corridor. He'd been surprised by her suddenly doing that; he'd laced his hands into her hair and pulled her against him, but a minute later, he'd thrust her away. For a heavenly minute, it had been bliss; kissing the girl he loved without feeling insane and out of control. But then he knew that he had to use the self-control he had at that time of month and push her away, since he couldn't *really* be with her....

Remus smiled up at Emil. Can I be with anyone? he wondered. Should I be doing this at all? He'll find out and he'll leave me. I can't do this to him—

"Everything all right?" Emil asked, putting his hand on his shoulder. "I mean, I kiss you, and then you get this look—"

"Yeah," Remus said quickly. "Could we—um—could—"

Emil smiled and leaned down again, and Remus groaned in the back of his throat, sliding his fingers into that hair once more.

Everything was fine until two days before the next full moon. Remus wasn't quite in the grip of his mania yet, but he certainly felt like he had less control than during the new moon. He was also feeling incredibly frustrated because he wanted Emil dreadfully, but he was afraid; this was new and different for him, and he thought it possible that Emil had never done this before, either. It was definitely a case of the blind leading the blind. They'd kissed some more since that first time, and touched each other tentatively, through their clothes (they were always on the sand at Brighton, standing up, so there wasn't much more they could do).

Remus had been going mad, so even though it was two days before the full moon, he went to the werewolf pub again and found it surprisingly busy with other people who were already starting to feel a bit restless, like him. Across the room, he saw a young man with dark, soulful eyes and curling dark brown hair. Remus was struck by how much he looked like Emil. The young man was looking right back at Remus, and finally, he rose and crossed the room, standing in front of him. The next thing he knew, they were in an upstairs room, attacking each other...

Afterward, a part of him wished he hadn't done it, because after the fact, he felt that he'd cheated on Emil. Another part of him felt like it was research—he understood much more now. But doing it with a stranger—he'd felt so empty afterward, wishing he'd waited for Emil. Technically, he wasn't a virgin, hadn't been since he'd first slept with Lily in his fifth year. But in a way he was as inexperienced as any fifteen year old, at least when it came to being with another man.

The next morning, he'd owed Emil to tell him that he was going away for four days. All the next day, he locked himself up in his room, determined not to weaken and go to the werewolf pub. He put himself in the Ministry lock-up for the full moon again, and when it was over, he sent Emil another owl, saying he was back and needed to see him.

They'd been together for a month, except for the full moon. So, Remus thought. *My first real relationship will have lasted for a month.* He was meeting Emil for lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, in a back room where they wouldn't be seen. Emil looked disturbed when he entered.

"What is it?" he asked immediately. He saw the look on Remus' face and sat, groaning. "Oh, god. You're breaking up with me..."

Remus drew his mouth into a line. "Well—not as such. I've got something to tell you, and then you're probably going to break up with me...."

Emil frowned at him. "What have you got to tell me? Why would it make me break up with you?"

Remus swallowed and then confessed, gibbering about how stupid he was. To his surprise, Emil strode to him and pulled his body against his, lifting his head up to kiss him hungrily. Remus had wanted to tell him about the lycanthropy, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to do it before. *He's going to break up with me for this anyway,* he had thought; *why tell him something I don't want the world at large to know just when we're breaking up?*

When Emil broke the kiss, Remus looked at him in amazement. Everything moved very fast after that, more kissing, Remus telling him that he loved him, and then—that he was a werewolf. But oddly enough—it was his being bisexual that seemed to bother Emil more. Although he didn't dwell on it. He found himself coming back to the werewolf announcement.

Emil had smirked ever so slightly. "God. That explains why you're so strong, doesn't it? And the red lights in your eyes. And—"

Remus rolled his eyes. “—and why I can sometimes eat like there’s no tomorrow. I know, James used to tease me—”

“No,” Emil replied, sounding breathless now. “Why—why I find you so damn sexy.”

Remus stopped dead at that. He had no words. But it wasn’t necessary. Emil led him to the fireplace and they went to his house. (“My parents went out.”) It was so strange, to be alone with him, in a house, to walk up the stairs behind him, to enter his bedroom...

And in the morning, Emil’s parents were completely blasé about it. “Oh, Remus and I were out at the pub last night and he’d had just a bit too much so I let him stay in my room. He couldn’t have Apparated in the state he was in—”

(“I can’t Apparate at all, remember?” Remus had whispered to him.)

At the breakfast table, Mr. and Mrs. Gaillard were friendly and kind, but Emil’s sister Claudine looked at the two of them suspiciously, and Remus guessed that being Emil’s twin meant she was a bit more tuned in to him than their parents were. Remus made a mental note to watch out for her. She’d been a Slytherin. And she looked at him funny.

But now it was established that, at times, Emil stayed at the Lupins’ or Remus stayed at the Gaillards’, and neither family commented upon it or questioned it (although Claudine looked sorely tempted at times).

Remus turned on his side to watch Emil comb his hair now that he was finished dressing. He knew he had to get out of bed himself and do the same, but he was uncertain how to tell Emil that he was going to go to James’ party by himself. He hadn’t even told Emil about the party, which James was holding to celebrate Lily finishing her Auror training. Even though they’d been seeing each other for almost two months, Remus suddenly felt shy about introducing Emil to his friends, and explaining to them that he was attracted to both men and women, and that he was in particular attracted to Emil. It was too much too soon. Everything with Emil still felt so fragile, like he would slip away from his grasp if he wasn’t careful, and he didn’t want to risk that.

“So where did you say you were going today?” Emil asked, his hand on the door knob.

“Um, to James and Sirius’ place. It’s Sirius’ parents’ place, actually. No big deal. Just passing some time with the lads. Peter’s not even going to be there. He’s not back yet. No one can find him. It’s really weird.” But he shrugged nonchalantly, as though to indicate that he wasn’t exactly worried about Peter. He was a big boy and could take care of himself.

“All right,” Emil said, sounding a little hurt that he hadn’t received an invitation. “Have fun,” he added, leaving the room. Remus moved around, getting dressed, trying not to feel guilty about not being ready to tell James, Lily and Sirius about this part of his life. It just—felt like a very separate thing from his friendship with them, and for a little while longer, he wanted to keep it that way.

* * * * *

Lily *popped!* into the entrance hall of Ascog Castle, then blinked and brushed down her robes; suddenly, she stopped, realizing that this reflex to clean herself up when traveling wasn’t needed when she wasn’t covered in dust because of the Floo Network. She’d learnt to Apparate and passed her test during her training, and wasn’t quite used to the freedom it afforded her yet. A moment later, she heard two other people arrive by Floo; she stepped into the sitting room and saw Sam Bell emerge from the fireplace, followed by his very pregnant wife, Trina, who looked quite green after her trip. Unfortunately, Apparating wasn’t an option for a pregnant woman, and Sam didn’t want her to travel through the network by herself in her condition, so he hadn’t Apparated.

Lily gently led Trina into the large old kitchen and seated her at the long refectory table, fetching her a glass of water to drink. Sam sat next to her, stroking her brown curls affectionately, but Lily could also see that he was a bit on edge; the entire time she’d been training, he’d been distracted by his wife’s pregnancy. All Aurors who’d been on the job more than five years were supposed to be involved in training new recruits one week a month, so in the three and a half months she’d trained, Sam had taught her class of would-be Aurors three times. Once it had been a classroom course in magical surveillance techniques; another time it had been a combat course, during which Lily had dueled with him and won, which she could see had shocked him—but she could also see that it was in part because of his distraction. He had congratulated her and held her up as an example to the rest of the class, but she noticed that after that, he also watched her out of the corner of his eye, as though she might attack him any time.

And now she was done, and James wasn’t playing for the Montrose Magpies on this day, either. Lily had found out just the night before, as she and James lay quietly together in her bed in London, that he’d been in hospital for two weeks after a match against the Wimbourne Wasps. He’d discreetly Apparated directly into her bedroom after her parents were in bed, as he also had his Apparition license now.

"That damn Bagman," James had said, playing with her hair. "Most annoying Beater I've ever seen. MacFarlan was there, too, and Martha—I did mention that she's captain now? Anyway, Martha said he was shaking his head over us. Mind you, as head of Magical Games and Sports he's not supposed to show preferential treatment, but MacFarlan was a star on the Magpies for over ten years, and even though he's been with the Ministry for the last ten, I think he still expects to go to a Magpies game and see a win. Personally, after a game, I expect to be conscious and have a memory of what I *did* that day, but you can't have everything..."

Lily kissed his chest affectionately. "I'm glad you're all right. I'm sure you did fine. You're just not used to losing, even after the World Cup. It will happen to you sometimes, you know," she teased him, tweaking his nose between her thumb and forefinger. "Professional play is different. You know you love it. I just wish I'd *known* you were in hospital." She sighed. "I don't know why they feel the need to isolate us all during our training. I *missed* you so much it *hurt*..."

She edged further up the mattress and leaned over to kiss him lightly; James, however, had different plans, holding her head in place and deepening the kiss. She pulled back slowly and smiled at him. "Is that supposed to show me that you're worth waiting for?"

He smiled and nodded. "And to remind you of why you're marrying me."

She laughed. "*That's* not why, silly, although it's a nice fringe benefit." And soon they were both enjoying yet another fringe benefit...

Lily rubbed Trina's back and looked at Sam, who was focused on his wife. "I can't imagine where the lads are. You stay here, I'll look upstairs."

She found Mr. and Mrs. Black first, who hugged her warmly and congratulated her on finishing her Auror training. She was very fond of the Blacks, as they were the closest thing James had to parents now, other than his Aunt Othalie. Sirius' mother said that he and James were up in their room still.

When she opened the door, James cried out, trying to shield a package from her view; she saw now that he was wrapping a present on his bed, and was just finishing tying the ribbon.

"Don't look!" he cried. She immediately clapped her hand over her eyes.

"What are you two still doing up here? Sam and Trina are waiting downstairs, and Remus will probably be here any minute. Managed to contact Peter yet?" she asked, her hand still over her eyes.

"No. Although the owl didn't come back for me, as it did with the letters Weasley tried to send to him. Odd. Anyway, I was just finishing wrapping your present, and Sirius is in the shower. He'll be out presently." She took her hand down from her eyes and James seemed to forget about her not being able to see the present.

He had no sooner spoken than the door to the en suite bath opened and Sirius emerged, still slightly damp, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, while he used another to do some preliminary hair drying. James wasn't thrilled by the way Lily immediately became speechless, looking at Sirius with her mouth open slightly, and he saw the way her eyes traveled down his chest to his legs. He wished she still had her hand in front of her eyes.

Then she raised her eyes and noticed James watching her reaction, and felt herself flush. She smirked at Sirius and said lightly, "Are you sure you can't be talked into wearing a kilt for our wedding? *Both* of you?" she added, thinking about James' legs. "Appropriate tartans, of course..."

"*No!*" James and Sirius said in unison. "You're having all of those Muggles coming," James went on, "so we agreed that we're wearing Muggle suits. No robes, *suits*."

"We said Muggle *clothes*," Lily reminded him. "Kilts can also be thought of as Muggle clothes. I know some Scots wizards still favor kilts over robes, but they're considered Muggle clothing also—" She was finding it difficult not to laugh; they were so funny about this. She didn't really want them in kilts, she just liked winding them up.

"*No kilts!*" James and Sirius chorused.

"Well, if Sirius didn't walk around showing off, it wouldn't give me ideas..." She smirked evilly, looking very pointedly at Sirius' legs now.

"All right, all right, move along—" James said, pushing her out of the room and closing the door after they were both on the landing. "Besides, Sirius has to get dressed, and—"

"Oh, I don't mind if he dresses in front of me—" she started to say with wide-eyed mock-innocence, wondering how much longer she could wind up James before he hit his limit. James told her by suddenly covering her mouth with his and kissing her deeply. She shuddered and slid her arms up around his neck, pressing against him.

When he finally pulled his mouth gently away from hers, she looked up at him with her large green eyes glittering. "Well," she said softly. "That'll teach *me*."

She grinned at him and he grinned back. "You are a she-devil, Lily Evans."

"And now a licensed Auror. A deadly combination."

He laughed. "I'll say. Oh-damn. The present is still on the bed." He rapped on the door.

"Don't come in, Lily!" Sirius' panicked voice said through the door. "I'm not decent."

"When the hell are you ever *decent*?" his best friend joked. "Just do me a favor and bring the present when you come, all right? We're going downstairs," James told him. They went trippingly down the winding stone stairs, hand in hand, but when Lily was still half a flight up from the ground floor, she heard a moaning that suddenly made her pull her hand away and clutch her robes in her hands, rushing down the remaining stairs.

James sprinted into the kitchen after her, finding her stooping next to Trina Bell, whom he hadn't yet met. There was a large puddle on the floor under Trina's chair, and her hazel eyes were wide and frightened. Her husband was rubbing her back, also looking panicked.

"Um," Trina said, her hands covering her distended belly. "I think my water broke."

"You *think* your water broke!" Lily said, her voice rising in pitch. She turned to James, resisting the urge to tell him that he looked like a ninny, hovering in the doorway. "Go get Sirius' mum. Upstairs," she said tersely. James nodded and ran out of the room.

He didn't care that Lily was ordering him around; he could only think, *Oh, god. Lily and I are getting married in six months, and the next thing you know she'll want to have a baby....*

For some reason, this hadn't occurred to him before. He just knew he wanted to be with Lily always when he proposed to her. It had been awkward and inarticulate, and she'd practically had to ask him, "Um, are you proposing to me, James?" to which he'd nodded dumbly.

He found Callisto Black and gibbered out something about what was happening, and she immediately went into gear, pulling her wand out of her robes and making the sheets and blankets fly off her own bed; different sheets flew onto the bed from the wardrobe with another flick of her wand, and she turned to him and said tersely, "Get her up here. If her water's broke, there's no time to waste."

James nodded and ran out of the room again, thinking how businesslike women suddenly became about this sort of thing. How could they do that, when another woman was suffering so? How could they be so dispassionate that way, when the thought of what Trina was going to do was tying his stomach in knots?

The vigil seemed to last forever. Even though her water had broken, she wasn't having contractions at first. Callisto Black contacted the Bells' midwife, but she was busy delivering a baby in Bristol and couldn't come immediately.

James had seen Lily swallow and whisper, "I-I suppose I could help. I just finished my Auror training, and they taught us a number of emergency medical procedures—including delivering a baby. And of course, Sam's an Auror, too."

The midwife shook her head over that. "He's the father. He needs to keep her calm. And he needs to work at staying calm himself. You need to keep a cool head, girl, and make sure you remember your training. Can you do that for me? Until I can come?"

Lily nodded, swallowing again; perhaps she wasn't being completely dispassionate. She was going to be responsible for overseeing Trina's labor until the midwife could come, along with Sirius' mother. She was eighteen years old and had only delivered a baby in a magical simulation. She was scared to death.

James, Sirius and Walter Black paced the landing outside Sirius' parents' bedroom, and Remus joined them when he arrived. Lily, Callisto Black and Sam were in the room with her. It seemed forever before they were hearing a baby's cries; James tentatively opened the door a sliver and glanced in; Lily saw him and smiled beatifically, waving him into the room. Trina was collapsed on the bed, Sam mopping her brow with a cloth, while Callisto cleaned the baby and swaddled her. She handed the baby to Lily, who then handed her to Trina. When Trina immediately pulled down her blouse and put the baby to her breast, James wished he could drop through the floor and disappear. Lily laughed at his expression and hustled the other men out of the room again, wiping her face with exhaustion. Sweat trails ran down her cheeks, and her eyes had dark circles underneath. Somehow, it had become night and it was well past time for tea. No one had noticed, or made any food.

She laughed tiredly and leaned against James, who gathered her into her arms and kissed her brow. "You were wonderful," he whispered to her.

She lifted her face and frowned. "You weren't there. I was a dolt a lot of the time."

James shook his head. "I don't care what you say. I contend that you were wonderful."

She grinned at him now. "Watch it. I just may marry you if you keep that up."

He grinned back. "I'll take my chances."

Remus saw the love between them as they exchanged this bit of light-hearted banter; he couldn't help but smile and picture Emil, which immediately made him think, *Huh. I must be completely over Lily at last.* It was a strange thought, but he looked at her now, with James' arms around her, and felt oddly content, as though the world were coming round to being just right. He glanced at Sirius, who looked a little less content, but then Sirius had neither gainful employment nor a steady girlfriend, and Remus also wasn't sure how he would take the news of Remus' relationship with Emil. He'd groused about not being able to get in touch with Remus whenever he liked recently, even though Remus had pointedly refrained from complaining about *his* lack of companionship during the full moons that had occurred since they'd left school. Sirius had always had a remarkable talent for being self-centered, Remus thought, and as much as he loved his friend, he couldn't deny that that talent was still much in evidence.

A little later, they were down in the kitchen, having some tea and sandwiches, when Sam entered, tiptoeing, carrying a blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms. He sat next to Lily, a too-happy-for-words smile splitting his face. She peered into the bundle, seeing bright brownish-greenish eyes gazing back at her above a button nose, with a tuft of curling brown hair on the crown. The baby was rosy-cheeked and curious-looking, and Lily caught her breath, gazing at her.

"Oh-Sam! She's so beautiful..."

He nodded proudly at his daughter. "Would you like to hold her, Lily? The first baby you've ever delivered?"

Lily smiled back at him and gently took the baby from him, feeling something inexplicable and primal move inside her as she held the small body against hers, felt the warm weight on her arms, both heavy and far too light, as though it could disappear at any moment. James was sitting on her other side, and she looked up into his eyes, feeling that she had never loved him more, and surprised by how much she wanted to have *his* child. She also knew how that conversation with Bonnie had panicked him, but now-now he didn't look panicked at all. He gazed into her eyes lovingly, then down at the baby, and put out his finger tentatively, poking gently at the tiny curled fingers with the impossibly minuscule nails. The baby's hand reflexively reached out and grasped James' finger, and Lily looked at him again, shocked to see the expression on his face change.

He looked at Lily, thinking that he had never loved her more, and that she had never been more beautiful than she was now, with that soft look on her face as she held the baby. He felt something move within him, too, and found that he couldn't look away from her, even as her eyes went back down to the baby again, who seemed determined to keep James' finger always.

"Um, do you mind if I have my daughter back?" Sam asked, clearing his throat. Lily looked like she'd woken up, and she forced a laugh.

"I'm sorry," she said, disconnecting James' finger from the tiny fist and handing Sam his daughter. Sam held her tightly, possessively, and James understood. *He may trust us, basically, but the fact remains that she's Sam's and his wife's. Their responsibility. Forever.*

He swallowed, feeling a bit overwhelmed by it all again, but also having an incredible urge to carry Lily up to his room and make love to her...

"What's her name?" Lily asked, peering into the blankets as the tiny face was contorted into an adorable yawn that sent her insides spinning again, little fists flailing.

"Kathryn. But she'll be Katie. Sort of named after her mum, since her full name's Katrina, but not exactly. One will be Katie and one Trina, to avoid confusion."

Lily nodded. "That's nice." She looked into James' eyes again; the love she saw there was both empowering and frightening.

"Some party, eh?" James said feebly, trying to make the moment a little less intense. She grinned at him and laced her fingers through his, wishing the following six months would hurry up and pass.

"One I'm sure we'll never forget."

* * * * *

Thursday, 15 March, 1979

"Hello?" Bill called uncertainly into the quiet forest. "I'm looking for—for Firenze. Firenze the Centaur. Hello?"

Silence.

After waiting for a few minutes, Bill walked on, his boots crunching dead leaves underfoot. He didn't hear any sounds not made by him. Which wasn't to say there weren't any. He didn't notice,

for instance, the sound of a rat running on very small feet on a path parallel to his, but about twenty feet away. As far as Bill could tell, there were no other humans in the forest.

He stared around at the legion of trees. It looked the same in all directions. He began to feel uneasy in the silence. He stared around some more. How do you get a Centaur to come to you? he wondered. What do Centaurs like? he asked himself. Fortune telling. Stargazing. Well, this was an opportunity to interpret a prophecy. One might even call it *The Prophecy*. What Centaur wouldn't be interested in that?

He and Charlie had pored over the Prophecy for hours on end. Bill had asked Professor Trelawney whether she had written it down, and she had allowed him to copy it from the parchment on which she'd recorded it, cautioning him again about *who* had given it. Bill couldn't make head or tail of the thing, and, not realizing that he was speaking aloud, said to Charlie in frustration, "I'll bet one of the Centaurs could tell me what all this means." Bill had kept this from his dormmates, and from Jack and Geoff as well, as he couldn't tell any of them about his sister. Charlie had been there, so he knew, and at any rate, Peggy was also his sister.

They were alone in the fourth year dorm and Charlie had been silent for some time. Finally, Bill heard a light snore coming from him, and realized that Charlie's eyes were closed, yet he still held the Divination text open on his lap, as though he was reading it.

"I'm looking for help," he said loudly now, to whatever spirits of the forest might hear him, "interpreting a Prophecy about the Dark Lord's fall! I'm looking for Firenze the Centaur!"

The echo of his voice died away. He looked up; he'd walked into a clearing, and he heard wingbeats overhead. An owl was flying toward the castle. Perhaps that's what he should have done, he thought. Sent a letter to the Centaur by owl-post. None of this wandering about the forest nonsense. He wasn't even supposed to be in here.

He looked down from the sky again and screamed in surprise, practically jumping out of his skin. An enormous half-man, half-horse creature was standing before him, gazing at him calmly. He hadn't heard him enter the clearing. Could Centaurs Apparate? he wondered. He knew humans couldn't Apparate on the Hogwarts grounds, but did that include the forest? And he knew that house-elves could get around at Hogwarts with no problem. Their mode of travel evidently wasn't quite the same as Apparition. Perhaps the Centaurs had a Centaur version of Apparition that worked at Hogwarts. Or maybe he'd just been very quiet.

"F-Firenze?" Bill said softly, uncertain whether there was some more formal protocol one should use for addressing a Centaur. He wasn't even sure whether he should be addressing *this* Centaur, but for some reason the name "Firenze" had been written in the notebook where he'd recorded the Prophecy and his many theories about it. It wasn't in his handwriting and Charlie denied that it was his.

"Yes. You have come to see me, William Weasley?"

Bill refrained from asking how he knew his name. *Probably just one of those Centaur things.* "I have," he answered formally, to make up for his previous informality. It felt natural to do this in response to the dignified Centaur. He felt rather like he was being presented to the queen.

"You said that you have a Prophecy...."

"Yes. My-my teacher gave it..."

The Centaur turned to go suddenly, and Bill panicked.

"Where are you going?" he asked, his voice shaking.

The Centaur did not turn around, but he did stop.

"Do not lie to me."

Bill shivered. Could he trust this being? Or was he a Creature? He couldn't remember what had been decided by the Ministry—or by the Centaurs themselves.

"O-okay," he said, voice still shaking. "My-my little sister gave it. I think she-she may have the Sight."

Firenze nodded sagely, turning around. "She does. We see things in the stars, and one of the unmistakable things the stars tell us is when a True Seer is born. Her words, even as a child, should not be taken lightly."

Bill bobbed his head. "That's what I thought. Do you think—could you listen to the Prophecy and tell me what you think it all means?"

He nodded again. "I think we have already seen some of this Prophecy in the stars, and in our scrying. But it is in fragments; perhaps what you have will help us to make sense of these fragments."

"Right," he said, feeling odd that he might be helping the Centaurs, since he'd come to *them* for help. "It starts like this:

*"In days to come the Dark Lord's fall
Is split by silver into gold.
A Triangle, each time, his bane...."*

"Ah!" the Centaur said, looking displeased. "Bane is in this Prophecy. Pity."

"What does it mean?" Bill asked him, perplexed. Unless he was joking, which, Bill realized, he probably was. He would have laughed politely, just to show that he recognized the joke, but it was a bit late now.

"Give me the rest. Let me think on it."

"All right." Bill continued:

*"One corner is a Lion tall,
Of good intent, named for the coal;
Twice hidden, both a beast and man.*

*"One corner comes from blood of yore,
Child of the silver Moon so cold,
Dark Lord's servant and Lion's mate.*

*"Last comes a flame-haired Daughter of War,
Caught between silver and the gold,
One of two and one of many.*

*"The Lion loves the Daughter bright
As does the Child of silver Moon.
But the Dark Lord's servant shall betray.*

*"What though they flee before their fate,
Three shall bring forth the days of doom,
And Love shall end the Dark Lord's reign...."*

Bill looked up at Firenze expectantly. The Centaur was staring at the sky and frowning, pulling at his chin. After waiting several minutes, Bill cleared his throat.

"Well?" he asked. "Any ideas?"

The Centaur nodded, but looked a little distracted. "This would explain some things we have seen in the scry. There have been many omens lately concerning the Dark Lord's falls."

"Fall," Bill corrected him automatically. Then he bit his tongue, but the Centaur didn't seem to mind.

"Falls," he said again, unperturbed by Bill's interruption. "The first triplet clearly indicates that the Dark Lord will fall twice."

Bill thought about the words again. "It does?" He furrowed his brow, puzzling over this. Then he thought about the words *A Triangle each time his bane*. "So three people will be responsible each time? Is that what it means?"

"I believe so. The Three can be described the same way each time, if I am judging the rest of the Prophecy correctly."

Bill was still frowning. "But what does 'split by silver into gold' mean?"

Firenze waved his hands as though this were self-evident. "What it says. The Dark Lord's fall is split by silver into gold."

Bill shook his head. "What?"

"The two times are split by silver into gold," the Centaur repeated reasonably, as though Bill would understand this better. The boy shook his head, still baffled.

"Maybe we should move on," Bill said. "What about *One corner is a Lion tall, Of good intent, named for the coal; Twice hidden, both a beast and man.*"

Firenze nodded, looking at the sky. "There are, of course, two Lions. Or there will be. We have seen the signs. One will be like a father to the other."

Bill squinted. "One of them isn't born yet?"

"Yes. And his mate. *His number is five.*" He looked at the sky once more; Bill looked up too. It was growing dark. He saw Venus winking at him in the twilight sky. "The Lion's number is eleven," the Centaur added dreamily.

"Eleven? What does that mean? Which Lion?"

"Both of them," he said casually. What did it mean? Bill wondered. What did *Lion* mean? He was a Gryffindor; they were all called Lions. If it meant someone from Gryffindor, that didn't narrow

it down much. That covered roughly twenty-five percent of the wizarding world. The pronouns seemed to indicate that it was a male, but that only brought it down to twelve or thirteen percent of all wizards.

Bill had no idea what to make of the eleven.' "How about the next part?" he said to Firenze. "*One corner comes from blood of yore, Child of the silver Moon so cold, Dark Lord's servant and Lion's mate.*"

"The Moon Child," Firenze said mistily, reminding Bill of Professor Trelawney. Then he had a sudden thought; he remembered the many hours of working on his own horoscope and star charts for Trelawney.

"Wait," he said breathily, trying to get his thoughts out as quickly as he was having them. "Aren't people born under Cancer called Moon Children?" He looked up at the Centaur, who nodded at him with a smile. Bill felt he was really on to something. "And the Lion—what if that's a sign of the Zodiac too? What if it's someone born under Leo?"

"It is someone—two someones—born under the sign of a Lion," he said placidly. How is that different from what I said? Bill wondered. It sounded so literal, like someone's mother having a sign with a lion hanging on the wall above where she was giving birth. "You know both the Lion and the Moon Child," the Centaur told him casually.

"What?" Bill said, his voice rising in a squeak. He cleared his throat, embarrassed. "I know them?"

"And they know each other. Well. They have conspired together. They have been friends. And they love the same woman. The same will be true in the future."

Bill shook his head. This was so confusing. "Is that the woman in the Prophecy?" Firenze nodded again. "The Daughter of War? Who is she?"

"One of two and one of many," the Centaur said.

"I know, that's what the Prophecy says. But what does it mean?"

"There are two Daughters." Bill waited for more. What did *that* mean? He hated to ask the same question again, but he felt the so-called answer had been clear as mud.

"One of them is one of two and one of them is one of many?" Bill asked, getting a nod in return. He breathed a sigh of relief. He'd guessed something correctly. Not that it did much good... "What's the Daughter's number?" he asked now, even though he had yet to figure out what the Lions' and Moon Children's numbers meant. Firenze consulted the skies again.

"We have seen their signs," he said quietly. "We have watched the movement of Mars. Red is the color of Mars, the color of war, the color of discord. Yet, together, the two Daughters make one. Together, they will bring Peace."

"What?"

"They make one. The two Daughters do not have the same number. If that were so, the Dark Lord would be utterly defeated by the first Triangle, or fail to be completely defeated by the second. The second Daughter also makes the second Triangle one. The three in that group make one. The three in the first Triangle make only half of a whole."

"Half of a whole...because the job is only half done?"

"And together—the six people make six."

Bill didn't know why he was saying this. "Right—six people make six," he repeated. Was there a point to saying something so obvious?

But Firenze nodded at him again, still staring at the skies. Then suddenly he looked very penetratingly at Bill, making him catch his breath. The Centaur had not looked at him so directly before. "Your family..." he said slowly, softly, almost menacingly. "From your family will come many who will fight the Dark Lord before he falls. Your youngest brother will march by the side of the second Lion. His number is also eleven. A Daughter of War will come from your family...."

"What?" Bill squeaked again, but not—this time—because he did not understand. He understood all too well. *Was it Peggy? Or Annie?* Then he realized that there were two Daughters of War. Were they both of his sisters? Was only one of his sisters the Daughter of War?

"Who?" he asked. "Who is it?"

The Centaur stared up at the sky some more, not answering him. Bill waited. But it was as though Firenze had forgotten why he was in the clearing and what he'd been doing there. "Curious," he said softly now. "Most curious...."

Without another word, he turned and walked from the clearing, leaving Bill standing alone, staring after him. *Am I supposed to follow him?* Somehow he didn't think so. It seemed that his time for consulting Firenze was over.

Your youngest brother will march by the side of the second Lion. The Daughter of War will come

from your family....

His youngest brother? That was Fred; George was born just before midnight on April 17, Fred just after midnight, on April 18. His heart ached; the twins weren't even quite a year old yet. *His number is also eleven.* What did the damn numbers mean?

He turned to walk back through the forest, but it had grown very dark, so he lit the end of his wand. He walked carefully, but his mind was whirling with everything the Centaur had said, and he had a hard time paying attention to where he was walking. Only stumbling a few times, he at last reached the edge of the trees again. He was able to put his wand away once he was in the open; there was still a glow in the western sky, lighting his way back to the castle, and without the dark trees around him, he was able to see. As he strode up the sloping lawn, he thought again about his family. Peggy had given this Prophecy. Fred would march by the side of the second Lion. And either Peggy or Annie was the Daughter of War. As it had been Peggy giving the Prophecy, it seemed most likely that the one in the Prophecy was Annie. Annie was only eight years old! She would be nine in September, starting her sixth year at the village school in Hogsmeade. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair.

He swallowed, wondering whether to tell Charlie about this. Whether to tell his parents. What could he say to them? *Fred's going to be the right-hand man of one of the three people who's going to defeat Voldemort. Oh, and Annie will be one of them, too. Just thought you should know.*

He shook his head; they'd all think he was barking mad. What could he do, drag them to the school and take them into the forest to talk to Firenze, so they'd know he wasn't out of his mind? He entered the castle and went to the Great Hall, sitting down in the middle of the Gryffindor table and staring at the banners on the high walls, at the rampant Gryffindor Lion. He thought of his baby brother, and his young sister, and wondered what on earth he should do....

Back in the forest, Firenze had been aware from the beginning that he had not one visitor, but two, and he decided that it was time to speak to the second one. He walked calmly through the trees, away from the clearing where Bill had consulted him, hearing the scuttling of tiny feet behind him, the rustling of leaves and brush on the forest floor. He reached another clearing, a large grassy one that had the reputation of being a fairy ring, and he stopped and turned, facing the direction in which he'd come.

"Show yourself, wizard," he said sternly, looking with his keen eyes through the trees to where he knew his other visitor hid. A small animal crept out from behind the root of a tree, clearly trembling. It was a thin grey rat. "Do not speak to me but in your true form," the Centaur said, his eyes glittering.

In the blink of an eye, the rat changed into a young man, hardly out of school for a year. He was a small man with a round belly and close-cropped colorless hair, his pointy nose making it seem like he might have neglected to completely leave his rat form behind. The young man was trembling. The Centaur looked at him sternly.

"Why are you here?" His voice rang through the forest with authority, and the man knew now that when he'd been addressing Bill Weasley, the Centaur had been making an effort to be kind and gentle and non-threatening. He made no such attempt now.

Peter shook violently. He had tried to steel himself to follow Bill Weasley, he had. He'd been hiding at Hogwarts for months, even taking up residence in the fourth-year Gryffindor dorm. It wasn't too bad, when he managed to avoid the large grey cat owned by Weasley's friend, Alex Wood. A thin blond boy by the name of Booth had adopted him and made a pet of him. Wood and Weasley didn't get along well with Booth and his best friend. Having Booth for a master had worked out very nicely for Peter, as he now had a rather easy time getting food (when he was hungry, which wasn't that often) and someone to protect him from Wood's cat. And he was able to find out whatever Bill and his brother knew about the Prophecy, since they didn't bother being careful about speaking around him. He could curl up on Booth's bed while Bill and Charlie were in the dorm, talking about the Prophecy, and they didn't care that he could hear everything, because he was just a rat.

He'd panicked a bit when Bill had sent a letter to him, Peter, about his sister. Bill had evidently used a school owl, up in the Owlery, and when he'd come back downstairs to Gryffindor Tower and gone to his dorm, he'd discovered the same owl bashing itself against the window, trying to get into the dorm. Peter had shivered and run into a crack in the stone wall, afraid at first because owls preyed on rats, and then he was afraid for a different reason, when Bill opened the window and took the parchment from the owl, saying to his brother, "That's odd. The letter I wrote to Pettigrew has come back. Why do you suppose that is?"

Charlie's brown eyes had gone very round, and the second year had said fearfully, "I've heard that when you try to send owls to dead people, they just come back. D'you reckon someone's killed

him? Because he heard the Prophecy? Is everyone who's heard it going to start dying?"

Bill Weasley had actually looked panicked about this for a second, his eyes very large as he stared back at his brother, holding the owl on his forearm. Then the older boy seemed to shake himself. "Don't be daft. Let me try again."

He made certain the parchment was tied tight to the bird's leg and hurled it out the window. Peter watched as the owl wheeled in a circle and headed back to the dorm again, perching on the windowsill and glaring at Bill.

"Damn!" Bill said, clearly getting quite annoyed. "The letter to Lupin didn't come back." He turned toward the window. "Are you sure you're a post owl and not just someone's stupid old pet?" he asked it. Bill and Charlie Weasley tried to shoo the owl away, tried to convince it to deliver its letter more than half a dozen additional times before giving up. Peter continued to watch nervously, knowing that the owl knew full well that he was there, somewhere in the room. Bill and Charlie had never suspected that the owl was doing precisely the right thing all along. It knew where to find Peter Pettigrew all right.

He'd been very careful about transfiguring into his human form in the night and taking out Bill's Prophecy notebook, copying down the words there, then putting the parchment he'd written on into his robe pocket before transfiguring himself into a rat again and sleeping on the old trousers in Booth's wardrobe that he particularly liked. He also wrote the name "Firenze" into the margin of Bill's notebook, because he'd visited the forest on occasion since he'd returned to Hogwarts and he tracked several Centaurs, determining that Firenze was the best hope that Bill had. He'd waited and waited for Bill to go to the Centaurs, but still he did not. The dreams did not leave him, and finally, he had stood over Weasley in his human body and pointed his wand at him, unsure whether he could do it, shaking as he uttered the dread word:

"Imperio."

The next morning, Bill decided that he would go to the forest to see Firenze the Centaur.

"I'll tell you why you are here, wizard," said the Centaur. "You are here because you have heard your own destiny, but you wish to contest it. Is that not correct?"

He dared lift his eyes to the enormous creature speaking to him. "M-my destiny? How so?" he stuttered out. He didn't like the sound of that.

"When you heard the Prophecy, it was not the first time you heard your destiny, was it? You have known before now, and you came to me hoping for a different answer. I cannot give you that. And now that you have shown your true form, I should call you by your true name," the Centaur said more conversationally now.

"M-my true name?" He hadn't given the Centaur the name of Wormtail, rather than Peter Pettigrew, so he wasn't sure what was meant.

"Yes, your true name, *Moon Child*."

The small man trembled even more and sank to his knees. "No, no, no—" he chanted, remembering his dreams again.

"Yes," said the Centaur. "You denied it, you didn't want to believe it, but when you heard the Prophecy, you knew it was telling your own fortune."

No, no, no, he screamed again, inside. The dreams filled his head....

"But—" he stammered, "—that means—"

"That means that you know who the Daughter of War is."

Peter sank down further. *No, no. Not her...*

One part of the Prophecy had been frighteningly clear to him from the start:

The lion loves the daughter bright, as does the child of silver moon....

"You know whom it is you love. There can be no question..."

And the lion. *James*, he thought. Who else could it be? James who had been the one responsible for Peter always being included, ever since their first year in school. James who was going to marry Lily, he reminded himself crossly.

He looked up at the Centaur. "Are you sure?"

Firenze nodded. "It is all part of the plan. The stars and planets move in their dance and care not for human concerns. This has been destined since the dawn of time, since before men and Centaurs looked at the skies and saw in them their own fates. Yours is not a pleasant part, this is true; but it is a necessary one. It is not for the faint of heart."

Peter tried to think, *I'm a Gryffindor. I can do this. Only—*

"People will hate me. I'll probably hate myself..." His lip shook.

"Quite possibly. If they find out..."

Right, he thought. Maybe no one will ever know.

“You know what you must do.”

What you must do.

“Yes.” He stared at the ground, feeling like he might throw up, but he hadn’t eaten recently, so there was nothing in his stomach. He’d had the nightmares again the previous night, after putting the Imperius Curse on Weasley so that he would finally come to the forest. He lifted his eyes again, but the Centaur had mysteriously disappeared. He swallowed, then changed into a rat again to scurry out of the forest undetected by creatures who might like to prey upon a human.

He knew that he could not deny his destiny. His mother had taught him that. He knew that what you are born to do, you do. He had often wondered why he’d been sorted into Gryffindor, but now he stopped wondering. When he’d been in school, he had flinched when they had dealt with many evil things in Defense Against the Dark Arts; he had feared to ride a broomstick the first time they’d learned; in fifth year; he had quaked and hidden behind his friends when Remus Lupin transformed into a werewolf, and his friends had been amazingly tolerant of him. He had screamed the loudest about the pain of the Animagus Transfiguration. Now he needed to be braver than he’d ever been. He needed to do two things which went against everything he believed in and held dear.

Peter Pettigrew needed to betray the woman he loved.

And he needed to approach You-Know-Who himself and convince him that he truly wanted to be a Death Eater.

— CHAPTER TWELVE —

New Lives

Thursday, 12 April, 1979

Bill was awoken early by a noise at his window. He tried to open his eyes, rubbing the blurriness of sleep from them. He saw and heard that Charlie was still snoring deeply, oblivious to the noise that had disturbed Bill. The banging kept on, and finally, Bill staggered to the window and opened it for the post owl that was trying to get his attention.

“Sorry,” he told it. “No food up here. Check the garden for mice,” he suggested to it after removing a rolled up parchment from its ankle. He closed the window and sat down on his bed to read the letter; he knew it was from Juliet before he even unrolled it. She usually sent him owls in the early part of the morning, after he’d mentioned what a difficult time his siblings and even his mother gave him about it. (If she mussed his hair and sighed, “Ah, young love,” one more time he was going to scream.)

He smiled as he read the missive. He could hardly believe his good fortune that he and Juliet were a couple now. They couldn’t go to Hogsmeade together, since there was a moratorium on Hogsmeade visits, and she lived clear across the country in a flat without a fireplace (she was Muggle-born), so they couldn’t travel to each other’s houses by the Floo network. (She had joked, “If they could connect our cooker to the network, I could try fitting into the oven. Perhaps the witch in Hansel and Gretel’ was merely trying to send them on a trip?”)

It was very frustrating; they’d had to content themselves with walks round the lake when they were at school, and some furtive kissing behind one of the greenhouses. Charlie was especially bad about teasing him about Juliet; he seemed to think she’d stolen Bill from him. Alex was all right about it, surprisingly enough, telling him it was about bloody time, and Jack and Geoff tried to hide their envy about Juliet—neither of them had girlfriends yet. For Bill, it was a balancing act to see Juliet as much as he wanted to, see his brother as much as Charlie wanted him to, and to not alienate his three closest friends in the process.

Something had fallen out of the letter when he’d unrolled it, and he picked it up from his bed now. It was a picture of Juliet at the seaside, when she was about ten years old. She’d asked him for a picture of himself when he was younger, since she hadn’t known him then, and she’d promised to send one of herself also. She was very thin in the picture, frozen while waving to the person taking the picture with one hand while holding her hand over her eyes with the other, to shade them from the bright sun. She was next to a sand castle she’d evidently been working on. Bill stared at the picture, wondering whether, if he’d come across her on a beach when they were both ten, he’d suspect that she was a witch.

He dropped the picture and shoved the parchment under his pillow when Peggy suddenly burst into the room. At the back of his mind, a familiar thought formed. *Oh, no*, he groaned inwardly; *not again*.

“Oh B-b-bill!” she sobbed, throwing herself at him. She crawled into his lap and he held her tightly, rocking her back and forth and shushing her. It had been the same every morning since he’d been home for the Easter holiday. Each day she came running into his room, terrified by some dream she’d had in the night, and would spend the first half-hour of the day sobbing.

Charlie was woken by the noise now, and when he saw that it was Peggy again, he groaned and rolled over, put his pillow on top of his head, holding it in place with his arm. Bill looked down at Peggy with concern. “Pegs,” he said affectionately, drying her tears. “What’s going on? Why are you like this every morning since we’ve been home?” She hiccupped and wouldn’t say anything, ducking her head down below his chin. He sighed. “I think I should tell mum, so she—”

“No!” Peggy said suddenly. He was surprised by her vehement reaction.

“Why not?”

She sniffed deeply. "Because...it's Mum who does it. And I don't know *why*, because I thought she loved us...."

Bill sat up; this didn't sound like a bad dream anymore. *Oh, god...what's she Seen now?* he wondered. *Something our mum's going to do....*

"Sssh, Peggy. Mum would never do anything to hurt you, nor any of us..."

"Not hurt. And not all of us. Just me and Annie."

He shook his head. "What are you talking about? What do you think Mum is going to do to you and Annie?" He tried to be jocular about this. "Wizards don't do arranged marriages much anymore in this country, so that can't be it..."

Peggy just shook her head and then leaned her cheek on his chest. She put her little arms around his shoulders and said softly, "I'll miss you, Bill."

"Miss me! I'm going to be home again before you know it. The summer term will just speed by..."

She sniffed. "That's not what I mean," she said softly into his shirt. He held her bony little body against him, wondering what could be giving her such a fright. Peggy just wasn't like other children, and it was no good to try to gauge her behavior based on any other model. Even Annie was an open book compared to Peggy. Annie was always very clear about everything she thought or felt. And Annie didn't see tantalizing and sometimes terrifying glimpses of the future...

They sat quietly for a while, until their mother finally bellowed up the stairs, "What do I have to do to get you lot out of bed and down here for breakfast? Or were you all expecting room service?"

Bill grimaced; their mum had been very edgy lately. He wondered whether she'd been getting quite hacked off at Peggy, and now Peggy was terrified of her own mother. The twins were more of a handful than ever as they approached their first birthday. They'd been walking for a month, his mother had informed him, and getting into everything they shouldn't, despite their parents' precautions.

"Just when I think I have every possible thing shielded with a charm, they find something to get into..." his mother was saying just the night before, her head on her hand as she sat wearily at the kitchen table, drinking a rare cup of tea.

Their usual source of entertainment, however, was Percy. Within an hour of Bill and Charlie's arrival the previous Saturday, Percy, just over two-and-a-half now, was crying over his stuffed bear being spewed on by Fred, and several minutes later, his hair was being pulled mercilessly by a giggling George, who was clapping his hands over this even after their mother had taken poor Percy into her arms to cuddle and comfort him, after she cleaned Fred's sick off the bear. Even though they were more than a year younger than him, Percy always seemed to be the one bellowing because a toy he'd been playing with was plucked out of his hands or broken by one or both of the twins. Bill never saw the twins cry or look unhappy in any way; they seemed to live in a world of perpetual glee due to their having Percy to amuse them. Percy looked far less happy about this than they did, and their mother was clearly at her wit's end.

Bill kissed Peggy on the top of the head and packed her off to her room to get dressed. When she was gone, Charlie sat up on his elbows and asked, "Don't you think we ought to tell Mum and Dad about her? She's been in here every morning." He looked uncharacteristically serious for Charlie.

Bill shook his head. "Can you imagine talking to Mum about something like this right now? She'd bite the head off anyone who tried."

Charlie nodded as he threw back his bed covers. "Good point. God. I've spent the entire holiday just trying to find ways to avoid her. And the twins. Right little buggers, aren't they? Tell me again why Mum and Dad had them?"

Bill opened and closed bureau drawers, searching for clean socks. He sighed. "The theory was that the baby would be a mate for Percy. Not two little pests who would gang up on him."

"And Mum. I've never seen her so—"

"Yeah. I know."

They finished dressing in silence and descended the rickety, winding stairs to the Burrow's messy, comfortable kitchen. Everything was going along fine until, just as he was putting the last spoonful of porridge into his mouth, Annie, who'd been swinging her legs under the table, accidentally kicked Charlie in the shins.

"Hey!" he immediately responded, and before anyone knew what was happening, Charlie was using his spoon as a catapult to hurl a dollop of porridge at Annie.

"Charlie!" their mother exclaimed from the cooker, where she was watching a fork moving about by itself, scrambling some eggs for the twins. "Look what you've done!"

Annie had a sticky, gleaming bit of porridge in her fringe, dripping down onto her nose. The look she gave Charlie was murderous, and she picked up her own spoon now.

"But Mum!" Charlie protested. "She kicked me! Hey!" he added, as Annie's ammunition reached him. Now he had porridge in *his* hair.

"Charlie and Annie Weasley! I have enough to do around here without the pair of you giving me even more work!" She waved her wand at each of them, cleaning them up. Just then, the twins, on either side of Percy, each grabbed one of his hands and put his fingers in their respective mouths, biting with their new teeth. Percy's howls now filled the kitchen. Molly Weasley threw up her hands. She strode to the mantle and opened a small jar there and withdrew a wrinkled five-pound note.

"Here, Bill," she said, giving it to him. "The last bit of Muggle money I have on hand. Take Charlie, Annie and Peggy into the village for the day. You can use that to get some pasties for lunch. Go to Fillmore's, in the High Street. They're good." She looked very weary. Bill was amazed; he knew that five pounds in Muggle money was about one Galleon in wizarding money. He'd never had a Galleon in his possession in his entire life, nor its equivalent. His mother had carried the money when they'd shopped for their school things in Diagon Alley, and he'd been shocked by the fact that his wand was over six Galleons. It seemed like a fortune.

Suddenly, they all realized that Peggy was sitting at the table with tears streaming down her cheeks, her spoon half-way to her mouth, the porridge dribbling back into the bowl. "What's the matter with you?" their mother snapped at her impatiently. Bill winced; their mum *really* needed a holiday. It was just as well he and Charlie and the girls would be going to the village.

"P-please, Mummy. D-don't send us a-a-away!" she pleaded through her tears. Their mother looked even more impatient.

"Don't you start, now. You and Annie can play with some nice little Muggle girls in the park. The Muggle schools are also having their Easter holiday, so there should be plenty of children there. You're always saying you'd like to have other playmates..." she muttered as she took the eggs from the stove and divided them into two identical bowls and set them before the twins.

"B-but M-m-mummy," Peggy stuttered, her sobs making it almost impossible for her to speak, her eyes streaming.

"Not another word!" Molly Weasley said imperiously; Bill knew his mother wasn't going to budge. Peggy scrambled out of her chair and ran to her mother, throwing her arms around her waist.

"I don't want to go, Mummy! Don't make me go!" she sobbed into her mother's apron. Bill gently pried her fingers from the cloth and pulled her to him.

"It'll be fine, Pegs. We'll have a nice day out, some lovely pasties for lunch, and a beautiful park to play in. You like the swings, don't you? You're a great girl now; I'll teach you how to do it yourself..."

She looked at Bill with large blue eyes, very wet from crying. Looking in her eyes was like looking in a mirror for him. "I already know how," she said softly. "Learned last month, finally." Bill nodded; Annie had been teasing her for the better part of a year about not being able to use the swings without being pushed by someone; Annie had been able to do this since she was four.

"That's good! You can get more practice."

She looked up pleadingly at her mother one last time, but said nothing. Bill saw that his mother was softening somewhat. She stooped down and held Peggy's thin shoulders. "Tell you what, Peggy-pumpkin, I'll give you a cheering charm and you'll be right as rain and ready to enjoy a day out..." She waved her wand over her daughter and moments later, Peggy was smiling sunnily and skipping to the door, ready to go. Molly Weasley watched her. "I don't normally like to do that," she confided to Bill. "I think we should all be responsible for our own happiness, without resorting to charms to make us think we're happier than we are. But just this once..."

Bill smiled at his mother. "We'll all be fine. Try not to go mad while we're gone, yeah?"

She pecked him on the cheek. "Thank you—and you too, Charlie—" she added, "for taking the girls today. When the wee ones are napping I may actually be able to do the same..."

"Don't worry, Mum. We'll be home for tea," Bill told her. "Until then, you have four fewer people to worry about."

* * * * *

The weather was uncharacteristically warm and they had a fine day in the park. Charlie and Bill had made the acquaintance of some boys who were playing football, and Annie and Peggy spent most of their time on the swings and playing jump rope. They also met up with some Muggle girls who were pushing dolls in small prams, and soon all of the girls were sitting on a bench, changing the dolls' many outfits. Bill could usually see them out of the corner of his eye, when the football action wasn't too hectic.

As at Quidditch, Charlie proved a natural, but Bill kept forgetting not to touch the ball with his hands, like a Quaffle. The four of them went walking down the High Street just after noon and bought some pasties at the shop their mother had recommended, taking them back to the park

to eat, sitting on stone benches near the duck pond and throwing bits of crust to the ducks who begged the most adamantly.

The afternoon was much like the morning, except that Bill felt more like he was getting the hang of football. He glanced at the swings, where Annie and Peggy were moving in perfect synchronicity. Someone on the other team sped by him with the ball and he raced to intercept them, wishing he was on a broomstick. Another player, trying to do the same thing, wound up fouling the boy in possession of the ball. An older boy who was acting as referee blew a whistle and Bill turned again to look at his sisters, but he didn't see them this time. It was no more than a minute or two since he'd last looked, but now the swings they'd been on were swaying back and forth at exactly the same speed—only without his sisters.

Bill looked round the park quickly, spotting a number of other children, some of whom he'd seen playing with his sisters earlier. *I'll look in a minute, if they don't show up, which they probably will*, he thought. He turned and started running when his team's goalie caught the penalty kick; he felt great, running down the field, the spring air in his lungs. He didn't know when he'd had such a good day.

However, when the girls didn't rematerialize ten minutes later, Bill jogged over to where Charlie was. His brother wore on his face a grim combination of concentration and determination that Bill recognized from when Charlie played Quidditch. He was bobbing on the balls of his feet, watching his teammates passing the ball, then one of them dribbling toward him with it. Bill said his name repeatedly, but Charlie didn't seem to hear him. Finally, Bill took his shoulders and shouted in his face, "*Charlie!*"

The ball hit Bill in the back of the knee and he thought he was going to fall over; it had been kicked very hard and made his leg buckle for a moment. When the ball bounced off him it was intercepted by a player from the other team, who started toward the goal.

"Sod off, Bill! What do you think you're doing? You just made me miss that pass!"

"Annie and Peggy aren't where they were. It's been about ten minutes since I've seen them. We should look about."

Charlie looked like he couldn't believe this was the reason for what Bill had done. "Ten minutes? Are you mental? They probably went to play with some Mugg—I mean, some village girls. I'll bet they're all off somewhere dressing up their ruddy dolls..."

"Still—we should look," Bill insisted. Charlie glared at him, then turned with a sigh and called to the boy who was captaining their team, "We have to go! Have to look for my stupid little sisters!"

The other boy waved them on. "I know what you mean. I have *four* little sisters. S'okay. You still home from school tomorrow?"

"Yeah!"

"Come on down again. We'll all be here." The other boy, who had sandy hair and tan freckles, a slightly large nose and a good deal of acne, said wonderingly, "I can't believe you've never played football until today. I thought you said you go to boarding school? What boarding school doesn't have football?"

"Erm," Charlie said awkwardly. "I didn't say our school doesn't have football; I said *I'd* never played. Which is true." He also hadn't said that his school *had* football.

The sandy-haired boy grinned at him. "Well, when you get back, you should think about trying out for the team!"

Charlie gave Bill a sly smile. "I just might do that," he said. Bill wondered what the boy would do if he saw a Quidditch match. *As he's a Muggle, he'd probably drop dead in shock just from seeing people riding broomsticks.*

They started scouring the park for the girls, walking over every path, but did not find them. Near the swings Bill found one of Annie's hair ribbons, but nothing else.

"When's the last time you saw them?" Charlie asked Bill.

"Just before that penalty kick. They were on the swings."

Charlie looked thoughtful. "You know what *I'd* do..."

"What?"

"Let me finish. What *I'd* do if I were *them* is go home on my own, to make us look bad. I'll just bet that's what they did, and they're home now enjoying their tea and having a good laugh!"

Bill frowned. "I reckon they *might* be home. They certainly don't seem to be in the park." He sighed. "Let's go. You're probably right—I'll bet they went home without us."

They walked back to the Burrow, tired in a good playing-instead-of-working all day sort of way. They stumbled into the Burrow and Charlie immediately started bellowing, "All right, you little devils! Where are you hiding?"

"Ssssh!" their mother immediately hissed at him, from her rocker near the fire, where she was doing her own knitting for once. Although she said she found knitting relaxing, she rarely had the luxury of enough time to indulge in this, and they were accustomed to seeing her charmed knitting needles hovering above her basket of wool methodically knitting, knitting, knitting. They all had numerous jumpers their mother had made for them; for Christmas, Bill had received one in Gryffindor colors of red with a gold "B" on it. Charlie's jumper was ochre with a maroon "C" on it, which, with his red hair and brown eyes made him look very autumnal. "I have masses of maroon wool, but I hate the thought of making an entire sweater out of it," she had said when they'd been home at Christmas. "I expect that someday I might, but thankfully, I have a good supply of other colors until then..."

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, pausing in her knitting. "I've only just put the twins and Percy in their cots, and for once I've a little time to sit and enjoy the quiet." Somehow, Bill had suspected she wouldn't actually take a nap. "Where are the girls?"

Bill and Charlie looked at each other. "Erm," Bill said, taking it upon himself to answer, as he was the eldest. "We—we thought they were here. That they'd come back on their own. We—we couldn't find them in the park anywhere."

Their mother dropped her knitting and stood abruptly, so that the ball of wool that had been sitting on her lap went rolling across the floor. "You have to go back," she said tersely. "Go back and look some more. I'll contact your father."

Bill and Charlie looked at each other and swallowed. As they were leaving, they saw their mother toss some Floo powder into the kitchen fire and say clearly, "Arthur Weasley, Ministry of Magic, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

Bill and Charlie ran back to the village, barely pausing to catch their breaths. It was the hour of the day when most of the villagers had their tea, it seemed, and there was almost no one on the street. A lone car went through the roundabout they needed to go past to get to the park; it seemed to be moving very fast when it was in fact going rather slowly, a concession to the curve. To Bill, all Muggle automobiles went far too fast. They unnerved him. He'd almost leapt into Charlie's arms when they'd been walking down the High Street to get their pasties and a very fast red convertible had sped by, almost clipping his heels as he scrambled for the pavement.

"You don't suppose—could they have been hit by an automobile?"

Charlie rolled his eyes. "There would have been a bit of a fuss if two girls were hit by a car, don't you think? Please-men and ambulances and so on. We'd have heard those noises the please-cars and ambulances make. And Bill, can you say car' like the Muggles, please? Do you want to make all of the Muggles think you're weird, even *without* knowing you're a wiz—"

"Ssssh!" Bill hissed at him. "While you're at it, could you not mention what *we* are, and stop using the "M" word? You should talk, when it comes to Mug—erm, terms used by people who aren't like us. At least *some* people in Ottery St. Catchpole probably still say 'automobile'. I doubt anyone says 'please-men'. It's 'policemen', stupid, not 'please men'." His head hurt and he felt like he was being distracted by the nit-picking the two of them were doing. "Bloody hell, Charlie, we have to think! Where could they be?"

Charlie looked weary and somewhat guilty. "I don't know, Bill. I wish—I wish we'd paid better attention to them..."

Bill nodded grimly. "Me too. Okay, you take the half over by the duck pond, I'll take the area from the swings to the other edge of the park. Give a yell if you find *anything*, any clue at all."

"Right," Charlie said, moving off, looking like he wished he could do so wand in hand. Bill flexed his right hand, also feeling like it was empty and wishing there was no Restriction on Underage Magic. He strode toward the swings and began looking for some indication of what had happened to his sisters.

* * * * *

"So—what do you think?"

Lily looked at James anxiously. He bit his lip. "A bit smarmy. Do we have to have some bloke who thinks he's Sumatra—?"

"*Sinatra*. Sumatra is a place. And yes; I want to dance with my dad to his favorite Sinatra tune. What can I say? Mum and dad raised me to love the music they love, and that means a lot of standards from the fifties and late forties, including some big band music. We'll have some more contemporary Muggle music as well. They do tunes from the nineteen-forties up to and including disco, they claim." She sighed. "It seems that Mum and Dad are inviting everyone with whom they ever went to school or uni, plus a number of people Mum has met when she's been in hospital.. And some of their friends' kids, as well. So don't worry—we won't just have ancient music."

"But-but-none of this is ever heard on the Wizarding Wireless!" James said, holding up the cassette tape to which he and Lily had just been listening.

"Yes, well—we'll just have to live with that," she said with only a slight shake in her voice as she tried to suppress her laughter. James was being completely serious, and she couldn't bear to hurt him.

He sighed. "I reckon we will. All right, they don't sound *too* bad. The girl who sang some of the songs was good. At least she's not pretending to be someone else, like the phony Sinatra fellow."

"Actually, I rather thought she was trying to sound like Rosemary Clooney, and sometimes Ella Fitzgerald. She didn't quite pull it off, but few people can do that..."

"She sounded like *who*?"

She smiled at him. "Just ask my dad. He can show you his record collection. He's nurtured it since he was fifteen. Honest. Mum thinks that if there was a fire, he'd get all of his precious vinyl discs out of the place first and then ask after us."

James looked horrified. "That's awful!"

Lily looked at him as though he were daft. "I was *kidding*, James. It's just—to show how much he loves those records." James looked like he felt rather foolish. "At any rate, I think we have a lovely band for our reception now. All right, we already have the music taken care of for the ceremony...I assume your groomsmen will be Sirius, Remus and Peter?"

James shrugged. "Probably. Peter finally wrote back last week, after I sent him six owls. Funny thing is, he still didn't say where he is, just that he will definitely meet us at the tailor to have the suits measured and fitted, and also be at the rehearsal and wedding."

She wagged her eyebrows at him. "And your party."

He frowned at her. "What party?"

She rolled her eyes. "Only the party Sirius is probably going to throw for you. Don't worry—I'm quite secure. I don't think a last night of debauchery will ruin you for marriage..."

"Debauchery! What do you think I'm going to do?"

"You? Oh, it's not you I'm worried about. It's Sirius. He'll probably get completely pissed. You'll be the one holding *him* up during the ceremony, no doubt. When you can't do it, he can lean against Remus," she grinned mischievously. "Just—I think you should brace yourself. This is *Sirius*. I'd be prepared for him to throw a *very* risqué party—"

There was a sudden knock on the door and her father's voice called, "Lily!" Lily jumped and James quickly pulled on his Invisibility Cloak; he was planning to spend the night and her parents didn't know—for obvious reasons. They didn't even know he was in the house. Sometimes it seemed very odd to him that she was nineteen, working as an Auror and living with her parents still, but it also didn't seem worth it for her to get a flat of her own when they were marrying at the summer solstice and would be living together soon enough.

When he was concealed by the cloak, Lily opened her bedroom door wide, so her father had a good view of the apparently empty room, just in case he should wonder. "Yes, Dad?"

"Erm, there's someone here to see you, Lily," he said uncertainly. He stepped aside and Lily could see Sam Bell standing there, carrying his wizarding robes over his arm. Her father leaned close to her. "*Are you certain you should be entertaining a gentleman caller when you're engaged to be married?*" he asked her, *sotto voce*.

Lily reddened. Under his cloak, James seethed. "I work with Sam, Dad. He's another Auror. He helped train me. I told you I helped his wife deliver their daughter, remember?"

Sam nodded to Mr. Evans. "I'm here on business. Is there a sitting room or some other place downstairs where we could talk, Lily?" he said, turning a little red himself, perhaps at the thought of speaking to her in her bedroom.

"Of course," she said, starting to leave the room. "Let's go to the kitchen."

"Bring your robes," he told her. Then he turned and said, "On second thought, don't. We'll be going to a Muggle village—"

"Going?" Lily said, frowning. "I worked all day at the Ministry, standing around doing *nothing* but holding my wand ready during three Death Eater trials where the accused looked like they'd already received the Kiss and were about as likely to try to escape as the people they were accused of killing. My feet are dying; I can't believe how exhausting it is to simply stand at attention for hours on end. I just arrived home a little while ago—"

Sam looked very grim. "I'll explain when we get downstairs. Everyone's being recalled, no matter how recently they've worked. Believe me—you won't be standing still."

Lily's heart was in her throat. "Oh my god. Is it—You-Know-Who?"

Sam looked sideways at Mr. Evans; something about his expression made her father clear his

throat and say, "Well, I'll just be getting back to my newspaper—" He jogged downstairs hurriedly. Lily thought her father had both looked curious about what was going on and about what Sam might do to him to get him to leave if he didn't go on his own.

Lily felt James brush past her in the doorway and when she and Sam were walking down the stairs she was aware of him also descending, several steps behind her. They went into the kitchen and Lily took a bottle of ginger beer from the fridge and offered one to Sam. He took a long swig while she was opening one for herself.

"Thanks," he said with feeling. "We're about to be involved in thirsty work, so it's good we're having this now. Oh, and don't you think you had better get one out for James?"

Lily practically spit out her mouthful of ginger beer. She only just managed to swallow. "J-james?"

Sam gestured around the room with his bottle. "Not sure where he is in the room, but I know he's here. Where'd you get the Invisibility Cloak, old boy? Nice, that. Wouldn't mind one myself, if a long-lost relative died and left me a fortune..."

James sheepishly lifted up the cloak so Sam could see him. "My Aunt Othalie gave it to me. She decided she didn't need it any more. Is that part of Auror training? Being able to detect people in Invisibility Cloaks?"

Sam grinned. "It's part of one's training to be very alert to what's going on around you, and not trusting what you see on the surface, necessarily. I heard very small inexplicable noises, and Lily obviously knew about you; the way she's been behaving and sometimes looking in the direction of the noises rather tipped me off. As I couldn't imagine her letting anyone *else* hang about in her bedroom in an Invisibility Cloak, not to mention anyone else she wouldn't want her dad to know about—a girlfriend wouldn't be likely—I narrowed it down to you pretty quickly."

"Speaking of my dad not knowing, I'd like James to cover up again, to play it safe."

James did, but he also said, "I think Sam had a good idea, though. I could do with something to drink."

She removed another bottle from the fridge and a disembodied hand reached out and plucked it from her; the hand and the bottle promptly disappeared again.

"So what's going on?" Lily asked, feeling a chill move through her, and not because of her cold drink.

"Everyone's being called out to search for two little girls who've gone missing. They're from a wizarding family, obviously. They also happen to be the only daughters of a Ministry department head—he runs Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, and because of that he's raided a number of Death Eaters' homes and confiscated contraband which has landed them in a lot of trouble—one of those raids led to the trial you saw this afternoon."

"The Murphys? But during the testimony, the man who said he raided their home was—" Her heart leaped into her throat. "Arthur Weasley. And he had bright red hair, and was very tall—"

James saw the appalled look on her face as she put her hand to her heart.

"What's wrong, Lily?" Sam said, mystified by her reaction.

"Oh, James!" she said, turning to where she thought he was and throwing caution to the wind. "He must be Bill and Charlie Weasley's dad! So that means—"

"—that means the missing girls are their sisters," James finished for her, thinking of the boys he had known from school, the boys whose family was now ripped apart...

Lily turned to Sam, trying not to fall apart but retain some semblance of professionalism. "We—we went to school with two Weasley boys. How old were—are—their sisters?"

Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out a small notebook. "The older girl is Annabel Weasley, called Annie. Born the first of September, nineteen-seventy. She stands four feet three inches, weighs about four stone and has blue eyes. When last seen she was wearing her bright orange hair in two braids just past her shoulders, and sported a blue skirt, white blouse and green cardigan, with white socks as high as the ankle and brown brogans. She had blue hair ribbons on the ends of her braids; one hair ribbon is the only trace that's been found of her. The other girl is Margaret Weasley, called Peggy. Born the first of November, nineteen seventy-two. She is three feet eight inches, weighs about three stone, and also has blue eyes. When last seen her chin length bright orange hair was pulled back with a silver-colored hair clip on the right side of her head, to keep it off her face. The clothing she was wearing was a brown gingham dress with short-sleeves, a faun-colored cardigan, ankle-high white socks and dirty beige trainers. She is currently missing her left front tooth. No artifacts have been found from the younger girl."

Lily drank her ginger beer while Sam recited the information, unable to not picture Bill and Charlie Weasley, and also their father, whom she had seen just that afternoon, testifying staunchly about the way he was attacked when he raided the house of the accused, who had tried to put

Cruciatus on him. Evidently he received this sort of reception quite a lot, and she had marveled at his nerve. Certainly he was encountering more danger as a Ministry department head than she was as an Auror. She wondered now who had decided to get revenge on him...

"Do they think it was someone getting back at Arthur Weasley? For a raid?"

Sam shook his head. "We don't know. The girls were last seen in a park in the village of Ottery St. Catchpole, in Devon. It's near Exeter. We're to scour every inch of the village for signs of what happened to the girls, or of the girls themselves."

"Do you—do you have a picture of them?"

He nodded and took out a copy that had been made of a picture the Weasleys had provided to the Ministry. Lily stared down at the girls, kneeling on the floor next to a Christmas tree with presents under it; they were excitedly holding up their presents for the photographer to see; the older girl was shaking the box she was holding and sometimes putting her ear to it, to listen to what it sounded like when she shook it. They looked happy and innocent, an excited light in their sparkling blue eyes. They were still in their dressing gowns, their red hair standing up on their heads as though they had just tumbled out of bed and run downstairs to see what Father Christmas had brought them...

Lily handed it back to Sam, trying very hard not to cry. "I'm ready to go," she said, hoping her voice sounded hard, rather than like she was about to break down.

"So am I," James said from under his cloak.

Sam shook his head in the direction of James' voice. "You don't have to do this; it's not your job."

"You need everyone you can get looking for those girls. I can do it in my cloak and stick with Lily, if you like. I didn't have to tell you I was coming; I could have just done it..."

Sam grimaced. "All right, all right. Because of what it is—you can come. If someone's made off with them, we need to find the trail before it grows cold. But you're going to have to get used to the idea that most of the time, you won't be able to follow Lily around while she's working. She won't always be standing guard at Ministry trials. You're going to have to get used to her being an Auror."

"It's not that I don't want to leave Lily alone, although I reckon I won't need to worry about her as much if I'm nearby. I like Bill and Charlie Weasley. They're good lads. I'm sure they get it from their dad. If there's anything I can do to find their sisters, I'll do it. Weasley was only doing his job, raiding Death Eaters' houses. He doesn't deserve this..."

"And their mother!" Lily cried, wiping an errant tear from her cheek. "She must be going mad!"

Sam nodded. "You could say that. All right. Now, we can't Apparate right into the village; it's already very crowded with witches and wizards looking for the girls. We're going to Apparate to the garden of the Weasley house and then walk into the village. It's called the Burrow, and it's on a road about a twenty-minute walk out of Ottery St. Catchpole in a southwesterly direction. Got all that?"

Lily closed her eyes and concentrated. She opened her eyes again and nodded at Sam. "Got it. I'm ready."

"Ready," came James' voice from under his cloak.

Lily closed her eyes and took her wand out of the holster she wore strapped to her left forearm. She thought about the Burrow, and about it being a mile southwest of Ottery St. Catchpole. She thought about the village being in Devon. She pictured Devon on a map of England, imagined herself flying high over the landscape, the rolling hills and trees passing too quickly to be really seen....Taking a deep breath, she waved her wand and thought all of these things very strongly, feeling the tingling all over her body. She knew she was traveling along some indescribably fluid dimension where she was thought, all thought, and then as her thoughts turned to her own body and clothes, and again, the location that was her destination, she felt the tingling again, more strongly, as she appeared with a *pop!* in the garden outside the Burrow, where Arthur Weasley lived, and where his daughters should be now, but were not.

After Lily had her bearings, she looked around at the rickety house, at the homely vegetable garden, and thought what a lovely place it looked like to grow up. She turned to Sam. "Should we keep our wands out, do you think?"

Sam shook his head, replacing his in the holster. "No; we'll be searching a Muggle village. If you need to do some magic, make it as subtle as possible, and wandless if you can manage it. So, nothing fancy, obviously. You there, James?"

"I'm here," came the disembodied voice.

Without another word, the three of them set off for the village to join in the search for the missing Annie and Peggy Weasley.

* * * * *

"Can I sit down?" Annie whined; her brogans were very sturdy and probably would have lasted long enough to hand down to Peggy, but they weren't necessarily designed to be comfortable when walking mile after mile on the road to Exeter from Ottery St. Catchpole.

Peter Pettigrew looked at the girl, wondering for a moment why he was doing this instead of just killing them, as he'd been told. *It's because I'm not a murderer*, he reminded himself. Annie Weasley, however, was making it more and more difficult to resist temptation...

Peggy Weasley was another story. She had an easier time with the walking, no doubt, because she was wearing trainers. They looked like they'd already been owned by other Weasleys and were quite worn, but still more appropriate to a long walk than her sister's shoes. "My sister's tired," the little girl said to Peter, who nodded and led them to a low wall bordering a cottage's front garden. Annie sighed as she sat, and Peggy sat next to her, looking up uncertainly at the man who had brought them thus far.

Peter drew his mouth into a line and sat on the low wall a few feet away from them. His heart seemed to be pounding very loudly in his chest and he wished he knew how long they'd been walking, but he didn't own a watch—which he wasn't even sure would help—and there was no one in the world he could ask. He looked at the cars sitting in the street, the people behind the wheels frozen in a moment of time, talking to other people in the car, drinking something from a paper cup with a plastic lid, glancing to the left to see if a safe turn was possible...

He and the two Weasley girls were the only people in the entire world moving at this moment in time. He hadn't really been sure what was going to happen when he cast the spell; all he knew was that it would allow him and anyone else he included in the spell to move very fast, move between milliseconds, really. The Death Eater who'd given him his task had taught it to him. Peter had never heard of it.

He wished for the millionth time that he hadn't left Hogwarts after following Bill Weasley into the forest. But he needed a drink; he just couldn't cope with what he'd learned without *something*. Although his first thought, upon realizing that he was probably the first Moonchild, was that he had a duty to uphold if You-Know-Who was ever going to be defeated, his second thought, when he returned to the castle was *No. I can't. I just can't...*

He'd gone back and forth, and finally decided that he couldn't stand one more day cooped up in Booth's wardrobe, waiting for the boy to bring him scraps of food. He needed to get out and walk as a man again. Not to mention that it was getting increasingly unnerving that owls kept bringing him post in the fourth-year dorm. Luckily, the post came at the same time for him as for the other students: during breakfast. None of the boys were in the dorm at that time, so they didn't see the owls scabbling at the closed window, trying to get in to deliver their letters. Each time, he'd run to the door to check that no one was still hanging about, then he'd furtively changed back to his human body and opened the window, hurriedly taking the parchment from the owl and tossing out the bird again, as he had no food for it. Most of the letters he'd received were from James, asking him about his intention to participate in his and Lily's wedding as a groomsman. The idea made him sick, but he knew it was expected of him.

After James had sent a half-dozen letters, he'd finally managed to find a moment when he could nick some parchment from one of the boys and scribble out a reply. It was a more complicated maneuver to take it up to the Owlery and mail it. First he had to evade Filch's mangy cat on the way there, which was no mean feat as his secret wall-passages did not reach all the way up to that particular tower. He didn't dare walk about the castle in his human form, so he had no choice but to go there as a rat. Once there, he knew he would have to change quickly and enter the room in his human form, as he didn't dare enter the owls' lair as a rat. He'd have been an owl feast within seconds if he'd done that. In the end, he transfigured back into a human just before he entered the Owlery, after going there very early in the morning. He tried going late at night once and discovered that the birds were all out hunting overnight.

After returning from the forest, Peter knew he had to get out of the castle or go mad. Finally, he left under cover of night, scampering to the village (going from shrub to shrub along the road to Hogsmeade, to evade the many school owls that were out hunting) then furtively changing to his human form before Apparating to a wizarding pub he knew in Norfolk, near his mother's home. He should go to see his mother, he knew. But he needed a drink first, and he needed to ponder his next step. If he was in a Prophecy, was there anything to be done? Or was he just plain stuck?

Maybe the Centaur was wrong, he thought. *Maybe I'm not the Moonchild. Just because I'm a Cancer...Just because I've had some dreams...There are loads of other people who are Cancers, too. It might be someone else...*

He was on his second pint of stout at the pub, staring into his glass, trying to work out what

to do, when it happened. Suddenly the door of the pub burst in and a band of seven Death Eaters entered, all wearing masks and hooded cloaks that hid their hair color. They started shooting curses left and right and Peter scrambled under the bar, putting the stool where he'd been sitting between him and the attackers, although it offered precious little protection. The Death Eater who strode toward him and yanked the stool out of his hands was laughing. Across the room, Peter could hear people howling in agony as they suffered the Cruciatus Curse. *Oh god oh god oh god*, Peter thought desperately. *Why did I leave Hogwarts? If I hadn't I'd be sleeping safe and sound in Booth's wardrobe right now...*

He held up his hands in supplication; he didn't want to find out what Cruciatus was like, having heard the cries of the other people in the pub. "Don't curse me, please! I-I can tell you something! I have information You-Know-Who may like to have—about a Prophecy concerning his fall!"

He wasn't sure what made him do it; perhaps it was because the moment he started begging with the Death Eater, he also thought, *And why in the world shouldn't he curse me? He's a Death Eater—it's what he does. What could I possibly say to convince him to do otherwise?*

And the Prophecy had just popped out.

The Death Eater lowered his wand; Peter could tell he'd said just the right thing. *Oh god*, he thought. *I'm part of the Prophecy. Possibly. What if he just kills me once he finds out?*

For even though he'd never felt he had any particular destiny until hearing Peggy Weasley pronounce the words of the Prophecy, he suddenly had an incredible urge to *live*. A primal survival instinct took hold of his faculties and said *Live, Peter. Do whatever you have to do to live.*

And so, in the midst of a pub rife with people screaming while being tortured and Death Eaters randomly destroying furniture, shards of glass flying everywhere as the liquor supply was blasted by some destructive Death Eater urge, just because they thought it was fun, Peter found himself being questioned by the faceless Death Eater who had refrained from cursing him when he'd mentioned the Prophecy.

"When was this Prophecy given?" Peter heard him say above the din.

"L-last November. At Hogwarts. The Divination professor did it—Professor Trelawney." There. Blame the old cow, as Bill had wanted to tell him in the letter that kept coming back. Peter knew everything that was in it anyway because Bill had read it aloud to Charlie to ask his opinion of it. Peter described the players in the Prophecy: the Lion, the Moonchild, the Daughter of War. The Death Eater nodded and Peter could see his eyes glittering through the slits in his mask.

"What use is this to me?" the Death Eater spat when Peter was done. "You've told me nothing. Who *are* the actual people in the Prophecy?" Peter opened his mouth and shut it again. The Death Eater moved closer to him and held his wand to his chest. "You know something else, don't you? Do you need some—gentle persuasion?"

"I—um—that is—" Peter fumbled about, feeling like he was going to spew. *Don't say anything about Lily. Don't say anything about Lily...*

"Well, um, I went to this Centaur about it, since they're interested in such things, but he couldn't or wouldn't tell me much..."

The Death Eater nodded. "Centaur's are like that..." he agreed, sounding less threatening now. He waved his hand at a stool that had miraculously been left intact by the other Death Eaters, who seemed intent on destroying the pub utterly. Peter ducked as a bottle went flying directly at his head; it flew over the bar and smashed against a mirror on the wall, which was already splintered and crazed, reflecting the wrecked room at irregular angles. The Death Eater put his hand on the bar and lithely leaped over it; he found an unbroken glass and pulled a pint for Peter. Although Peter had been drinking stout, not ale, he took the drink. Another crash behind him caused Peter to whirl, to see what had happened. A table lay splintered against the door to the pub, so no one could leave or enter. He turned back to the Death Eater who was, amazingly enough, still not hexing him. He lifted the ale to drink it just as the Death Eater asked him, "What's your name?"

Peter paused before he drank and considered his answer. He would tell the truth—and yet not. "My friends call me Wormtail," he said, then took a sip of the ale, hoping it would make him drunk enough to not care about the pain if the Death Eater decided to curse him after all.

The Death Eater put both hands on the bar and leaned very close to Peter's face. "All right then, *Wormtail*, tell me something that the Centaur said about the Daughter of War."

Peter swallowed the ale with some effort, as his throat was very tight. *Think, Peter, think. Tell him something, anything, but not the truth. Tell him—*

"The Centaur said a Daughter of War would come from the Weasley family."

Damn! Why had he said that? He hadn't meant to. Yes, he was trying to draw off the Death Eater by mentioning the Prophecy, but he hadn't meant to mention the Weasleys. Or Lily. He hoped he managed *not* to mention Lily. He looked down suddenly at his drink; while he didn't normally

request ale, he had drunk it before and knew what it should taste like. There was something odd about this ale. Something off...

Veritaserum.

Peter's throat felt even tighter. Oh god, he had to get out of here before the Death Eater wormed anything else out of him. He really hadn't meant to say anything about the Weasleys. Could he take it back? He didn't think so; the Veritaserum would not enable him to lie while it was in effect. When had the Death Eater put it into his drink? While the glass was still down below the bar or when he'd turned to see the shattered table at the entrance to the pub? He didn't dare change into a rat and have everyone present see that he was an Animagus, and he wasn't sure whether he could Apparate while he was so agitated; he would likely splinch himself.

"Interesting, very interesting..." the Death Eater said. He suddenly turned to a Death Eater nearby who was having fun seeing what happened if he pointed his wand at all of the taps, making them spill all over the floor behind the bar. The pub was stinking like a combination distillery and brewery from all of the broken liquor bottles and spilled beer.

"You, there. Watch this one until I get back. I have something important to tell our Master. Oh, and he hasn't experienced the Cruciatus Curse yet. Can you take care of it for me? I'll be back."

Peter frowned at the way the Death Eater was so casual about this, as though he were some sort of normal businessman having to go see his boss and delegating some responsibility for which he had no time to an underling. Before the first Death Eater had Apparated away, the second one turned to Peter and, without warning, pointed his wand and cried, "*Crucio!*"

Peter toppled off the stool, knowing now why the people around him in the pub had been screaming so. He felt like his internal organs were set on fire, like a vulture was picking out his liver, like cannibals were feasting on his body....There was no way to process all of the pain, all the many varieties of it. Stabbing, slashing, fiery pain; hitting, crushing, twisting pain. It moved through his body incessantly, never pausing, never giving him any respite. He heard himself screaming and it didn't seem to be him, it seemed to be someone else, some other person crying out from the depths of hell....

After an a few minutes that were an eternity, the Death Eater finally stopped cursing him. Peter stayed where he was on the floor, wondering whether he was dead. *That would simplify matters*, he thought. And yet—he knew right away that he wasn't dead. The first Death Eater had returned; he stood over Peter, arms akimbo.

"Well, well, well. Now you know what will happen if you do not obey the order you are about to receive. Not very nice, is it? For giving the Dark Lord such *useful* information, I am authorized to extend to you an invitation to join us, the glorious ranks of those who serve the Dark Lord, the Death Eaters. But we do not invite just anyone; you must first prove yourself loyal to our Master."

Peter trembled. "*How can I be a Death Eater?*"

"What do you mean *how can you be a Death Eater?*"

Oh, god, thought Peter. *Did I say that out loud?*

"I mean," Peter said quickly, "with all due respect, I wasn't the most brilliant student in my year or anything like that. Many times I barely scraped by. I just mean—I would think the Dark Lord would want someone more *talented* than me..."

The Death Eater laughed. "Oh, good try! Now tell me how you have an appointment to have your teeth cleaned next week, so you're unable to meet with him and accept a position as a Death Eater...."

Without warning, he pointed his wand and uttered the curse and pain shot through Peter again. He howled at the top of his lungs, wishing he were dead. Abruptly, the pain left him once more and he remained on the pub's tile floor; suddenly he couldn't stop himself and he turned and spewed onto the dirty tiles until he had nothing else he could heave out of his body.

"Hmph," the Death Eater said scornfully. "Lying there in a puddle of your own sick when you could be a servant of the Dark Lord. You may not think you are a very talented wizard, but how much talent do you need to get rid of two little girls?"

Peter whipped his head around and stared at the mask, wishing he could see the face behind it.

"Get rid of—"

"Yes. That is the task you must perform. When you have done that successfully, you will have shown your loyalty to our Master and will be deemed a good servant. And don't get any ideas about not doing it, thinking they'll be safe. If you don't do it, someone else will. *And* if you don't do it—you will be tracked down....And you will think that what you have experienced today is a holiday," he said ominously.

Peter tried to swallow. "All—all right," he stuttered out, just so the pain would stop coming

and coming. He would figure out some way of protecting the girls later, some way to warn their parents.... "As-as I said," he reminded the Death Eater, "I wasn't the best student in school....Do you have any suggestions for how I might do it? How I might get to them without being caught?"

And the Death Eater had puffed himself up importantly and told Peter about the Tempus Fugit spell....

Finally, the "festivities" were winding down and the Death Eaters were leaving. Peter's companion put his wand to Peter's chest before he left.

"I'll be in touch," he said simply before Disapparating. Peter slumped against the bar, heaving a sigh of relief. The pub around him was something to behold; it looked like there had been a war, which there had been, Peter reckoned. He stood up shakily and walked around the bar; no one took any notice of him, as no one had evidently taken any notice of his conversation with the Death Eater. He pulled a pint for himself from a tap that hadn't been emptied and drank it in one gulp. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he tried to concentrate on Apparating to his mother's house....

"Where are we?" Peggy Weasley asked him.

"Exeter," he said shortly.

She nodded, then said, "Why?"

Why indeed? Peter thought. He'd returned to Hogwarts after a brief visit with his mother and then went back to living in the Gryffindor dorms—this time with the second-year boys, and he avoided being seen this time, even though not being someone's pet meant he had to scrounge for his own food. He listened carefully to everything Charlie Weasley said about his family, but no useful information seemed to be forthcoming from him. He didn't want to risk Booth making him a pet again, so he didn't return to the fourth years' dorm. Then, not long before the Easter holiday, Charlie provided him with the idea...

"I don't know how I'm going to stand my little sister for a whole week," he said to an Asian-looking boy who had the bed next to his. "Annie, that is. A little *more* than a week, actually. She's such a brat these days. Drove me mad during the Christmas holiday. I wish one of our cousins would ask her to visit or something, or just make off with her...My Aunt Meg likes her. Too bad she doesn't just go off to live with *her*..."

That's it, Peter thought from his hiding place under the bed. *I was told to get rid of them. Not to kill them....*

He remembered the Tempus Fugit spell the Death Eater had shown him; if he ever wanted to live as anything other than a rat again, he would have to do this, or risk being tracked down and killed—probably after a fair amount of torture. The girls wouldn't be with their family any more, but it didn't sound like the second-year boy would consider the one named Annie to be any great loss anyway. He vaguely remembered her from the day her younger sister had pronounced the Prophecy. He could take them away to a new home... A memory charm on each of them would take care of their remembering their old lives, and he'd heard there was a spell for owl-proofing people, so they could no longer receive owl post. He didn't know what it was, but he could sneak into the library and look it up.

He wasn't sure where the Weasleys lived, so he decided to stow away in Charlie's trunk when he went home for the holiday, after discreetly chewing a small hole in one corner of the dilapidated old piece of luggage, so he would be able to breathe. *This won't be so bad,* he thought. *I'll find some place nearby, with some Muggles, where no one would think to look for them...They'll begin new lives instead of being killed by Death Eaters....They'll be fine....*

He had to reassure himself about his plan frequently, and very nearly changed his mind up to the very moment when he'd cast the Tempus Fugit spell in the park and gently lifted the girls from the swings; he deposited each of them on a bench and then included them in the spell. They blinked, obviously surprised to be on a park bench instead of on the swings, but he tried to alleviate their fears right away by saying that their father had sent him to get them, to take them away because they were in danger and they needed to be somewhere safe...

The older girl had not believed him at first. She nodded at her brothers, frozen while playing football with some village boys, and said, "But they'll be worried when they've found that we're gone. And Mum will go mad, too!"

Peter shook his head. "Your father told me that that couldn't be helped. He doesn't want anyone else to know so that they can't tell what happened to you if they are given Veritaserum."

Peggy looked up at him, swallowing. "Is this because of that Prophecy?"

Peter looked at her, shocked. "How—how did you know?" He felt flustered, and he'd let his guard down for a moment. He was unaccustomed to being around children.

The small girl shrugged. "It makes sense." She turned to her sister. "I'm sorry, Annie," she said,

sniffing a little. "This is all my fault..."

Annie was belligerent. "It's *not* your fault Dad is hiding us. It's *his* fault. He's probably worried that if you stay, we'll all be attacked. If just you disappear, someone who thinks you're me could still attack the family, so he has to pack off all of the girls." She looked very cross and yet also like she might cry any minute. "Where are we going?" she asked Peter thickly.

"To Exeter. I found a lovely place run by some very nice ladies. They're nuns, and they'll take good care of you and keep you safe until it's all right for you to come home again. No one will find you there."

"What about school?" Peggy asked suddenly.

"Erm," Peter hesitated. "You'll go to school with Muggle children. It's just temporary."

Peggy nodded; she should have known that her mother would never do anything dreadful to her; her mother didn't even know her father had arranged for them to be sent off to a safe place. She thought sadly of her mother for a minute; her mother would miss them, she knew. But hopefully they would soon be reunited. A sixth sense prickled at the back of her brain. Somehow she *knew* this would happen, but she didn't know why...

"We're in Exeter," Peter told Peggy, "because this is where you'll be living for a while."

They walked past people frozen in mid-step, down street after street, until they finally reached the hospital and orphanage complex where Peter had watched the kindly nuns, day after day, finally determining that they would take good care of the girls and keep them safe. He'd then returned to the Burrow, where he'd lain in wait until the perfect opportunity presented itself. And then—that morning he'd nearly been killed. It was bad enough trying to get to the owlery at Hogwarts in his rat form without Filch's mangy cat chasing after him; but at the Burrow he had to live in garden gnome holes, and then when he poked his nose out of a hole early in the morning because of a loud noise, he'd seen a very determined barn owl battering itself against one of the upper windows of the house until Bill Weasley had opened the casement to retrieve his post. As soon as the bird flew away from the window, it turned and dove at the garden, and Peter had fled into the depths of the warren of tunnels. He was starting to wonder how he was going to get out to execute his plan; in a few days the older boys would be going back to Hogwarts and the younger girls would be going back to the Hogsmeade school for most of every day. The time to do this was during the holiday. And then, when he'd seen the four older children leaving the house and walking toward the village, he knew that this was his lucky day....

It had felt like they'd been traveling for at least five hours—perhaps it was even an entire day—whereas the world around them had not even advanced a single second since the moment he had removed the girls from the swings. Peter took them into the building and to the children's ward. "Now then; we need to give you a reason to be here...."

He took the Tempus Fugit spell off them and then put spells on them to make them look like they'd been in terrible accidents. He also performed the spell he had researched that would make it impossible for them to receive post owls. Then he ducked behind a screen and took the Tempus Fugit spell off himself and magically cut a small hole in the bottom of the wall. He immediately changed into his rat form, hoping the nuns wouldn't see him and scream. He scampered into the hole to watch and wait.

Instead, they screamed over finding the two girls who appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Peter managed to find his way through the walls to the room where they took Peggy, by following the voices. Once there, he found a loose knothold in the wooden skirting at the bottom of the wall; he final emerged under a bed, seeing feet in sturdy black shoes moving about purposefully. When the shoes left, Peter emerged, and after determining that no one else was around, he returned to his human form and then transfigured his clothes so that they looked like the things he had seen the doctors wearing. Peggy was sleeping peacefully, no doubt exhausted by her long walk to Exeter, although it was only ten minutes since he'd removed her from the park. Her brothers might not have noticed they were missing yet, and she was safe and sound, miles away in a place they would never think to look. He still had some things to do, though, before he left.

"*Obliviate!*" he said, pointing his wand at her. She convulsed in her bed momentarily, as he put a very strong spell on her, designed to wipe out memories of most of her six-and-a-half years. He worried that she might wake, but she did not. He pocketed his wand and took one more look at her before leaving her room. Now he only needed to wipe Annie's memory clean and give some of the nuns false memories, so they would think the girls showed up when they did because they were in a car accident.

He wandered the halls of the hospital, unquestioned in his doctor's garb, receiving deferential nods from the nuns who passed him. He surreptitiously checked in this room and that until he found where they'd taken Annie; She was also fast asleep, not a hair on her head showing. It was

still light out and evidently she'd pulled the covers over her to sleep in utter darkness. He closed the door and pointed at her sleeping form, again saying, "*Obliviate!*"

He let himself out quietly and went to find the nuns. He had done his job; he was told to get rid of the girls, and he'd done just that—but not in the way the Death Eater had probably meant. Still—a hue and cry would go up about the missing girls and it would *seem* that he had killed them. He would let You-Know-Who believe that. Maybe then nothing would happen to Lily...

He just had one more thing to do; he had to go to Leicestershire, to the house where Lily used to live. He remembered her talking about the nice people her parents had found to rent their old house, the people who had lost their only daughter to cancer. *I know it's an Unforgivable Curse*, he thought, *but putting Imperius on them to make them want to give two little girls a home is hardly in the same class with making people do horrid things...* He was rather proud of himself for thinking of this last detail. He was going to see to it that the girls had a good home, and even that they were together. He wasn't a bad person, he thought. It was all for the best. The Weasleys would only have gone through something similar but worse had the girls been killed, and if he hadn't done it, someone else would have. It was all for the best, really...

After the door to Annie's room closed, she crept out from the screen in the corner where she'd been putting her clothes on again, planning to run away from the nuns. She had no intention of being kept in a hospital when there was nothing wrong with her. She would take her sister and go somewhere, anywhere, far away.

And then she heard the wizard who had brought them to Exeter cast the memory charm; she had seen him around the corner of the screen. He wasn't looking in her direction. He was looking at the mound of blankets she'd put in the bed to fool the nuns. *Why should someone working for my dad put memory charms on us if this is being done to protect us?*

She swallowed. *She knew why.* Her father had no intention of their ever coming home. He was just getting rid of them—*forever*. Annie felt tears start rolling down her cheeks despite her best efforts not to cry. She remembered the fit Peggy had had that morning. *She knew. She knew what was going to happen. And Mum sent us away, probably also knowing. I don't believe that wizard who brought us here; Dad wouldn't have done this without talking to her...*

Our parents don't want us. We're a danger to the rest of the family, so we're not a part of it any more...

She waited a little while after the wizard left to creep out from behind the screen; she moved the mounded blankets out of the way and climbed back into the bed. *Well, Dad*, she thought bitterly, tears filling her eyes again; *nice try. But I still have my memories. I will always remember that you didn't want me.*

She threw herself back on her pillow and stared up at the ceiling, having changed her mind about leaving. Where would she have gone, anyway? She was eight years old; she would be nine in September. She turned on her side, looking around the clinical room, wondering when the nuns would bring food. A tear trailed down the end of her nose and she wiped her nose on her sleeve.

There are probably worse things than living in a place like this, with Muggles, she tried to convince herself. *Like being in a family that doesn't want you....*

The walk had exhausted her and she could no longer resist the urge her eyelids had to close, glad that she still had her memories, and vowing that she would get her father back for this some day...

* * * * *

Friday, Saturday, 21 June, 1979

James Potter had never been so petrified in his life. The trumpeter started blaring Clarke's *Trumpet Voluntary*, the harpsichord twinkling under the strident tones of the brass and the bows gliding over the strings of the violins and cello and bass. Beside him stood Sirius, dressed, as James was, in immaculate formal clothes; Remus stood next to him identically attired, and Peter brought up the rear, looking uncharacteristically neat and dignified in his groomsman clothes and making James wonder whether he'd ever considered working in a Muggle bank; he looked like he'd be right at home turning down people who were asking to borrow money. Like he'd quite enjoy it.

Why did I think that? He frowned. His mind was wandering. He was nervous, incredibly nervous. He'd never been so nervous before in his life. He looked up the aisle from his position under the canopy of flowers at the front of the large white tent on the lawn of the *Willows*, the inn where Lily's parents had been married. Cecilia Ratkowski was walking with a very slow, stately gait, as she'd been told to do during the rehearsal. A circle of flowers crowned her head and her shimmering golden gown clung tightly to her; she looked rather as though she might be holding her breath. Lily

had said she was worried about fitting into her gown as she'd broken up with her boyfriend and gone on a bit of an eating binge.

James saw that Sirius was gazing appreciatively at Cecilia. "Put your eyes back in your head, you," he whispered to Sirius. "Lily said she just broke up with her boyfriend."

Sirius straightened his tie and smirked at Cecilia, who saw and blushed, wobbling a little on the next step, as though Sirius had distracted her. "Then she'll be wanting a rebound bloke, nothing she could possibly consider long-term. It's perfect," he whispered out of the corner of his mouth to James.

"If you like her so much, why didn't you go out with her when we were in school?" James probed softly.

Sirius shrugged; he barely moved his lips when he spoke. "I dated a lot of girls, but I couldn't manage to get to *every* one. Besides, she was in Gryffindor. It would have been a bit tricky after breaking up with her, having to hang about in the same common room, being in all of the same classes. I mean, look how awkward it was after I tried to kiss Lily *once*."

James grimaced. "You know, this really isn't the best time to remind me that you made a pass at my bride..."

Sirius smiled and continued to watch Cecilia. "Just reminding you of what you're getting into. Don't cross that little wife of yours if you don't want to be eating all of your food through the back of your head."

This made James recall the Picasso' incident and he had a difficult time stifling his laughter. He was glad that the trumpet was rather loud. "Stop saying things like that," he whispered to Sirius. "This is no time to make me laugh."

"Don't be stupid," Sirius said softly. "You're too tense. This is the *perfect* time to make you laugh." He grinned mischievously.

Cecilia had reached the front and now Lily's sister Petunia was walking down the aisle, looking like she'd rather be eating raw lemons. Or like she already had—it was hard to tell the difference. She held her head high, as though determined to take the high road and not reveal how distasteful this all was for her. She failed miserably, in James' opinion.

He had a sudden thought. "Oh, god, Sirius. *What if I forget what to say?*" he hissed to his best man. "What if I bollix it up completely? I don't think I remember. Bloody hell, I've forgotten everything from the rehearsal..."

"I know what you're supposed to say. I'll feed you your lines. And the minister will help you, too. Don't worry."

Sirius' soft assurance was not *completely* reassuring to James. "What if I—what if I *faint*?" he choked out softly, starting to feel somewhat lightheaded as soon as he suggested it.

"Then *breathing* might help somewhat, to get some oxygen to your brain. Just *breathe*, James. Come on, you can do this..." He gave a lopsided smile to Cecilia, across the aisle from them. Now Lily's mother was starting down the aisle, wearing a more matronly version of the dress Cecilia wore, as had Petunia. Lily had chosen her own mother to be her matron of honor. "I'm going to sweep that girl off her feet at the reception, just you wait," Sirius whispered.

James snorted softly. "You? Sweeping? How?"

Sirius gave him a secret smile. "I've got a surprise for you at the reception. For everyone, really..."

Lily's mother was drawing nearer. James gave his best man a small frown. "All right, all right. It worked. You've succeeded in distracting me. Now, what's this surprise?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise. And actually, now that I think of it, I've got *two* surprises..." Sirius wore his most mischievous expression, and from what James could see, Cecilia was finding it very appealing; she was giving him sly looks, then gazing down into her flowers, as though she hadn't been making eyes at the best man.

Finally, the trumpeter took the fanfare up a notch and James looked to the open flap of the tent, where Lily had appeared on her father's arm. James thought again that he was going to faint, and then realized that Sirius was right—he had to take a breath. He did so rather self-consciously as the guests rose to watch Lily draw nearer to the front. Her gown was the same color as the lilies-of-the-valley she carried; it clung almost indecently to her, revealing her shoulders, dipping daringly low, shrinking in to her impossibly small waist, then flaring out in a grand skirt that trailed behind her along the white runner. James couldn't look at her enough. Her hair was caught up on her head in some complicated style he didn't know the name of, stray red tendrils artfully trailing across the nape of her neck and on her cheeks and brow. A wreath of more lilies of the valley sat on her bright hair. Her brilliant green eyes sparkled, meeting his, and he felt his chest hitch. *I'm marrying Lily Evans*. How could this be? Was there any luckier man anywhere in the world? No, he didn't think so.

She and her father reached the front and he leaned in to kiss his daughter on the cheek, mindful of not smudging her make-up. She also kissed his cheek and beamed at him. James heard her whisper to him, “*You look very much the elder statesman, Daddy.*”

It was true; Lily’s father had a bit of a round belly and a dark beard streaked with white, plus the green eyes he’d given his daughter. The words *Lord Mayor of London* suggested themselves to James.

“And you look like the loveliest bride I’ve seen since your own mum,” he told her, looking proud and sad at the same time. He kissed her again and then grasped James’ hand unexpectedly; James nodded at him and received a grim nod in return before the older man turned to take his seat in the front row of folding chairs. Lily stepped forward to take James’ arm instead of her father’s and James swallowed, his nervousness returning, hoping Sirius had been right that he and the minister could help him if he forgot what to do and say...

But it was all right. He did everything he was supposed to. Sirius gave him the rings at the right time and he looked in Lily’s eyes, slowly putting the ring on her finger, and then she put his ring on his finger. The minister was beaming at them, and the next thing he knew they were kissing, kissing deeply before everyone they knew, practically, but it was all right, it was expected, and when they surfaced, the musicians had struck up the recessional and they were marching up the aisle arm in arm, grinning uncontrollably at each other. Lily leaned in to him as they reached the end of the aisle, saying, “We did it!” as though she had been as nervous as him. Perhaps she had been.

On the lawn, he pulled her into a hug and twirled her around, her skirt bellowing outward. She threw her arms around his neck and when he stopped spinning her, she pulled him down into a kiss that started a fire somewhere around his toes and started working its way quickly up his body...

After all of the planning and anxiety, the day of their wedding passed in something of a blur for the two of them. They were very grateful to the photographer, a wizard who was taking photos of them with a Muggle camera. He would develop some rolls with a special potion so that the pictures would move, like all wizard photos, while he would develop others in the Muggle way, so that the Evanses could have pictures in their home that did *not* move and confound Muggle visitors.

They had hours of daylight ahead of them still, since it was the longest day of the year, so Sirius, Remus and Peter could stay as long as possible. An hour before sunset they were going to slip away so they could accompany Remus during the full moon, for once. Just the night before, when they were at an incredibly seedy Muggle club in the East End of London, it had occurred to James to wonder how Remus had been coping for the previous year. He felt rather ashamed that he hadn’t bothered to ask before.

When Remus had told them all, rather bashfully, that he’d been going to the Ministry lock-up during the full moon, James was appalled. “You sould have shed shomethin’! No, Remush. I’m shorry. *We sould have shed shomethin’.* God! What kind of mates are we?” He’d put his arm around Remus’ shoulders and pulled him into an awkward hug. “How could we det you loo that? How we could not you be there for?” He’d tightened his hold on Remus and started to sob.

Remus had looked alarmed. “Erm, how much has James had, Sirius?”

“I’m ferpeckly sober,” James reassured him, raising his glass of beer.

A scantily-clad dancer gyrated before them; she had a long blonde wig and what little clothing covered her body left absolutely nothing to the imagination. James looked up at her blearily. “What would you thick,” he asked her, “if you were a werewolf and your mates adanboned you?” He pulled Remus close again with his right arm and pointed at him with his left. Remus was appalled, and saw that Sirius and Peter were also.

“Er,” Remus said awkwardly to the largely-naked woman thrusting various body parts under their noses. “My mate’s had a few too many. He’s getting married tomorrow.”

She laughed and continued dancing. “Congratulations,” she said to James as she moved closer to him. At this range, it was clear that she was probably about twenty-five years older than they were. She ran her finger down his cheek. “Would the groom like a little extra-special treat?”

Sirius stepped between her and James. “The best man might,” he said, grinning.

James pushed between them; he put his hand next to his mouth, as though he was whispering very confidentially to the woman, but instead he spoke in a sort of whispered shout.

“He *knows* things,” James declared loudly. “He’s a wizard, you see. *We all are.*”

“And that’s it,” Sirius said, rolling his eyes. “Time for us to go.” He took one of James’ arms while Remus took the other; Sirius reached into his pocket and handed some money to Peter to pay the bill. Soon they were on the pavement outside, where Sirius hoped the cool night air would clear James’ head.

“I’d hex you good if you weren’t getting married tomorrow,” Sirius said when they were outside.

“Wha? Why?” James said, breathing odiferously into Sirius’ face. Sirius frowned at him.

"Because you have a big mouth. How many times have you been drunk, James?"

"Counting tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Once."

"Are you all right?"

James turned suddenly. Lily was standing next to him, looking a little concerned. She held out a glass of champagne for him. He grimaced at it, vowing to only drink a little.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

She smiled. "Well, I see you survived last night. Sirius was telling me a little about it." She nodded at their best man; he was chatting up Cecilia, standing very close to her. The band was playing something sort of soft and mushy-sounding, no discernible beat. James sipped his champagne briefly, then put it down on a nearby table.

"When do I get to dance with you?" he asked, wanting an excuse to hold her in his arms. She grinned and looked up at the conductor, giving him a nod.

"How's right now? Remember the song we picked?"

He swung her out onto the dance floor, her skirt whirling in a perfect arc. "The most perfect song..." he said, his face against her neck, loving the feeling of holding her close to him, feeling her heart beat against his as the young woman began to sing in a sultry contralto...

*I'm wild again, beguiled again
A simpering, whimpering child again
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I . . .*

James stepped away from her and twirled her, making her smile in pleasure before he captured her in his arms again. The singer continued...

*Could not sleep, would not sleep
Till love came and told me I should not sleep
Bewitched and bewildered am I . . .
Lost my heart, so what of it?
He was cold, I agree,
He can laugh and I love it
Although the laugh's on me.*

"Well," Lily whispered, "not *completely* perfect. You were never cold to me...And we laugh together, not at each other..."

"Ah, but this is the part I like best..." James said directly into her ear, making her shiver with pleasure...

*I'll sing to him, each spring to him
And long for the day when I'll cling to him,
Bewitched, bothered so bewildered am I . . .*

When they were done, he gathered her to him and captured her lips with his, putting his hand on the back of her head, wondering whether it would make her hair fall down, and then *hoping* he would make it fall down....

It was unclear whether the applause was for their dancing or the orchestra and singer. James and Lily turned and applauded in the singer's direction, though, to show their appreciation, and she bowed, smiling with pleasure. Lily's father appeared at her elbow now to dance with her, and James sought out Lily's mother to ask her to dance.

After a while it seemed that they were dancing non-stop, but then the orchestra took a break and dinner was served, and James thought he'd never been at a party when he'd had more fun. It was odd to think that technically, he was the host. (When he and Lily had gone to her parents to say they were going to marry, her father had sighed and said there was no money for a wedding, but James had said he'd pay for it all, as he had a sizable inheritance.) Sirius was being his wittiest, Remus was chiming in with his sardonic asides, even Peter's sometimes too-sarcastic comments hit just the right note on this day, and, to James' relief, Lily's sister had departed soon after the reception had started, so they didn't have to continue to see her sour expression for hours on end.

As they ate, James leaned toward Sirius and asked him, "So, when do we get the surprises you promised? Or were you just saying that to keep me from falling apart during the ceremony?"

"No, no," Sirius said as soon as he'd swallowed the bite of steak he'd been chewing. "I can tell you all the first surprise: I am now—and have been for the last two months—gainfully employed." James,

Lily, Remus and Peter all dropped their jaws in a rather unflattering manner. Sirius grimaced. "Well don't look *that* shocked. I wasn't a total lie-about at school, after all. I did get ten O.W.L.s and respectable marks on my N.E.W.T.s, even if they weren't up to yours and Lily's," he reminded James.

"But-what-where-" Lily sputtered.

Sirius laughed. "Can't imagine who'd have me, eh? Thank goodness you weren't the one doing the hiring," he said, his eyes twinkling at her. On this day, though, his antics could only make her laugh.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," she smiled. "I'm not trying to insult you, really. Well, don't keep us waiting any longer! Tell us what the job is."

"Well, I may not be an Auror, and I may not be a Chaser for the illustrious Montrose Magpies *and* playing Quidditch for England, *but*-I am now the assistant to the department head in Research and Development at Comet Brooms, Limited. I am personally in charge of testing the experimental charms we're developing for faster acceleration and pinpoint braking."

James laughed. "Which means you get to ride brooms all day. What a perfect job for you!"

Sirius looked genuinely offended. "I'm not just riding brooms all day.' I'm actually working on developing the charms. And-I'll tell you a secret..."

"Another one?" Remus said, rolling his eyes.

He motioned for them to lean in to hear him, so they were huddled together conspiratorially, creating an odd sight for the other guests when they glanced at the head table. "I'm not just planning to use the charms on brooms."

Lily immediately sat up and covered her ears with her hands and started humming a tune. Sirius raised an eyebrow and asked James, "What's she doing?"

"Well," James explained, "it sounds like you're planning to do something illegal. Those charms are only to be used by authorized employees of licensed broom manufacturers and *only* on brooms. Remember, I married a cop."

Sirius grinned. "Yeah," he whispered; "a cop whose husband is an illegal Animagus..."

"Ssssh!" James hissed at him. "Are you mad? And you said last night that *I* had a big mouth!"

"Oh, I'm being quiet enough. And you *did* have a big mouth. You were mouthing off to a Muggle."

"She just assumed it was because I was drunk."

"It *was* because you were drunk," Remus said, grinning.

James glanced at Lily. "While she's busy distracting herself, tell me: what else are you going to put the charms on?" he asked Sirius.

Sirius looked almost unbearably smug. "A motorcycle."

"A *motorcycle*?" James didn't know whether he was outraged or deeply envious. The two emotions were warring within him. "Why?" he asked Sirius.

"Well, I already have this motorcycle, see, that I bought from this old bloke in Wemyss Bay. You're off so much of the time playing Quidditch or staying at Lily's that I had a lot of spare time, and I've put it in the cottage back at Ascog in lieu of a garage. I've been working on it constantly, and now it runs like a dream. The birds all love it," he added, winking slyly at Cecilia. "And once I, er, alter' it a wee bit, it'll be every bit as useful as a broom. After all, there are times when Apparition isn't really practical..."

James shook his head, smiling. "You're going to be a life-long bachelor, aren't you? With always another scheme for getting girls."

"Women, mate, *women*. We're out of school now, remember."

James shook his head over Sirius, wondering how he could just walk up to a strange woman and ask her out. Lily was the first girl he'd ever asked out, technically. The first time he and Bonnie had gone to Hogsmeade together, *she'd* been the one who'd asked him, when they were working together during Herbology. He'd been so surprised that a girl was asking him out that he'd said yes without thinking *Do I actually want to go out with Bonnie Manetti?* He just looked at how stunningly pretty Bonnie was and knew that if Sirius had found out she'd asked him on a date and he'd refused Sirius would never let him hear the end of it.

After dinner, there was still more dancing. Remus helped Lily to stand and said, "I don't believe I've had a chance to dance with the bride yet, and soon circumstances will force me to leave..."

Lily smiled at him and let him lead her to the dance floor. When she heard the song, she grinned at him. "Did you tell them to play that?"

"How'd you guess? As songs about the moon go, it's not bad..." He held his hand lightly against her lower back and grasped her hand with his other hand as they listened to the singer croon to them and moved languidly around the dance floor...

Blue Moon

*You saw me standing alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own*

Blue Moon

*You know just what I was there for
You heard me saying a prayer for
Someone I really could care for*

“How’ve you been?” she asked him, suddenly feeling rather guilty, as though he had asked her to marry him and she’d chosen James instead, even though she’d loved him first.

“All right,” he said calmly. She had to admit; he looked better than she’d ever seen him. His white lock of hair flopped over his brow rakishly, and as the light-filled early evening progressed, his cheeks became more and more hirsute. He appeared to have a light brown beard now. “I’m seeing someone,” he said suddenly, needing to reassure her, remembering when she had confessed to him that she was in love with him, on the Hogwarts Express.

*And then there suddenly appeared before me
The only one my arms will hold
I heard somebody whisper please adore me
And when I looked to the Moon it turned to gold*

“That’s good,” Lily smiled, her guilt assuaged somewhat. She would always be terribly fond of Remus and felt the injustice of what he had to suffer very keenly. *It just isn’t fair*, she thought, not for the first–or last–time. *He’s so sweet; he deserves to be happy...* “Tell me about her?” she asked him. He grimaced and drew his lips into a line.

“There isn’t much to tell. It’s someone from school, but not someone I knew well...and not someone from Gryffindor...” he said truthfully, consciously not using a pronoun to refer to his lover.

Blue Moon

*Now I’m no longer alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own*

*And then there suddenly appeared before me
The only one my arms will ever hold
I heard somebody whisper please adore me
And when I looked the Moon had turned to gold*

Blue moon

*Now I’m no longer alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own*

Blue moon

*Now I’m no longer alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own*

They clapped when the song was over, and then Lily leaned toward Remus and kissed his scrubby cheek. “I’m glad you’re happy, Remus. You *look* happy.”

He smiled gently at her, taking her hands. “I am. You make a beautiful bride, Lily. I’m so glad you and James are together.”

Her new husband suddenly appeared at her elbow and put his arm around her shoulders possessively, grinning broadly. “So am I,” he said to Remus.

Remus nodded to him and made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “She’s all yours, Prongs...”

“Thank you, Moony old boy,” James said, taking his bride in his arms again as Lily laughed.

“Are the four of you going to use those old nicknames until you’re a hundred years old?”

James pulled her close to him as the pianist’s introduction ended and the singer began to sing; he grinned even more broadly. “Probably. That isn’t a problem is it? A deal breaker? Should I have told you that before the ceremony–?”

She hit his shoulder lightly. “Oh, you. Don’t be silly–”

*You must remember this
A kiss is still a kiss
A sigh is just a sigh
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by*

*And when two lovers woo
They still say, "I love you"
On that you can rely
No matter what the future brings
As time goes by*

*Moonlight and love songs
Never out of date
Hearts full of passion
Jealousy and hate
Woman needs man
And man must have his mate
That no one can deny*

*Well, it's still the same old story
A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die
The world will always welcome lovers
As time goes by*

*Oh yes, the world will always welcome lovers
As time goes by*

"May I cut in?"

Lily looked up in surprise. Sirius stood grinning at her elbow. He'd removed his tie and unbuttoned the top two shirt buttons, spreading the collar of his shirt over his jacket collar and revealing a small gold medallion with the scales of justice on it (the symbol of his birth sign of Libra) resting on a chest with a light dusting of dark, wiry hairs.

"Erm, it didn't take you long to get comfortable, did it, Sirius?" she said wryly.

"And no, you cannot cut in," James informed him, "because the song is over. You can, however, have the next dance. If it's all right with Lily."

She laughed with her hand over her mouth, trying not to let on that she was laughing at how ridiculous Sirius looked. She had to bite her tongue to keep from saying, *You know what you look like...*

"Yes, fine with me," she said, barely containing her merriment.

As the music started up, Sirius surprised Lily by steering her masterfully across the floor, twirling her and dipping her and making her feel like she didn't need to do much more than let herself be manipulated by Sirius like a marionette, as the orchestra played and the singer sang...

Understand the Night.

When she flashes her sparkling eyes at dusk, she flirts with Twilight.

*When the noise of day dies away, the Night and Twilight stay and stay, making quiet love
up high over the town.*

And the gentle Twilight gives his light, making a queen of Night.

If I could, I would write a sonnet of the night as a remembrance of your eyes.

And, if you'd promise not to tell, I could whisper the words in the dark, like a lover.

*We could count the stars - the shooting stars - and talk of lovers through the ages who had
lived out of their dreams.*

*Such will and courage they needed to live in a dream; to burn, with every breath so serene
- as if they had been the first to find love at all - like Night and Twilight.*

(They were the first of lovers ever.)

Could we be like them - hold on to one another until dawn comes?

Then, we'll fly off and dream until Night and Twilight kiss again....

Lily swallowed, trying not to think about the words of the song. She looked with concern at Sirius, who seemed to be thoroughly consumed by concentrating on the dance steps. And then this made

her frown. "When did you learn to dance?" she asked suddenly; she'd been planning to ask him whether he was all right, as she'd wanted to make sure Remus was all right, but somehow she had a feeling he would brush off her concern with a flippant remark. Which he probably would have. It was his way.

"That's my other surprise, besides having joined the ranks of the gainfully employed," he grinned. The song ended and suddenly the same song was being played again—but with a pounding four-four beat, and suddenly, he was whirling her around the floor even more vigorously, and as she struggled to keep pace, Lily dropped her jaw, realizing who he was trying to resemble.

"Oh, my god! I get it now! You're—you've been seduced by *disco!*" she proclaimed, shocked. Sirius just grinned and spun her round expertly, looking remarkably like the actor who had appeared in that disco film, who even also had a small chin dimple...

He laughed as he moved effortlessly. "It's where all of the birds are right now, you know. The clubs, the discos. I'm a big hit with them..."

She laughed as she moved in tandem with him, catching on to some of the moves he was doing now. Her training had helped her lose some of her physical awkwardness, although she knew she would never be mistaken for a ballerina. But she found that she was having *fun* dancing with Sirius, and she reckoned it was good exercise, too.

"I understand going to the clubs and dancing," she said, growing breathless as they moved, "but why the medallion with the scales? Afraid you'll forget when you were born?" she grinned.

"Nah. All the Muggles are wearing things like this. Helps me blend in."

She nodded and they continued dancing to the driving beat, although she could see that James was looking rather anxious as he stood at the edge of the dance floor.

Remus also watched them, twirling a glass of champagne between taking sips from it. He'd meant to be honest with Lily, of all people, and he hadn't been able to. He felt like kicking himself. He should be able to tell her, at least, about Emil. Telling his mates about seeing a man was no easy thing; he dreaded the inevitable questions about whether he'd ever been attracted to *them*. If the answer had been no' he wouldn't have feared the question quite so much, but if he said that he'd have been lying. He remembered very vividly the many times he'd been closer than was wise to one of them prior to the full moon, especially when they were waiting for moonrise, which he felt couldn't happen soon enough, so that he'd be in his wolf form and they in their Animagi forms...

But now he thought about why he hadn't told Lily. She was the first girl he'd ever been with. *Correction*, he thought. *The first person I was ever with*. She would wonder whether his having a boyfriend now, instead of a girlfriend, had anything to do with her, whether it was her *fault* (as though there was any "blame" about it). He didn't want to deal with that any more than he wanted to deal with the lads wondering whether, every time he'd seen them undressed, he was imagining touching them....

He sighed and took another sip of champagne as Sirius and Lily continued to dance. No, he just wasn't ready to come clean about seeing Emil. To anyone. Any more than he wanted to shout from the rooftops that he was a werewolf....

Suddenly, he noticed the time and nudged Peter, standing near him, with his elbow. "We have to go soon," he told him. "You haven't danced with Lily yet. You should pry her away from Sirius before it's time."

Peter looked up at him, surprised. Remus looked back at him guilelessly, not realizing that Peter had been thinking about what was going to happen at the new moon, in a fortnight.

He was going to get the Mark.

The thought made him weak, and yet when the faceless Death Eater who'd ordered him to get rid of the Weasley girls congratulated him on a job well done, he'd also felt a swell of pride. The Cruciatus Curse hadn't been used on him; instead, he'd received an unexpected payment: two hundred Galleons. He was shocked, not having expected anything. Afterward, he was uncertain whether he should keep it. Even though he hadn't really killed the girls, it was blood money. But then, somehow, the money started spending itself. Some new clothes, a nice meal out here and there...Before long, he found himself wondering what he could do next to merit another similar windfall. Surely it wouldn't be too bad, he thought. After all, he'd managed to earn this by giving two girls whose lives were in danger new homes and safety. Any time any guilt crept into his mind for what he'd done, he quashed it firmly. *They'd be dead if it wasn't for me*, he reminded himself. *I saved their bloody lives and found them a new home*.

He nodded to Remus, feeling more confident about approaching Lily. He tried not to think about her being an Auror, a person who hunted down Death Eaters, which was what he was about to become. She was still his Lily. Somehow, his mind managed to separate these things into neat little boxes that had nothing to do with each other. *So I'm going to be initiated as a Death Eater*,

he thought. *It doesn't mean I'm a bad person. Whatever I'm told to do—if it's very bad, I'll just find another way to make it seem that I've done it, like with the Weasley girls...*

He went to the conductor and whispered instructions to him, then approached Sirius and Lily as the song ended.

"M-may I have this dance?" he said nervously, damning himself for stuttering. *God, she looks so beautiful!* he thought, in awe of her, even though she would have been appalled if she had a handy mirror; dancing with Sirius had caused half her hair to fall down and her upper lip was perspiring. Her chest was heaving with each breath, and Peter tried very hard not to watch as her breasts rose and fell, rose and fell. As the song Peter had requested started, she smiled at him and held out her arms.

"Of course, Peter. After that, I reckon I need something a little slower. That was great fun, Sirius!" she said over her shoulder, grinning, as he smiled back at her and just happened to capture Cecilia in his arms; Sirius was never long without a partner.

*Only you can make this world seem right
Only you can make the darkness bright
Only you and you alone
Can thrill me like you do
And fill my heart with love for only you
Only you can make this change in me
For it's true you are my destiny....*

Peter closed his eyes as he held her and they swayed together, wondering if she suspected that the words of the song expressed his feelings for her. He could almost imagine, for a brief moment in time, that he was the one who had married her, that this was *their* wedding reception, that she was going to be in *his* bed that night, and every night thereafter...

*When you hold my hand I understand
The magic that you do
You're my dream come true
My one and only you
Only you can make this world seem right
Only you can make the darkness bright
Only you and you alone
Can thrill me like you do
And fill my heart with love for only you
Only you can make this change in me
For it's true you are my destiny
When you hold my hand I understand
The magic that you do
You're my dream come true
My one and only you*

"Peter? Peter!"

"Hmm?" he said, opening his eyes slowly.

"The song is over. Thank you for the dance. I think Sirius and Remus are trying to get your attention. It seems to be time for the three of you to go," she said, nodding at where the two of them were waving their arms at the edge of the dance floor.

Then, unexpectedly, she leant toward him and brushed her lips lightly across his cheek. "Thank you for everything, Peter. And also, thank you for being with Remus tonight. I'm glad he won't be alone again in that dreadful Ministry cell. I've *seen* them. You're such a good friend," she added, putting her hand on his cheek fondly. Peter turned bright red and leant toward her to kiss her quickly.

"Congratulations, Lily," he said hoarsely. "I know you and James will be very happy." The words had almost stuck in his throat, but he managed to get them out. She smiled at him and took his hands in hers.

"Thank you, Peter," she said again. "Have a good night. And we'll see you all here tomorrow morning, for the wedding breakfast, right? Before seeing us off on our trip?"

He nodded, trying not to think about seeing her after she'd spent her first night with James Potter as his *wife* (even though he knew it wasn't the first time they'd spent the night together) and finally tore himself away from her. James was standing with Remus and Sirius now, at the edge of the dance floor. They were discussing Sirius' dancing prowess.

"I thought I was hallucinating..." James said incredulously, shaking his head.

Remus guffawed. "That's because at all other times in the past he always seemed to have two left feet. How much practicing did *that* take?"

Sirius looked offended. "It's rather simple, really. And you'll note that I wasn't the only one out there. A load of Muggles guests were dancing as well. It's everywhere these days."

James grinned at the three of them. "Well, I can't thank you blokes enough. You're the best mates anyone's ever had," he said slapping Remus and Peter on the arm and wrapping his arm around Sirius' neck and pretending to try to strangle him good-naturedly. "I almost wish I could be out running with the three of you tonight, under the moon...haven't done that for ages..."

Remus laughed again. "Don't let Lily hear you say that. This is your *wedding night*. Speaking of which, if you decide to bow out, it looks like there's someone who wouldn't mind stepping in for you..." He'd meant to sound lighthearted about it, but he wasn't sure that came across; even to his own ears, there was an edge of resentment in his voice.

"What on earth are you talking about?" James whirled, looking in the direction where Remus had nodded.

Someone else was dancing with Lily now.

It was Severus Snape.

"What that bastard doing here?" Peter demanded indignantly.

"Want me to deal with him, James?" Sirius asked. "Let him know what we do with gate-crashers?"

James put a restraining hand on his arm, but reluctantly. "He's not a gate-crasher. He was invited." His three friends could tell it cost him a great effort to say this.

"*What?*" they said in unison.

"You must be barking," Sirius said, ever the non-judgmental one.

"It was Lily's idea. According to her, we have Snape to thank for *us*. She reckons that if he didn't have the self-respect to refuse to be mistreated by her any more, they'd still be together, making each other miserable, and we wouldn't have found each other..."

"You're damn right he'd be making her *miserable*," Sirius agreed. "Mistreated! When did she—"

"It's none of your business," James said suddenly. Sirius took note of the dangerous tone in his voice suddenly. James was usually smiling and laughing, but when he looked like that, you didn't go on joking and laughing. You took it seriously.

"Erm, right. Well okay, then. We'll be off. We'll see you back here at breakfast. Have a *good night*," Sirius added, winking and nudging James in the ribs, making him wince and then grin. He sent them off with slaps on the back, then turned back to watch his bride dance with Severus Snape.

She was looking down and away as they danced, not meeting his eyes as the singer crooned the sad, sad words...

*Darling, I'm so blue without you
I think about you the live-long day
When you ask me if I'm lonely
Then I only have this to say*

*You'll never know just how much I miss you
You'll never know just how much I care
And if I tried, I still couldn't hide my love for you
You ought to know, for haven't I told you so
A million or more times?*

*You went away and my heart went with you
I speak your name in my ev'ry prayer
If there is some other way to prove that I love you
I swear I don't know how
You'll never know if you don't know now*

*You'll never know just how much I miss you
You'll never know just how much I care
You said good-bye, no stars in the sky refuse to shine
Take it from me, it's no fun to be alone
With moonlight and memories*

When the song was over, she looked up at him; she'd forgotten how tall he was. She had to tip her

head back to see his face—and she was almost as tall as James. He looked like a stranger in Muggle formal clothes; a sad, forlorn stranger. “Thank you for coming, Severus. I—I wanted you to know—”

“That’s all right, Lily,” he said, interrupting her. “You don’t need to say anything.” They’d otherwise been silent while dancing. He just wanted the one dance with her; that was enough. When he heard what the singer was pronouncing, he wished he’d gone to the conductor with a request, like other people, but he didn’t know any Muggle songs and wouldn’t know what to ask for. He’d managed not to wince at the words of the song, hoping she didn’t think he was still pining after her, but unsure whether he really was over her at the same time....

“Severus,” she started to say into the silence between songs; she was unsure of what else she might say. Inviting him had seemed like a good idea at the time...

“Snape.”

They both turned at the same time, finding James standing at Lily’s elbow. The tall Slytherin nodded at the groom.

“Potter. Congratulations,” he managed to choke out, feeling bile rise in his throat.

“Thank you,” James answered, just as stiffly. “I came to retrieve my bride,” he said then, wishing he could take back the words as soon as he said them; he sounded insufferably possessive and he’d be lucky if Lily didn’t give him a piece of her mind.

Snape gave a slight bow and said, “Good evening,” turning to go. Lily put her hand on his arm.

“You haven’t kissed the bride,” she said softly, looking up at him with those incredible eyes.

He swallowed, then leaned down to brush his lips across her soft cheek. Pulling back, he recalled all of those times when they were together and he dreamt of marrying her some day. He knew that on the day he looked down at her, attired as a bride, she would look as beautiful and radiant as this. He just didn’t know that his heart was going to be aching so badly, and that he would be filled with remorse...

“Goodbye, Lily,” he said, not acknowledging James this time. He turned and retreated to the small tent that had been set up especially for witches and wizards to use as a safe Apparition point. A burly wizard with auburn hair was standing outside the tent, smoking a cigarette absentmindedly, keeping Muggles from wandering into the off-limits space. Severus didn’t recognize him and wondered whether he was one of Potter’s teammates on the Magpies. *Trust Potter to land a spot on the single most successful Quidditch team in League history...*

“Leaving?” the wizard asked him. Severus tried not to breathe in the smoke the other man was exhaling.

“Yes. I’m Apparating to London, if it’s all the same to you.”

The wizard nodded at him and Severus stepped into the tent, preparing to go directly to Platform Nine and Three Quarters to meet Crouch’s train. He’d succeeded in befriending Barty Crouch, Junior the previous summer, before the end of the term, as per Lucius Malfoy’s instructions. It had been surprisingly easy, as the boy was rather starved for friendship. He was one of the most sarcastic people Severus Snape had ever met—apart from himself. From what he could tell, this caused most of the Ravenclaws to rather distance themselves from him and his caustic remarks. Standing about making snide comments about other people was something that Severus Snape did very well, and the two were soon doing this together quite a lot, and then meeting up during the holiday.

His uncle was gratified that he actually seemed to have a friend now and didn’t work him too hard when Crouch was visiting. He was also pleasantly surprised that his friend was a Ravenclaw, as that was Duncan MacDermid’s school house, and that his dad was a respected Ministry official. “Now *that’s* the sort of fraind ye shood-a bin makin’ fer the last saiven years, Saiverus...” his uncle had said approvingly.

The three of them had gone sailing on the Firth of Clyde, on the *Patricia*. Crouch was sometimes resistant to pulling his weight, but when a rope wrapped itself around his ankle and he was pulled overboard, or a boom swung into him, sending him flying, he soon learned to pay attention, and was even learning to trim the sails and do some complicated sailor’s knots.

Now Crouch was done sixth year and he was going to be spending the entire summer with Severus and his uncle. His father evidently didn’t care that he hadn’t seen his son in a while; he was far too busy with work to fret over that, and had told his wife that it was good that “young Barty” finally had a friend. Severus sighed, pausing before Apparating to King’s Cross. *One year down, one to go.* Hopefully, he wouldn’t need to associate much with Crouch after the younger boy was out of school. Malfoy had said he had two years to “cultivate” him. Well, he was doing his best to get Crouch to trust him....

James looked at Lily with concern; she was still looking at where Snape had gone, to the Apparition tent. “Lily?” he whispered. “Dance?”

She turned to him suddenly, looking like she'd just woken up. "Oh, yes, James. Of course..."

The orchestra had started playing one of her favorite songs, and she smiled at James as they held each other closely.

"I know this one, too," he said to her softly. "Mum and Dad liked it. I didn't hear much Muggle music at home, but Dad was always singing this one to Mum." He sang softly in her ear, along with the singer on the dais...

*It had to be you, it had to be you,
I wandered around an' finally found
Somebody who
Could make me be true
Could make me be blue
And even be glad, just to be sad, thinkin' of you,
Some others I've seen
Might never be mean
Might never be cross, or try to be boss,
But they wouldn't do
For nobody else gave me a thrill,
With all your faults, I love you still,
It had to be you, wonderful you, it had to be you!*

"What faults?" Lily laughed, grinning up at him.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, feeling the melancholy from the Snape-encounter lift. "Not kissing me enough while we're dancing, perhaps," he breathed softly against her mouth, before pressing his lips tightly against hers and gently opening his mouth. The singer went on without him:

*Some others I've seen
Might never be mean
Might never be cross, or try to be boss,
But they wouldn't do
Nobody else gave me a thrill,
With all your faults, I love you still,
It had to be you, wonderful you, it had to be you!
It just had to be you!*

The rest of the reception seemed to go very fast. Lily threw her bouquet from the steps of the inn before they two of them went inside and up to their room. James opened the door and picked her up to carry her inside, and the moment the door was closed it seemed that they were hungrily ripping off each other's clothes...

Afterward, lying together on the cool sheets wearing nothing at all, feeling a breeze wafting in the open window and watching the full moon drift in and out through the clouds, James looked down into Lily's face and marveled that they were here, on their wedding night, that they were married and need never again fear her father finding them in her bed in the morning, or sneaking around the house in his Invisibility Cloak...They were husband and wife and together forever.

"What are you thinking?" he whispered to her.

She looked surprised, then pensive. "Oh, just-maybe we *should* have invited Bill Weasley. Even though we don't know him *all* that well, and we'd have had to invite his parents, whom we don't know at all, because they probably wouldn't have let their fifteen-year-old son travel all by himself in the current climate..."

"You're thinking of those girls again, aren't you?" James said softly, brushing her hair out of her face. She mentioned the Weasley girls often; it haunted her that they hadn't been able to find the two little girls, with all of the resources of the Ministry of Magic. She nodded sadly.

"I'm sorry. I just-it's so sad...I don't know what I'd ever do if we had children and something like that happened-" He saw a tear roll down her cheek and he kissed it away.

"Now, now, Lily. You've got it all out of order, as Sirius would say. Have the children *first*, then start worrying about them..." He gave her a small smile, trying to gently coax her from her little mood.

She sat up and stroked his chest thoughtfully. "Are you saying-" She let her hand trail further down and slowly closed her hand around him, making him gasp.

"Um, no, I'm *not* saying that. I mean-we just got married-"

She moved her hand some more. "Thank you for reminding me. This is our wedding night, after all. I believe there are certain *things* we should be attending to..."

James gasped again, then sighed. Suddenly, she let out a yelp as he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her up for a long, leisurely kiss. “I believe you’re right, Mrs. Potter. There are certain approved activities for a wedding night, and getting maudlin or doing too much planning for the future are *not* on the list of approved activities.”

She grinned down at him. “I *am* Mrs. Potter now, aren’t I? How funny. It works very well, actually, doesn’t it? Lily Potter. I like it.”

“I don’t,” he answered promptly, very adamantly.

She frowned. “What?” Suddenly, he turned them over, so that she was lying under him and he was propped up on his arms above her.

“I love it,” he whispered huskily to her before lowering his mouth to hers again, and soon they were engaged in the chief approved activity for wedding nights everywhere...

Notes: The music referenced in this chapter included–

Trumpet Voluntary by Jeremiah Clarke

Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring by J.S. Bach

Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered (from the musical “Pal Joey”), music by Richard Rodgers and lyrics by Lorenz Hart

Blue Moon also by Rodgers and Hart

As Time Goes By lyrics and music by Herman Hupfeld

It Had to Be You (from the 1944 Hollywood musical “Show Business”), music by Isham Jones and lyrics by Gus Kahn, 1924, 1944

Moonlight Serenade music by Glenn Miller and lyric by Kurt Elling

Only You by The Platters

You’ll Never Know (From the 20th Century-Fox Picture “Hello, Frisco, Hello”), by Dick Haymes with The Song Spinners (Mack Gordon & Harry Warren)

A Mother's Arms

Monday, 20 August, 1979

The two low figures ran swiftly through the high grass around the loch. Although his kind had long been gone from Scotland, the larger one was a grey wolf. He slowed down and loped to the shore, panting thirstily, then lapping sloppily at the water. The other animal, a shaggy black dog almost as big as the wolf, followed moments later, also welcoming the cool water. He slaked his thirst while watching the wolf out of the corner of his eye, knowing that it was always the wolf's goal to shake him and look for prey. He could not allow that to happen, he knew. It was his job to prevent it at all cost.

But then, as the wolf continued to drink, a change started to come over him; the dog hadn't realized how close to moonset it was, and was taken by surprise. The wolf stopped drinking and stood still, shivering. Then he lifted his voice in an ear-splitting howl and sank to the loamy ground on the shore, rolling over on his back. In this vulnerable position, with his paws in the air and his belly exposed, he writhed and continued to howl as, little by little, the snout changed to a small, hairless nose, the tail disappeared, the ears became small curved shell-shapes against his head, and the fur became tattered robes. Finally, the sleekly curved paws that had been an efficient medium for killing no longer carried fur, the sharp claws peeking out between the toes, and instead long, slender fingers clutched the soft, moist ground in agony. The eyes never changed; they were always a mix of green, brown and amber, with sometimes a strange red light flickering there.

Remus felt no less pain when this change occurred than when he became a wolf at moonrise. Either way, he felt like his bones were being wrenched about and parts of his mind closed off to him, made inaccessible. He experienced the odd sensation, the morning after a full moon, that his senses were muffled, as he didn't have quite the same awareness in his human form that he had as a wolf. He still had more acute hearing and smell, and a different way of seeing things than ordinary humans, but somehow, when he was a wolf, he remembered being so much more aware, in his bones, of *everything*. His instincts were razor sharp in a way they never were as a human. Of course, he worried that, some day, those instincts would be sharp enough to allow him to shake Sirius and do something dreadful. When he was human, he too was of the opinion that that must never happen.

The dog walked to Remus and put his shaggy black head on his arm, his large dark eyes sympathetic. Remus smiled and scratched him weakly behind the ears. "Could you help me get back to the house, Padfoot? I'm all done in," he groaned, his arm dropping. The dog backed up, and in the blink of eye, his best friend was standing before him.

"You'll be all right, mate," Sirius said in that gentle voice Remus never heard him use with anyone else but Lily, his sister Ursula, and his mother. He helped Remus to stand, slinging his friend's limp arm over his shoulder so he could virtually drag him to the cottage that served as an unobtrusive entrance to Ascog Castle, which appeared to Muggles to be an uninhabited ruin. Once inside the cottage, they passed Sirius' motorcycle, lying in pieces all over the dirt floor because he was still trying to work out exactly which parts should have the flying spells on them. He'd been boasting to Remus for over a month that he was going to get it right "any day now." Remus suspected that Sirius was actually doing this for him, as he couldn't Apparate. Sirius had also told him how useful the bike was for attracting Muggle women especially, strongly hinting that Remus might have a girlfriend if he wanted to use it for "bait." Remus managed to change the subject at these times.

They descended the stairs to the tunnel that led to the castle's dungeons, then climbed the curving staircase to the entrance hall. After stumbling into the kitchen together, Remus collapsed at the long refectory table. Sirius put the kettle on the hob and fetched some mugs. After some dangerously hot tea, Remus felt a bit better. Sirius helped him up the stairs to his own room, and

Remus collapsed on James' old bed while Sirius showered.

When he emerged from the bath, drying his hair with a towel while wearing another one, Sirius said, "So—what're you going to get up to today, Moony?"

Remus looked at him wearily. "Not much. I'm not expected back at the warehouse until Wednesday. I'll probably shower after you're gone, then sleep for a good long while." He had had sex with Emil before coming to Ascog. Remus couldn't think of it as making love' somehow; Emil had used a restraining spell on him, at his own request, to make it less likely that he would hurt Emil. The precaution had been successful, although Remus was less than satisfied about the encounter, which seemed mechanical. Normally, he enjoyed touching Emil a great deal when they were in bed. But, of necessity, there had been none of that. Remus had to admit, it had worked; being with Emil had kept him from feeling dreadfully anxious about being near Sirius while they waited for moonrise. He remembered many times when he was waiting with his friends, when they were in school, and their scents crept into his nose, intoxicating him, making him shiver with want.

However, sleeping with Emil did nothing about that fact that since he had decided to be honest with himself about fancying both men and women, it was far more difficult to be around Sirius in states of undress than when they were in school (when Remus was deep in denial). Sirius was standing before his open wardrobe now, selecting lightweight summer robes, still wearing only the towel around his hips.

Stop that, Remus scolded himself sternly, watching the muscles in Sirius' back flex as he lifted his arms, taking down folded trousers from a shelf. *You should not be having thoughts like that about your best friend*. It was even more difficult to keep his thoughts in check when Sirius took out a clean pair of drawers and dropped the towel. Remus squeezed his eyes shut, stifling a moan in the back of his throat.

"What's wrong with you?" Remus tentatively opened one eye, then the other. Sirius had pulled up the clean drawers, but Remus closed his eyes again to avoid seeing Sirius' chest.

"My bones ache, is all," he said feebly, thinking, *Yeah. One bone in particular*, and then quashing that thought quickly.

"Oh. Sorry," Sirius said. "I didn't realize." He seemed very subdued now. Remus heard him moving about, fabric rustling as he dressed. When he dared to open his eyes again, Sirius was about to leave. "I'm going to say goodbye to Mum and tell her to make sure you don't forget to eat." He went to open the door, then turned back to Remus again, grinning. "Oh, and by the way—I know your secret." Remus swallowed, thinking his heart had stopped (or perhaps he just *hoped* his heart had stopped).

"You—you do?" Why was Sirius looking so cheerful? Oh, was it too much to hope that he would take it really well? Remus resisted the urge to cross his fingers like a small child.

"Yeah. Lily told me the other day. I was having lunch at the Leaky Cauldron and she was meeting James there. I think I told you that. Anyway, *she* told me your secret."

Remus frowned now. How had Lily found out? Had she had him and Emil followed? Emil was a Ministry employee. Perhaps someone was keeping tabs on his private life? If one worked for the Ministry, was one permitted to *have* a private life?

"Erm, I was going to tell you, but it was hard to know when the time was right."

"You were *going* to tell me! How long has this been going on?"

"Well, erm, we met up at the Leaky Cauldron, actually, after I went to that Quidditch match at the school, with Peter. Last November."

"*That long?*" Sirius looked very upset now, and Remus winced. He *knew* he should have just told his friends. He had a feeling this was going to be even worse than revealing his lycanthropy. "So when are we all going to meet her?"

"Well, maybe—" He stopped, confused, having really heard what Sirius had said. *Her*. "That depends. Lily didn't give you any details?" he asked, wondering what she'd said.

"Not really. She just said that you'd told her you were seeing someone."

Oh. He remembered now. At the wedding, he'd said this to Lily, to reassure her. When Lily had assumed, like Sirius, that it was a girl, he had sidestepped the issue. However, he couldn't say now, "Oh, I was just trying to make sure Lily didn't feel guilty about me or anything," as he had already told Sirius that he'd been seeing someone since the previous November. "Well, I'm seeing someone. There's not much to tell."

"Not much to tell? Who's the mystery woman you've been hiding for nine months?"

Remus closed his eyes again. "You should get to work. I should get some sleep." There. He'd just ignore the issue. Another type of denial.

"I'll find out, you know. Eventually."

Remus nodded, with his eyes shut. He couldn't continue to look Sirius in the eye. "I know you will. Let me have my fun for now." There. Let him think it was a game.

Sirius laughed. "All right, mate. Rest well."

When he was gone, Remus opened his eyes again, staring up at the canopy of the four-poster. *Rest*. Well, he thought; there's no rest for the wicked. But which would be more wicked? To be honest with his friends and reveal not just his but Emil's secret as well? Or to continue lying and skillfully obscuring the truth? He was walking a tightrope, and below were long, sharp silver spikes. He closed his eyes, but failed to fall asleep.

No rest for the wicked.

* * * * *

Remus raised his hand as Emil entered the waterfront pub. Emil gave him a heartbreaking smile as he crossed the noisy room. As soon as he sat with Remus, the barkeep approached and took their order. When he'd left, Emil turned to gaze happily at Remus.

"This is so much better than eating by myself in the commissary at the Ministry. Seeing you in the middle of the day is a huge improvement over having to wait."

Remus laughed. "Is work that bad?" The pub was very noisy; they wouldn't be overheard.

Emil groaned. "Let's see—a report about broom straw diameter on imported brooms. A report weighing the pros and cons of the question *Should imported brooms continue to be permitted, or should the market here be restricted to domestic brooms?* A follow-up report answering the question *If we restricted imports and people started smuggling in illegal foreign brooms, what should the penalties be?*" He groaned. "My job would have to become ten times as interesting as it is to be considered merely *boring*."

Remus laughed again, gazing happily at Emil. "You actually don't make it sound too bad."

"Then I'm not doing a very good job of describing it."

"I'm sorry you don't enjoy it more," Remus said, smiling sympathetically.

Emil shrugged. "Well, at least I haven't been sent to the Centaur Office yet."

Remus shrugged. "What would be so bad about that?"

Emil grinned. "Oh, you don't know! Centaur Liaison, in the Beast Division of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

Remus frowned. "Why the Beast Division? Aren't Centaurs considered to be 'beings'?"

"Well, they *can* understand magical law, but they refused being' status because they didn't care for some of the creatures who were also going to be classified that way, like hags and vampires. Merpeople did the same, because they like to keep to themselves. So even though there's a Centaur Liaison office in the Beast Division, no centaur has *ever* used it. If you're transferred to that office, you know you're really on your way out."

"You're being sacked," Remus said, nodding.

"Right." A teenage girl approached, carrying the meat pies and drinks they'd ordered, and they started eating. Remus noticed that she was eyeing them both.

Between bites, Remus said, "I'm not really sure whether I'm considered a being' or a beast.' The Werewolf Registry and Capture Unit are in the Beast Division, but Werewolf Support Services falls under the Being Division. That's how I found out about that werewolf pub, and they oversee the werewolf cells at the Ministry as well."

"I still don't think they should have classified hags and vampires as beings," Emil said. "Yeah, I know vampires have free will. But what many of them use their free will for is to *choose* to behave like beasts. When the full moon rolls around, you don't have any choice about it. *They* do." Remus noticed that he was looking across the noisy pub, his eyes wide now. "And speaking of vampires, look who just walked in."

Remus craned his neck around some people playing darts and saw Severus Snape entering the pub with a pale blond boy. "He lives north of here, in Dunoon," Remus told Emil. "Snape and his uncle sail quite a bit. Sirius and James spotted them at the quay once."

Emil's eyebrows danced. "Well well well. We may have a little something in common with old Snape, eh?" he said suggestively, picking up his drink and nodding at Snape and the boy. "Perhaps if Snape hadn't hated you so, he might have wanted to shag you."

Remus dropped his jaw. "No! Snape?" He watched Severus Snape lead the boy to a table on the far side of the room. They were both dressed for sailing. The boy looked slyly at someone and said something to Snape, whose lip curled unpleasantly in a sarcastic smile. "You think?" he said now; he'd never considered this. "But—he and Lily were—"

"So were you and Lily. Doesn't mean anything. Maybe he fancies both, like you."

Remus furrowed his brow. He didn't know who the blond boy was. He had a feeling he was a Hogwarts student, but he knew that he hadn't been in their year. He didn't even seem like he might be out of school. "Who's he with?" Remus asked Emil.

"Not sure. Ravenclaw, I think. Couple of years behind us."

"Hm. Not a Slytherin, then."

Emil shook his head. "No. Looks like Snape likes'em young too."

Remus grimaced and lowered his head. "Please stop. I wouldn't want someone else to speak about *us* like that."

Emil nodded and put his glass down. "Sorry. I thought you didn't like him."

"I don't. But if he's—he's similar to us, in this way, it probably isn't any easier for him than it is for us. In fact, he'd probably be just as embarrassed as I would be if he knew we'd seen them here. Let's try to finish and get out. I'll show you the loch."

Emil shrugged. "All right. If you say so."

They slipped out after paying for their meal without Snape and the boy noticing. After walking along the quay briefly, they turned inland and headed for Loch Ascog. The walk around the loch was relaxing, the weather perfect. Remus felt a lightness in his heart that made him think *Maybe we can actually tell people soon*. It would, however, need to be a joint decision. He couldn't tell his friends if Emil objected. He didn't want a row.

Emil needed to leave soon, but he couldn't Apparate while outside in the open. They went to the cottage, where Remus showed Emil the motorcycle. "Erm; are the bits and pieces *supposed* to be all over, like that?"

Remus laughed. "Hardly. When Sirius first tried putting the charms on it, it started doing some frightening things. Took on a life of its own and wouldn't obey him. So to fix the problem, he took it all apart, did a *Finite Incantatem* on each piece separately, and started all over, trying to work out which parts *specifically* need to be charmed. He reckoned putting a spell on the entire bike was overkill, and that's why it developed a personality. You can't tell anyone about this, by the way. Sirius could lose his job."

Emil smiled. "Don't worry. I may work for the Ministry, but I think they have larger worries than Sirius' motorcycle." He paused then, as though he was going to say something else. "Why did you come here for the full moon? Instead of the Ministry?" he said suddenly, an urgent tone in his voice. Remus swallowed. It was one thing to show Emil Sirius' motorcycle, which he might not be able to charm, anyway. It was another to reveal that Sirius was an illegal Animagus.

"I was locked up in a dungeon cell here. Quite safe. This morning I was already in a house, Sirius helped me up the stairs and I was able to have a hot shower and a meal made by Sirius' mum, instead of being thrust out into London, having to travel home alone at that hour. Much nicer. Sirius apologized for not suggesting it earlier, but now that we've been doing this for a couple of months, it seems like a pretty good solution."

Emil nodded. "But you're still—I mean, during the full moon, you're all alone?"

Remus shivered. "Yeah," he lied. "If I weren't—"

"What if you were with another werewolf?" Emil said suddenly.

Remus stepped back, frowning. "What?"

"I said—"

"I heard what you said. What are you getting at?" But Remus had a feeling he knew.

"Hear me out. I know it will sound mad, but—"

"I think I see where you're going with this—"

"I want to become a werewolf."

The silence hung between them. And continued to hang. Remus couldn't move. Then Emil stepped forward and tried to touch his arm, and Remus discovered he could move after all. He recoiled from Emil's touch, tears behind his eyes making them sting. "You don't know what you're suggesting," he said thickly. "Yes, it sounds mad. Because it *is* mad. You don't just *decide* to be a werewolf, to be a creature that can rip someone's throat out in a split second, and enjoy it. You just *don't do that*."

"Remus—" he began, putting out his hand imploringly. "I want to *be* there for you."

Remus backed up, horrified. "No! You've no idea—for there to be one more ravenous, murdering beast like that—to do it *on purpose*—" He could hardly continue. "That has to be the most evil thing I have ever heard of," he said softly, looking into Emil's eyes, knowing that he was losing him, that he had in fact already lost him.

Emil looked as though Remus had hit him. "I want to do this because I love you!"

"No! You want to do this because you're ignorant! If you knew—" Remus sank down on his

haunches, his face in his hands. He heard Emil go down on his knees next to him.

"Then *tell me*," Emil whispered. Remus raised his head, swallowing.

"Are you sure you want to know?"

Emil put his hand on Remus' arm; this time he didn't flinch from the touch. "Yes."

Remus sat down hard on the dirt floor of the cottage. "I became a werewolf when I was not quite three years old. I lived in a nice little house at the edge of a forest with my mum and dad and my brother, my twin. His name was Romulus."

Emil looked like he wanted to laugh, so Remus, the edge of his mouth quirking, said, "Go on. You know you want to make fun of the names. My dad thinks he has a boring name. John. Mum's isn't much better: Mary. With the name of Lupin and their first children being twin boys, they decided to have some fun and gave us interesting names. Romulus and Remus. Of course, I later came to hate my name..."

Emil touched his arm tentatively. "So—you're a twin, too," he said softly. "Something else we have in common. Why have I never heard about this brother before?" But a second after he asked the question, Remus could see that Emil had already thought of the answer. He looked horrified by his blunder. "Oh. Bloody hell. I'm sorry, Remus."

Remus met his eyes. "I'd have given anything to have really known my brother, the way you know Claudine. Even if we didn't get along any better than you two do."

Emil shrugged. "We may have been in different houses, but she *could* have been in Hufflepuff. Okay, maybe she's not all that hardworking and too ambitious. But she's very, very loyal. Not a single Slytherin got away with insulting Hufflepuff when she was around. They learned pretty quickly that she was very fast with her wand." He grinned.

Remus smiled back at him. "See? That's what I never had. That kind of bond." He picked up a spanner Sirius had left lying on the ground next to the motorcycle, twirling it idly as he talked. "When I was ready to go off to Hogwarts, I asked Mum again how I had been bitten. I'd been asking for years. She always said, 'When you're older.' Well, I was older, so the night before I was going to leave for school, I asked her again. This time she told me.

"Not long before my third birthday—*our* third birthday, that is—the Muggles living nearby, most of whom kept sheep for a living, were having trouble with a marauder. Every morning for several days running, some sheep would be found dead on almost every farm in the district. They weren't eaten, either. It was like the killer was just doing it for sport. It didn't actually seem to eat sheep—just liked killing them. Or just liked killing.

"However, they finally found out what the marauder really liked to eat when a poor old man was found dead in his garden one morning. The footprints of what seemed to be a large dog were all around him. His throat was ripped out and—other parts of him had been devoured as well. The corpse was supposed to have made men sick who worked day in and day out slaughtering sheep, up to their elbows in blood and offal.

"The door to his house was left open, as though he'd just stepped outside for a moment. Fingerprints that weren't his were found in the house, and his wallet was missing, as well as some money a few close friends knew he'd stashed in a tin in the kitchen. They decided that the thief must have happened on the house after the poor man had been killed by the beast. How the thief knew where to look for the hidden money, and how he managed not to be ill at the sight of the dead man no one ever knew.

"He was killed after several months of the sheep deaths. Some locals finally worked out that the attacks always fell on the three nights of the full moon. It was a very provincial area; most Muggles would call the people there "superstitious," because they still believed in ghosts, witches, magic, good and bad omens, all that sort of thing. Mum said she and Dad always had to be careful around our neighbors, because they *believed* in magic. If they accidentally saw my parents do something, they wouldn't just shrug it off, like most Muggles, who don't even need memory charms at all when they see magic—they just go into instant denial. But on top of *believing* in magic, the villagers didn't like it, not a bit. A witch moved into the village once, Mum said, and set up shop as a fortune-teller. Loads of Muggles do it, after all. They ran her off. A mob came to her house and demanded she go. She didn't have a choice. Oh, you might say she could have hexed them. But the Ministry would have been down on her in a trice. She moved away.

"So, they worked out the full moon angle and realized that the marauder wasn't a sheep dog who'd turned wild, as some thought. That had happened before. The dogs get tired of pushing the sheep around all of the time or something. An actual wolf wasn't a possibility; wolves have been gone from Britain for quite some time. No, they didn't have modern ideas about certain things being impossible or myths—they *knew* what the culprit was: *A werewolf*. It made sense. Sheep aren't a werewolf's preferred food. But when a werewolf is being affected by the full moon, it's ravenous and

violent, and if no humans are around, something like a sheep—slow and stupid, no real defenses—is going to be sport for a werewolf. It isn't going to last long in a fight. Isn't even *going* to fight. Several of the oldest people in the village said that in their youths, they'd seen killings just like the old man's. No one was ever caught.

"My dad had been attending the village meetings about this, so he and my mum would know what was going on. No one knew he was a wizard. But he couldn't join the team being put together to hunt down the werewolf; he was called away, because his father was dying. My dad's Muggle-born. He and Mum became preoccupied with his trip, and the possibility that they might have to plan a funeral. The werewolf seemed to be the least of their worries.

"The villagers had pistols loaded with silver bullets and scythes and sabers, to behead the beast. The old man was murdered on the first night of the full moon; when the full moon rose again on the third night, they set out to kill the werewolf." Remus sighed. "I've lived in fear of that almost my entire life. A mob coming after me. And yet—I think I might find it a relief. An end to it all—"

"No," Emil said suddenly, gripping Remus' arm. "Don't talk like that." Remus looked at his face, the dark eyes so concerned, the full lips that he wanted to be kissing trembling slightly.... However, he knew he had to tell Emil everything if he was going to understand.

"Well, they had dogs with them, hunting hounds rather than sheep dogs, and the hounds picked up the wolf's scent almost as soon as the sun set and the moon rose. In the village square itself they found it. They shot at it and missed; they tried to behead it, but only wounded it. The wolf ran from the mob, perhaps recognizing that they were too well-armed to be prey, and they followed it to the edge of the forest, near our house. Later, when my mum went back to our house for some things that had been left behind, she found a story about it in the local paper, even though the marauder that was being hunted was described as a large dog. I reckon the villagers were worried about outsiders reading that rag and assuming everyone in the village was barking mad, as they probably would have if the culprit had been called a werewolf.

"While all of this was going on, it was actually very peaceful in our house. It was bedtime for me and my brother. Mum could still carry both of us at the same time, one on each hip. We had a cat, and every night Dad put the cat out for the night and Mum gave us our bath. Then she tucked us into our cots. Since Dad was visiting his dying father, Mum was carrying us while she was putting the cat out. She opened the door and nudged it along with her foot.

"However, when my mum opened the door, the wolf was evidently close enough to smell *prey*. The mob wasn't very close to it yet; perhaps it thought it had time for a meal. The wolf was *fast*; before Mum had a chance to close the door, it had pounced, and sank its teeth into my brother's neck. It ripped him from her grasp and his neck snapped. But the wolf didn't want one meal; as soon as it realized that my brother wouldn't fight, it came at me. My mother cursed herself for years because she stood there dumbly, instead of closing the door. But she was in shock; she just couldn't believe what had happened; one of her sons was gone in a blink. He was dead.

"She saw it preparing to pounce again and finally awoke, tried to shut the door. Too late. Its body forced it open and its teeth sank into my arm. Then she heard a strange sound, a loud, sharp report, and the wolf collapsed on us, changing instantly into an old woman.

"The mob finally caught up. One man in particular led the way. He was the one who'd spotted that the wolf had attacked me and my mother. He'd fired the shot which killed it. In death, the werewolf changed into her human form again.

"My mother sat on the floor just inside our house, the door open, while these strangers came in and examined the corpse, as though my mother and I weren't there. I was bleeding badly; my mother bound up my wound with a spell, very quietly, while they talked about the old woman.

"It turned out that she was the wife of the old man who was killed. She'd left him years ago. That was when the first sheep killings had stopped. She'd returned, but he didn't want to see her. No one knew whether his death was intentional. If he knew what she was, he shouldn't have walked outside at the full moon, should he? Unless it was—suicide.

"They carried the body out of our house, and the man who'd killed the old woman turned to my mother, still sitting on the floor rocking me, and said, I hate to do this, but I have to.' He put his gun to my head and prepared to pull the trigger. However, he didn't know that my mother was a witch. She disarmed him in a second, without her wand, and stunned him. She went to the door and stunned the ones outside, too, as quickly as she could. She'd never done much wandless magic, either, but suddenly, she needed to do it, and could. I'll never understand it, but then I'll never be a mother. I think it's like when you hear about Muggles who get a surge of adrenaline in emergencies, and can suddenly do amazing things, like lift automobiles. She knew that she had to protect me. She'd already lost one son.

"She tucked me into my cot after putting a sleeping charm on me, and then set to work. Mum

found the old man's wallet and savings on the old woman, what she'd stolen from her husband. She took it; the old woman had no need of it now. We had to flee and needed Muggle money. She buried the old woman and brought Romulus inside and wrapped him carefully, then buried him too. She transported the stunned Muggles into the forest, well away from our house, one at a time, and put numerous memory charms on them. She hid behind a tree while she revived them, then Apparated back to our house. They never knew that they'd killed the wolf—although the man with the gun might have noticed that he was missing a bullet—but more importantly, they didn't know *I'd* been bitten, and they wouldn't come after me. If Mum had acted a second later, I would have had a silver bullet in my head. The man who saved me was ready to kill me, too. And yet—if he hadn't shot the wolf, I would already have been dead. And probably my mum, as well.

"It's possible that we could have stayed, but Mum was afraid that if even one of the memory charms was faulty, someone there would know about me and try to kill me. Luckily, there wouldn't be another full moon for twenty-six days. There was time to plan what to do about me during that time. We arrived at my grandparents' with some things from our house that my mum shrunk down, so she could carry them, and the clothes on our backs. Mum said she had exactly one pound left in Muggle money.

"My dad cried and cried over my brother, but then he became like my mum, determined to protect me no matter what it took. Mum never did tell me where we lived when the wolf bit me. I'm not sure why she didn't want me to know, but she refused to tell me. I reckon it didn't really matter. We ended up moving quite a lot, because from month to month, neighbors would complain about the noise I made as I struggled to get out of my cage. And as I became stronger and stronger, they had to keep working out better ways to restrain me. They couldn't risk my getting loose."

Remus put his hand on Emil's arm. "You can't *plan* to become a werewolf. If you're with a wolf during the full moon, you can't convince it to just bite you and walk away, so you can join the club.' Being bitten usually means being killed, pure and simple. I'm only alive because that werewolf lacked another ten seconds to finish the job. That's all it would have taken. You can't control the wolf, Emil. It just can't be done."

Emil put his hand on Remus' cheek. "Why didn't you ever tell me this before?"

"Why not? Because—" His voice caught. "I reckon because I don't tell people that story, ever. I haven't before. My own best friends don't know." He swallowed. "There isn't a day goes by that I don't feel like a part of me is missing, because of my twin dying."

Emil held him closely as they sat on the dirt floor, surrounded by motorcycle parts. "What about me? Can I help you with that missing part? Can I fill that void for you?"

Remus looked in his dark eyes. "You do. You know you do." Something was bothering him; he stood and found that he'd been sitting on what seemed like a carburetor. He grinned through his tears at Emil. "Speaking of missing parts...."

Emil laughed. "And speaking of being missing, I'd better get back to work before there's a story about me in the *Daily Prophet*, with my description."

Remus put his arms around his waist, smiling. "*Last seen wearing his werewolf lover...*"

Emil kissed him quickly, groaning for a second. "Tempting as that sounds, I must fly."

"Are we clear now? Do you understand why I told you about how I became a werewolf?"

Emil kissed him once more. "Thank you for that. I'm so sorry about your brother."

Remus nodded. "Thank you."

"I love you."

"I love—"

But with a *pop*, Emil was gone.

* * * * *

Friday, 7 September, 1979

Bill Weasley strode down the castle corridor, his new robes billowing behind him, his silver prefect's badge gleaming on his chest. He wore the grim expression of a much older person; indeed, he appeared to feel that the weight of the world was on his shoulders. He stopped short when a pretty dark-haired girl emerged from a niche in the stone wall; her goal, evidently, was to ambush him, and he froze when he saw her, swallowing.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him; she too wore a prefect's badge. "Bill Weasley! Have you been avoiding me? We've been back at school for almost a week, and somehow I can never seem to get you alone to talk to you!" It hadn't been easy to avoid Juliet, since she was in all of the same classes as Bill, except for Divination, but he didn't dawdle between classes and had spent no

time in the common room since returning to school. He had sat on the opposite side of the room when they had attended their first prefects' meeting the previous Sunday. He *had* been avoiding her, because he knew precisely what she had to say to him, and it was unlikely to be any different from every letter she'd written him that summer, or from almost every confrontation they'd had the previous term, after he'd broken up with her.

He set his jaw; he had to be strong. He looked at her large grey-blue eyes, her waving brown hair, her slender face which had dimples when she smiled.... He thought of her laugh, and what it had been like to kiss her for the first time, the giddy feeling that had made him feel like he was filled with fizzy champagne. He didn't deserve her, plain and simple, and he had to let her go. He *had* let her go, but she still hadn't accepted it, evidently. He had told her that she should be with someone worthy of her. She had agreed, and said that was *him*. He had disagreed about this.

He looked at her now. "I haven't changed my mind," he told her softly.

She looked like she might be about to cry. She twisted her robes in her hands and he swallowed, unprepared to deal with this. *Please don't cry*, he thought desperately. *Please please please*.

"You didn't mean to break up with me," she insisted, as though he'd simply selected the wrong spell in Charms. "I know you didn't."

"I told you that you could tell people you broke up with me. I don't care."

Bloody hell. The tears had started to run down her cheeks. She stamped her foot, her lip shaking. "Well you're ruddy well *supposed* to care! Why don't you care about *me* anymore? About *us*?"

He swallowed again, trying to keep back his own tears. *God, yes, I care about you*, he thought, wanting to hold her. "I needed to let you go," he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking, "so you could be with someone worthy of you...." He parroted the same words he'd said before, unable to speak about this without a script.

"I'm tired of hearing you say that. *You're worthy!*" she cried, stepping toward him. She looked very hurt when he stepped back from her, as though the idea of her touching him was repulsive.

"No, no I'm not."

She opened and closed her mouth soundlessly, as though she didn't know what to say to convince him. "Why you didn't answer my owls this summer?"

"Well, um--"

She stepped toward him too quickly for him to step back this time, throwing her arms around his neck and whispering to him, "I'll do it. I'll sleep with you."

"What?" he tried to say, but then she pressed her mouth to his, opening her lips slightly, and Bill tasted her soft warm tongue as it flicked at his, felt her breasts pressed against his chest. He wanted to hold her tightly to him, explore her mouth, slide his lips down her neck.... But he pulled his mouth back from hers and took her arms from around his neck, stepping back again. "Juliet," he said, unable to keep the shake out of his voice now. "I don't want you to sleep with me." *Liar*, he immediately thought. He couldn't resist a glance down at her chest; he'd actually seen it, twice. The first time had been the previous spring, after returning from the Easter holiday. He remembered vividly how lovely it had been to see her that way, and what it had led to....

When he'd returned from his holiday, he'd been nearly catatonic, going from class to class in a zombie-like state. Juliet had taken him up to the Astronomy Tower one afternoon and tried to talk to him, but he didn't want to talk. Once alone with her, he'd decided that he only wanted to forget; that he wanted to do something completely mindless, something that involved so little thought that there would be no danger of those thoughts turning to his missing sisters. He had begun kissing her ravenously, trying to bury his feelings, forget about how worthless he was. She had been swept along, and before they knew what was happening, he was opening her bra and gazing at her chest in awe. He had loved the noises she'd made when he'd touched her breasts, not really knowing what he was doing and just tentatively trying one thing and another, but she had stopped him when he'd tried to remove more of her clothing.

"It's not that I don't want to," she had said breathlessly. "It's just that—I haven't had that potion. I've even thought about going to get it. But—I haven't been able to work up the nerve. I mean, I'm sure Madam Pomfrey is very understanding about it and all, and I turned fifteen last year, and you turned fifteen months ago, but—I haven't been able to contemplate just walking up to her in cold blood and *asking* for it...I'm sorry, Bill."

He'd pulled back, saying, "That's okay," very softly, trying to slow his pulse; his heart felt like it was running away with him, and his trousers had become *very* uncomfortable.

"No, it's not," she said, biting her lip. "Here I've got you all worked up, and you're just supposed to *forget* about it? I'm not a tease, Bill Weasley." She reached out and began to unbutton his trousers. He watched her in disbelief, lacking the strength to push her hands away.

"What are you *doing*?" he'd practically squeaked, but she'd managed to open his trousers by

then, and wasted very little time in showing him just what she planned to do. He gasped and clutched at her arm; she stopped moving her hand. "Juliet—"

"Is this not the way you do it? Don't lie—all boys do it. Constantly. Do you want to show me?"

"No!" he'd cried immediately, turning deep red.

"What's wrong, Bill? I just thought—maybe if I get used to the idea a little at a time, it won't seem so scary. I mean, yes, on the one hand it's something I want to do," she said, making him very aware that her *hand* was still on him. "But on the other hand, " *there was that word again*; "it's—intimidating. Both doing it *and* asking Madam Pomfrey about the potion. I know I'm a Gryffindor, but maybe that just means I'm willing to run into burning buildings and save babies," she said, with a small smile. "Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with *this* sort of bravery," she said, giving him a small squeeze which made him gasp again.

"Erm," he'd said in a strangled voice. "Can you not squeeze when you're talking? It's—a bit distracting," he managed to get out. It didn't help, either, that she was still sitting before him with nothing on from the waist up. He'd never in his life imagined being in a situation like this. When he thought of sleeping with a girl for the first time, it was very much in the abstract. He'd even thought of doing it with Juliet, but it was still a vague sort of fantasy, not involving specifics such as who took their clothes off first, had she taken the potion, was anyone going to walk in on them, did they even know what to do...

"Think of this as something *you're* doing for *me*, Bill. Letting me get used to things having to do with sex bit by bit. We'll start with this..."

And after that, he hadn't been strong-willed enough to push her hand away. She'd been fascinated by his reactions, especially the way he'd pulled her to him afterward and kissed her deeply in heartfelt gratitude. Later, he'd felt guilty for a multitude of reasons. Yes, he'd felt very nice (*very, very* nice), but she hadn't received a similar satisfaction from it. He'd felt vaguely dirty, and as though he'd taken advantage of her.

He'd started avoiding her intensely after that, making excuses about helping Geoff, Alex and Jack do homework. She had only asked once to be included; Bill had made up something inane about the other boys being very shy around girls, and how they'd be unable to get anything done if she joined them. She'd managed to corner him two other times before the term was over, and Bill had been ashamed of how weak he'd been, giving in almost immediately to kissing and caressing her. The second time it had only been that, and all of their clothing stayed on, but the third time, she'd worked up the nerve to unbutton his trousers again, and he went along, knowing how guilty he'd feel after, and also knowing that he should try to find out how to please *her* (but having no idea how to acquire this information).

The final time she cornered him, about a fortnight before the end of the term, he'd started talking first, before she could kiss him or take off any of his clothes (or hers—she'd let him touch her breasts again, the previous time). He broke up with her quickly, no warning, offering no explanation. He just walked away quickly afterward. She didn't chase after him, but had stood there, utterly numb with shock. He knew because of things he heard the other girls in their year saying that she was a wreck after that, crying constantly, and that she'd received terrible marks on her exams in June because she hadn't bothered studying and couldn't concentrate. Bill felt like kicking himself when he heard that; he couldn't do *anything* right! Now it was his fault that she had received bad marks.

He'd quickly glanced at the first few letters she'd sent him that summer before throwing them away. They all said the same thing. After that he just threw them away without reading them. He didn't want to feel tempted to give in. *Who am I to want to be happy? I'm the bloody sod who let my sisters disappear, that's who I am.* Every day that summer, he heard his mother crying in his parents' bedroom. Every day when his father returned from work, he shook his head sadly at his mother; nothing new had been discovered about what had happened to Annie and Peggy.

He and Charlie were very subdued that summer, helping their mother with Percy and the twins. They didn't go farther from the house than the orchard, and even then, their mother was very nervous. She had their father plant a tall privet around the garden, like a defensive wall.

Their father brought down from the attic the clock that old Mad-Eye Moody had given them as a gift, when Bill had been born, which had never been used. He read the instructions to activate the clock, and performed the binding charm on each child; after that, their parents performed the charm for each other, so that they could all be tracked by the clock. It would ever after tell the location of all of the family members at all times. Labels like "work," "traveling," "school," "home," "hospital," "prison" and "mortal peril," would tell what each of them was doing at any given time.

After the charms were cast, Bill found himself staring intently at the clock whenever his dad was at work; his dad's hand on the clock usually read, "work," but a few times during the summer, Bill had seen it point to "mortal peril." He had stared fixedly at it then, his heart in his throat,

until it went back to "traveling," followed by "home," and the sound of his father Apparating into the kitchen. When Bill had tried to pump him for information, find out what the danger had been, his father had changed the subject. Bill remembered when his father had had to kill a man in self-defense, and he wondered how many other dangerous wizards he was encountering. It seemed to be far too many for Bill's taste.

Once, when he had voiced a wish that his father had a different job, his mother became very defensive and had huffed about their dad doing his best, and they didn't need frills and a mansion to live in. Bill had deferred to her and apologized, not explaining that he'd really meant that he wished his dad had a job that wasn't as dangerous. He thought that having the clock made him more nervous than ever about his father's safety, instead of being reassured. What good was knowing that his father was in mortal peril if he couldn't do anything about it?

He had groaned when he read his Hogwarts letter that summer, which said that he'd been named a prefect for Gryffindor; the other Gryffindor prefect was *Juliet Hathaway*. Just what he needed. The girl he was trying to avoid was going to be his counterpart for the next three years.

"What do you mean, 'I don't want you to sleep with me'?" she said, incredulous. Then she colored. "God. I must sound so conceited. I mean—"

"That's a lie," he said, immediately. "Of course I want to sleep with you," he said, his voice breaking. Then he panicked, in case she misunderstood. "But not right now!" he said quickly. "I mean—that's not why I broke up with you. I'm the last person in the world who deserves you. It doesn't matter what I want or don't want. You—you need to find someone else," he said softly, crying now, but he didn't care.

"Why?" she whispered, shaking her head. "Why do you *want* to be unhappy? Why do you hate yourself so much?"

He sank down, leaning against the wall. "Because it's all my fault. If I'd been paying more attention—"

"Bill! It wasn't your fault!"

"Yes, it was!" he roared, making her step back. He was also still getting used to his fuller, lower voice. "It was all my *bloody fault!* Why should I have any happiness in my life now? Are my sisters happy? Who knows? We can't bloody well ask them, can we? Which is *all my fault!*" he said again, his voice echoing in the high stone corridor. He was breathing very quickly. Juliet gazed at him sadly; the echo died away and he looked up at her, his face tear-stained. "*Peggy knew,*" he whispered.

She crouched down beside him. "What?"

"Peggy knew it was going to happen. She didn't want to go. She *begged* Mum not to make her go. But we went anyway...."

Her brow furrowed. "Are you saying—"

"Right," he nodded. "Peggy had the Sight."

Juliet stared. "You're *joking.*"

Bill shook his head. "I should have known she had a good reason for not wanting to go. But our mum was going mad, trying to take care of the twins. I thought Charlie and I were helping, taking the girls out for the day...."

"See?" Juliet said softly. He stared at her.

"See what?"

"It's not your fault. Or your mum's. It was just meant to happen. That sounds dreadful, I suppose, but how can you blame yourself for something that was fate?"

Bill stared at the opposite wall, trying to think about this. "But if it was fate—why did Peggy beg to be allowed to stay home? Shouldn't she have just accepted her fate?"

"She was—what? Six?"

"She would have been seven in November. On the first." He gave her a small smile. "Her birthday is the day after yours."

"Right. Well, what do you expect of a six-year-old with the Sight? Just because she could *See* what was going to happen didn't mean that she had to *like* it. And perhaps she didn't know for certain that she couldn't change it. Perhaps she thought it was only a sort of warning. You know—if she went to the village—well, whatever happened would happen. *If* she didn't, it wouldn't. Of course, it probably doesn't really work that way...."

Bill shook his head; he raised his knees and propped his forearms on them. "No, I reckon it doesn't." Juliet sat next to him, her head on his shoulder. He didn't prevent her. It really was comforting to talk to her. He'd never found anyone he could talk to like this until her. It wasn't quite the same with his other friends. Jack came closest to being someone he could have serious

talks with, after Orville had died. *Orville...*

"The thing is—I feel like Orville was my fault, too," he whispered. She nodded, her head still on his shoulder.

"I know," she also whispered. Then she lifted her head and looked thoughtfully at him. "So, what you're saying is you *do* care about me, too much to let me be with a horrid beast like you who should be locked up in Azkaban?"

He grimaced. "Don't make fun."

"Sorry," she apologized. "Do you think you'll ever change your mind?" she asked softly. He turned to look at her. She was so close, and all he really wanted to do was slide his fingers into her hair and bring her mouth to his, feel her body against his again. But he just couldn't shake the nagging feeling that it would be a happiness that he didn't deserve.

"Maybe," he said before he could stop himself; she was just *too tempting*. She smiled.

"But not yet?" she asked. He nodded grimly. She looked like she knew what was going on now. She wiped her eyes and became very businesslike. This was more like the Juliet he knew. "All right then. Here's what we'll do. On my sixteenth birthday—the day before Peggy's seventh—you will give me a kiss for my present. On the last day of term before we go home for the holiday, you will give me a kiss for a Christmas present. And after we're back from holiday, on your sixteenth birthday, I'll give you a kiss. That's it. That's all. Sound fair?"

He frowned. "Not to *you*." He made a face. "God. Now *I* sound conceited. You know what I mean. That's why I told you to—"

"—find someone worthy. *Blah, blah, blah*," she added, as though he were speaking gibberish. "You mean *settle* for one of the other blighters around here? Are you mad? No, I'd much rather wait for *you*. However long it takes. I'll be fine." She leaned toward him and traced his jaw lightly with her finger. "You're worth the wait, Bill Weasley. When you change your mind, you know where to find me," she whispered, her warm breath on his face making him shiver. He swallowed, trying not to weaken.

"If *you* change your mind about waiting, I'll understand completely," he said with a croak in his voice. She backed up and laughed, her eyes sparkling in that way he loved.

"Not unless I decide to get that frontal lobotomy..."

"A frontal what?"

"It's an operation. To remove part of your brain." She laughed when he made a dreadful face at the thought. "Sorry. Being silly. I suppose wizards don't ever say that?"

"*Never*." They both stood; he looked down at her, wishing things were different. He wouldn't really blame her if she didn't wait, but at least he wouldn't have to argue with her anymore, or avoid her. He wished he could just *be* with her without the crippling guilt, but it was too soon.

"Well, I have to go—"

"—meet the lads," she said, completing his sentence, smiling. "Go on, then. I'm glad we talked."

He looked at her gratefully. "So am I." He'd been avoiding it, but now that it was over, it was a huge relief. And they could have a kiss (or even two) at Halloween, on her birthday, and another at Christmas. It was something to look forward to, anyway, without making him feel like he was forgetting his sisters completely and just selfishly pursuing his own pleasure constantly.

They walked down the corridor in opposite directions.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 31 October, 1979

"Mmm..."

Lily murmured contentedly as she became dimly aware of James' caresses. She adored waking up like this, his sensitive fingers drifting sleepily over her skin. She wondered how long newlyweds were supposed to be like this, but decided she didn't care whether they were breaking some unwritten rule saying they had to become boring old married people who only made love on Saturday nights. She bit the inside of her cheek as he ran a finger up the back of her thigh, then down to the back of her knee again. *He's teasing me*, she thought. It wasn't an unpleasant thought, actually; she liked this game. She would lie in bed, pretending to be asleep still, while he tried to coax her into wakefulness, and then *he* would pretend to be surprised by how aroused she was upon waking, as though that had absolutely no connection at all to the responses he was *trying* to evoke from her with his gentle stroking and kissing.

She felt his lips on the back of her neck now, his breath hot against her skin; her breasts were aching with want and she tried to be patient; he would touch all of her eventually, she knew. He rarely neglected any part of her...

Opening her eyes for a split second, she saw that she wasn't wearing anything. *That's my efficient husband*, she thought with a smirk. *Already banished the clothes*. His chest was pressed against her back, and she tried to remain passive, feigning sleep, but it was becoming very difficult as he moved his fingers and kissed his way down her neck to her shoulder, then down her back.

Oh, I love how he does this....

James watched Lily intently, *knowing* that she was awake, but playing along with the conceit that she wasn't. He loved the little ways in which she betrayed herself, the way her chest hitched when he ran his fingers up her thigh and then stopped just short of where she wanted them, running them down to her ankle again. He loved the way she started to *purr* when he stopped teasing her and finally touched her where she was longing to feel his fingers, the way she would finally let loose and moan, "*Oh god, oh god, oh god,*" into her pillow. He loved the way her body tensed, then went almost completely rigid, as she cried out his name, then relaxed again bit by bit, as she stretched languidly, her release making her feel boneless in his arms.

He rolled her over so that she was lying on top of him. He wrapped his arms around her, kissing her deeply, while she panted against his tongue, still not having her breath back. She seemed to awake fully then, propping herself above him on her arms and breaking the kiss, looking down at him with a sly smile while her hair cascaded down around them.

"Well, good morning to *you*, too," she said with that throaty edge to her voice he only heard in bed, at times like this. That voice alone was enough to make him feel ready for his own release. (Actually, watching her respond to what he'd just done was enough to make him feel ready. It was his favorite sight in the world.)

He smirked at her. "*You were a very randy wife.*"

She looked almost offended and raised her brows. "Oh, and whose fault would that be, I wonder?"

"Fault? That makes it sound like a bad thing."

She smiled and leaned down to lick an agonizing path down his chest to his nipples. "I never said it was a *bad* thing," she murmured, between using her mouth for other things. He squeezed his eyes shut, a groan trapped in his throat. He watched her as she worked her way down, then put his hand on her head to stop her.

"If you do that, I won't be responsible for what happens. We can't afford to—"

"Ah," she said, nodding, understanding. She lay down next to him and reached for him. "Can't wait, eh?" He slipped between her legs; she wrapped them around his waist, pulling him to her. "You don't have to wait," she whispered, feeling a contentment that was indescribable when he was where he belonged. She looked up at him; his eyes were closed, and she couldn't tell whether he was happy or in pain. "All right, James?"

He opened his eyes again and smiled down at her, still not moving, then kissed her quickly, his tongue stealing out for a second before he dipped his head to take the hard tip of a breast between his teeth. When he had wrung several minutes of throaty moans from her this way, he raised his head to smile at her. "I'm just trying to exercise some self-control. You do make it difficult, you know, when you're so-*responsive*—"

She moved her hips against him in answer, no longer smiling, but looking very, very serious. He claimed her mouth again, and her tongue was warm and alive against his as they moved faster and faster. At last, he had to break the kiss, his eyes screwed up tight. Lily's hands gripped his upper arms convulsively, urging him on, meeting his every thrust with an upward movement of her hips, whispering a soft, sibilant, "*Yessss,*" when he released his breath and she knew he'd finished. She smiled tenderly up at him, still holding him to her, her long legs imprisoning him. He leaned down to kiss her, grinning.

"Um," he said uncertainly, "did you—?"

"Again? No, not this time. I suppose I was a bit distracted by our goal. Don't worry about me, James. You already took care of me. I'm quite happy, I assure you." She kissed his nose affectionately. He separated himself from her and collapsed with exhaustion by her side, but she kept her legs in the air. He stared.

"Is that really necessary?"

She raised her eyebrows and shrugged. "Possibly not. If I get pregnant, I get pregnant. But I've heard this can't hurt. You know, the aid of gravity and all. Get every little thing to work for you."

He nodded, thinking about the idea of being a father. He was only nineteen, but they had decided two months earlier to start trying to conceive when Lily's mother's health took a turn for the worse again. She'd cried on him after leaving the hospital, convinced that this time was different. Her mother had fought her cancer for years now; at long last, it seemed that the cancer might win. Lily couldn't bear the thought that her mother might not see Lily become a mother, too, and James had agreed that they would put aside their original plan of waiting a few years.

Lily had never been what he would have called inhibited' in bed, but now that they were trying to have a baby, she was downright minx-like. He enjoyed it thoroughly, and thought with a little trepidation of the eventual change in their physical relationship that would have to occur while she was pregnant, once she conceived. However, until then, there were ample opportunities for fun....

"So, let's see, what's the date?"

James squinted at the calendar on his desk, on the other side of the room; that was hopeless, so he reached for his glasses and could see it properly now. "The thirty-first of October. Halloween."

"That's right. So-if we have a baby in exactly nine months, he'll be born on-the thirty-first of July. That's close to your birthday, James."

He shrugged, kissing her. "That'll be nice."

"An early birthday present."

She put her head on his chest and he wound his arms around her, caressing her back gently. "Well, maybe we'll get lucky this time. A magical day for a magical conception," he said, grinning at her.

Lily laughed, her green eyes crinkled up with merriment. "Of course, it will be absolutely impossible to keep a straight face when anyone mentions Halloween ever again, if this is the day we've conceived our first child."

"Right. While our kids are growing up, it will be, 'What are we doing to celebrate Halloween this year, Mum and Dad? And why are you grinning like idiots?'"

Lily laughed again and James joined her, holding her even more tightly, hoping that they'd been successful. But if not, there was always later, he thought happily....

He kissed her brow lightly. "You'll make a wonderful mother, you know..."

She smiled lovingly at him. "I hope so," she whispered, staring into space, into the future, unable to imagine being anyone's mother, and hoping that she wouldn't be too awful. And that her own mother would continue to be there for her with advice and encouragement.

"You'll have to ask Sam to put you on desk work again. Until you can take the test tomorrow."

She sighed, nodding. "Right. Well, I can keep Gemma company. She's getting *quite* large."

"When's she due?"

"Late February or early March. She's only five months, but you'd think it was a full nine. I hate to think what she's going to look like in four more months."

"Why'd they finally change their mind?"

"I think it was when Frank and Gemma baby-sat for Sam and Trina around Easter. She caught baby-lust from taking care of Katie. I could see the look on her face the next day," she said, smiling.

"Well, if we're successful this time, our kids will both be in the same year in school. That'll be nice. They can be best friends."

Lily made a face. "I don't like the idea of trying to make children's friends for them, let alone before they're even *born*. If one of them is a boy and one a girl, what are you going to be doing next, trying to marry them off?"

He threw himself back on the pillow. "Sorry. I was just thinking..."

"Anyway, Frank's mum already has *plenty* of plans for that poor child. She and her brother-in-law and his wife were by the other day, to take Frank and Gemma to lunch. I could hardly believe my ears! Frank's mother is, erm, something else."

James laughed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, let's just say she puts the 'B' in 'witch.'"

"Lily!" he said, shocked. "Gemma must be in hell, with her for a mother-in-law."

"Now that's where you'd be wrong. It's *Frank* who has to watch out with her. She *adores* Gemma. She seems to think that it's amazing that Frank can tie his own shoes. And she's just as bad with her brother-in-law, Frank's Uncle Algernon. Although his wife Enid isn't too bad. Poor Algie's a little clumsy, and the next thing you know Verity-that's Frank's mum-is telling all of us, 'Oh, that runs in the Longbottom side of the family, you know. That's what did my husband in.' Can you believe her saying that? Might as well say, 'If my husband hadn't been so incurably clumsy, he might still be alive.'"

James hesitated before saying, "Well, that might actually be true, Lily."

"That doesn't mean she has to *say* it! Whatever happened to not speaking ill of the dead?"

He grinned at her. "I don't think that's Mrs. Longbottom's chief concern in life."

She shook her head. "Anyway, I pity that poor child and I just hope that they manage to keep it as far away from her as possible. She'd be a dreadful influence on a child."

"Frank seems to be all right."

"Yes, oddly he does until his mum is around. Then he falls apart. I've never seen anything like it. He's a perfectly competent Auror until Mummy walks in the room..."

James enfolded her in his arms again. "Well, we shall just have to make sure you do not follow her example as a mother," he said, joking.

Lily laughed. "Definitely."

* * * * *

"Maggie! You'll be late for school!"

Valerie Dougherty's ghost watched as Maggie groaned and rolled over, the early morning sun in her face.

"Had another dream?" Valerie asked her gently. Maggie didn't answer, but frowned into the pillow, trying to remember it. In the dream, she saw something she'd seen once or twice on the telly, before her parents had hustled her from the room. Not that she'd minded them making her leave, as it was mushy stuff. Snogging, she knew other children called it, before snickering. In her dream, a tall boy with red hair was snogging a pretty dark-haired girl who seemed to want him to do it. She seemed to want him to do it quite a lot. Maggie sat up and blinked against the morning sun. Why should she dream about that? For some reason the boy looked familiar, but she couldn't say why. In her dream, the girl called him Bill.

"Maggie!" he mother cried again, starting to sound exasperated.

"Coming, Mummy!" she called now, a croak in her voice, because she wasn't fully awake yet. She seldom willfully disobeyed her mother and father, or even gave them cause to ask her to do something before she thought of doing it herself. She was so glad to be with them she didn't want to do anything that would make them want to send her back to the orphanage. Not that they would, she knew, but still—she didn't want them to even *think*, for a single moment, *Oh, why did we have to choose this one?*

She knew why she was chosen. She had red hair and a face very similar to their daughter, Valerie. Valerie had died from cancer. They hadn't been coy about telling her that. She reminded them of Valerie, and they felt that Valerie couldn't have been taken from them for no reason; after much meditation on the matter, her parents had decided that Valerie must have died to induce them to make a home for another child, a child who had no parents. They no longer had a daughter; Maggie didn't have parents. It seemed that they were made for each other.

The nice thing for Maggie was that she knew that Valerie approved of the whole arrangement. Maggie smiled at the specter of her predecessor now, getting up to pad to the bathroom, to brush her teeth.

Valerie watched her fondly, the morning light shining through her. She liked this little girl who made her mum and dad so happy. Something her parents didn't know was that when Valerie had died in the hospital in London, she had returned to her parents' home in Leicestershire, sitting in her old room, waiting for the day when another little girl would live there. Somehow, she knew that would happen.

And then the day had come, the previous spring, when the strange little man had shown up on their doorstep and told them that there were two little girls at an orphanage in Exeter, two little girls who needed a home, and he hoped they would provide that home. Valerie had been fascinated by him. He wasn't like anyone she'd known when she was alive. Now that she was dead, she knew much more than she used to. She knew about witches and wizards, for a start. She knew that this man was a wizard, as he simply *popped!* into existence in the Doughertys' front garden; he also had taken what she assumed was a magic wand from his pocket and peeked into one of the front windows, muttering something. The last thing he did before ringing the bell was to wave his wand again, converting the odd, long coat he'd been wearing to a short jacket.

He'd told them that he'd heard through a mutual acquaintance that they'd lost their daughter, and he extended his condolences to them. He asked them whether they'd ever considered adopting a child—or two—who needed a home.

The three of them didn't discuss it for long; her parents were skeptical at first that they would be allowed to adopt, as they were both in their fifties now and had inquired at a number of agencies, all of whom turned them down because of age. Of course, they'd been trying to adopt babies, not little girls. It hadn't occurred to them to try this.

"I don't know why we never considered it," she said to her husband. "Why didn't we ever think about it, Sean?"

Valerie's father shrugged. "Dunno. Aren't kids like that usually from homes where the parents never married, they were just shacking up? Or drug addicts? Do we want a kid with half a brain because the parents were drug addicts?"

The little man had stuttered, "These—these girls aren't like that. A terrible accident left them orphaned. Please—they don't have anyone else. Two sisters, about six and eight. Lovely little girls—with red hair," he added, trying to seem casual about it. Valerie saw the look her mother gave her father. *Just like Valerie*, her look seemed to say.

She didn't follow them to the orphanage; she waited patiently in her old room, still wallpapered in a pink and white print of eighteenth-century country folk engaging in country activities like putting cows and sheep out to pasture, making haystacks and walking by streams over rickety but picturesque bridges. She'd loved looking at her wallpaper when she'd been sick in bed, making up stories in her head about the people in the pictures. She hoped the little girls would like it, that they wouldn't make her parents paint or paper over it. Somehow she knew that they wouldn't be able to resist two little red-haired girls.

When the arrangements had been made for them to become adoptive parents and they'd returned with just one little girl, Valerie had been confused. She never did overhear anything about why they didn't bring both girls home that the man had mentioned. She'd watched, invisible, while her parents had tucked their new daughter into bed that night. Mrs. Dougherty settled down to read to her new daughter from *Peter Pan*....

"All children, except one, grow up," began Mrs. Dougherty, making Valerie feel unspeakably sad. *Little girls who die of cancer don't grow up*, she thought in her ghost-mind.

When Mrs. Dougherty finished the chapter and went to kiss the small red head goodnight, the little thing looked up at her new mother with large blue eyes and said, "How funny that you read that to me tonight. I don't remember most anything else, except that my first name is Margaret, but I do know that I was brought to the orphanage by Peter."

Her mother looked startled; she smoothed the quilt over the little girl's legs. "Now, dearie, don't tell tales. Peter Pan did not take you to the orphanage, even though one *could* say that Lost Children live there, as they do in Neverland...."

"Lost Children?" the girl asked, frowning; Valerie realized that the girl had never heard *Peter Pan* before, and her mother hadn't read enough for her to know about this.

"Well, at any rate, you have a good night, Margaret." She surveyed the small girl for a moment. "That seems rather a formal name for such a wee thing. Let's see if we can think of something better. Hmm...What about naming you after old Thatcher, eh?" she smiled. "Shall you be our little Maggie?"

The slip of a girl smiled at her. "Yes. But—can you read a *bit* more, Mummy?"

Mrs. Dougherty looked at the large blue eyes, and Valerie could tell that it was the word Mummy that had gone straight to her heart. "Of course, love," she said, tears in her voice. But they were happy tears, Valerie could see, as her mother wiped an errant drop from her cheek and sat down next to the little girl again, to continue reading the story of the children who had left their parents heartbroken when they flew off with Peter Pan.

Valerie saw that Maggie was listening very attentively when Mrs. Dougherty read the explanation from Peter to Wendy of who the Lost Boys were.

"*They are the children who fall out of their perambulators when the nurse is looking the other way. If they are not claimed in seven days they are sent far away to the Neverland to defray expenses. I'm captain.*"

"*What fun it must be!*"

"*Yes,*" said cunning Peter, *but we are rather lonely. You see we have no female companionship.*"

"*Are none of the others girls?*"

"*Oh, no; girls, you know, are much too clever to fall out of their prams.*"

"I must not be very clever then. Although I don't think I fell out of a pram," Maggie said quietly. Mrs. Dougherty hugged her tightly and kissed her on the head for a moment.

"Just listen, dearie," she said before continuing. Eventually, Valerie noticed that Maggie's head was nodding; her mother read on, oblivious.

"*Don't get any letters,*" he said contemptuously.

"*But your mother gets letters?*"

"*Don't have a mother,*" he said. *Not only had he no mother, but he had not the slightest desire to have one. He thought them very overrated persons. Wendy, however, felt at once that she was in the presence of a tragedy.*

"*O Peter, no wonder you were crying,*" she said, *and got out of bed and ran to him.*

"*I wasn't crying about mothers,*" he said rather indignantly.

Valerie's mother looked down at Maggie, who was breathing evenly, her head against her new mother's arm. She was fast asleep, her pale red lashes on her freckled cheeks, her rosebud mouth

open just slightly. Mrs. Dougherty leaned down and kissed the child's forehead, whispering to her, "I don't know what pram you fell out of, my wee Maggie, but I hope you like your new home."

Valerie had watched the girl sleep that night, and decided to introduce herself the next morning. If this little girl was going to take her place, she needed to talk to her. Hopefully that wouldn't be a problem.

Oddly, it wasn't. When Maggie awoke the next morning, stretching and rubbing her eyes sleepily, Valerie was perched in the air next to the bed, as though she were in an invisible chair, and when Maggie saw her, she looked momentarily startled, and then fascinated.

"Um," she'd said uncertainly, "hullo."

"Hullo," Valerie had answered in kind. "Don't be afraid. I'm Valerie. I wanted to welcome you to my old room."

The sun shone through her and Maggie had squinted as though she was uncertain she was really awake yet. "Your old room? So—you're a ghost?"

Valerie nodded. "I just want to make sure my mum and dad are happy. I'm so glad you've come to stay. They're good parents. I think you'll like them."

Maggie nodded. "I already do. I didn't know my new room had a ghost, though!" she said, smiling. "I think that's lovely!"

Valerie smiled back at her. "You do?"

"Oh, yes. Especially as it's *you*. I mean, you can tell me things. About your mum and dad."

Valerie agreed. "Whatever you need to know." She'd kept her promise.

Maggie returned from the bathroom and quickly scrambled into her uniform, getting the blouse buttoned wrong. When she arrived in the spacious kitchen to eat her breakfast, her mother clucked her tongue at her and fixed the button problem, then buttoned the navy cardigan over the blouse and straightened the blouse's round collar.

She smiled up at her mother, who clearly enjoyed doing this. She seemed to see another red-haired woman in the back of her mind, in a very fuzzy way, fussing over her in a similar fashion, but it was in a darker kitchen, with more clutter. She wondered sometimes at these little mental images, wondered whether she'd ever really remember what happened to her before she arrived at the orphanage. But if, as the nuns had said, she didn't have anyone, remembering her real family would probably just make her sad. She had a lovely home now and two loving parents; she knew that she was a very lucky little girl. She also had a ghost friend to keep her from being lonely, although Valerie had cautioned against her telling anyone about this.

"They might think you're barmy," she had warned. Maggie had agreed. It would be best to keep Valerie a secret.

Her mother was about to pour hot water into the teapot while Maggie was eating her porridge; suddenly Maggie looked up, feeling a panic in her chest. "Don't touch the kettle, Mummy!" she cried.

Her mother looked at her oddly, her hand on her chest. "Whatever are you going on about, Maggie?"

"The handle—"

Her mother leaned forward and squinted at the kettle handle; then she tried to lift it very slowly and one end of the handle came away from the body, making it fall heavily to the hob. Luckily, since she'd been lifting it very slowly, instead of the brusque way she normally did, the kettle only splashed a few drops of very hot water onto the hob, where they sizzled and quickly evaporated. She turned and looked searchingly at Maggie, who was peacefully eating her porridge.

Valerie was watching, as well, invisible now that she was in the same room as her mother. She'd noticed Maggie do quite a number of interesting things since coming to live with her mum and dad. She seemed to *know* some things before they were going to happen, for some reason that Valerie hadn't worked out yet.

When it was time for Maggie to dash outside to catch the school bus, Mrs. Dougherty enfolded the little girl in her arms, loath to let her go afterward. Valerie watched Maggie leave, and she watched her mother watch Maggie leave, and knew that her mother was finally getting over her Valerie's death. She wasn't *completely* over it yet, but Valerie knew that the day was coming when she would be leaving her parents for good, when she knew that they were happy and Maggie was settled. That day hadn't come yet, but she could hope.

* * * * *

"How dare you send that demon-child to us!" Mrs. Ferris shrieked, thrusting the little red-haired girl away from her, then huddling against her husband, who put a protective arm around her shoulder.

The reverend mother gathered the girl to her; the thin shoulders were shaking, and although any other child would have been crying to hear an adult talk about her so, the girl glared at the couple over her shoulder.

"Let's go into my office," Mother Crispin said, with her slight Irish lilt. "We can sit down and—"

"—and discuss it? Not bloody likely," Mr. Ferris interjected, evidently not caring to watch his language before the reverend mother. "What is there to say about our lunch, dishes, knives, forks, spoons and all rising up in the air and spinning about the room? What is there to say about the television channels changing every split second? With the telly *turned off!*" he roared; he was shivering while holding his wife, and it was difficult to say which one of them was more frightened of the little girl.

Mother Crispin's lips were drawn very thin. Her faith had always been strong, but she had to admit that when she heard tales of miracles, she was a skeptic. She'd seen far too many people in this world benefit monetarily from having a plaster stain in their entrance hall that looked remarkably like the Virgin Mary, or a shadow cast on the side of a house that resembled Christ on the cross. When she heard of phenomena like this, she did not automatically credit it, but reasoned that there must be some other explanation for its occurring, a reason other than a miracle or any other type of divine intervention. (Her usually assumption was that the reason was avarice.) Surely events couldn't have transpired *exactly* as the Ferrises were describing them, she told herself; it defied logic. She was a *very* logical woman. Of course, she had told herself the very same thing the last time....

She sighed. Regardless of the explanation, she had to accept that Mr. and Mrs. Ferris were not going to give Anna a home, and they would probably not consider any other child at the orphanage at this rate, either. They wouldn't want to take another chance after this. She lifted her chin and gave them a steely glare herself, on the child's behalf.

"Fine. Go then. Drop off the girl and make up stories about why you won't take her. Parenthood isn't for everyone, you know," she said acidly. "You might want to consider a dog. Or better still, a cat, as they don't need walks. Or perhaps you should completely reconsider any other living being having to rely on your care and goodwill! Good day!" she snapped, turning, the girl still in the protective circle of her arm, as they entered the old brick building, leaving Mr. and Ferris standing on the front steps.

She was shaking with rage, but at this point, she was most angry with herself, for letting the girl see her lose her temper. It wasn't the best way to remain an authority figure, she thought. But looking down, she could see that Anna was looking back up at her with a smile curling at the corner of her mouth, her large blue eyes shining in admiration. She afforded the girl a rare smile.

"Come to my office. We'll have some tea."

Anna nodded and smiled at the reverend mother. It wasn't easy to think of herself as Anna' at first, but she was learning. When the reverend mother had first spoken to her, she asked her for her name.

"Annie," she'd said automatically, before realizing that she should have feigned memory-loss when it came to this, too. She'd already told the nuns that her entire family had died in a fire and she was the only survivor. She wasn't certain whether they believed her, but she concentrated very hard and repeated her story over and over, and they seemed to gradually accept it. She felt a surge of power when this occurred. *Did I do magic?* she wondered. It wouldn't be the first time, although her brother Bill was the one in the family known for wandless magic, especially charms. Then she tried not to think of her family...

"Annie?" the reverend mother had said, her mouth twisting. "That's not a proper name. *Anna*. That's a good and proper name. You shall be Anna."

A look on her face made the newly-christened Anna say, "That was your name, wasn't it?"

The reverend mother froze and examined the child before her. "Yes," she said slowly. "Yes, if I am to be truthful. As *you* must always be truthful," she added, giving the girl a meaningful look.

"Why did you change it?"

The reverend mother crossed her hands on her lap and narrowed her eyes, trying to fathom the girl before her. If she wanted to be the interviewer, so be it. She knew that the questions a child chose to ask could be every bit as revealing as the answers given to questions, if not more so.

"When I took my vows, I was beginning a new life. So I became Sister Crispin, after St. Crispin. Do you remember your surname?"

The girl hesitated. It was subtle, but the reverend mother caught it. "I don't remember. I-I must have been bumped on the head. I don't even remember where I lived. Just that a fire killed my family."

The former Anna Garrison nodded, which belied the fact that she didn't believe the child for a

moment. She also thought it very odd that Anna looked so much like the other little girl who'd turned up, yet that girl's family had died in a car crash. It was all very strange.

She'd had the matter investigated, and found that no one in the entire country, nor in Scotland or Wales, had reported missing two little red-haired girls of their ages. However, there also didn't seem to be any instances of entire families perishing in car crashes or house fires. It was very, very odd, but inasmuch as the girls didn't have anywhere else to go (and the younger one seemed very disoriented) Mother Crispin felt it was her duty to take good care of them and to help them find a new home. She sighed as she poured the tea for herself and young Anna. She had had high hopes that the Ferrises would like her, but the one-day visit hadn't even reached the half-way point when they returned her to the orphanage.

The girl added some cream to her cup but no sugar, blowing across the surface delicately before sipping. Suddenly, Anna put her cup and saucer on the desk that sat between her and the reverend mother and said, "Do you like being a nun?"

Mother Crispin was startled, but she should have known better; unlike the other children in her care, Anna usually said whatever was on her mind. "Yes," she said without hesitation, before taking a sip of tea.

"Why?"

Now she did hesitate. "Well, originally, I studied nursing. I wanted to be of use. And I did feel of use. For the most part. There was still something missing in my life, I felt. And oddly enough, it was the fact that I was being called sister' day in and day out that finally awoke me to my true calling. I knew that I was meant to do both—to be a nurse and a nun. After I took my vows, I came to work here with the other sisters in my order, instead of the hospital where I had trained. I knew that I had done the right thing."

Anna nodded. "But you're not a nurse anymore."

"Ah, that is not true. I became a matron eventually. Then, when the reverend mother who led the order when I arrived decided to retire, she recommended to Father McAninley that I take over for her, running the orphanage. I am and shall always be a nurse. I happen to run an orphanage now. But above all, every day of my life, I am a servant of God."

"Did you ever want to be a doctor instead of a nurse?"

Mother Crispin's mouth went very thin. *The child was entirely too good at working out these things.* "In those days, very few women did that," she said, which wasn't really an answer, but it wasn't a lie, either. It also implied that she was far older than she was. She had only just turned fifty-five.

"Did you ever want to be a priest instead of a nun?"

The reverend mother froze. "You're not a Catholic, are you?" she asked the child.

"I don't think I was."

"Nor do I," she confirmed with a sniff. "If you were, you wouldn't be asking that."

When the girl had finished her tea, Mother Crispin dismissed her and she left the office to return to her dormitory. As she softly closed the door, Anna breathed a sigh of relief. She had avoided possibly being adopted. She looked through the glass in the reverend mother's office door; it was frosted, but through it she could see the shadow of the reverend mother as she sat at her desk.

She remembered the first time she'd awoken and found the older woman sitting in a chair at her bedside, when she was still in hospital. They'd had the conversation about her name, followed by a hot meal. Later, the reverend mother had come at bedtime to see to it that Anna' was not afraid to be sleeping in a strange place. She'd stared at the reverend mother's wimple, asking her, "What color is your hair?"

She could tell that Mother Crispin was startled. Looking around furtively (there were no other sisters nearby and the other children were already asleep) she said, "Would you like to see?"

She'd sat up anxiously, nodding. The wimple was removed carefully, then hairpins extracted from the complicated pile of hair, before the cascade of pale tresses came tumbling down. It was a lovely white, soft and full. She thought she saw some strands of another color, though.

"It used to be gold, didn't it?"

The reverend mother hesitated before nodding. "Yes," she said truthfully. "It was gold."

Anna appreciated the fact that so far, the reverend mother did not seem to be lying to her about anything. She'd even tried asking her personal questions, and had received what seemed to be honest responses. This was such a contrast from the other adults in her previous life, and even the strange wizard who'd brought her and Peggy to Exeter, that she felt an immediate attachment to the reverend mother, and knew that she had to do whatever was necessary to avoid leaving.

She kept her ear to the ground and learned that a couple was coming to look at her and her

sister (whom she had denied was her sister) because they might be interested in adopting them both. The police had found out nothing about them, and they needed homes.

She had eavesdropped when the Doughertys came to visit Peggy, to meet her for the first time. She heard the wife say to the husband, when Peggy left to go to the bathroom, "She's lovely, but what about the other girl? What if we have to take them both?"

Fine, Anna had thought. *If she doesn't want me, I don't want her. I've put up with enough of that already.*

When the reverend mother had come looking for her, so she could meet the Doughertys, she'd hid until they left. She didn't emerge until after dinner, and went to bed with an empty belly. She awoke in the middle of the night when someone sat on her bed; it was the reverend mother, who immediately put her finger to her lips.

"Where were you earlier, child? There was someone I wanted you to meet."

"I know."

"Then why—"

"They just want one."

The reverend mother hesitated. "Really." It wasn't a question.

"I heard them say. There wouldn't have been much point, would there?"

Mother Crispin looked grim. "Possibly not."

"She can have them. That's all right." But suddenly, her throat felt rather tight at the thought of not seeing Peggy again. She'd snuck into her room to watch her sleep, remembering the way she'd screamed at their mum not to make them go to the park...

"You're quite sure?" The reverend mother smoothed down the blankets on the bed in a businesslike manner.

"Yes," she said, nodding, willing herself not to cry. *Peggy*, she thought. *I'll miss you.*

She had watched when the Doughertys had come to take Peggy, or Margaret, as they called her, to live with them. The next day, she had been transferred to the orphanage, as there was no real reason to keep her in the hospital ward any longer. The doctors could find no physical reason for her to lack her memories. She had toyed with the idea of doing something to give herself a head injury, but discarded the idea as too frightening. (She might really hurt herself.)

It had been almost six months now, and the Ferrises were the second family interested in her. The first, the Trents, had had a similar reaction to her (because she had had a similar reaction to *them*). The reverend mother had given her the same penetrating look and the same staunch defense. It wasn't *her* fault; she was just a child. For any caring adult to find the child wanting clearly indicated that *they* were not fit to be parents.

The reverend mother always came to turn out the lights in the dormitories, which weren't appreciatively different from the hospital ward. The dorm had the same white-painted metal beds, lined up regimentally. Seventeen girls from the ages of eight (Anna) to fifteen lived in the same dorm; only eleven boys from ten to fifteen lived in the boys' dorm. (Boys seemed to have an easier time appealing to adoptive parents.) It was a small orphanage, which allowed the sisters in the order to give the children plenty of attention, but enough children that when someone like Anna wanted to be alone, she could do that.

When Mother Crispin stood at the doorway of the girls' dormitory and bade them goodnight and God bless, Anna laid in her bed, feigning sleep. The brightness pressing against her closed eyelids disappeared, and when she opened her eyes a tiny crack, she saw that the lights had been turned out. A minute later, however, she felt her bed dip to one side as someone sat on it, and she felt a gentle hand on her brow, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

"Sleep well, little Anna," she heard the reverend mother's soft voice. "I'm sorry about the Ferrises," she added. Somehow Anna didn't think she meant *I'm sorry they didn't want you*. She seemed to be apologizing instead for making Anna put up with them for any length of time. The gentle hand continued to stroke her hair and Anna swallowed, hoping the reverend mother wouldn't notice. It felt so nice to have a mother hover over her and care about her; she couldn't remember the last time her own mother had done this. She'd been so busy with all of those boy babies for so long...

"Ah, little one. Shall we exorcise you or canonize you?" the reverend mother's voice said in a bemused tone. Anna didn't know what either term meant. She made sure her eyes were closed tightly, but her acting didn't work.

"Anna?" the reverend mother said softly. "You're awake, aren't you?"

She opened her eyes slowly, then unnecessarily nodded her head. Mother Crispin smiled at her.

"Sit up, child."

Anna pulled herself up and sat waiting, wondering whether she would get an explanation of the strange words the reverend mother had used.

"Were they so *very* dreadful?"

Anna hesitated. "I could never live with them."

Mother Crispin nodded. "You shan't have to." She put her hand under Anna's chin and lifted her face slightly. "But you *do* want a home, eventually, yes?"

Anna hesitated before nodding. The nod was a lie. She didn't want to leave the orphanage *ever*. That would mean leaving the reverend mother.

The reverend mother could tell Anna was lying. And while something at the back of her mind whispered the reason to her, she pushed that away, not wanting to feed her ego. Unfortunately, the child once again picked up on something and spoke her mind.

"Did you ever want to be a mother?" Anna said to her softly.

After a second, she said, "I am a mother, child. To all of you."

"I mean—a *real* mother."

She pulled her mouth into a line. "Don't I seem real to you?"

Anna smiled at her, and she could tell it was a genuine smile. She seldom saw that sight on the thin little face; she knew to enjoy it while she could. "Yes."

She gathered the child to her, and Anna wrapped her arms around the reverend mother's waist, pillowing her head on her chest.

She didn't need another mother because she already had one.

Without thinking, Mother Crispin kissed Anna on the top of the head and tucked her into bed again. When she was in the corridor again, she thought, *I shouldn't have done that*. But it was too late now. Giving out kisses wasn't a good idea, she felt; she shouldn't play favorites. And she certainly shouldn't let herself to get so attached to one child. There was no telling when the right family would come along for any of them. She'd made that mistake once, with a little Welsh boy named David, and it had been very hard to get over his being adopted, even though it was a lovely family. She'd cried for a week after he was gone, knowing how irrational it was, knowing that she wasn't really his mother.

She'd been much younger then, and had managed to keep her distance from the children since that time. Somehow, Anna had broken down those defenses and crawled into her heart, with her naked, probing questions and her honest gaze. She was so straightforward the majority of the time; when she lied it hardly seemed to matter, she was so utterly transparent and the reverend mother could tell right away. It seemed that Anna could tell that she knew too, so it was hard to say whether it was really lying at all when you considered that. She was fairly certain that the girl's family had not died in a fire, but if the child was going to such lengths to avoid having her family found, and if they had not expended any effort at all to find her, then as far as the former Anna Garrison was concerned, they didn't deserve her and the child shouldn't be required to return to them.

And then, there was still the question of what both the Trents and the Ferrises had said when they'd returned her to the orphanage. Objects flying through the air. Appliances behaving wildly. Both the families and Anna were relieved that the experiments were over. Mother Crispin wondered about the girl again, thinking once more the words she had said at the girl's bedside:

Shall we exorcise you or canonize you?

Suspect

Thursday, 15 November, 1979

Sirius opened his eyes, blinking in the pre-dawn light, trying to work out where he was. He turned his head to the left and saw Cecilia Ratkowski lying beside him on her stomach. The sheet was pulled up to her waist and she wasn't wearing anything else. Her normally-neat blonde hair was tousled and she was facing Sirius, her countenance quite peaceful, as she snored very softly.

Blast, he thought. *I was going to just close my eyes for a moment, and the next thing I know it's practically morning.* After they'd made love, she'd implored him to stay the night instead of running off, as he usually did. He'd relented somewhat and stayed a little longer, lying down again after starting to dress. She'd curled up beside him, her arm across his stomach like a heavy rope. He'd watched her sleep at first, feeling like he couldn't breathe, as though a steel band was binding his chest, instead of just her thin arm flung across him. Finally, his eyelids felt too heavy to keep open....

Bugger. Where were his socks? He fumbled around the messy room, trying to distinguish his clothes from Cecilia's. She was not exactly the neatest girl he'd ever been with. Just the week before, he'd had a one-off with a Muggle woman at least six years older than him who'd been positively obsessive about where he put his drink, before they'd reached the bedroom. She'd been a bit scarily obsessive about some things in the bedroom, too, which was one reason he'd decided to contact Cecilia again.

They weren't technically a couple, but they kept sort of coming back to each other, ever since Lily and James' wedding in June. He'd told Cecilia many times that he didn't mind a bit if she saw other men, and she told him—very unconvincingly—that he was free to see other women, as well. He strongly suspected that she wasn't exercising her freedom nearly as much as he was (if at all). He never saw evidence of other men having been in her disorganized flat. (Once, when she'd gone to dress for a date, he'd changed into his dog form and had sniffed around a bit, although he felt a bit foolish afterward, especially when he hadn't found anything but a bowl of curdled milk that had been left under a chair for the cat.) He wasn't certain whether he was relieved that she didn't seem to be seeing anyone else, or wished that she would.

He finally found all of his clothes and was about to Disapparate to Ascog Castle. However, he waited a fraction of a second too long, and the next thing he knew, Cecilia was rolling over and stretching, looking at him with those lovely eyes. He did adore her eyes, he had to admit. It was very easy to get lost in them and be drawn to her, even when he was trying to do quite the opposite. And the fact that she was sitting up while stretching now, wearing nothing at all, didn't exactly make him eager to vanish.

"Where are you going, then?"

Good morning to you, too, he thought. "I hadn't planned to spend the night," he explained. "I reckon I must have been more knackered than I thought. We have an early meeting at the office, and I need a shower. I was just going to pop home."

She frowned, sitting up fully, not covering herself. "You could have at least woken me to say goodbye. It's not very nice to go skulking away. I'm surprised you stayed for any length of time at all last night. Usually it's eat, shag and go."

Sirius frowned. Perhaps she was being honest because she wasn't fully awake yet. "Cecilia, I-I'll stay the night at some point in the future. I very *likely* will," he added, for protection. "But—well, we're not really serious, are we?. This is fun, but we're—we're old school friends. We're not—" He stopped himself, having been about to say *Lily and James*. He sighed. It had been *very* hard to watch *her* marry his best friend. He'd put a good face on it, but he'd been just as glad that he and Peter and Remus had had to leave the reception because of the full moon. He didn't think he'd

have been able to watch them walk up to their honeymoon suite.... Going back to the inn for the wedding breakfast the next morning had been torture, seeing them so deliriously happy, and him with a gnawing empty feeling in the pit of his stomach that wouldn't be fixed by food. And yet, he knew that a combination of Sirius Black and Lily Evans would have been a complete disaster. He knew that she and James were meant for each other. It was still hard to let go of the *idea* of her, when he'd cherished that idea for so long.

Seeing Cecilia at the wedding breakfast had been his salvation; he'd talked and laughed with her, trying to avoid even looking in Lily's direction, and they'd gone off and spent the day together afterward. Near sunset, he'd been ready to run off to be with Remus again, but she had surprised him by seducing him (he hadn't thought to be so presumptuous on the first date as to initiate the seduction). He'd had to run off afterward, of course, as the moon would be rising forty-eight minutes after sunset. And thus the pattern of their so-called relationship had been established, right from the start.

Eat, shag and go.

"You *very likely will*? Oh, that's encouraging," she opined sarcastically. "It wouldn't kill you to stay, you know. You stayed most of last night, and you aren't dying, are you?"

Only dying to get away, he thought irritably.

"Stay tonight. It'll be worth your while..."

Sirius made a face. "Cecilia, I'm not just coming over here for sex—" *Okay*, he admitted to himself, *it's usually for the sex...*

"I didn't mean that!" she said, laughing. "I meant that I'd make you breakfast. And anyway, I don't look on sex as something *I* give you. It's a gift we give each other."

Sirius thought he was going to spew.

"Did you read that somewhere?" he asked, making a face, not daring to tell her what he really thought of such platitudes.

She looked a little embarrassed. "Maybe," she admitted softly. "Oh, come on, Sirius," she said, going back into wheedling mode. "Stay tonight. Or do you have another early meeting at the office tomorrow?"

No, but tonight I'm supposed to be keeping my mate the werewolf company during the full moon.

He looked at her thoughtfully and decided that she didn't seem ready to cope with the idea that he was an illegal Animagus, and that he'd become an illegal Animagus to keep company during the full moon with his friend the werewolf. The funny thing was, as many girls as he'd been with in school, none of them questioned his disappearing during the full moon. He hadn't been steady with any of them, and perhaps they all just assumed he was with some other girl at that time. Now he was experiencing a down-side to seeing someone somewhat regularly—keeping a certain monthly secret was more difficult when there was someone like Cecilia in his life. She looked at him suspiciously now, as though knowing that he was going to beg off and that he wouldn't tell her the real reason why.

"Sorry, can't see you tonight. Remus and I have plans. We have for a while. Can't break them. For the next three nights, actually," he added, before she could suggest the next night, or the one after that. Her eyes narrowed as he regarded her. He realized that he'd actually managed to forget that she was sitting up in bed with nothing on. Except that—he'd just noticed again. *Bugger.*

"Remus Lupin? For the next three nights? You didn't mention this before."

Sirius was really itching to get away now. "Sorry. Meant to. I just—didn't," he finished lamely, smiling feebly at her. She frowned.

"Well then, I'll just have to find someone else to spend time with for the next three nights," she said with a sniff. Sirius narrowed his own eyes, observing her body more keenly than he would have liked to admit to himself.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he said, aware at the same time that she wanted to wind him up. *Sod that*, he thought. *It's working.*

"It means what it sounds like it means," she said casually, as she rose from the bed and began trudging through the piles of clothes, still naked. Sirius was starting to have second thoughts about leaving.

"Listen, maybe I can see whether Peter or James can keep Remus company tonight—"

She paused, standing before him like a newly-awoken nymph, if nymphs normally frequented laundry hampers that had exploded.

"Keep him company? Is that all you were going to do—keep him company?"

"Er, no, not all. It's a long story. Listen, I'll talk to them and let you know, all right? That's all I can promise." He swallowed, trying very hard not to carry her back to the bed. She continued

to poke at various piles around the room until she finally found an old dressing gown of green chenille that immediately made her into a completely asexual being upon donning it and tying the belt. Sirius was certain that he'd seen the same sick shade of green in his cauldron during Potions, when they were still in school. He was starting to regret promising to ask Peter or James to be with Remus.

"Well, let me know what you decide," she said carelessly, as though she hadn't just been badgering him to stay the night. "I might not be here, though, if you wait too long." She seemed to be trying to sound carefree, but failed miserably.

"I'll be able to let you know before noon, hopefully," he said, trying to ignore the veiled threat in her words. He really did mean it when he told her she could see other men—didn't he? "And now I *must* dash home to shower and change before I'm late for that meeting."

"All right," she said, suddenly agreeable. She walked to him in the dreadful green dressing gown and stood on tiptoe to kiss his stubbly cheek, as dutiful as any wife. *No*, he thought angrily; *not like a wife, anything but a wife....*

He bade her goodbye and Apparated from her flat, feeling like a criminal making his getaway—and not a moment too soon.

* * * * *

Remus pulled Emil to him with his left hand around his middle, pressing his lips to the back of his neck. Emil turned his head to smile over his shoulder at Remus, who couldn't help grinning himself. After they'd had sex at Remus' house the night before—his parents had gone out—with restraints to prevent Remus injuring Emil, they'd Flooed to the Gaillard home, where they were going to stay the night. (Emil's bed was bigger and more comfortable for them both to sleep in.) Just before the dawn, Remus had felt Emil's hands moving over him again, and it was lovely to be able to respond properly to him this time, instead of being prevented from touching him back. Now that the mania was gone from him, thanks to their time at his house, he felt close to *normal* again, reveling in making Emil sigh or groan, to cry out his name. It wasn't the same when it was all one-sided.

Remus breathed in his scent, feeling very peaceful, glad he'd told Emil he was a werewolf, and even glad he'd told him how he was bitten when he was small, although it had been in response to Emil's daft idea of becoming a werewolf himself. He ran his fingers affectionately through Emil's short wavy hair, thinking how much he loved him, how he had never thought he would love anyone again after Lily. *We can be very silly and melodramatic when we're young*, he thought, as though nineteen weren't still young. He continued to stroke Emil's hair lovingly, enjoying the moment, the pocket of peace.

"So, what's the plan tonight?" Emil said suddenly, his voice soft in the morning stillness.

"I'm meeting Sirius at Ascog Castle. Dungeon. The usual." He still hadn't told Emil that his closest friends had become illegal Animagi to be with him. "And Sirius said his sister is making breakfast tomorrow. The nice one," he added with a smile Emil didn't see.

"Ah," Emil said, making Remus frown. Emil sounded decidedly odd. Remus fought his natural curiosity to ask why. There was a prickling of foreboding in his brain, his wolf-instinct, telling him not to. *You won't like the answer*, part of his brain told him. *But I really want to know*, another part of his brain responded.

"Why?" he said in a normal tone of voice, which sounded absurdly loud suddenly.

Emil sat up and turned to look at Remus. "No reason. Well," he admitted, "yeah, there is a reason. I was hoping you weren't going to be in the Ministry lock-up is all. I'm glad Sirius' sister is going to be taking care of you in the morning...." Somehow, Remus didn't think he *looked* terribly glad. His eyes widened as he realized the reason for this.

"Oh, god, Emil. You don't think—you don't think I *fancy* her, do you?"

Emil shrugged, looking a little forlorn. "Well, I sometimes wonder when you'll decide you're tired of me and want to be with a woman again. And she's your best friend's sister. These sort of things happen quite a lot."

Remus laughed. "First off—Ursula was out of school before we even started at Hogwarts. I have nothing against older women on principal, but somehow, even though she's very pretty, I always think of Ursula as being very *motherly*. Not quite the same as—"

"Lily?"

Remus drew his mouth into a line. "Yes. And second—Ursula is *married*. Perhaps I hadn't mentioned that. Her husband is quite a nice bloke. I wouldn't dream of going after his wife, even if she didn't make me want to call her Mum, whenever I see her."

Emil smiled at that and Remus leaned forward to gently kiss him on the lips; he leaned his head on Emil's shoulder afterward and asked, "Satisfied?"

But then—he suddenly needed to lift up his head and cock his ear at the door. *Someone was on the other side.* He swallowed, staring at the door, wishing he could see through it. He crept out of the bed and pulled on his boxers, then began walking toward the door very, very slowly, trying to distinguish whose smell it was, and trying to hear what the person might be doing. He almost forgot about Emil until he said, “What on earth are you doing, Remus? Some bizarre pre-full-moon werewolf ritual you haven’t told me about?”

He spoke in a normal voice now, and Remus’s stomach clenched; suddenly he wanted to *hit* Emil very hard, which he knew was a very bad thing to want to do to the person he loved. He ignored Emil, and when he reached the door, he inhaled deeply, immediately recognizing the scent on the other side. He turned the knob quickly and abruptly opened the door. She fell into the room, looking both guilty and triumphant, although she was regarding both of them from an undignified position on the floor.

“A werewolf!” Emil’s twin sister cried her eyes blazing up at them. “A *werewolf!*” she repeated in wonder, her voice softer. Then Claudine saw her brother in the bed, not wearing anything (he quickly put a pillow over his lap). Remus cursed himself for forgetting that Emil was exposed. She swallowed, looking at Remus standing over her, in just his underwear. “And—and—” she stuttered, “the pair of you are—are—”

Remus closed the door quietly and lifted her to her feet, half-dragging her to the bed, repeating in his head, *You will not throttle her, you will not throttle her—*

“Sit,” he said roughly, shoving her onto the mattress, giving her no choice. Remus’s jaw was clenched painfully; he breathed quickly through his nose, at a loss for how to handle this. *Bloody hell,* he thought. *She knows we’re lovers and that I’m a werewolf.*

She looked back and forth between the two of them. “How—how long has—”

“Quiet,” Emil said suddenly, taking his wand from the table next to the bed and pointing it at her, an implied threat in his voice and posture, despite the fact that only a pillow covered his nakedness. “You will listen. You will not talk. Yes, Remus is a werewolf. Yes, we’re a couple. But you won’t be telling anyone either of those things.” He pointed his wand at her and said, “*Stupefy!*” just as she was opening her mouth.

She fell over on the bed. “*Emil!*” Remus cried, shocked. “What are you doing?”

“She can’t tell,” Emil said, grimly. “And she won’t. I’ll see to that.”

“What?” Remus said, dismayed. “She’s your twin sister! You can’t just—”

“Relax, Remus. I’m not about to kill my own sister. Give me some credit. We’re both going to get dressed, I’m going to take her into the corridor, revive her and then put a memory charm on her. She won’t remember any of this, nor what she overheard.”

Remus didn’t like it. “She’s your sister, Emil. Think about what you’re saying—”

Emil nodded. “Yes, she’s my sister. And I know what that means far better than you do, if you don’t mind my saying so. I know what she’s capable of. Trust me, this is the only way.” Remus stepped back reluctantly, wishing he had some alternate course of action to suggest, but he had nothing. He watched Emil do everything he said he would, wondering *who* this stern, pragmatic person was. This Emil was like a stranger to him.

Later, at breakfast, Claudine looked distinctly unsettled and disoriented. Emil sounded, on the surface, very solicitous when he asked her whether she was feeling all right.

“Well, I’m not sure,” she said, looking at him and Remus with utter confusion on her face. “I—I’d gone to the loo when I woke up, but then on the way back to my room—I blacked out for a little while. I think. When I woke up, I was in the corridor outside your room, on the floor, and according to my watch, about fifteen minutes had gone by....”

Remus felt himself flush. He looked at his plate and shoveled eggs into his mouth, convinced that if he looked at Claudine Gaillard, she would see the truth in his eyes. He also didn’t want to look at Emil. He wasn’t convinced Emil had done the right thing, and he was very uncomfortable with it. But he couldn’t say anything; Emil had been trying to protect his werewolf secret, and the secret they shared, their relationship. He evidently didn’t think that his sister could be trusted with either secret, and maybe he was right.

When Remus left, the last thing he saw before the Floo network swept him away was Emil standing with his arm around his sister while she looked at Remus, eyes narrowed. *That was either a close call,* Remus thought as he was whirled away, *or the beginning of the end.*

* * * * *

Sunday, 18 November, 1979

Remus stretched and yawned. He lifted up his shirt and looked at his stomach, at the fresh wounds

he'd inflicted on himself the night before. *Well*, he thought. *At least I won't have to put up with that for another month.* He took out his wand and tried to think of first aid charms, but his mind was still too sleepy for magic. He lowered his shirt again, wincing, and reached in the pocket of his tattered robes to find the key to the cell. When he'd placed it in the keyhole and turned it, he was once more a free man.

His stomach was quite empty, but there was something else he had to do before breakfast. He loped down the dungeon corridor leading to the underground grotto where the pool was; no one would be down here at this hour, so he stripped completely and lowered himself into the warm water, sighing with contentment. After he'd done some lazy laps, he simply reclined against the side of the pool, watching the creatures that populated the mural garden. He looked down, finding that his natural ability to heal quickly was already in evidence; his new wound was scabbing over, and would be nothing but an off-white scar in a few days. Magic healing spells were even faster, and produced better-looking results, but as a werewolf, time was all that was really necessary for healing, usually.

As he dried off and dressed, he gave a lonely sigh. It was nice that he could spend the nights of the full moon in the dungeon at Ascog Castle and have a soak in the pool after, but he'd hoped to have the company of his friends some time during the previous three nights. The first night, Sirius had left him a note: *Sorry I can't be there tonight, old boy. I told James to call you. Next time, maybe.* –*Sirius*. James had never called. Remus didn't know whether he'd ever received the message—or if Sirius had even bothered to call. Remus had no idea where Peter was. The following two nights Sirius had also been busy. The previous evening Remus had finally contacted James, but when James' head appeared in the fireplace at Remus' parents' house, he was in a tearing hurry to leave.

"Tonight? Full moon? Oh, Remus, mate, I'm sorry. Love to help, but I've a game tonight. We're playing Pride of Portree. Sirius isn't going to be available?"

"No," Remus said, trying to smile and not feel abandoned. "Don't worry about me, James, I'll be fine. You have a good match." He'd forgotten that many Quidditch games were at night for security reasons. Of course James couldn't be with him. James' head had disappeared from the fireplace before Remus could ask where he'd been the previous two nights, whether Sirius had contacted him, or whether he knew where Peter was, even though Remus wasn't really feeling like he particularly wanted the company of a rat.

Remus strode up the stairs to the entrance hall and then turned left to enter the kitchen. Ursula stood at the cooker, waving her wand gently over several pans where bacon was being flipped, eggs were being scrambled and sausages were being browned. She turned to smile at him. Her husband, Alan, sat at the long table, reading the *Daily Prophet*.

"Morning!" she said. "I didn't hear you come down from Sirius' room. Sleep well?"

He nodded and sat down opposite Alan, who pushed the paper toward him, in case he wanted to read a section. Remus held up his hand to tell him it was all right, but then something on the front page caught his eye and he pulled it toward him.

Ministry Employee's Mangled Body Found in Werewolf Public House

by Rita Skeeter

LONDON—*The bloody and battered remains of Emil Gaillard, assistant to the head of International Magical Cooperation, were found yesterday morning by an employee of "The Howling Wolf," a public house in the East End catering to a werewolf clientele. Investigators have determined that the murder occurred at least thirty-six hours earlier, not long after the full moon rose on 15 November. Gaillard was nineteen years old, having finished his Hogwarts education last year; he was in Hufflepuff House.*

The nearly-unrecognizable remains, found in a private upstairs room of the pub, were identified by the victim's twin sister, Claudine Gaillard, as her parents were too shaken to undertake the task themselves. There are no suspects at this time, although all of the employees and usual patrons of the public house, Muggle and wizard alike, will be questioned by the Ministry. It is plain to the investigators that the cause of death was a werewolf attack, but no further details about the crime scene are being released at this time for security reasons.

"The Howling Wolf" is one of many werewolf pubs monitored by the Ministry. The pubs are popular places for werewolves to congregate and socialize, especially just prior to the full moon, but they are not approved for detaining werewolves during the nights of the full moon. While an investigation is underway concerning whether the pub's proprietor was

willfully violating the law by providing inadequate full-moon accommodations, the pub has had its license suspended.

"I don't know why those places exist anyway," Miss Gaillard said, distraught over her twin brother's death. "They're all just probably gathering so that they can pledge their allegiance to You-Know-Who. If we let them all go on running free like this, my brother will definitely not be the last victim of a werewolf."

Remus didn't realize that he was crying until Ursula looked at him in dismay and said, "Remus! Are you all right?"

He shook his head wordlessly, saying nothing to Sirius' sister or her husband. He left the room carrying the paper, moving blindly toward the sitting room, his breakfast sitting uneaten on the table. He strode to the fireplace and threw some Floo powder into the fire, hoping he would be able to speak coherently. He stumbled out of the fire in his parents' home, longing for nothing but the comfort of his own bed, the shades drawn, darkness and solitude in which to mourn. The world was a blur seen through his tears.

Instead, he was met by three witches and a wizard, plus his parents. His mother and father were sitting on the sofa, holding hands. He couldn't read their expressions through his tears. Remus swallowed, looking round at them all. Claudine Gaillard was one of the witches; she looked daggers at him. And then he realized that the other three blurs were wearing Aurors' robes, and that the one with the long red hair was—

"Lily!"

She looked grimly at him, and he felt his insides flinch. He didn't recognize the other two Aurors; if they were friends of Lily's, he hadn't been introduced.

"Hello, Remus," she said quietly. Her colleagues were a serious-looking clean-shaven man in his thirties and a handsome woman with short auburn hair, of about the same age as the man and obviously pregnant.

"I reckon I don't have to ask what's going on?" he managed to choke out.

Lily drew her lips into a line. "Then you'll come willingly?" Her voice shook.

Remus frowned. "Of course. I want this to be over with as quickly as everyone else," he said, feeling like he still wanted to cry, but somehow his tear ducts seemed to have gone dry. Lily nodded, looking like she was going to cry for him. She said, "Turn around and face the fire," her voice rather hard. It was strange to hear her speaking this way, but he reckoned that she had to maintain a certain professional demeanor. He thought they were going to use the fire to travel to the Ministry and did as he was told, turning slowly, surprised when he suddenly felt magical restraints around his wrists. He whirled, staring at Lily, whose wand was still out; it was she who'd conjured the restraints.

"Lily! What's going on?" He felt a fear blossoming in the pit of his stomach. Pulling very slightly at the restraints, he felt them give; he was able to move his arms freely again. Although magical, the restraints were not designed to withstand werewolf strength.

"He's loose!" the man cried, as though Remus were a rampaging hippogriff.

The other woman pointed her wand at him, crying, "*Stupefy!*"

Remus Lupin fell over on his living room floor, before his parents, Claudine Gaillard, and three Aurors, including his first love, Lily.

The world had been pulled out from under him and he knew no more.

* * * * *

"*Ennervate.*"

The word floated at him through a haze, as though it was something he was trying to remember from before birth. He blinked, feeling the blood flowing through his limbs again as he sat up and rubbed the back of his head; he ached where he'd struck the floor when the Auror had stunned him at his parents' house. He found that he was lying on a low pallet in what he recognized as a Ministry cell. He wasn't alone; Lily was standing next to the pallet. She must have cast the spell to revive him.

He looked up at her; her colleagues were nowhere to be seen. She crouched next to him, her hand on his arm, an expression of concern in her eyes. "Are you all right, Remus?"

He nodded, then thought better of that and shook his head. "No. I—I can't believe he's gone...."

She drew her mouth into a line and said softly, "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

He looked up at her, nodding. "But first—how long have I been here? Do you know anything else about what happened to him?"

She looked grim again. "Are you ready to answer some questions, Remus?"

He swallowed and nodded again. "I'll tell you whatever you need to know. If I can possibly help—"

She hesitated. "You do understand that—that *you're* the chief suspect?"

How am I going to get out of this? he wondered. "But I haven't seen Emil for days! I would never—"

"Ssh, ssh," she hushed him gently. "Please cooperate. Else it could be very bad. Soon two other Aurors will be coming in here. Frank and Gemma Longbottom. I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this. However, you must understand—right now, there *is* no other suspect. Even though—"

His breath came faster, and it seemed that his heart was running away with him. He tried to push down his panic, but it wasn't working. "But—but—I just—I don't understand how all of this happened—"

She sighed and looked a little less stern. "Well—I probably shouldn't tell you this—"

"What?"

"He left a note. For you." She withdrew it from her pocket and handed it to him.

Dearest Remus,

I sincerely hope that you never read this, but if you are, it means that I failed. I only wanted to be with you at all times, no matter what. Know that I attempted to be like you because I love you. Yes, you tried to tell me it was a bad idea, but I have endeavored to take every precaution to avoid an adverse outcome.

If I have failed, please forgive me and remember me always as your loving

Emil

He began crying anew, the tears dropping onto the letter and making the ink run. Lily whisked it away from him, stuffing it into her pocket, putting her arms around him and rocking him, looking like she was trying very hard not to cry herself. Suddenly, they heard the bolt shoot back in the door and Lily hastily separated herself from him, scrambling to her feet. When the door swung open, the other Aurors who'd come to his parents' house were there again, with a dementor whose presence made Remus go all cold inside. He could see Lily shivering, putting her hand to her head, as though she suddenly had a migraine. His teeth were clacking together uncontrollably. The cold inside him kept growing and growing—

An animal's loud growling. A woman shrieking, "Nooooo! My baby!" Then the sound of a loud report, and more screaming from the woman. A baby crying.

Him. He was the baby.

"Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!"

"I hate to do this, ma'am—"

"Stupefy!"

The voices rang in his head; he curled in a ball on the pallet, unable to stop the cold, to stop the voices....

"Get that thing out of here!" Lily snapped to the Longbottoms.

"But—" the man began.

Lily put her other shaking hand to her head now. "Please, Frank! Before my head explodes—"

He nodded, looking a little green himself. The woman was very pale and trembling, her hand on her rounded stomach as the dementor glided past her and back out into the corridor. They closed the door, looking relieved, in their way, and Remus heaved a grateful sigh.

He'd never before remembered first-hand what it had been like to be bitten, whether because he'd been so very young or because he'd been traumatized, he didn't know. He only knew the story his mother had told him. *I heard her stunning the man who was planning to kill me, because I was bitten by the wolf and lived....*

Mum, he thought, starting to cry again. Mum, I'm sorry. I know this wasn't why you saved me, so I could break your heart by going to prison....

"Oh, stop your blubbering," Gemma Longbottom said irritably. Remus lifted his head now and sniffed the air. There was something about her....Seeing her bulging belly again, he realized what the smell was that he'd picked up on. *It's because she's pregnant,* he thought. But the scent wasn't just coming from her. He turned to Lily, his nose quivering. *Lily is pregnant, too,* he realized, even though there was no sign of a bulge yet.

He swallowed, the reality of this washing over him. Thus, he was caught off-guard when the man came at him with what looked like a *spoon*, of all things.

"Sit up and pay attention, werewolf!" he snarled at Remus, putting the spoon to his throat. Immediately, a pain shot through Remus, starting at his Adam's apple, and he smelled his own flesh burning. He couldn't stop the scream that was ripped from his lungs.

"Frank! No! *Accio silver spoon!*"

Lily had summoned the spoon from his grasp without using a wand; Remus clutched at his throat, trying to catch his breath. Lily was glowering at her colleague.

"Just what do you think you are *doing?*" she demanded, her voice rising. "You could kill him!"

Frank Longbottom sneered at Remus Lupin. "Nothing less than he deserves, Lily. You saw that poor boy at the pub."

Remus jerked his head around. *Lily had seen Emil.* She looked as though she was remembering this now, and it did not seem to be a good memory. She twisted her hands in her robes.

"Yes, Frank. And Remus is one of my oldest and dearest friends. We will conduct this interrogation by the book, do you hear?"

He stepped toward her, a challenge in his voice. "Do you need to be reminded who is your senior? I'm twice your age, girl. I've seen more animals of his sort than you can shake a stick at. Don't you tell me how we're going to run this interrogation."

She stood toe to toe with him. "I have already, and I shall do so again," she said, her voice low and dangerous. There was a light in her green eyes Remus didn't think he'd ever seen before. "I'll go straight to the top to get you thrown off this case, if I have to. You *and* Gemma. I know Remus. Let me talk to him, find out exactly what happened. Can't you see how broken up he is by this? Do you think any werewolf ever *wants* this sort of thing to happen? Do you think it's done willfully? The details will come out. Don't worry. But you don't lay a finger on him—or wand, or spoon. If you do, you'll have me to answer to."

Her voice was so soft now that Remus wouldn't have been able to hear her, he imagined, if he hadn't had his wolf-hearing. She turned to Remus. "Where were you on the night of 15 November?" she said, trying to be businesslike.

He cleared his throat, which felt completely parched now. "I—I was in a dungeon cell in Ascog Castle, on the Isle of Bute."

"Why didn't you come to the Ministry to be properly restrained?" Frank Longbottom wanted to know. Lily glared at him and he backed down. She paced as she spoke, looking daggers at her colleagues, threatening them wordlessly. "Did someone lock you in?"

Remus was tempted to lie at first, but in the end he decided that wouldn't be a good idea. "No. No one locked me in. I did it myself. Sirius usually does, but he wasn't about. Sirius Black, that is. Ascog Castle is his family home. He said he was going to have James come, but he didn't show up, so I did it myself, as it was getting late."

"James—" Frank Longbottom prompted him.

"James Potter," he said, as calmly as he could. He nodded at Lily. "Lily's husband."

She looked slightly embarrassed by this. "You're certain that the door was thoroughly secured?" she said now, as though he hadn't just mentioned her husband.

He nodded. "Yes. After I locked it, I put the key in my robes. When I change, they change with me, as an Animagus' clothes do. And when I awoke in the morning, I took the key out of my robes and let myself out."

"Did *anyone* see you go into the cell on the fifteenth?"

He swallowed; he'd managed to avoid any contact with Sirius' family members. At the time, that had seemed like a good thing. "No," he whispered.

Her mouth was drawn very thin. "Well, did anyone see you come out in the morning?"

He sighed. "Not that morning. I went up to the sitting room and used the Floo network to return to my parents' home. I had been planning to eat breakfast at the castle, but changed my mind."

Frank pointed at him, crying triumphantly, "Aha!"

Remus looked up at him, baffled. "Aha?" he repeated.

"Yes," the Auror replied. It was the snidest yes' Remus had ever heard. "Do you want me to tell you what you were *really* doing on the first night of the full moon? I'll *tell* you what you were doing. You were at the Howling Wolf, in the East End. You'd taken your victim there, one Emil Gaillard, a Ministry employee with whom you have been seen on occasion at a *certain* wizarding pub in Brighton." Remus shivered; the Brighton pub probably *was* under surveillance. "You rented a room for an hour. You and Emil Gaillard walked up to the room, above the bar. You had Gaillard tie you to the brass bedstead—" Remus choked in disbelief, hearing what had occurred in the pub; "—and then while your unsuspecting victim was undressing, not realizing that the full moon would be rising soon, *you* pulled your arms from the restraints, something he did not notice. And then, when the moon rose and you became a murderous animal, you attacked him." Frank Longbottom's hand had risen and he was pointing a shaking, accusing finger at Remus now.

Remus shook his head, crying again. "*No, no, no,*" was all he could say, the tears running down

his face, soaking his clothes.

"And *then!*" Frank Longbottom cried, continuing, his indignation making his voice shake. "*Then*, the next morning, you had the *nerve* to try to cover up what you'd done! You forged this note—" he held out his hand to Lily and she reluctantly took the note from Emil out of her pocket and handed it to him; "—to try to make it look like he'd *wanted* to become a werewolf, like you, as if any sane person *would!*"

He continued to rock back and forth, his arms wrapped around his legs, which were drawn up to his chest. "*Oh god, oh god, it's all my fault,*" he keened. "*All my fault....*"

"A confession!" Gemma Longbottom cried, whipping out a piece of parchment and a quill.

"No!" Lily cried, looking sadly at Remus. "Remus, tell me it's not true...."

Oh, god, she thinks I'm confessing. He looked up at the Aurors. "Please—give the parchment and quill to Lily. Can I—can I please talk to just her, alone?" he whispered. He had no hope of this being straightened out while the Longbottoms were present.

The Longbottoms didn't budge. Finally, Lily held her hand out to Gemma Longbottom, who reluctantly gave the parchment and quill to her. Lily thanked her, and the pair of them turned to leave, Frank Longbottom looking over his shoulder at her, as though thoroughly convinced that this was a bad idea. When they were gone, Lily put the parchment and quill into her pockets and pulled a stool over to the pallet, sitting down. Remus still held his legs to his chest, crying, blaming himself.

"Remus!" she said, perhaps more than once; he wasn't certain. He hadn't been paying attention. "Please, Remus. I—there are a few things I need to discuss with you."

He swallowed and tried to collect himself. He finally managed to sit on the edge of the pallet like a civilized person, instead of an insane man who should be locked up in St. Mungo's. "Yes, Lily," he finally said, trying to keep his voice even.

She looked like she was reluctant to start. "Well, first off," she said softly, "there's that note. Did you write it?"

He shook his head vigorously. "No, Lily. I did not write that note."

She peered at him, her eyes narrowed. Then she widened them again and patted his hand. "I believe you," she told him, her voice far warmer now than it had been.

"So—so you don't think I was confessing?" he asked hopefully.

"No, Remus, I don't. I know you're very distraught." She was quiet again for a minute. "So—that would mean that Emil Gaillard did write it. That he intended to try to become a werewolf. Because—he loved you," she said softly. Remus swallowed and drew his lips into a line, nodding. "So—was he suffering from delusions? Or did that note mean—" She couldn't continue, her voice giving out.

"We were lovers."

She looked very odd now, standing and pacing. "I see. So—you're a—a—"

"Well, actually, Lily, I'm not a homosexual," he said, providing the technical term she couldn't say; "although Emil was." *Was. The past tense.* "I'm actually bisexual."

"Oh," she said blankly, evidently not expecting this.

"You know what that wizarding pub in Brighton is, don't you?"

She nodded a bit guiltily. "It's not that I'm judging you, Remus. I'm just—I thought that if you—if you fancy men, it would explain why you couldn't love me....Oh, god, that was professional, of me, wasn't it?" she said, snorting softly.

"I'm sorry, Lily. But—I may as well tell you now—I did love you. Very much."

She looked shocked, standing stock-still. "What? I mean—I had certainly hoped so. I suspected it, although I also suspected that it was just wishful thinking on my part...And on the train, you said—"

"I know what I said. I needed to put you off, because I didn't think I deserved you. Me being a werewolf and all. Plus—well, I was aware of sometimes feeling attracted to blokes, although in those days, I thought when that happened, it was because it was around the time of the full moon. I didn't realize that that wasn't it, not entirely. I thought that it was just the pre-full-moon trouble I'd always had. I mean, I usually felt like I could shag just about anything before the full moon...." He saw the look on her face and gasped. "Oh, Lily! I—I didn't mean—" He stood at last and strode to her, putting his hands on her arms. "What you don't understand, Lily, is that until you, I had always managed to stop myself from acting on those impulses, whether the attraction was to a male or a female. I'd run away, or get something from Madam Pomfrey to help me sleep. When *you* offered to help me, *you*, the girl I was in love with—" she lifted her head and gasped; "—I hadn't the strength to resist anymore. I didn't *want* to resist anymore. But I never really felt like I deserved you, either. I felt like an abnormal monster and I felt like was taking advantage of you."

She swallowed and looked down again. "No more than I was taking advantage of you, probably," she said quietly.

"When I met Emil," he went on in a rush, determined to get it all out, "I was finally able to admit to myself that when I'd thought about boys when I was in school, it wasn't just before the full moon. It wasn't just because I'm a werewolf. That's who I am, Lily. And I know I bollixed things up with you, I know I hurt you. I'm so sorry for that." He held her dear face between his hands. "But face it—you're far happier with James than you ever would have been with me. You're meant to be together."

She smiled sadly at him. "Yes. I just—sometimes I feel guilty about you. As though—as though I gave up on you too easily. Abandoned you. You've such a hard life. You've so many burdens that would be lighter, shared with someone else. I had hoped, when you told me that you were seeing someone, that you had found someone to share those burdens...."

He nodded. "I had thought Emil was that person...."

"So," she said, clearly thinking very hard, trying to work out everything; "you told him you're a werewolf. He clearly knew." Remus nodded. "But you couldn't tell me," she added, looking very hurt. He pleaded with her with only his eyes.

"Lily, I was young and stupid. Yes, I should have told you. That was why I told Emil. I'd learned my lesson. Only—telling him produced an entirely new problem. He took it into his head to *become* a werewolf. He told me his idea, and I told him it was mad, that he'd end up dead. He evidently decided not to pay attention to what I told him—"

"What did you tell him, precisely?" She hugged her arms to herself, as though she was cold.

"I told him how I was bitten," he whispered, his eyes closed. "My mum told me. And then when that—that *thing* was in here—" He couldn't bear to name the dementor.

"Oh, god, Remus!" she cried, throwing her arms around him. "That's what you heard! You heard—"

"Yes," he confirmed, clutching at her. "I heard the wolf that bit me, my mum's voice, the voice of the man who shot the wolf, who was going to shoot me...."

She backed up from him, holding him at arm's length. "*What?*"

He nodded, the quiet words spilling out of him. "A werewolf hunter killed the wolf that bit me, moments after it happened. That was the only reason my mum and I lived. And he would have shot me too, if my mum hadn't stopped him." Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to mention his brother.

She swallowed, her hand cupping his cheek tenderly, then going up to his brow to smooth his prematurely-greying hair from it. "That's what mothers are for," she said softly. "To protect their children."

He wanted to ask her what she heard when the dementor had been in the room, why she was holding her head that way. Instead, he forced a smile, putting his hand on her belly gently. "When are you due, Lily?"

She looked shocked now. "How—?"

"There's a distinctive scent." She nodded, understanding.

"So," she said, trying to smile now herself, "I didn't put you off women?"

He laughed. "No, Lily. You only put me off being dishonest with someone I loved." He sighed. "What am I going to do? I didn't kill anyone. I didn't want Emil to be a werewolf, to suffer the way I have. I loved him. I love him yet," he choked, tears running down his cheeks; Lily's face was a blur through his tears.

She nodded. "Leave it to me. The only thing you may need to help me with is the sister. When the note was found, with your name in it, and she was told, her eyes sort of lit up. The revelation broke through a hasty memory charm that had been placed on her. She said she found you and her brother together in his bedroom, and had heard Emil mention your being a werewolf. She said her brother was the one to put the charm on her."

Remus nodded. "That's true. I didn't like it, but Emil wouldn't listen to me. Why is that damaging? She's telling the truth. Now, if she was saying that *I'd* been the one to put the charm on her, that might very well make me look bad..."

Lily looked thoughtful. "You might be right. And we *do* have fingerprints of several other werewolves who'd been in the room in question." Remus shivered, remembering being photographed and fingerprinted every two years as he was growing up. A werewolf had to keep his records up to date. When in wolf form, a werewolf's pads bear exactly the same patterns as his hands and feet.

"But don't the other Aurors think you're in here writing down my confession?"

She gave him an ironic half-smile. "Probably. As I said, I'll take care of it. Something they

didn't mention to you is that the werewolf who went upstairs with Emil was seen very clearly by several patrons at the pub. It *does* seem that they were hanging about there because they were also planning to get rooms for the night—the ministry was right to close the place down. They weren't authorized for that trade. Their testimony was discounted by Frank and Gemma because they thought the other werewolves were your friends, covering up for you. However, they all gave consistent descriptions of the other man. I think that if we actually make an effort to match up the prints in the room with the information in the werewolf registry, and pay attention to the other pub patrons, I can convince them that you're not to blame." She dropped her voice, looking toward the door. "They're a bit biased against you because of—well, the homosexuality thing, on top of everything else. Not the most open-minded people, Frank and Gemma."

"Bisexuality," he reminded her.

"They don't know that. And I don't think it would help. I don't advise you to set them straight." She grinned then. "So to speak."

"So, they don't know that you and I—" He raised his eyebrows suggestively at her.

"Oh, god, no. It's bad enough that they know you're my friend, and James' friend. If they knew about that—they'd never have let me stay in here with you alone."

He frowned. "What—did they think we'd be shagging?"

She flushed. "No, of course not. But they're already doubting my objectivity. That would make them completely convinced that I couldn't approach this whole affair with what they consider to be the proper attitude." She had an edge to her voice, and he winced on her behalf; Remus had no doubt that if Lily really thought he was guilty, she'd have treated him like any other criminal. He also didn't think that another werewolf would have been successfully tortured with silver in her presence, even if it wasn't an old friend. Lily would have objected to that just as she had objected to Frank Longbottom putting the spoon to *his* throat.

He peered at her; her flush was fading, after he'd suggested that the Longbottoms might think they were shagging. "I shall always care about you, Lily, but I hope you understand—I *am* over you now. I was deeply in love with Emil..." he trailed off, trying not to cry again. She smiled lovingly at him—but it seemed to him now that it was more like a sister's love—and put her hand over his.

"Good. And I can truly say that I shall always care about you, but I am very much in love with James," she said firmly. He looked down at her stomach again.

"So—?"

"Oh! Right. I'm due right around James' birthday. We're thinking Harry for a boy, Rose for a girl. Gemma's due in February, a boy, so our children will be in the same year in school."

"Ah, she's having a boy. Then I think you are having a boy as well."

"Why?"

"Same scent," he said shortly. She nodded.

Then he thought again of Emil dying in that room at the pub, because of his love. "Was—was he very bad, Lily?" he whispered. He clutched at her hand; she squeezed back.

"You don't want to know," she told him, and he believed her.

She led him to the door, still holding his hand. "Come, Remus. It will be all right. We'll find who really did this."

Before she could open the door, he stopped her and said, "Thank you, Lily. For—everything. But there is one thing still—"

"What?"

"Can you—can you not tell the lads about—"

She frowned, then her eyes widened in understanding. "I see. Of course. I'll let you do that yourself."

"Yeah, well, that's the thing. I—I don't feel I'm ready to tell them yet. I mean, I lived with them for seven years. I think it might make them uncomfortable at this point. Maybe when we've all been out of school for a few more years—" Lily laughed quietly for a moment and Remus was baffled as to why she should do this. "What?" he asked her.

"Well—when we were in school your big secret was that you're a werewolf, and the lads all knew but I didn't. Now this is your big secret, and I know but they don't. That's all. Silly, really."

He smiled at her. "It is a bit funny, I reckon. So you promise—you won't even tell James?"

She took both of his hands in hers and looked earnestly into his eyes. "I promise. As James said to me once—it isn't my secret to tell."

He looked back at her, swallowing, the grief rolling through him again. "And—and don't tell them about *this*, if possible. I—I don't want them to feel guilty about—about not being with me. If one of them *had* been with me, it might have come out that they're—well, you know."

She nodded, knowing that he meant their being illegal Animagi. Including her husband. She put her hand on his cheek again. "I'm so sorry, Remus—"

He covered her hand with his own. "Thank you, Lily."

"I don't just mean about Emil—although I'm sorry for that too. I'm sorry I ever doubted you. Here you are, worrying about your mates getting into trouble, and—and I actually thought it was possible that you—you could have—"

"—that I could have killed Emil," he finished for her. She nodded guiltily.

"Right. I should have known better—"

She gently took him in her arms, and when she did that, he felt the dam break again and the sobs burst forth from him, as he cried for his love, the first love who knew him for the monster he truly was, and who loved him in spite of that. She held him and rocked him, and he clutched at her, thinking of the baby growing inside her. *You'll be a good mother, Lily*, he thought, as he continued to cry on her. And she cried with him, again providing him with the comfort he needed when he needed it, in exactly the right form, just as when they'd been in school. The comfort was of a vastly different nature, and for a different reason, but he once again allowed himself to forget and know nothing but the sanctuary that was Lily.

* * * * *

Thursday, 15 May, 1980

"It's a boy!"

Arthur Weasley grinned at his sister-in-law and she hugged him warmly. It was a slightly awkward hug, as she was standing on the floor and he was one step up, having just descended from the upper reaches of the house.

"Oh, Arthur, congratulations! May I see Molly?"

"Of course, Meg, of course. Go right up. I'll watch the boys."

He finished descending the rickety stairs and moved out of the way so that she could go up. He swept into the living room, his worn robes billowing around him, and sat unceremoniously on the hearth rug, where his three youngest sons were playing—except for the newborn boy upstairs whom he'd just seen enter the world. He arranged his threadbare robes around him and gathered the little ones close to him. At more than three-and-a-half years of age, Percy was already a tall, lanky boy, and the twins were mischievous two-year-olds, slightly stockier than Percy had been at the same age, still with rather round baby-like faces.

"C'mere, lads, c'mere. I've some exciting news! Your mum has had the baby! You've a new little brother named Ron. Isn't that nice?" The twins each sat on one of his legs and Percy stood at his shoulder. His blue eyes looked very large in his thin, pale face, and Arthur Weasley was jolted, reminded suddenly of his daughter Annie. He swallowed, thinking how much Molly had wanted another girl. It had been over a year since the girls had disappeared. She'd looked so disappointed when the midwife had told her it was a boy. (The midwife had tried to tell her this months earlier, having cast the appropriate spell, but Molly had stubbornly refused to believe that it wasn't a mistake.) Molly had tried to hide her disappointment, but he'd seen her expression before she'd plastered the stiff, unmoving grin on her face. Arthur didn't know what to do; ever since the girls had disappeared, she'd been a shadow of her former self. He'd hoped the new baby would make a difference, but—no girl.

"We've quite a collection of boys now, haven't we?" he said to them more jovially than he really felt. Fred—he thought it was Fred, anyway—reached up and tried to take his glasses from his father's face, giggling gleefully when he succeeded. Arthur ruffled his hair and reclaimed the glasses.

The little ones didn't really have a clear idea of what was happening, he knew. Meg had been tending to them while Molly was in labor, and when Arthur had come downstairs to give his sister-in-law progress reports, the boys had continued to say, "Mummy, Mummy, where's Mummy?"

"Mummy is upstairs, cherubs, helping your new little brother or sister get ready to meet you," he'd heard her say as he stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at the very small boys and their aunt.

"Tell Mummy to come down," Percy had said, his finger in his mouth the way Peggy used to do.

Arthur looked at Percy again. It was almost unbearable sometimes, the way Percy reminded him of his girls. The lad had no idea....

"Can I play in the garden, Daddy?" Percy asked now.

"We can all go. Come on, Fred and George," he said, grunting as he swung the toddlers up on to his hips. "Let's go scare the gnomes," he grinned.

Arthur Weasley didn't notice Percy nicking a bit of food from the dresser in the kitchen before they went out the back door into the messy, homely garden. Percy clutched the crust of bread in his hand so that his father couldn't see it. It was a good large chunk, and Percy thought it would make a nice meal for his pet rat.

No one knew he had a pet rat. He'd found him in the garden months ago, and rather than feeling afraid, he'd been fascinated that the timid animal had come slowly up to him to get a proffered piece of toast. Percy had watched with that peculiar stillness he had about him, so unlike most three-year-olds, while the rat stood on his hind legs and held the toast in his front paws, nibbling delicately, licking the melted butter from his whiskers and smacking his chops with evident satisfaction. Percy had been entranced; the greyish-brownish rat was so like a little person as it nibbled its treat. Percy had named him Twitchers and decided to keep him a secret, his very own secret.

While his father took the twins to help him find gnomes in the bean patch, Percy went on his knees and called down one of the gnome-holes in the onion patch. "Twitchers! Here, Twitchers! Bread! A nice crust of bread!" He held the bread crust slightly above the hole, his back to his dad and brothers, so they couldn't see. At length, he heard a scuffling noise and a slight squeaking. Soon he saw bright black, glittering eyes and a small, twitching nose flanked by quivering whiskers. Twitchers knew a meal was in the offing.

Peter Pettigrew had been nervous at first when the small boy had started behaving as though he was his pet. But the arrangement had its advantages; once or twice, when he'd ventured too close to the house, Molly Weasley had swung at him with a broom, sending him scampering. Percy had intervened, crying, "Mummy! Don't hurt him!"

She'd stopped immediately, going to her knees as Percy started weeping. "Oh, my pet, don't cry," she'd crooned to him. "Mummy just doesn't want the nasty dirty rat in the house, that's all. Rats aren't clean."

"What-what if he stays in the garden?" Percy had said in his softly lisping voice. His mother stood with difficulty, her large belly protruding quite some distance from her body.

"That would be fine, dear. Gracious!" she said, putting her hand on her belly. "Such an acrobat your new sister is! Feel."

Percy put his hand on his mother's stomach; even from the shelter of a gnome hole, Peter could see the movement under the fabric of the flowered apron she had tied around her robes. Ever since he'd learned, during a casual visit to the Weasleys the previous autumn, that Mrs. Weasley was expecting another baby, he'd been very, very nervous. *What if they have another girl?* he'd thought, worried that he would have to dispose of yet another Weasley daughter.

After he'd visited the Doughertys, in Appleby Magna and convinced them to go to the orphanage in Exeter to adopt the Weasley girls, he'd felt much better about having stolen Annie and Peggy away from their home. At least, until he'd gone back to check on the Weasley family during the summer. What he'd found was a woman who stared into space while her eldest sons tended to the little ones all day, even though the boys were obviously very broken up and feeling responsible for their sisters' disappearances. It was a shattered family, and Peter's instinct had been to flee, disliking the emotions this stirred in him, but he'd forced himself to stay for a little while longer. When the younger boys were put in their cots for their naps, the older boys would go out to the garden and toss gnomes over the privet. As they did this, they spoke to each other about their sisters. Peter sat crouched in his hole, listening; he had a feeling that they never let their mother hear them do this. It always ended with each of them breaking down in tears, sitting in the dirt, while the gnomes crept back through the holes in the hedge, shaking their heads.

Peter thought at the boys, *It was to protect them! They'd be dead if I hadn't taken them away...* But he knew that even had they known the truth, it would be cold comfort. He remembered when he'd made James, Sirius and Remus think that Bill Weasley had grassed on them. Bill hadn't caved; he'd held his head up high and the older boys still had respect for him. Peter didn't know how to be that person. He could wish it, but that still wouldn't make it so. He hated Bill Weasley. This hate helped him cope with his guilt over abducting the girls. Knowing that Bill Weasley was miserable was a definite bonus.

Percy leaned forward avidly, a smile on his innocent young face as he watched the rat nibble on the delicious bread crust. "You know what, Twitchers?" he piped. He paused as though he actually expected the rat to answer. Peter continued to nibble; it tasted delicious. He'd been eating far too many onions, living under the onion patch. The carrots were too young, he didn't fancy raw beans, and there wouldn't be any lettuces for a while. "My mum's had the baby," Percy told him softly, as though sharing a confidence.

Peter pricked up his ears and stopped his nibbling. *What is it?* he thought anxiously, afraid to

find out. He knew that Mrs. Weasley wanted a girl; she'd been calling her stomach the boys' new little sister for months. On the other side of the garden, he could hear the twins squealing with delight as their father spun them in circles, upside down.

"We got a new brother, Twitchers," Percy whispered to the rat. "Named Ron."

Peter Pettigrew heaved a tiny rat-sigh of relief. *A boy. Molly Weasley had had another boy.* Well, it made sense, didn't it? Some families just seemed to turn out girl after girl, and others, like the Weasleys, were clearly designed to turn out boys. Maybe they'd had their quota of girls already. Peter could hope, anyway.

Well. Now that he knew, this meant he could leave the Weasleys and go back to Cardiff, to help Lily again. He'd been hanging about with them earlier in the year, as Lily was also expecting a baby. He tried very hard not to think about the fact that James was the father. Lily was absolutely glowing at the time he'd left them, about six weeks earlier. She was five months pregnant then, and nesting like mad. Peter had helped her to decorate the nursery in the small flat. He painted it while she was at work, and mended her old cot that her parents had given her. They'd offered it first to her sister, who was also expecting a baby, but Lily's sister had turned up her nose at anything *old*. Heavens! *Her* child must have the best of everything, the most modern and up-to-date things imaginable.

Peter had listened attentively and sympathetically when she'd said, "Listen to what Petunia has written! The nerve!" Then she'd launched into reading a letter all about how Lily was trying to steal Petunia's thunder by having a baby the same year as her older sister. She should have had the decency to wait, and so on. Lily had fumed, pacing the small nursery. Peter relished these times. He would put his arm around her shoulders and steer her to the small sitting room, where a table and chairs in the corner were used for dining. He would make a pot of tea in the small kitchenette and sit at the table with her, drinking tea, nodding at whatever she said. She often told him what a wonderful listener he was. He wasn't always listening to her so much as gazing at her, imagining that they were sitting and drinking tea in their own tiny flat, that the baby she was expecting was *his*. He'd gasped at the unexpected physical contact the first time she'd pulled his hand toward her stomach, saying, "The baby is kicking! Oh, you have to feel this, Peter!"

Her face was glowing and the new life writhed under his hand; he couldn't take his eyes from her enraptured face. Her hand was over his where she'd placed it on her belly, over her robes. They were like that when, a minute later, James Apparated into the flat from his Quidditch practice, tired and sweaty. James glared at Peter, who immediately pulled his hand away guiltily. Peter knew that James thought he was a pest, but Lily felt very tired much of the time and was grateful to have the help and the company, so he didn't ask Peter to leave. Peter kipped on the small, uncomfortable couch in the sitting room, wedged between a bookcase and the tea table. Anything to be near his Lily.

He tried to reassure her about the impending birth, although he really knew nothing about it. "Gemma told me that the placenta was the worst, actually...." she'd said with a shudder, over tea. Gemma Longbottom had already had her baby in February, and had promptly begun to terrorize Lily with descriptions of her own labor and delivery. "She just wanted to hold Neville, see him for the first time, and the midwife was punching her in the stomach. Well, not punching, precisely. But that's how Gemma felt...."

Finally, after one glare too many from James, Peter decided he should leave for a while, before James kicked him out. He thought he would go to check on the Weasleys, to see whether Mrs. Weasley was soon going to give birth. Peter wasn't certain what he'd do if she had another girl. He hoped that no one else knew she was pregnant.

However, the day after he'd returned to the garden at the Burrow, he was sniffing around the dustbins for something to eat, not long before dawn, and his paw began to hurt in a way he'd only felt once or twice before. He'd received his Dark Mark the previous summer, and the painful Mark was telling him that he was being summoned. The pain became bad enough that it forced him to revert to his human form. He writhed on the ground by the Weasleys' dustbins, holding his left forearm with his right hand, biting his tongue to keep from screaming, hoping he wouldn't be discovered.

The graveyard at Little Hangleton, said a voice in his head. He swallowed; he'd been there before. It was one of the Dark Lord's favorite places. The pain in his arm subsided and Peter rose, panting. Dawn was probably still an hour away. He took out his wand and closed his eyes, thinking about the graveyard at Little Hangleton....When he arrived, there were only two other people there, the Dark Lord and the Death Eater who had originally tortured and recruited him. Peter did not know the man's name, nor had he ever seen his face, but he recognized his voice. They, in turn, only called him Wormtail, and he had not yet revealed to them that he was a rat Animagus.

It had gone the usual way his meetings with them always went. The Death Eater started off

laughing and joking, then he would suddenly put *Cruciatus* on Peter. After Peter had writhed on the ground in pain for a while, he would receive his instructions, to which he would immediately agree, to avoid further pain. This time, he was being ordered to find out more about the Prophecy. He nodded, saying he would try. It was difficult; Divination hadn't been his strong suit in school. The Dark Lord had looked in his eyes, saying silkily, "But I am certain that a smart boy like you could do it, couldn't you? With the proper—motivation." His eyes slid over to the Death Eater again, standing faceless, expressionless, his wand out. Peter swallowed.

"Y-y-yes, My Lord. I will do as you say."

When he'd returned to the Burrow, he'd tried to figure out how to do as he'd been told. When Bill and Charlie Weasley returned home for their Easter holiday, Peter decided that, as Bill had Divination (which Peter knew from living in his dormitory for a while), he would probably have the standard Divination text. Plus, Peter was wondering whether Bill might have worked out more of the Prophecy himself; maybe he had a notebook where he'd written down ideas that Peter could use. He would have to break into the house while Bill was home on holiday, and look through his things. Peter was nervous about this, as he would have to make certain he wasn't caught. The eldest Weasley boys would recognize him in his human form, from when they were all in school together, and Molly Weasley would be just as likely to kill him as look at him in his rat form.

Fortunately for him, they went to the home of a friend of Bill's for Easter dinner, allowing him the perfect opportunity to sneak into the house and creep upstairs in his human form, easily finding the room shared by the two eldest boys. Unfortunately, he didn't reckon on the appeal that an empty house held for four teenage boys, and while he was still going through Bill's things, he heard raucous laughter coming from the kitchen as four boys stumbled from the fire. While they were coming up the stairs, he quickly shoved Bill's notebooks and papers back into the box that had been under his bed, and after pushing the box back under the bedframe, changed into a rat and ran under the bed, between the box and the wall. His small heart was thumping very fast in his chest as the heavy footsteps drew nearer. He hoped Bill wouldn't notice that his things had been moved.

Their footfalls had been very loud on the stairs, and when the four boys entered the room, their feet produced something like an earthquake under Peter's small paws. It felt as though they were going to shake the world apart. Two boys flopped onto the rickety beds, making the springs scream in protest, and the two others threw themselves down onto the floor between the beds, causing the floorboards to shudder some more. Peter withdrew deeper into the shadows under Bill Weasley's bed.

"So," Alex Wood said, clapping his hands together; he was sitting on Charlie Weasley's bed. "How are the plans coming?"

Peter could see that the boys had grown significantly since he'd been living in the fourth year Gryffindor dorm. Wood had shot up in height, and it was obvious that he was shaving. His voice had deepened further and he looked strong and capable. He put a large hand on Bill Weasley's shoulder; Bill was sitting on the floor, leaning against the bed on which Wood was sitting. Peter was confused about the other two boys, though; surely they weren't Booth and Leonard? However, he wasn't concerned about the other boys. They didn't matter. Weasley was the one who had gone into the forest to work out the prophecy his sister had given. He had grown up more than the others, it seemed. Peter knew how very tall he had become from having seen him tramping about the garden during the previous week, and it was even evident when he was sitting down. His flame-red hair was a bit long over his collar (Peter had seen his mother starting to move her wand toward it, itching to trim it) and he had grown sideburns that his mother also wanted to remove. (She ranted about this to the chickens when tossing them their feed in the morning, which Peter often filched when he was particularly hungry).

There was a maturity and a sadness to Bill's bright blue eyes that made him seem years older than the other boys, and while his shoulders weren't as broad as Alex Wood's, he had a lean grace that made him seem utterly at ease with his new' body, whereas the other boys appeared surprised that they were no longer eleven and twelve, as though someone had pulled a prank on them and they were waiting for the punchline of the joke.

"Well," one of the strange boys said, in answer to Wood; "they're not. At least not for Transfiguration and Charms. For Dark Arts, we might be able to get some amulets that would help ward off some of the dark creatures that will be part of the practical exam. We might want to focus on that; Geoff only needs to get one O.W.L. out of those three, and it really seems unlikely that we can pull the wool over McGonagall's and Flitwick's eyes." *Geoff?* Peter thought. *Who's that?*

"McGonagall already suspects something, I think," a miserable voice said from the bed above Peter; he assumed it was *Geoff*. "During the last lesson before the holiday, she was checking my work and kept calling it interesting' how *my* Transfigured knife box and Jack's were so similar. The

kittens had *exactly* the same markings.”

The boy who'd been speaking before “Geoff” pounded the floor in frustration. “Bloody hell! I kept *trying* to make them look different. I'm sorry, mate.” *Ah, Peter thought. He's Jack.*

Geoff swung his legs; they didn't touch the floor. “S'all right, Jack. She's very sharp-eyed, is McGonagall. When Bill gave me that Transfigured toad and I switched it, she just kept *humming* and saying, Isn't it funny how Weasley's sugar bowl was exactly the same pattern this morning. And is it *croaking*?” I kept hoping she would take the lid off and find the toad inside that I was supposed to have Transfigured....”

Jack snorted, then stifled his laughter quickly. “Sorry, mate. I know this is serious....”

“You're bloody well right it's serious,” Weasley said, sighing, his arms propped on his knees. “Security will be very tight for the O.W.L.s. We'll need some *very* effective amulets for the Dark Arts exam, else Geoff'll be out on his ear.” They were all silent at that, and Bill Weasley grimaced. “Sorry to put it so bluntly, Geoff, but I don't want you to get your hopes up,” he said quietly. Peter could hardly believe his ears. Weasley and his friends were helping the one called Geoff cheat on his schoolwork! But why?

Alex Wood put his hand on Bill's shoulder again, giving it a slight squeeze. “Bill! What's this talk? You're the one who's come up with most of the techniques for getting Geoff through the last two-and-a-half years.”

Bill drew his mouth into a line. “Third and fourth years. Easy. Piece of cake. Hardly the same thing as the O.W.L.s.”

“McGonagall *definitely* suspects something,” Geoff said again, even more morosely. “It's only a matter of time before—” He trailed off. Suddenly, Peter knew. *A Squib.* The boy was a Squib! Peter remembered the beginning of his fifth year now, the boy who hadn't been called for Sorting....It was *him*, and that was why his name hadn't been called....His heart was beating even faster now than when he'd been afraid of one of the large oafish boys treading on him and not even noticing. *I can use this*, Peter thought.

The boys were all rather subdued, but continued to talk quietly for a while, changing the subject to Quidditch and then who liked whom at school. “So,” Jack said, punching Bill in the arm lightly, “tell us. Have you and Juliet—?” He wagged his eyebrows suggestively, looking, Peter thought, quite mad.

Bill Weasley colored deeply and frowned grumpily. “I should never have told you about that time—”

Peter noticed that for some reason, Alex Wood's hand was still on Bill's shoulder; he seemed to be squeezing it rather hard now. Weasley reached up and knocked it away. “Ow! I'm not saying anything else, Alex! Hurting me will get you nowhere.” But to Peter's eyes, Alex Wood wasn't regarding Bill as though he wanted him to tell about his girlfriend; there was something else there; Peter couldn't put a name to it. Wood's gaze was very intensely boring into the back of Bill Weasley's head, but Weasley was oblivious.

At length, the boys had decided to return to Jack's house; Peter discovered through further conversation that that was where the other families had gathered for Easter dinner. They clomped noisily down the stairs again and he heard the shouts as they said the name of Jack's house very loudly before stepping into the fire. Peter had waited a few minutes before emerging, then changed back into his human form and went on looking in the box for anything Bill might have written down regarding the Prophecy. He found nothing else of interest, however, and finally decided that it wasn't safe to stay in the house any longer.

Peter sat in his gnome hole, nibbling his bread crust, looking up at Percy now. Percy's chin was propped on his fists as he lay on his stomach in the dirt, peering down at Twitchers' while he ate. Percy was a good boy, and lonely. The perfect person for Peter to latch onto at the Burrow. Thanks to him, he didn't need to go through a lot to determine whether Molly Weasley had had a girl or boy; thanks to him, he had a steady supply of food and there was no danger of someone trying to set rat traps for him.

You and I, Peter thought at the boy as he nibbled his crust; *we will do great things together. You wait and see.*

* * * * *

Friday, 20 June, 1980

“Weasley and Wood, the headmaster would like to see you in his office,” Professor McGonagall said, standing next to the Gryffindor table. Bill and Alex looked apprehensively at each other. Bill saw that Geoff and Jack were standing just beyond McGonagall as though waiting for them to join the

party. He swallowed; across the table from him, Juliet moved her lips silently, asking him *What?* Bill shrugged, although he had a fairly good idea what it *might* be about. Mary Ann Boxwood was also trying to get Alex to tell her what was going on, but he shook his head at her. Bill followed his friends and Professor McGonagall, thinking what a complete and utter failure he was.

The others had no idea he was thinking this, and would have been quite surprised had they known. To them, Bill was the *wunderkind* who had received *twelve* O.W.L.s. Alex had managed eight, and Jack nine. They were perfectly respectable results, but they paled beside Bill's. Geoff had not managed to pass the O.W.L. exams for Transfiguration, Charms or Defense Against the Dark Arts. He had passed Potions, History of Magic, even Divination (he was very good at Tarot readings), as well as Astronomy and Care of Magical Creatures. But it wasn't enough. A student had to get one amongst the truly practical exams that required the casting of spells, and he'd failed every one of them.

Bill had seen his face when they had received the letters during breakfast, the day before. Most of the fifth years were jumping up and down as the owls delivered the missives; a few people looked a little disappointed, or muttered things along the lines of, "*Mum will kill me....*" Only Geoff sat staring at his letter as though the world had come to an end.

And for him, it had.

Not that they hadn't had a good idea of what to expect. On the day of each of the failed exams, it was painfully clear than none of their subterfuges were going to work. In desperation, Geoff tried time and again to get his wand (his mum's old wand, actually) to do something, *anything*. To no avail. Geoff was hopelessly and irrevocably a Squib.

The leaving feast was largely over and most of the students were saying goodbye to friends for the summer, or continuing to socialize one last time in the Great Hall, as they'd been doing before McGonagall had fetched them. Bill, Alex, Jack and Geoff silently followed her straight-backed figure to Dumbledore's office. When she turned to glance at them periodically, making sure they were keeping up, her mouth was very thin, and Bill was starting to get a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps they were *all* going to be expelled! Bill's heart was beating double-time as they ascended the strange rising spiral staircase leading to Dumbledore's office, where McGonagall left them with a distinct expression of disapproval on her face that made Bill feel about one inch tall. The headmaster asked them to enter and bade them to sit in the four chairs before his desk, looking, Bill thought, rather jovial for someone who was about to expel four boys.

"Well!" he said, his eyes twinkling. "I imagine you are all relieved to have the results from your O.W.L.s?" He looked over his half-moon spectacles at them, his eyebrows raised, and the four of them shuffled their feet while remaining seated. His gaze went to Geoff. "All except for you, I imagine," he said gently. Bill glanced at Geoff, who seemed like he might cry but was trying manfully to remain dry-eyed.

Geoff swallowed. "Yes, sir," he whispered, his lip quivering.

Dumbledore sighed and put the tips of his fingers together thoughtfully, leaning back in his chair. "I hope you can forgive me for engaging in a little experiment. I knew when you arrived almost five years ago, that you were not bearing your own letter but your mother's. I thought—perhaps your magic would manifest itself before long. Perhaps putting you into Hufflepuff House, with the hardest workers, would bring out your natural magical abilities...." He sighed again and looked at the other boys. "You are truly good friends, and although you were helping another student to cheat—" Jack started to open his mouth in protest, but Dumbledore held up his hand to stop him. "No, don't deny it, Mr. Richards. There is no point. As I was saying, although you were helping another student to cheat, you were essentially doing what I was doing: giving your friend a chance to stay at Hogwarts, hoping that his magic would yet come out. So I turned a blind eye, even though Professor McGonagall first told me of her suspicions two years ago. She did not necessarily think I did the right thing to admit you," he said, nodding at Geoff. "And perhaps she was right. But I was loath to kill hope." He smiled sadly at the poor boy.

Bill swallowed now. "So, what's to be done, sir?"

"Well, Mr. Weasley, if he is willing, I would like to offer Mr. Rottenham a position here."

Bill, Alex and Jack looked back and forth at each other, baffled. "Who?"

"That would be me," Geoff said softly. "Davies is my mum's name, remember? My dad's name is Rottenham. It's been a while since I mentioned it." He looked grimly at Dumbledore. "A job? You mean like-like Filch? Or Hagrid?"

Dumbledore nodded, smiling genially. "Hagrid's assistant, actually. It's how he started, years ago, as assistant to Ogg, our old gamekeeper. Hagrid says that you are very good with animals. And Professor Sprout could also use some assistance in the greenhouses. She says you are quite capable in Herbology as well. As your head-of-house, she is very sorry to see you go. She suggested

the work in the greenhouses.”

Geoff swallowed and looked at his hands. “I don’t know. I don’t think—I don’t think I would want to stay here and not be a student.” He looked up at Dumbledore. “I hope you understand. I wanted to be at Hogwarts all my life. I couldn’t believe that I’d finally been sent my letter—and with good reason, it turns out. To stay—but like *that*—” he choked. “I don’t think I could bear it. Thank you anyway, sir,” he said softly.

Dumbledore’s mouth was very thin. “Ah, well. I understand.” He sighed, as though he had perhaps expected Geoff’s response, and turned to the other boys. “As for you three,” he said, sounding a little more stern, “First—I am not of the opinion that your parents need to know anything about this.” The edges of his mouth turned up slightly and his eyes twinkled at them. “However—I am assigning you a bit of extra homework to be done over the holiday, and if it is not done, I may change my mind about that. I want a two-foot long essay about friendship and loyalty. I should like to hear the exact reasoning behind what you have done. Sometimes, rules are broken for very good reasons,” he said, sounding still more friendly now. “I do not think it is amiss to ask for those reasons to be written down, so that they may be thoroughly understood. You shall all turn in your essays to me on the first day of the new term. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the three of them mumbled. He nodded at them. “The others will be leaving for the station. You may go. Have a good trip and a good holiday.” He stood and extended his hand to Geoff, who stood and grasped the headmaster’s hand. “And good luck to you, Mr. Rottenham. I think that it is already evident that you are capable of stirring others to a loyalty few ever manage to inspire in their friends. No matter where you go in this world, I believe that will stand you in good stead. You were also a fine member of Hufflepuff House and a paragon of the Hufflepuff traditions of loyalty and hard work. Please send an owl now and then, to let us all know how you are getting on.” Geoff looked like he would soon lose the battle to keep from crying. Bill was the last one out the door; as he was about to go, Dumbledore said, “Congratulations on your twelve O.W.L.s, Mr. Weasley. Good work that, when you were also helping Mr. Rottenham.”

Bill flushed. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

When they were on the gently swaying train, the vivid summer green of Scotland rushing past the windows, they sat in their compartment rather quietly, along with Juliet Hathaway and Mary Ann Boxwood, who was Alex’s girlfriend now. Alex and Mary Ann sat next to Geoff, holding hands, while Bill and Juliet sat opposite them, Bill’s arm around Juliet’s shoulders, and Jack on Bill’s other side. They finally told the girls what they’d been up to, that Geoff was a Squib, and that he was leaving Hogwarts.

“Oh, no!” Mary Ann cried, putting her hand out to Geoff. “That’s dreadful!”

But Geoff appeared to have come to terms with this now. “No more dreadful than living a lie for the past five years.” He tried to shrug casually. “I reckon Muggle school can’t be that bad. Plenty of people put up with it, after all. And I’m sixteen now. Maybe I can just get a job and stay in one place, instead of traveling about with my mum and dad.”

Jack laughed. “You have a good singing voice. Maybe you can travel with them and steal work from your dad, in those Gilbert and Sullivan productions.”

Geoff snorted and rolled his eyes. “Only if I want to go *mad*. No, thank you.” He sighed. “I’ll think of something. It’s been brilliant being with all of you at Hogwarts, but I reckon I knew it had to come to an end sometime.” He looked at his friends gratefully. “Thanks for all your help. You blokes should have an easier time now, too, since you’ll only have your own work to worry about again.”

“But who’s going to help me with my Astronomy homework?” Alex said, punching him playfully. Geoff blushed; he’d actually been better at some things than his wizard friends.

“Bill, I reckon. Mr.-Prefect-With-Twelve-O.W.L.s-Who’s-Going-To-Be-Head-Boy,” Jack said confidently. Bill elbowed him in the ribs.

“Right. Helping someone cheat for years is what they’re looking for in a Head Boy.”

“No one’s to know, are they?” Jack said reasonably. “I mean, sure McGonagall knew. And Dumbledore. Okay, and probably Sprout. But the other prefects don’t know.”

Juliet gave Bill an impish smile. “I know, and I’m a prefect.”

Bill gave her a lopsided smile. “I’ll just have to make it worth your while to keep your mouth shut, then,” he said, leaning in to kiss her.

“I think the last thing you want right now is for her to keep her mouth *shut*!” Jack crowed, while the others roared with laughter. Bill and Juliet surfaced, also laughing. Juliet’s blue eyes snapped with fun as she grinned at him, and her hand rested easily on his knee. As the journey continued and the conversation took a different turn, her hand made small circles that seemed to electrify every nerve ending in Bill’s body. He, in turn stroked her neck gently, gazing at her profile when he

thought the others weren't looking.

They finally reached King's Cross and Bill saw Mary Ann draw Alex off into a corner of the platform, where it appeared that she wanted to kiss him goodbye. Juliet didn't seem to need that much privacy, though; she gazed up at him happily and he held her to him, her arms around his neck. He brushed her lips lightly with his, then felt her tongue ghost across his lips. He opened his mouth wide, a moan at the back of his throat, and she responded in kind, her body pressed against his. He held her tightly, trying to make it last. He was shaking when they separated, wishing that they *had* found someplace more private for their goodbye. She gazed at him in that way that made him feel like the luckiest person in the world, and he went on looking at her as well, memorizing her. Suddenly, someone poked him in the arm. It was Alex.

"Oi! Wake up, Bill! Where's Geoff? I didn't get a last chance to say goodbye."

Bill whirled. Their friend was nowhere to be found. Jack was loading his trunk onto a trolley next to Charlie, who was doing the same. "Where's Geoff?" Bill asked Jack.

Charlie answered. "He already went through. Didn't you notice? Or were you too busy snogging your girlfriend?" Juliet flushed at that. "He practically bolted from the train." Bill let go of Juliet's hand and, with Alex and Jack, leapt through the barrier, heedless of how many Muggles they might alarm by doing so. On the normal, Muggle side of the barrier, they looked around desperately for Geoff amongst the motley assembly of commuters waiting for their trains on Platforms Nine or Ten. But it seemed that the three of them had missed their last chance to bid their friend goodbye.

He was gone.

Bill sighed, running his hand through his hair. Suddenly, Charlie came through the barrier and rammed into him, knocking him over. "Bill! Don't stand there! What do you want, all of the Muggles to see what's going on?"

"Sssh!" Bill hushed his brother hurriedly. "Stop using the M' word, you prat."

Suddenly, another student came barreling through the barrier. It was a tall sixth year Bill knew was in Ravenclaw; he was also a prefect, and Bill saw him at prefects' meetings. He stopped just short of also running into Bill.

"Oi! Close call, there. Can't be too careful, Weasley."

Bill grimaced. "Sorry, Faulkner. I'm getting out of the way now."

Mary Ann came through next, with her trolley and Alex's too. "You forgot this," she informed Alex. He thanked her and took it. Bill bade them goodbye and watched Alex and Mary Ann move off toward the car park, where her father was supposed to be waiting for them with his car. Bill and Charlie moved off to meet their dad outside the station, where they were going to get a taxicab, and Jack went with them.

In the car park, Alex and Mary Ann stood for quite a long time next to a long brown car, waiting and waiting, watching other students move off with their parents in cars and taxis. They leaned against the car, holding hands, Alex starting to feel more and more anxious. He could still see Jack, Bill, Charlie and Mr. Weasley. A taxicab finally stopped and they all climbed in, making Alex heave a sigh of relief and remove his hand from Mary Ann's.

He put his face in his hands, shaking his head. "Thank god *that's* over." He looked up at her. "I didn't know how much more I could take. How am I going to keep this up for two more years? The lies, the sneaking around—"

She patted his arm sympathetically. "Don't fret. Summer is just starting and you two will have loads of time to spend together. You don't have to go home until July! Plus, now that Geoff is leaving, there's one less secret for you to keep. I can't believe you never told me about that. I wouldn't have grassed!" She hit him lightly on the arm. He shrugged.

"We had a deal. It was just between the four of us. Although maybe we could have used some more help. Count yourself lucky you *weren't* helping; you'd have one more essay to write this summer if you'd been in on it. That was what Dumbledore was telling us about—our special summer homework, for having helped Geoff cheat."

She snorted. "It could have been a lot worse." She shook her head. "It's too bad that he has to leave, but he'll be happier elsewhere, surely? He can't do magic, right?"

Alex drew his mouth into a line. *Is that what people will say about me someday? He'd be happier somewhere else, surely? Someplace where men aren't expected to be attracted to women instead of men. Wherever that was.*

He forced a grin and took her hand again. "Have I mentioned what a good friend you are, Mary Ann?" he said, changing the subject. Thinking about Geoff's situation ending so badly made him too morose, made him wonder what might happen to *him*.

She squeezed his hand and grinned. "You've looked happy, you know. Since you started seeing him. You always used to look so *worried*."

"Yeah, well—" he started to say, trailing off as he saw the tall figure walking across the car park toward them. His throat felt tighten, watching him. *You've looked happy.* He wanted to laugh. *You have no idea, Mary Ann.*

He actually knew what it *was* to be happy now. He knew what it was to be in love, even though he didn't yet know what it was to *make* love. He knew what it was to be thoroughly immersed in someone's soul and to ache when they weren't around. Mary Ann had helped them to kiss on the platform, smuggling them into the loo. Technically it wasn't a goodbye kiss, since he was going to Lowell's house for the first month of the holiday. He'd been bouncing off the walls when he'd learned that both sets of parents had approved the arrangement. It was almost too good to be true.

Of course, he couldn't tell Bill how he and Lowell first become acquainted, even in that far-off future when Alex could tell Bill that he was gay, as it was because Alex had been ogling Bill in the library—again. He didn't know why he did it. He was just *around* Bill so much. Booth and Leonard were certainly nothing to look at. But Bill—he'd changed a great deal. It wasn't just Alex—many eyes were drawn to Bill, mostly female, but Alex had seen other male eyes, although whether in lust or envy, he didn't know.

One day after returning from the Easter holiday, they were doing O.W.L. revision in the library and Bill had taken off his robes and unbuttoned the top of his shirt, as it was a hot day. He rolled up his shirtsleeves and suddenly Alex felt himself mesmerized by those forearms. After a minute, he'd found himself thinking, *Forearms? I'm ogling Bill Weasley's forearms? God, I'm pathetic.* And yet still he did it. Something about the way the muscles moved under the pale, freckled skin with their dusting of fine red hair when Bill was writing with his quill or lifting a heavy volume...his large, capable hands turning the pages...the way his exposed throat looked, framed by his shirt collar, his Adam's apple bobbing when he swallowed...

When Bill rose to get another volume, Alex followed him with his eyes, and was startled when a mouth very close to his ear suddenly said, "Yes. *Isn't he lovely? I bet you've seen a lot more of him than most people, too, since you live with him.*" Alex's eyes had flown wide, but he'd been too alarmed to look behind him to see who had spoken. Geoff and Jack were in a class with the other Hufflepuffs, thank goodness. The voice had been deep, the breath near his ear intoxicating, and his blood seemed to be thrumming in his veins in a vital, exciting way that was quickly becoming so overwhelming he was afraid he might pass out. He finally dared to look up and saw a boy with dark brown hair that both looked messy and artfully arranged. He was perching on the table where Alex was sitting and looking down at him with a sardonic smile. His eyes seemed neither grey nor green but a strange combination of both, and they positively smoldered as he looked at Alex. Alex boldly looked back, although he felt quite naked being examined so.

He swallowed, waiting, and soon his patience was rewarded, for the other boy spoke again. "So—you're not denying it?" he said in a low voice that wasn't quite a whisper; he sounded slightly surprised. "You *were* looking at him?" He looked rather satisfied that he'd been right. "You're hardly the only one. Although rumor has it Weasley is shagging that Hathaway witch. Ah, well. Can't win them all." He shrugged, resigned.

"He's not," Alex said quickly, unable to stop himself. The other boy's mouth twisted.

"Really? Is she his beard? Oh, by the way, nice work on that. Good beard *you've* got," he said quietly, looking around to see whether anyone else might be near. "Is there a girl she fancies? Maybe I can pretend that the girl she fancies is *my* girlfriend...."

Alex frowned. *Is he saying what I think he's saying?* "Beard?"

"Right. Boxwood. Who does she fancy?"

"She—she doesn't fancy girls. I don't think," he added, confused. Did she? He wasn't certain, really. They hadn't talked about it. All he knew was that she used to fancy *him*, before they were good friends. He hadn't seen evidence that she fancied girls.

"Anyway," the other boy said, leaning forward in a conspiratorial whisper, "is Hathaway Weasley's beard? If they're not shagging."

"Erm, no. They—they have done some stuff. Just not—you know—yet."

The other boy nodded. "Ah. It seemed too much to hope for. Pity," he said wistfully, watching Bill bend over to reach a volume on a low shelf. Alex shuddered.

The boy grinned down at Alex again, looking at him appreciatively, his eyes looking more green than grey now. "Anyway, if you ever get tired of just looking at what you can't have, let me know. If you're interested, meet me this afternoon behind greenhouse number six." The boy rose and walked away, his robes billowing out behind him, and Alex had watched him, his mouth open in astonishment. He didn't even know his name.

Bill was carrying a huge tome back to the table and dropped it with thud that made the lamps shiver; Madam Pince frowned and shook her head at them. As he was sitting again on the opposite

side of the table, he said to Alex, "So. What did Faulkner want?" Bill opened the enormous book and started to run his finger down the table of contents.

"Faulkner?"

"Yeah. Lowell Faulkner. Sixth year, Ravenclaw. You were talking to him. Have you been doing too much revision? You look a bit gone."

Alex's head was spinning. *There's someone else here like me*, he thought. *Someone else, someone else!* The words kept ringing through his head. Oh, the feeling of no longer being alone! It was intoxicating! He looked up at Bill. "I'm fine," he said, his voice catching for a moment. "Did you find what we were looking for?"

They went back to working on their revision, but Alex's mind was rushing ahead to the late afternoon, to an assignation he planned to keep behind greenhouse number six....

When he arrived, there was no one there. Alex started to wonder whether it was just a prank being played on him. But presently, he saw the boy from the library emerge from the allee of oaks and make his way toward Alex, neither smiling nor frowning, but looking rather serious. He reached Alex and the two of them stood for a moment, looking around awkwardly, before Alex finally said, "I wasn't sure you were coming."

Faulkner grimaced, looking far less sure of himself than he had earlier, when he was cockiness incarnate. "Yeah, well I wasn't sure I was coming either," he said, surprising Alex with his honesty. He looked Alex in the eye now, swallowing. He extended his hand, surprising Alex again. "Lowell Faulkner. I should have said before. Sorry."

"Alex Wood."

"I know," he said tersely. Alex shook his hand firmly, but they both let go right after, feeling a little self-conscious. Faulkner shoved his hands deep into his trouser pockets, his robe pushed back behind his arms like a blazer. He rocked back and forth on his heels, drawing his lips into a line. "So," he finally said, drawing it out. "How long have you known?"

He said it very fast, and Alex had to concentrate very hard to work out what he'd said. Then he had to work out what he meant. A minute later it had dawned on him. "Oh!" he said, feeling rather dim. "Um—for a while. I was pretty young, I reckon. You?"

Faulkner nodded. "Yeah. The same."

Alex felt rather awkward, as though he had too many arms and legs. He waved his hand at the ground. "Why don't we sit down?"

Faulkner nodded and lowered himself gracefully, his legs folded neatly. Alex felt like a great oaf, grunting as he hit the ground, propping his arms on his knees. "So," Faulkner said suddenly. "For you it's Weasley?"

Alex swallowed. "Er, no, not really. I mean, sure Bill's nice to look at. But he's really just a friend. Actually—I had a crush on someone else when I was younger. Do you remember the—the explosion at Honeyduke's?" Alex's voice had grown very soft; he didn't like to speak of how Orville had died. Faulkner nodded.

"Yeah, I remember. Ruddy awful," he said with feeling, shaking his head.

Alex nodded. "Right. One of my best mates was killed—Orville Simpson. Only—I didn't just like him as a friend..."

Faulkner nodded, understanding. "I see..."

Alex grimaced and started pulling up grass stems. "I was only in second year. And—and it wasn't even physical, really. He just—" Alex closed his eyes and pictured Orville, very clearly. "He had this great smile. And I just wanted to make him happy, to see him look at me with that smile." He opened his eyes and felt a warmth move up from his neck. "Sounds stupid to you, I reckon..."

To his surprise, Lowell Faulkner laughed. "No, it doesn't. You'd probably *really* laugh if you knew who my first crush was."

Alex smiled, warming to him. "Who?"

Faulkner looked around, as though someone might hear them. "Do you remember a Slytherin who finished school a couple of years ago—"

"A Slytherin!" Alex said in surprise. Faulkner blushed and Alex said, "Sorry. Go on."

"Yeah, well, he was seeing that Head Girl who was in your house, but then he broke up with her—"

Alex's eyes opened wide. "Snape? You had a crush on Snape?"

"Sssh!" Faulkner said quickly, drowning out Alex's words. "You want everyone in the castle to hear you?" he said in a harsh whisper, even though there was no one else to be seen on the grounds. "Yeah, it was Snape. I reckon his breaking up with Evans really fueled my fantasies, you know? Like he was rejecting all women. And *then* something happened that made it even *worse*..."

“What?”

Faulkner looked triumphant. “I found out that he is like us.” Alex’s jaw dropped open. “No! You’re kidding!”

Faulkner held his hand up as though taking an oath. “I swear. You know Barty Crouch, seventh year? God’s gift to prefects?” Alex laughed at that; Crouch was a curse upon them all, a prefect who thought he was entitled to be Head Boy, but who had had to watch someone else be awarded that title (in this case, a sturdy, diligent Hufflepuff). Crouch was notorious for taking away house points with (or without) the slightest provocation from anyone who wasn’t a Ravenclaw, for throwing around his dad’s name, and for having made everyone want to kill him when *he’d* received twelve O.W.L.s two years earlier. He’d been completely insufferable about it.

“Well, last year, Snape was picking him up at the station at the end of the term, in June. And he was going to spend the summer with Snape and his uncle. I heard them talking, at the station.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t believe it. Must be why Crouch was so grumpy this year, besides not being Head Boy. He was missing his boyfriend.”

Alex was speechless. “Wow,” he finally said. “I had no idea.”

Faulkner shook his head. “I doubt anyone knows. Think what Crouch’s *dad* would do if it came out!” He sighed. “It’s the sort of thing that *almost* tempts me to commit blackmail....”

Alex laughed at that. “Well, someone could blackmail us just as easily...”

Faulkner shrugged. “Nah. Technically we haven’t done anything. Yet.”

Alex hung on the word yet.’ It was a word full of hope. He looked at Lowell Faulkner, his heart in his throat, realizing that for all his bravado and that he was a year older, this other boy was as inexperienced as he was....

The three of them walked to the street now, to hail a taxicab for Mary Ann, and then for themselves. When the car stopped and they’d loaded her trunk into the boot, she threw her arms around Alex, hugging him thoroughly. “I expect loads of owls, do you hear?”

He grinned at her. “Of course. And you have a grand time on the Isle of Wight.”

She turned to Lowell and nodded at him, one eyebrow raised. “You take good care of him, now. I’m trusting you.”

He laughed. “Well, I’ll make sure your trust is not misplaced.”

When they were finally settled comfortably in the back seat of their own taxicab, zooming through London and, eventually, to the Faulkner home in Mayfair, Alex reached for Lowell’s hand and squeezed it. He wanted to kiss him, as he’d kissed him in the station loo, lust roaring through his veins and the impending threat of discovery making him feel even more energized. The driver looked at them in the mirror briefly and Alex was glad that he couldn’t see their hands; it was dicey enough to get Muggle taxis. The drivers often had a lot of curious questions about Hogwarts students’ owls or large trunks, and some students didn’t think to remove their wizarding robes before exiting Platform Nine and Three Quarters, either (although Alex and Lowell had).

But for now, no one could see their joined hands. Holding hands was all they had done for a while, and on that first day, behind the greenhouse, they hadn’t even done that much, after the initial handshake. If you couldn’t see the hands, there was nothing to suggest that they were anything other than friends. The driver, for his part, neither knew that they were a couple nor a couple of wizards. “So,” Lowell asked him quietly, “do any of them suspect? Other than Mary Ann, of course.”

Alex shook his head, confident in this, at least. “Not an inkling. They think Mary Ann and I are a perfectly happy couple.” He felt Lowell’s finger move slightly, drawing a circle in his palm, and Alex swallowed, freezing up for a moment as he thought about the next stage in their relationship. He was sixteen, he had a boyfriend at long last, and it even seemed possible that he might have a physical relationship with his boyfriend that went beyond kissing. It was both thrilling and frightening; Alex wasn’t sure whether he wanted to tell the driver to hurry up already, or to turn back to the station.

Lowell looked as frightened as he felt, but he nodded, squeezing Alex’s hand, facing ahead as the driver wove his way through the hectic London traffic. He spoke softly.

“No one on my end suspects anything, either.”

Triangles

Monday, 14 July, 1980

Severus Snape looked around the cavernous entrance hall of Malfoy Manor. The collection of armor against the far wall gave a visitor the impression that he was not being greeted so much as held at bay until it was determined whether he was friend or foe. Severus swallowed, waiting to be noticed, hefting the medium-sized box he carried from one hand to the other. He was very glad that he was able to Apparate from one interior—his uncle’s flat—to another, without having to go out of doors into the hot July sun. The stone entrance hall was high and cool, especially compared to the cramped, dusty flat over his uncle’s apothecary, but in spite of the pleasant surroundings (threatening-looking collections of armor notwithstanding), he just wanted to get this over with.

Finally, a loud *crack!* echoed through the hall and a house elf appeared. He had large green eyes and a long pointed nose and was wearing what appeared to be a pillowcase. Severus recoiled from the creature; he wasn’t accustomed to house elves. He’d heard about them at Hogwarts, but he’d never seen one there. They stayed hidden far too well.

“You is to be coming with me, sir,” squeaked the elf, turning and leading him up the broad stairs. Severus hesitated at first, then followed the elf, staying a few steps behind. He eventually found himself in a generously-sized upstairs corridor lined with what seemed to be Malfoy family portraits. Many of them seemed to be every bit as unpleasant as Lucius; Severus was sneered at by more than one Malfoy ancestor on the way to the room to which the house elf was leading him, and even some Malfoy ladies rolled their eyes and turned up their noses at him.

“You is to go in here, sir,” the elf squeaked at him, opening double doors that led into a gracious sitting room that overlooked the front drive. The high-ceilinged room was empty of humans, but not empty as such; Severus resisted the urge to turn in a circle and gawp at the gilt details and elaborate tapestries, the ornately-carved furniture and crystal chandelier. The elf left without any acknowledgment, as Severus knew he shouldn’t be caught thanking an elf.

He put the gift down on a chair with delicate carved legs and strode to the window, looking out on the generous green lawn before the house, which was divided neatly in two by an allee of arching trees lining the drive leading to the gravel court before the front door. Looking down, he could see that the front steps were flanked by huge topiary sculptures in the shape of Welsh green dragons (smaller than life-size). If not for the dragon topiaries, it could be any Muggle country estate anywhere in Britain. But it wasn’t; it was the home of a very powerful dark wizard and his family, and Severus felt like he was walking on eggshells every moment he spent in the house. He wasn’t even certain that he *was* alone when he seemed to be, and did not think that it was a sign of paranoia to assume that he was being watched and behave accordingly.

Severus turned in surprise when the doors to the room burst open again and Lucius Malfoy strode into the room; he saw an expression of satisfaction on Malfoy’s face when he saw that Severus had been jolted by his advent. He was not dressed as though he expected visitors; he appeared to have been riding, his long light hair pulled back at the nape of his neck and the collar of his shirt unbuttoned against the heat of the summer day. He carried a riding crop under his right arm, which Severus mistook for a wand at first. A twisted smile on his still-pale face, despite the fact that he’d been riding in the hot sun, Lucius Malfoy ambled slowly toward Severus Snape with his hands in the pockets of his riding jacket, the crop still held between his right arm and his torso.

“Well, Severus. It’s about time you came by to pay your respects,” he said, rocking back and forth slightly on the heels and toes of his gleaming riding boots. He kept his hands in his pockets and did not make a move to grasp his guest’s hand; Severus had been about to put his hand out to Malfoy, but thought better of it, knowing he’d look a great ponce if Malfoy did not respond. “My

son is a week old today," Lucius Malfoy continued. "I expected to hear from you sooner than this. Instead, you have chosen to pay a visit on a dreadful day in my family's history. Do you know how many Malfoys were killed during the Revolution, when those animals stormed the Bastille on this day, almost two-hundred years ago? Not all of the Malfoys were killed, obviously, but if it weren't for the branch of the family that came here with William the Conqueror, there wouldn't have been any Malfoys to go back to France and claim our ancestral lands after the restoration of the monarchy...."

"What?" Severus asked in mock surprise, raising his brows. "Did they find a gang of Muggles too much to handle?"

Lucius Malfoy sneered. "No. It was Muggle-loving wizards, traitors to their own kind, who murdered them. Some of them were named—*Prud'homme*."

Snape swallowed, not liking where this was going. "How interesting," he said, trying not to let his voice shake. He made an attempt to sound more casual, but he wasn't certain it worked. "How funny that that might be true, when you said that we're both clan Campbell on the distaff side, my mother having been a MacDermid and all."

Lucius nodded, glancing at the small inexpertly-wrapped package on the chair with a disdainful sniff. "True. And that is to your credit, even though she was a Ravenclaw. I'd say that after Slytherins, Ravenclaws are next best. That cleverness has often been quite useful in keeping Muggle-borns and Muggle-lovers in their places. After all, our young Mr. Crouch is a Ravenclaw."

"Was. He just finished his seventh year," Severus said automatically.

Lucius stopped at that, looking more than mildly annoyed at being corrected. "He is still a Ravenclaw just as you and I shall always be Slytherins. You finished school two years ago, and I finished eight years ago, but we shall *always* be Slytherins." His voice was very hard and did not brook any disagreement. Severus nodded briefly, not wanting to antagonize him further. Momentarily, Lucius Malfoy's face relaxed; he took the riding crop from under his arm and threw himself into a black leather smoking chair with wide upholstered arms, beginning to hit his thigh with the crop, a sort of nervous habit, evidently. "At any rate, we shall come to the matter of young Crouch momentarily. I was talking about your family, before I was interrupted."

No, you were talking about Barty before you were interrupted, but I should have to interrupt you again to tell you so, Severus thought rebelliously.

"Were you?" he said innocently, sitting on a deep green velvet couch next to Malfoy's chair.

Malfoy smirked. "You know very well what we were discussing. The Prud'homme family. I've done a little more digging into your background. I previously only knew about your parents. It turns out that your grandmother was a Prud'homme, of all things," he said, as though this somehow made her sub-human. "I blame her for coercing your grandfather to become an *Auror*. The MacDermids had been a perfectly respectable pureblooded Clan Campbell sept until *she* came into it." Severus tried not to betray any emotion in response to this statement.

Lucius Malfoy shook his head, smiling, almost looking genuinely friendly. "And you've been *quite* the humble one about your father's family, old boy. Why didn't you ever tell me you were from *those* Snapes? Snape Bridge, over the Alde river, was the only route north from London for simply *ages*, and your family collected the tribute from every single person who had to pass over it, wizard or Muggle! The ruddy town was *named* Snape.' And the legends about the hexes people suffered at the hands of your ancestors if they failed to pay the tribute..." He was practically cackling with glee. "You know, you really should look into your own family history. Some good stuff there. A pity your MacDermid grandfather didn't care about upholding the Clan Campbell honor, nor your grandmother. It's a wonder their daughter had the sense to marry a Snape. At least *they're* no longer troubling our kind..." Severus gripped the edge of the couch tightly, willing himself not to hex Malfoy. "Bloody stupid name, too, Prud'homme. How simplistic. *Good man*." Malfoy snorted derisively. His obsession with bloodlines was definitely starting to annoy Severus.

"Yes," Severus said, although he knew it didn't necessarily sound like he was agreeing—as it shouldn't. "*Bad faith*, on the other hand, is far harder to make out. Does it mean that the Malfoys didn't believe in others, believed in the wrong' thing, like heretics, or that it was *unwise* to have faith in them?" He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Malfoy's smirk was growing across his face. "*Keep them guessing* should perhaps have been the family motto," he said silkily. "At least your parents helped redeem your Muggle-loving friend-of-Dumbledore grandparents. *Killed by Aurors!*" He leaned forward avidly, eyes glowing. "Tell me, what were they up to at the time? The Dark Lord tells me that they were not his servants, to his knowledge, but they must have been working with other Death Eaters if Aurors thought it so important to kill them..."

Severus looked at him without blinking. "Shopping," he said shortly, his jaw clenched so tightly it was painful.

"Eh?" Malfoy said frowning, looking down to examine a spot on his jodhpurs.

"They were shopping when they were killed," Severus repeated, feeling again the almost irresistible urge to hex him. "You're *very* interested in my family history," he said, narrowing his eyes as he surveyed Malfoy.

Lucius Malfoy met his gaze, unblinking; Snape felt like shivering, looking across the empty space at the cool grey eyes. "Blood is very important to me. The right blood. When all is said and done, even the Prud'hommages have an impeccable bloodline. A disgrace to the name of wizard in their day, but at least there doesn't seem to be any trace of that in *you*. The Prud'hommages are descendants of the founders of Beauxbatons, did you know that?"

Before Severus could answer, Narcissa Malfoy appeared in the doorway of the room carrying a blanket-wrapped bundle. She looked tired, dark circles under her eyes, and her clothing was slightly disheveled. There was a discolored patch of fabric on each shoulder of her light summer robes, and even as she walked across the room, bringing the baby up to her shoulder and patting his back, Severus learned why this was. The child, upon being put in an upright position, promptly spewed onto his mother's shoulder. It was just a small discharge, and was immediately absorbed by the already-stained fabric, but it made Severus wince and look away. He was not accustomed to babies. Evidently, Lucius didn't find this any more appealing than he did.

"Can't you get the nurse to take him when he's doing *that*?" Lucius Malfoy said in disgust. His wife behaved as though he hadn't said a word.

"I understand we have a visitor paying respects to our little Dragon," Narcissa said, bouncing the baby up and down, even though that seemed to worsen the emissions. She looked Severus Snape up and down, making him feel as naked as he'd been in the pool at Ascog Castle; he suddenly found it very hard to forget what she looked like without her clothes as well. His face felt warm, and he turned away from her, trying to find a reason to look anywhere else. This was far more awkward than he'd anticipated; he hadn't thought about the possibility that he would encounter Narcissa, although he perhaps should have.

"I've brought a present," Severus said awkwardly, picking up the box and presenting it to her; she didn't take it but sat in an armchair, holding the baby to her chest.

"You open it, Lucius. I can't." She didn't look at Severus. He'd gone from feeling like she was undressing him with her eyes to feeling utterly beneath her notice.

Her husband didn't move at first. Severus held out the clumsily-wrapped box to Malfoy, waiting; he made him stand there like a fool for a good minute, holding the box out while Malfoy stared at it, before he plucked it swiftly from Severus' hand and began to impatiently rip open the paper.

Inside were some wooden blocks, as well as a small gelatinous object the purpose of which clearly mystified Lucius Malfoy—at first.

"They're Froebel blocks," Severus tried to explain. "Invented some time ago by a wizard in Germany..."

Lucius raised his eyebrows and held up the gelatinous object as though he'd never been so offended by anything in his life.

"Is this what I think it is?" he whispered.

Severus swallowed before answering. "It's actually an invention of my uncle's. He gave one to my parents for me when I was born. It's impregnated with a never-ending supply of a topical pain-killer that takes effect when an infant sucks on it. It's very effective for teething pain, so that your wife won't have to be up in the night when he's teething. That won't be for five or six months, of course, but better to be prepared...."

However, Severus wasn't at all prepared for Lucius Malfoy to walk to the window with the offending object and throw it out the opening before swiftly drawing his wand from his right boot and exploding the thing into infinitesimal pieces, which were now showering down on the front steps of the house, presumably.

Severus swallowed. *Oh, don't let me stop you from overreacting*, he thought bitterly.

Malfoy turned to his guest and wife, saying, "And I don't ever want to see one of those things in my house again. My son will know what pain is from as young an age as possible. He will know what it is to suffer, and when I tell him to endure it, he will say, 'Thank you, father,' and be truly grateful that I am not allowing him to grow up to be *soft* and *weak*. He will *not* blithely roll around in his cot, sucking on *that*, as though he had my wife's teats in there with him all the time. As for that saving my wife from getting up in the night to tend him—that's what we pay the nurse for."

He glared at Severus, who looked resolutely back, swallowing. "Well," he said softly, "you know what's best for your son." He'd never seen such a rude response to a gift in his life. Malfoy was the worst kind of spoiled, self-centered aristocrat, in his opinion; unfortunately, he was also Severus' chief contact in the Death Eaters, and he needed to stay on Malfoy's good side. It wouldn't do to

show weakness or rebelliousness.

But Lucius Malfoy, in yet another display of his mood-swing prowess, was behaving now as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. He strode back to the chair where he'd been sitting and picked up the box of wooden blocks. "So," he said cheerfully, "what do these do?"

Severus felt safer now; he could explain the Froebel blocks without there being a blow-up—he hoped. "Well, Froebel designed them for wizarding children, something that could pick up on a child's inherently magical nature and augment that without the help of a wand, to help the child build what he pleases. His will directs the structure. If Muggles got hold of them—and Muggles evidently have—they'd just behave like ordinary blocks of wood. They're not really what you'd call magical but *charmed*; like a broom, the person handling them has to be magical for them to respond." He waved his hand over the blocks and thought intently of his childhood home in Oxford; the blocks rearranged themselves into a close approximation of it. It helped that he and his parents had lived in a very boxy house. Severus looked up to see whether the Malfoys appreciated the gift of the blocks. At this point he was quite prepared for it to be converted to kindling. "Of course, he'll probably just put them in his mouth for a while," Severus said, nodding at the baby. "But they can't be damaged by moisture," he added thinking with distaste of the child spewing all over the blocks.

However, in the moment that he looked up for her approval, Narcissa chose to open the front of her robes, completely exposing both of her breasts, which were far larger than he remembered (the milk, he realized) and put the squirming baby to one of them; she didn't cover the other breast as she nursed her son. His small hand rested against the curve of flesh there as he contentedly drank. Her exposed nipple seemed to be like another eye, staring at him, and he stupidly stared back.

Suddenly, there was a voice in his ear; "*Reminiscing, Snape? Harking back to when you had her at Black and Potter's party?*" He turned in alarm; Lucius Malfoy was very nearly as close to him as Narcissa had been when they were shagging. He could feel Malfoy's hot breath on his face. "You might have told me yourself, at least...."

And suddenly, his wand was flying out of his robe pocket and he was hurtling across the room; it seemed that his brain was either not processing things in the order in which they occurred or that he was just confused. After the fact, he realized that Malfoy had cried, "*Expelliarmus!*", his wand pointing at Severus with his right hand while he used his left hand to catch Severus' wand, which came flying out of his robe pocket. Severus struck the paneled wall hard, but the impact was mercifully cushioned by a heavy tapestry hanging there. He felt certain that had he thought about it, Lucius Malfoy would have arranged for him to fly into something far less comfortable, but it didn't seem that this had been planned.

"It—it was over two years ago," Severus said, floundering, trying to keep his voice from going up in pitch. He pressed himself against the tapestry and tried to get his breath. "You—you weren't married—and we—we didn't—"

"—finish?" Malfoy said, a wicked smirk twisting the corner of his mouth as he strolled casually toward Severus. "So Narcissa told me. She thought it was quite funny, really. And your former girlfriend caught the pair of you together. I wish I'd been there!" he crowed, making Severus frown; he'd been rather alarmed by the sexual behavior displayed by his fellow Slytherins at that party. He was starting to think he needed to make a very hasty getaway before possibly being privy to more of the same. In spite of the fact that that was the last sexual contact he'd had with anyone, he was feeling more alarmed than aroused by the suggestiveness in Lucius Malfoy's voice. *I have got to get out of here*, he thought desperately. Unfortunately, he'd never yet been able to decide when one of his meetings with Malfoy was over; Malfoy permitted him to leave his presence when he was good and ready, and usually long after he knew Severus had gone beyond his comfort-level.

"*Tracheo suo passus est!*" Lucius Malfoy cried suddenly, pointing his wand; Severus' eyes flew open and he clutched at his throat with both hands, falling to his knees, convinced that he was dying. Then the pain was abruptly gone; it was as though he'd been stabbed in the throat, but after the curse wore off, there was no trace of it. Still, Severus thought, for a moment the pain had been real enough.

Malfoy was standing over him now, still grinning wickedly. "That'll teach you to touch her without my express permission," he said smoothly, putting out his hand to help Severus to stand. He took the hand, feeling that it was prudent to do so, but he removed it from Malfoy's grasp as soon as he was on his feet again. Narcissa was still nursing the baby, this time at the other breast. The one the baby had been feeding at had a deep red elongated nipple which was making Severus stare again. Lucius Malfoy turned to see what the younger man was looking at and barked at his wife, "I don't believe I heard him cry to be fed, did I? You want for him to let you know he wants feeding, do you hear? And then let him yell for a good while. If he thinks that you're going to feed him before he even asks, he'll never learn how to open his mouth and demand what he wants."

To Severus' immense relief, she took the baby from her breast and closed her robes, meeting his eye with a lascivious wink. *Please let me go, please let me go...* he thought desperately. He had never been more uncomfortable in his life.

As though he'd read his mind, Lucius Malfoy casually waved his hand at Severus now. "You may go, Snape. You've done your duty. In future, try to be a little more prompt about it."

Severus swallowed, wondering if this would have to suffice for a thank you.'

"Of course, sir. I really must be getting back..."

"Remember," Malfoy said, turning and raising one eyebrow. "Next week you and your protege will be—well, you know. I expect you to prepare him before then. And if he gives you any trouble whatsoever, I can trust that you will deal with the problem...?"

Severus nodded, swallowing. "Of course." What did that mean? He might have to kill the son of the head of magical law enforcement? He didn't relish the idea of killing anyone. There were a lot of things he didn't relish doing that he might be forced to do, he thought apprehensively; but he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

"Good day, Snape. You'll be hearing from me soon," Malfoy added, as though he hadn't disarmed and then hexed his guest. Severus sighed; he was being dismissed. That was fine with him. His ordeal was finally over. Malfoy handed him his wand.

"Goodbye, sir. And madam," he added, with a small old-fashioned bow to Narcissa. It seemed strange to him even as he did it, and yet he never really felt that anything he did around the pair of them felt completely natural; it was as though he was playing a role the entire time, the role of Severus Snape, Death Eater.

With a wave of his wand, he Disapparated from Malfoy Manor, filled with relief.

* * * * *

Thursday, 31 July, 1980

Peter winced as Lily squeezed his hand tightly. When the pain from the contraction had faded, her grip relaxed, but she did not release his fingers. Peter brushed some hair from her brow and surveyed her; he couldn't bear the idea of her suffering. Lily's eyes no longer appeared green but were dark with pain, only a little sliver of color visible around her dilated pupils. She put her left hand over her and Peter's clasped right hands.

"Oh, Peter, I'm so glad you're here!" she choked out.

His heart turned over as he looked at her. "There, now, Lily. You're a brave girl. That wasn't so bad, was it?" He didn't believe a word of what he said. Oh, he thought she was brave, but he didn't believe for a moment that the pain wasn't bad. He thought about the many times now that he'd suffered the Cruciatus Curse, and while this surely couldn't be as bad as that, most people didn't *volunteer* to have the Cruciatus Curse placed on them.

She smiled gratefully at him. "No, Peter. You're quite right. That wasn't so bad." He had the feeling that she was also lying, but it was necessary lying. She had to lie, most of all to herself, in order to go on.

"When is James getting here?" There was a hint of a whine in her voice.

"I don't know. I'm sorry I couldn't Apparate to get him here; I'm just not familiar with Montrose, much less the place where the Magpies practice. I'd end up splinching myself. Your owl is rather fast though, yes? She'll go to him and he'll find out what's what and be here in a trice, you'll see."

She nodded, starting to tighten her grip on his hand again. Then she gasped and Peter had to squeeze back hard, to avoid his fingers being crushed. She puffed out small breaths as she stared into space, wide-eyed. Peter resumed the counting he'd been doing for her before.

"One, two, three, four..."

When that contraction had passed, she released his hand and laid back on her pillow, closing her eyes. "Oh, I don't know how much more of this I can take, Peter..." She put one hand over her very round belly; Peter glared at it, hating the baby, hating anything or anyone who made Lily suffer. *Stupid baby! Stupid James who fathered the stupid baby!*

"Peter?"

"Hmm? What?"

"I've been repeating your name; you were staring into space. God, you must be exhausted! First sitting with me at the flat while we worked out whether I was going through real or false labor, then sending Calliope to James, getting the taxi and now sitting here with me while I try to break your hand. When James arrives you should definitely go have a lie-down..."

Peter drew himself up, trying not to seem as tired as he was. "Nonsense, Lily. I'm fine. But I'm worried about you. Are you certain you don't want to go to a witch-midwife? Why must you do this

in a Muggle hospital?" He glanced around uneasily at the sterile white room, the gleaming chrome and alien-looking technology. He didn't even understand how to work the cords for opening and closing the blinds and curtains; a nurse had had to come and close them when Lily complained of the light being in her eyes, after he'd made a mess of it.

She shook her head adamantly. "At a time like this—I need what's familiar to me, Peter. And things Gemma told me...well, I just feel that magic shouldn't be involved in something like child-birth. That's how I feel and I won't change my mind. I've been seeing Dr. Van Dyke all through my pregnancy and he knows me. I feel comfortable with him, and comfortable here. Perhaps—perhaps next time I'll consider a wizarding-style birth. But right now this is where I want to be."

Next time? Peter thought with alarm. He didn't like the sound of that. Of course, he didn't like to contemplate Lily and James sleeping together at all, but it had sometimes been rather difficult to avoid acknowledging that they did this while he had been living with them. It had been *very* hard to live in denial about their physical relationship late in Lily's pregnancy. Of course, the pregnancy itself was an obvious daily reminder of what they did together, but he had also hoped that it would mean that during the months leading up to the birth, Lily and James would cease their sexual contact. It was a comforting thought. Unfortunately, he was utterly mistaken about that.

One morning, just after dawn, he'd heard quite a ruckus from behind Lily and James' bedroom door. She was laughing hysterically.

"Oh, James!" she heard him say. "*You should see the look on your face! Don't worry, come here...there are ways to avoid me having to bounce about, and you don't have to worry about...*"

The rest of the sentence was inaudible to Peter. He heard James' voice responding: "Oh, keep doing *that...*" There was a catch in James' voice, and then he was reduced to inarticulate moaning.

A wicked laugh emerged from behind the door. "*Now aren't you glad that all of these pregnancy hormones are making me so randy all of the time?*"

Peter had retreated to his couch and stuck his fingers in his ears, singing whatever music came into his head. (All he could think of was "Greensleeves," the lyrics of which weren't exactly comforting.) She was almost *nine months pregnant* and they were still going at it! He wanted to throw something, or hex something. Mostly he wanted to throw or hex James Potter.

But James Potter wasn't here now; he wasn't the one holding Lily's hand and comforting her. He was the one *causing* her the pain. Peter used a soft cloth to wipe the perspiration from her brow, smiling gently. When another contraction came over her, he put his hand in hers and squeezed back when she gripped his fingers tightly. *I'm here and he's not.* Peter had thought about not sending the owl, or not writing the correct message in the letter, but he was afraid that later, it would come out that he'd done these things. Instead, he did exactly as he'd said he would.

So it wasn't *his* fault that James Potter hadn't yet shown up at his wife's side, was it? Peter knew James would have to find an approved Apparition point near the hospital wing where they handled births, but James could always Apparate to their flat and take a taxi from there. Peter was starting to feel more and more smug; *Not so reliable now, is your precious husband?* he thought at Lily. *I'm here. I'll never leave you.*

But he had no sooner thought this than none other than James Potter himself came striding into the room. He was longer wearing his Quidditch robes, but still sported the muddy trousers and jersey he habitually wore under his Montrose Magpies uniform. He went to the bed, and Peter felt Lily's fingers leave his as James Potter took her hand instead, just as another contraction moved through her.

Peter stepped aside, suddenly feeling useless and discarded. James counted and breathed with Lily, as Peter had done, and when the pain had passed, James grinned at her and gave her a kiss on the lips. "You thought I wasn't going to make it, didn't you?" he said to her softly.

She smiled at her husband, all of her love for James Potter evident in her eyes. "I had faith you would make it," she said, and Peter could tell that she wasn't just saying empty words.

He was caught off guard when James suddenly turned to him, crowing, "We're going to have a baby!" He threw his arms around Peter in an exuberant hug, and Peter awkwardly patted James' back, forcing his face into a smile. James held him at arm's length, grinning at him. "I don't know what we would do without you, Peter. You're a giant among men!" He laughed at his own joke; Peter was barely up to his collarbone.

Lily reached out for Peter's hand again and he willingly gave it to her. "All joking aside, Peter, I really am so grateful to you for being here," she said quietly. Peter could see the affection in her eyes and felt a lump rise in his throat. She meant it, she really did. He'd been there for her, her pillar of strength, someone she could count on. James wasn't, Sirius wasn't, Remus wasn't, her friend Cecilia wasn't, her fellow Aurors weren't. Certainly her family wasn't, although he knew that they were all in a hospital room in London by Lily's mother's bedside. Her mum was very ill again,

and this was something else that had been distressing Lily in the days leading up to her due date. No, all of those other people had better things to do. *He* was the one by her side, the one Lily could count on, and she knew it. He felt his chest swell a little with pride.

James pulled out the chair in which Peter had been sitting; it was the only one in the room. He sat by her side and took her hand in his again, turning to Peter. "You should get some rest now, Pete. Or food. Do you need some Muggle money?" His face fell suddenly. "Oh, wait—I used my last quid for the taxi. Have you got anything, Lily?"

She nodded. "In my handbag, over there—"

"I'll be back," Peter told her, once he had a ten-pound note in his pocket. He started to leave, but Lily wouldn't let him.

"Oh, no, you don't. Come here, Peter Pettigrew."

He neared the bed and was shocked when she pulled his face down to hers and turned her head, kissing his cheek. He knew he was probably bright red when he stood upright again. "Thank you for everything," she said again, giving him, he thought, the sweetest smile. He fought the urge to put his hand on his cheek, to protect and preserve the spot where she'd kissed him.

"What are friends for?" he said, trying to sound more nonchalant about this than he felt. When he was leaving the room, James was leaning over to kiss his wife, turning the smile on Peter's face into a frown. Peter strode down the hospital corridor to the lifts, a swarm of conflicting emotions making his stomach clench. He thought at first that he'd try to find a bakery, have a nice pie, but instead, he decided to go looking for the nearest pub. After seeing that, he definitely needed a drink.

* * * * *

After leaving the pub, Peter had decided to go back to James and Lily's flat instead of returning to Lily's hospital room and having to see her and James together. He threw himself onto the couch, feeling very depressed. He hoped on the one hand that she wouldn't actually have the baby until the next day, but on the other hand, that would mean her suffering for longer, and he didn't want that either.

He glanced at the bookcases; he'd been able to do far more research on the Prophecy at James and Lily's flat than at the Weasley house. Lily had earned an Arithmancy O.W.L. in her fifth year and had other texts associated with Divination as well. Peter had discovered that if Lily had her baby on the first day of August, this birthdate would make his number nine, which meant completion' in Arithmancy, whereas if he were born on the last day of July, his number would be eleven, the number of the Lion in the Prophecy, according to the Centaur Bill Weasley had consulted. (The Death Eater who had recruited Peter had already tortured this out of him.)

Peter had already worked out that little Ron Weasley's number was also eleven, but since the Centaur had told Bill Weasley that his youngest brother would walk by the side of the Lion, Peter hadn't reported this to the Dark Lord. He *could* be the Lion, Peter reckoned, if Molly Weasley had another boy, who would then be the one to walk by the side of the Lion, his brother Ron. Plus, the family members seemed to have a habit of getting Sorted into Gryffindor. (Peter had heard Arthur and Molly talk about their days in Gryffindor Tower.) However, if all Gryffindors were considered potential Lions, at that rate Peter himself could be considered the Lion, and he knew for a certainty that he was not. He *knew* who he was.

The Moonchild.

And because of that, he knew who the Daughter of War was. *Lily*. She was the one whom he loved. It could be no other. He of course did not want the Dark Lord to know this. He'd gone to the Ministry to search for birth records for other people who could be likely candidates. Peter's boss, the Death Eater who always tortured him when he was summoned by Voldemort, had told him to only look for Daughter of War candidates born either in March or under the sign of Aries, as he'd been to a Diviner who had recommended this. It at least narrowed down his search somewhat, although it still included Lily.

He found another witch with a plausible birthdate: the second of April, 1954. Her number was seven, like Lily's. He turned in her name upon returning from the Ministry. When he saw the story in the *Prophet* with her name in large type over a photograph of her with her husband and children, shown next to a picture of her devastated house, the Dark Mark hovering over it, he'd felt a strong wave of guilt in the pit of his stomach. *That woman is dead because of me*, he thought. Her husband was dead, too, as he had tried to defend her and got in the way. The children were now orphans, two boys, both under the age of six. *Because I led Voldemort to her, and she wasn't even the right one...*

Unfortunately, the Dark Lord had a dream that that killing had been a mistake. He set great store by his dreams. He'd summoned Peter and told him to keep looking for all three people at once;

the Lion and Moonchild had to have a relationship to each other and to the Daughter of War. Peter had obeyed, after suffering Cruciatius, of course. After that, he made a list of witches' birthdates starting in 1959 and going backwards to the beginning of the century; when he was done that, he looked up marriage records, trying to find those witches' names. It was tedious work. Lily had no idea why it took him so long to go on shopping trips for her; she didn't know that he was slipping away to do research at the Ministry archives. He'd tried using a summoning spell to find the records he wanted, to no avail. One could only summon something if one knew what it actually was and where. He had to sort through the records by hand.

Eventually he found a witch born on the last day of March in 1944 *and* she had a husband born on the eighteenth of April in 1942. His number was eleven, and he'd been in Gryffindor when he was in school. (Peter had had to look up old O.W.L. records to find out about this.) What Peter lacked was the Moonchild, however. The pair had three children, two boys and a girl; their eldest son had just completed his third year at Hogwarts, in Gryffindor. Which made him seem more like a Lion than a Moonchild, but Peter checked his birth certificate and found—that the numbers didn't work. The boy was born on the tenth of April in 1966. His number was nine. *What is it with this family and spring birthdays?* Peter had thought. All Peter needed was for the boy's birthday to be slightly different, and he could deliver him to the Dark Lord. He could deliver the entire family. It would be plausible. It would work. When he was altering the boy's birthday so that it was now the fifteenth of April, (it was a simple thing to change the zero to a five in the Ministry archives) he tried not to think about the witch and her husband who'd been killed, their children orphaned. With the new birthdate the boy's number was five. But Peter still had to explain how he was a Moonchild.

Later that night, when he was having a snack in James and Lily's kitchen, he noticed that on the calendar Lily had hung up on the fridge door, the phases of the moon were noted. The next day, he went to Flourish and Blotts to find an almanac giving the phases of the moon for many years back and found that on the fifteenth of April in 1966 *the moon had been full*. It was great luck; by changing the boy's birthdate, he'd both given him the correct number and a reason to be called a Moonchild.

He did not volunteer this information, however. He waited until he was summoned by Voldemort again. He gave the family's name and birthdates, reasons why the mother was the Daughter of War, why the father was the Lion, why the boy was the Moonchild. Voldemort had been pleased, very pleased. And since it was the summer holiday, the boy wasn't at Hogwarts, where he would be inaccessible and safe. When Lily had read of the deaths in the *Prophet*, she'd cried. There was another uproar, fingers being pointed at the Ministry, an inquiry into just why the family had been targeted. It seemed utterly pointless and random. No one knew of any reason for Voldemort wanting them all dead.

But Peter knew.

And then—a week before Lily had gone into labor, he'd been summoned. He'd been told that Voldemort had had yet another dream. The members of the dead family were not the people in the Prophecy. Peter's search was to continue.

I don't need to search, he thought. *I already know who the Moonchild and Daughter of War are.*

As he'd held Lily's hand and counted with her, while they waited for the taxi, he was very, very thankful that he'd already taken steps to keep him and Lily safe. The day after he'd been summoned, he'd gone to the Ministry and altered his birth records and Lily's, so that if Voldemort had someone else investigate possible candidates, he and Lily wouldn't show up. He had considered giving up James, as he was a Leo and his birthday gave him the right number—eleven—but since he was married to Lily, Peter was afraid that she would be considered a viable candidate for the Daughter of War, despite the changed birthday. *Is James the Lion?* Peter wondered. *Perhaps if the Triangle of the Lion, Daughter of War and Moonchild will bring down Voldemort, I should tell James and Lily about it and we can actually do—something—to bring it about.* While this sounded romantic and daring at first, Peter couldn't help but follow up this train of thought with *But what?* And thus the train of thought was derailed.

Since he had to establish a relationship between the three people in the triangle, his boss' knew the research was more time-consuming than just finding one person, and he was given until the spring equinox to find the right ones. Peter had heaved a sigh of relief when he heard that, but tried not to look too relieved. They wanted him to get it right this time. Although Voldemort had nothing against killing people who just *might* be the people in the prophecy, every time another senseless act of violence was committed, the Ministry became even more dedicated to eradicating Voldemort and his followers. Peter wondered how soon the Dark Lord would grow tired of his floundering attempts and put someone else on the job. And although he'd already changed his and Lily's birth records, he had a bad feeling that it wasn't quite enough. He paced the floor, thinking.

Suddenly, he knew what else he needed to do; he needed to get back to the hospital, he needed

to alter Lily's *memory* so that she also believed she had the new birthday. James' memory would need to be altered as well. He could take care of Lily's Muggle family some other time. He needed to fix it on all of the other documents associated with her, while he was at it. Her school records, her O.W.L. results, her employment records with the Ministry. It wouldn't be easy, but it was all very, very necessary.

When he returned to Lily's hospital room, Remus and Sirius were also there and Lily was holding a small bundle in her arms.

"Peter! It's a boy!" James cried, embracing him as he entered the room. Peter gamely patted James on the back and nodded at Sirius and Remus, smiling.

"Hullo, you two," he said cheerfully. Remus looked truly happy about the baby, Peter noticed, which rather surprised him, given his former relationship with Lily. Sirius was grinning ear to ear.

"Congratulate me, Peter. I'm a godfather!"

Peter stopped dead. *Sirius? Sirius is the godfather. Oh, you must be joking....*

But he looked back and forth between Sirius and James and remembered how close the two of them were. *Well, Lily and I are close. Did anyone bother to ask her about her choice for godfather?*

"Well," Peter said, a catch in his throat. "Who's the godmother?" *If it's that witch Cecilia Ratkowski who's shagging Sirius, I may just spew,* he thought.

Lily looked a little embarrassed. "I wrote a letter to my sister last week, but I still haven't heard back from her. Mind you, she's only recently had a baby herself. And with Mum in hospital again, she's probably quite busy...."

Peter nodded; he'd forgotten that Lily had spoken of extending an olive branch to her Muggle sister. She wanted her to agree to be her son's godmother. Peter had never met Petunia Dursley; he'd glimpsed her briefly at the wedding, before she'd bolted. He thought she looked very uncomfortable and disagreeable.

"Never mind that. Harry doesn't need a godmother. In addition to Sirius for his godfather, he's got two honorary uncles! What more does he need?" James grinned.

Lily looked up at Peter, her face glowing. "Would you like to hold him, Peter?" she said softly.

Ha! on you, Sirius Black, Peter thought. *You may be the godfather, but she isn't asking you to hold her child, she's asking me.* Of course, he didn't know whether Sirius had held Harry before he'd returned, but he pushed this thought out of his mind as he stepped forward and gently lifted the baby from Lily's arms. She looked tenderly at her son, pressing her lips to his round little cheek. Peter held the tiny bundle carefully, trying to love him for Lily's sake. Unfortunately, little Harry Potter was the spitting image of his father, and Peter could not help but resent him. *It's too bad I can't give your name to Voldemort without implicating Lily,* he thought.

So he held the baby and smiled at Lily, and she looked up into the face of her dear friend and smiled back.

* * * * *

Friday, 31 October, 1980

"Oh, I cannot eat another bite," Bill Weasley groaned, putting his hand over his stomach. As usual, the Halloween Feast had been brilliant, all of the house tables groaning with the most unhealthy food possible and artfully carved jack o'lanterns floating overhead instead of candles, lending a wonderfully eerie feeling to the Great Hall. The enchanted ceiling was dark with clouds, although the rain that was falling out-of-doors was not duplicated in the hall. The lightening was duplicated, however; the entire ceiling of the hall lit up in an abrupt flash, just as the sky seen through the windows was illuminated. Mere seconds later, a rumble of thunder was heard as though the nearby Grampian Mountains were being picked up and moved by the gods.

Bill grinned at Juliet Hathaway, who was holding her fingers in her ears (the thunder was *very* loud). He gestured toward the ceiling with a chocolate frog in his hand (even though he'd said he couldn't eat another bite), saying, "Now *that's* what I call perfect Halloween weather."

She laughed, taking the chocolate frog from his hand and biting into it herself. "You know, I always thought I was weird because when I was small, my favorite holiday was Halloween and all of my favorite stories were about witches and magic. I reckon that wasn't so strange after all."

Across the table, Peregrin Booth and Rembert Leonard were reaching for some more sweets in a large bowl that never seemed to have any less in it, no matter how much was removed. "My granddad thought my mum might be a Squib until she was almost ready to come to Hogwarts," Booth said out of the left side of his mouth as he chewed some Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans on the right side. Suddenly he made a dreadful face. "Blimey! Bert! I think I've got a-a *dung*-flavored one!"

He spit out his mouthful into a napkin, making some nearby second-year girls scream, “Eeeew!” while his best friend rolled his eyes.

“Told you, Perry. You and those beans are a recipe for disaster. You have a talent for finding all of the vilest flavors. Have you *ever* eaten one of those that didn’t make you want to spew?”

“Stop saying words like that!” one of the screaming girls ordered him.

“Speaking of Squibs,” Leonard went on, as though the younger girls hadn’t said a word, “you know what I heard about Davies? About why he had to leave school?”

Bill and Juliet froze, looking at each other nervously. At just that moment, to make matters worse, Jack Richards appeared at Bill’s elbow, also looking replete with his Halloween repast.

“Hullo, you two,” he said to Bill and Juliet. “Mind if I join you for a bit?”

Bill and Juliet didn’t answer, but Juliet moved over so that Bill could sit closer to her, making some room for Jack on his other side. There was an awkward silence hanging over their part of the table.

“Like I was saying—” Leonard started speaking suddenly again; “I heard something. About why your fellow Hufflepuff was expelled, Richards,” he added, nodding at Jack.

Jack looked at Bill and Juliet, swallowing. Had someone else found out that they’d been helping Geoff with his Charms work, among other things? Bill wondered.

“What did you hear?” Bill asked Leonard, looking at him as levelly as he could, determined that he was not going to look away first. Leonard shrugged.

“Well, you know. Just that he was a Squib. Remember when he was a first year? How his name wasn’t on the list to be Sorted? And Dumbledore talked to the hat? I’ve heard that the board of governors isn’t happy; they’re looking into whether he should still be headmaster. They may demand surprise examinations of the magical ability of every student in the school,” he added ominously.

Bill couldn’t believe anyone would question Dumbledore’s fitness for his position based on one act of compassion, however misplaced it might have been. Geoff *could* have shown some magic eventually. Unfortunately, Bill thought, he didn’t show any magic before taking his O.W.L.s.

“Dumbledore gave him a chance. There’s nothing wrong with that,” a voice said just beyond Juliet. Bill leaned over to look at his brother’s face. Charlie was looking down at his plate, laden heavily with sweets and pumpkin pie. He didn’t appear to have eaten any of it. “We’re lucky to have Dumbledore here. This is one of the only safe places left in the wizarding world. If Craig had been here instead of at home, he wouldn’t be dead.”

Juliet turned from Bill and put her arm around Charlie, bringing his head to her shoulder. Charlie had been rather morose since word had come during the summer that his best friend, Craig Carmichael, had been killed by Voldemort himself, along with his parents. For some reason, Craig’s sister and younger brother had not been harmed, apart from being orphaned. “Someday they’ll get You-Know-Who,” Juliet said firmly to Charlie.

His head still on her shoulder, Charlie said, “It won’t bring Craig back.”

Bill grimaced. Almost no one in the school could claim to be completely untouched by the things Voldemort and the Death Eaters had been doing for ten years now. They’d lived with it for so long—most of their lives—that the idea that it might ever be different sounded like empty platitudes. “Someday” might as well have been a century in the future. It wouldn’t bring back their childhoods any more than it would bring back Craig Carmichael and his parents. Any more than it would bring back Orville Simpson, or Peggy, or Annie.

Bill had hoped that Charlie would get back to being his usual cheerful self when the new term had begun; during the summer he’d shown some signs of being a normal thirteen-year-old, practicing Quidditch in the orchard at home. Bill would hurl apples into the air and Charlie would snag each and every one of them before any of them dropped to the ground. When he was playing Quidditch, he looked happy again, Bill thought. Not that Bill had forgotten his sisters, or expected Charlie to; but they had to find a way to go on, to both respect their sisters’ memories and not have their lives be sacrificed to those memories. He’d let Juliet grow very close to him, and he’d come to trust her and rely upon her a great deal. She kept him from being maudlin, even if it was the summer holidays and she had to write letters to accomplish this. Bill and Charlie’s happy summer had evaporated, however, with the news about the Carmichaels.

“Why don’t we go up to the common room?” Bill suggested now. “It’s not that late, Jack; you come too.” Bill was also concerned about Jack, now that Geoff had been expelled. He wasn’t really close to any of the other boys in his year in Hufflepuff.

“Thanks. I think I will,” Jack said, looking grateful. One downside to the Hufflepuff loyalty, Bill had discovered, was that they were a bit cliquish. And as the friend of someone who’d been expelled for being a Squib—which everyone seemed to know about—Jack wasn’t exactly having to beat off new

friends with a stick.

Bill, Juliet, Charlie and Jack walked out of the Great Hall, and Bill found, to his annoyance, that Booth and Leonard were following them. Even more annoying was that Booth was speaking to him again.

"Oi, Bill, where's Wood, anyway? He didn't come down to the feast."

"Or, a better question would be, where are Wood *and* Boxwood?" Leonard said suggestively, putting an elbow in Booth's ribs. "J'ever noticed that *wood* is already *in* 'boxwood'?" he quipped. Bill had in fact heard these two make the same joke many times. The pair of them laughed conspiratorially, and Bill drew his lips into a line. He'd noticed that Alex and Mary Ann weren't at the Gryffindor table, but had very purposefully not mentioned it. If they were using this time to be alone in Gryffindor Tower, he didn't want others to be gossiping about it. He also didn't want to think about it too much himself, as he still hadn't gone that far with Juliet. He wasn't sure why he was holding back; he was just a bit apprehensive about it. Things would change between them. He liked everything the way it was right now. Change made him nervous; it wasn't always change for the better. In fact, in his limited experience, change *usually* wasn't for the better.

He didn't comment on what Booth and Leonard had said, and instead asked Charlie how Quidditch practice was going; he'd just started working with the rest of the team on Wednesday and Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings. It looked like Gryffindor had an excellent chance at the Quidditch Cup, with Charlie for a Seeker. Bill managed to keep the conversation on Quidditch all the way up to the portrait of the Fat Lady in the pink dress. She was leaning against the side of her frame; her cheeks were flushed, and Bill thought he saw an empty wineglass next to her feet, in the portrait. She must have had her friend Violet visiting her, for Halloween, Bill realized, and they'd had a bit too much to drink. Her eyelids drooped with weariness.

"Glumbumble," Bill said to the Fat Lady, as distinctly as he could.

"Mumble mumble to you to," she responded, yawning sleepily and opening the portrait hole to admit them all to the Gryffindor common room.

The large room was empty of people, but the fire was lit, casting a welcoming glow on the squashy red armchairs scattered about on the worn oriental carpets. As the storm was still raging outside, it seemed like an especially nice place to be on an autumn's evening. Charlie and Jack sat before the fire, where Charlie's chess set was waiting (in fact, some of his players were berating him for leaving them sitting about all evening with nothing to do). He and Jack started to play a game, chatting amicably with each other and the chess pieces. Juliet and Bill looked on; he sat in a large, comfortable chair with her draped across his lap, feeling very contented.

Upon entering the common room, Booth and Leonard crossed to the boys' stairs. Bill wasn't sorry to see them go. As he traced lazy circles on Juliet's leg and felt the warmth of her body against his, he was feeling very pleased with himself. Juliet had been trying for ages now to convince him that he didn't have to suffer for the rest of his life because of what had happened to his sisters, and he was coming round to her way of thinking bit by bit. He was looking at her neck now as she turned her head to watch Charlie and Jack's chess game (a yell had gone up from Charlie's players upon capturing Jack's knight), and, feeling mischievous, he reached out his tongue and gave her neck a little lick, enjoying the saltiness of her skin. She turned and smiled at him for a moment before leaning down and brushing her lips against his and slowly opening her mouth. Bill opened his own mouth, deepening the kiss, thinking that life probably didn't get much better than this, snogging your pretty girlfriend in an armchair by the fire, even with your brother and best friend nearby. Overall, he had to admit, life was good.

* * * * *

Mary Ann dried her hands on a towel and left the communal bathroom, fairly skipping back down the stairs to the common room, where she'd been reading instead of attending the Halloween Feast. She didn't mind, at least not much; Alex and Lowell were up in the sixth-year dormitory, having their alone' time, and she was helping it happen. She felt a little lonely sometimes, now that Alex had Lowell, and since Juliet and Bill were together so much, but she hadn't felt like falling back on Wallis as a best friend. The girl just got on her nerves in ways she couldn't even begin to describe, and all she ever wanted to talk about was how undeserving of Bill Juliet was. Mary Ann could barely abide sitting with her in Transfiguration and Charms. More than that and she'd have to put a temporary charm on her ears to avoid hearing Wallis's constant grating voice.

Voices. There were voices coming from the common room. Before she reached the bottom of the stairs Mary Ann could hear them, and she froze. She hadn't realized that students were starting to come upstairs from the feast already. What if they went up to the dormitory and found Alex and Lowell together? Her heart leapt into her throat. *I just went to the loo for a minute*, she said in her

head, as though rehearsing what she'd say to Alex. *Oh, Lord*, she thought now, her heart beating very fast. *I'm the worst friend ever.*

She ran down the rest of the girls' stairs and found Bill and Juliet in a chair near the fire, kissing, and Bill's brother Charlie playing chess with Jack Richards, from Hufflepuff. No one else was in the room, and she heaved a sigh of relief. Bill and Juliet looked up at her, reddening a little, and she smiled at them, trying to get her breath, but not wanting to look like she'd been running.

"Don't let me stop you. Carry on," she said with a grin. She bent down to pick up her book, which she'd left on the floor next to the chair where Bill and Juliet were now. They didn't seem to have noticed it.

Juliet grinned back at her. "For someone who missed the feast to be up here with your boyfriend, you're, well—fully dressed and all. Why were you coming downstairs? Where's Alex?"

Oh, Lord, she thought again. *How are we going to do this now? There's no way to get Lowell back to Ravenclaw without his being seen....*

"Well, erm," she stammered. And then Jack had to go and turn to look at her, curious about what was going on. Her stomach flopped when she met Jack's grey-blue eyes, the light from the fire limning him from behind. She felt like she couldn't breathe. *Oh, Jack*, she thought, wishing for the hundredth time that she wasn't committed to pretending to be Alex's girlfriend, feeling the pang of loneliness again. And why was Jack looking at her that way? As if he hated her? And yet, also, as if he—didn't.

She hadn't yet been able to formulate a good lie when a yell came from the boys' stairs. She felt faint; oh, this was worse than she thought. "Someone else is up here?" she squeaked, looking nervously at the doorway leading to the boys' stairs. She bolted for those stairs now, the others close behind her. When the five of them burst into the sixth-year dormitory, they found Booth and Leonard standing in a corner near the door, dumb with shock, while Alex Wood and Lowell Faulkner scrambled about awkwardly, putting their clothes on. Faulkner already had his trousers fastened and was pulling on a jumper, while Alex was still stumbling about, just one leg in his trousers and no shirt on.

Bill grabbed his brother Charlie and put his hand over his eyes. Charlie fought him off. "I'm not a baby, Bill! I'm sodding thirteen, you twit!" Bill backed off, reddening.

"Bloody hell!" Alex cried. "What are the girls doing here?" he shouted irritably. Mary Ann and Juliet obligingly turned around to let them finish dressing.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Mary Ann said, facing the door, tears flowing down her face now. "I—I just went to the loo—" She felt awful, and incompetent, and hoped he wouldn't hate her now.

Alex didn't answer her, but she felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up in surprise, seeing Jack looking back down at her with understanding in his gaze. And something else.

"It isn't your fault," he said to her softly. "You've been a good friend."

Somehow, she didn't want him to take his hand from her shoulder, didn't want him to move away from her. At the same time that she felt she'd as good as betrayed Alex, she also felt a guilty elation move through her. *Jack knows I'm not taken now.* She swallowed, looking up at Jack gratefully, with a small smile.

In the end, even Booth and Leonard were all right with it, although they persisted in asking a lot of stupid questions, including wanting to know whether Alex had ever looked at them in the shower. Alex burst out laughing, which was perhaps not the wisest reaction, but he calmed down again long enough to tell them that he wasn't the least bit interested in them; he had a boyfriend.

They sat in the dorm for a while, talking, and Mary Ann saw Alex smile at her and nod; he didn't blame her. Now that it was all out in the open, his friends—and even those he wouldn't have counted as his friends, Booth and Leonard—were more *normal* about the whole thing than he could ever have imagined. She was happy for him, and for Lowell, who seemed ill at ease still, as though waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I have to say—Ravenclaws probably wouldn't have reacted like you lot. Which reminds me—this doesn't leave this room, understand?" Lowell glared around at them all.

Bill laughed. "Aye, aye, Mr. Head Boy, sir. No problem. We know how to keep secrets around here."

Faulkner looked meaningfully at Booth and Leonard. Perhaps Alex had told him something about them. "Are we *all* understood?"

They looked a little cowed, but not much. Mary Ann wondered if they would be a problem. But they both nodded and said that they understood.

When Faulkner decided it was time for him to go, they all went downstairs with him, except for Booth and Leonard. There were other students in the common room by this time, but when he passed through, even though he was a Ravenclaw, the fact that his Head Boy badge was gleaming

on his chest seemed to be enough for the other Gryffindors to stifle any questions; there had to be a good reason for him to be in Gryffindor Tower, after all, and for a group of nine people—including two girls—to be coming down the boys' stairs.

Jack was going to leave, too, as it was late and he needed to return to Hufflepuff House. He turned to go, then stopped and gazed at Mary Ann, looking very serious as he spoke softly to her. "So. I can assume that all of this means that Alex is not your boyfriend?"

She gave Jack a small smile. "Yes. You can assume that."

His face didn't change expression. "Good," was his only response, before he turned and followed the Head Boy out of the portrait hole.

Bill, Charlie, Juliet, Mary Ann and Alex stood together near the exit, and Mary Ann saw Bill surveying Alex now; Alex seemed more relaxed than he'd ever been before, but also more vulnerable, more naked. He had a secret, and now more people knew it.

Bill seemed to be thinking the same thing. He poked his friend in the chest and said, "You weren't very bright tonight, you know. What you really need is some kind of early warning system, some way of knowing when someone might be about to sneak up on you, even if *they* don't know that's what they're going to do. No offense, Mary Ann. You did all you could. But a person *does* have to go to the loo at times. Something is needed that does not *have* human, well-needs."

"You mean something that you and Juliet can use, too," Charlie said, rolling his eyes, poking Bill in the arm. Bill poked him back. Alex, grinning, also poked Bill. It seemed that the boys were going to escalate this, and Mary Ann prepared to leave the vicinity, to allow them to behave like small children all on their own, but something in Bill's expression made her stop.

"Yes," he said slowly, stopping his finger in mid-poke (Alex again). "That's true. It could be useful for all of us...." Mary Ann could see the wheels turning in his head; Bill Weasley was up to something, but she didn't know what. A secret smile crept across Bill's face as he saw that the three of them were mystified about his meaning.

"Tomorrow I'm going to write a letter to Sirius Black."

The other four frowned at each other; it was becoming less and less clear. But it was Alex who spoke up, as it was largely his protection that was being discussed. "All right, I give up; why on earth are you going to write to Sirius Black?"

Bill smiled round at them, obviously still not quite ready to reveal all.

"I'm going to write to him about—a map."

* * * * *

Saturday, 14 February, 1981

Bill stared up at the underside of his bed canopy, grinning. Juliet rolled over on him, kissing his chest, looking quite pleased with herself, making him shiver at the sensation of her body pressed against his with no clothing between them anywhere. He ran his finger down the side of her face, gazing lovingly at her and wondering now what he was afraid of, why he had to be so superstitious about being *happy*. She looked beautiful and unguarded at this moment, and though her hair was all over the place, she looked disheveled in the best possible way. He felt like he could never grow tired of looking at her.

"You look happy," she whispered, before resuming kissing his chest. He pulled her up to his face, gazing at her the entire time.

"You'll never guess why...."

She rolled her eyes at the ceiling and bit her lip. "Um...getting twelve O.W.L.s?"

He grinned at the game she was playing. "Try again."

She made a great show of thinking very hard. "Becoming a prefect?"

He shook his head vigorously, barely suppressing his laughter.

"Could it be—finally shagging your girlfriend and managing to do it absolutely brilliantly?"

He tried to look thoughtful. "No, actually, I think it was that O.W.L. thing after all..."

She grinned down at him while he put his hands on the back of her head and guided her mouth to his. He opened his mouth under hers with a groan, almost unable to believe that this was happening, and that it was so perfect. She was supporting herself with her arms on either side of him now, and he slowly moved his hands down her back, lightly caressing, then around to her front, gently rubbing his thumbs over the still-hard tips of her breasts so that she made a wonderful noise in the back of her throat.

A sudden pounding on the dormitory door made both of them practically jump out of their skins.

"Oi in there!" came Alex's voice on the other side of the door. "Booth and Leonard are making noises about needing to get things from their trunks. Can I hex them? Please?"

Bill laughed. "No, you cannot hex them," he called. "Give us a minute; we'll be right out." Alex had been acting as their sentinel; Bill knew that he could trust him not to try to hear what they were doing and saying. It was quite safe to say that what was going on in the room between Bill and Juliet was something in which Alex had absolutely zero interest.

Juliet pouted and put her head down on his chest again. "Oh, poo. We're being kicked out."

He smiled at her. "I'm afraid so, love."

When they emerged from the dormitory fully dressed, Booth and Leonard were waiting on the landing; they pushed past Bill and Juliet while Bill shook his head and rolled his eyes. The three of them went down to the common room and sat on a table near the windows, their feet on the chairs. There was a glistening new snowfall outdoors and many students were on the lake, skating.

"So," Bill asked Alex, taking Juliet's hand in his. "How's it going?"

"So far so good. From the window up on the landing I could only see a bit of the lake, though. He's fallen twice. Not as experienced. After that, they kept up a lot of contact, I'm guessing to keep him from falling again. They looked very cozy the last time I checked." He nodded toward the window and Bill and Juliet walked over to the glass, looking down on the frozen lake, easily spotting Jack and Mary Ann in their Hufflepuff and Gryffindor scarves, respectively. Jack's right arm was around Mary Ann's shoulder and her body was close against his, their cloaks billowing out behind them as they glided across the ice with the other students out enjoying some skating before the evening meal. Since the sun set so early at this time of year, Dumbledore had set up wonderful magical lanterns which were hung on posts around the perimeter of the lake. In honor of the day, the lights being cast upon the ice were in the form of pinkish hearts.

Bill held Juliet close to him as they watched the other students; he was more content than he ever could have imagined. Alex came to stand near them, looking a little wistfully at the scene. Bill grimaced.

"So-when are you and Faulkner going to get to celebrate Valentine's?"

Alex shrugged. "Probably not for a day or two. I don't dare sneak out tonight; you know how Filch is on Valentine's Day. He'll be patrolling all night to catch people from different houses trying to meet up with each other. And Mrs. Norris'll be letting him know whenever she finds anyone, too." Alex sighed. "Too bad nothing came of writing to Black. What was that map supposed to be for, anyway?"

Bill shook his head. "It was bloody brilliant. A map of the entire castle and grounds, plus it showed *where people were*. Where they are, rather. You know what I mean. They activated it by saying, *I solemnly swear that I am up to no good*. And when they were done, they said, *Mischief managed*. They must have worked for years on that map--"

"-and gone through every book in the Restricted Section to work out how to do it," Juliet said, raising her eyebrows. "What did Sirius Black say when you wrote to him?"

"Well, he took a long time to get back to me, and when he did, it wasn't good. He said he doesn't have it anymore, that Filch confiscated it during his seventh year. He was trying to get back to Gryffindor Tower after meeting up with a girl, and Filch trapped him in a corridor near the library. It wasn't like he didn't know he was coming, either. But he couldn't do anything about it; there was no way out. So he deactivated the map and when Filch caught him, he took the parchment, along with everything else he had on him. It's either in Filch's office still or it's been discarded long ago with the rubbish. When it's deactivated it just looks like blank parchment. It's not obviously anything interesting."

"Maybe Filch used it to write a letter to his mum," Alex said, laughing. "*Dear Mum, Still terrorizing the students and managing to keep all women far away from me except for Mrs. Norris, who coughed up a hairball today which turned out to be Professor McGonagall's hat. She's the light of my life after you. Your loving son, Argus.*"

They laughed along with him. "Speaking of which," Juliet said suddenly, "how's your mum, Bill? Didn't you just get another letter from her this morning?"

"Yeah. To me and Charlie both, really. Just more suggestions for girls' names for the new baby." He sighed. "Honestly, I couldn't believe it when Mum and Dad said they were having *another* go at producing a girl. She was so disappointed when Ron was born. He's not a bad little bloke, either. Fred and George drive me round the bend. Of course, when he's actually walking and talking and all I could change my opinion. I don't see how she's going to avoid going barmy herself, having two kids inside of a year. And she has Percy and the twins to handle already. When we were home at Christmas it was a madhouse."

Juliet shook her head. "I'm not sure I even want to have children at all." She shuddered and

turned to look out the window again.

Bill didn't remove his arm from around her but he looked at her with concern. "Wh-why would you say that?"

She didn't look at him. "The world's already crowded enough. And look at everything going on, with You-Know-Who wreaking havoc and entire families being killed, like Charlie's friend Craig. And your own sis—" She stopped, biting her lip.

Bill swallowed; there was a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Craig's whole family wasn't killed. His little brother and sister weren't..." he said softly.

She threw up her hands. "Exactly! Those poor kids are orphans now. I've started to develop a pretty good idea of what I want to do when I finish school, and creating orphans isn't one of them."

"Just because you have kids doesn't mean you're going to die while they're still little," Bill argued, throwing up his own hands. Alex stepped away from the pair of them.

"Um," he said awkwardly. "I think I might see whether I can get some skating in before dinner. See you in the Great Hall," he added, before practically bolting from the room.

"And what do you mean you've got a pretty good idea what you want to do? For a living? What's the idea?" Bill wanted to know. From the way Alex had fled, he knew that their row was getting into very tricky territory, but it was like a runaway train and Bill had no idea how to stop it.

Juliet swallowed. "I want to be like Lily Evans," she said stoutly. "I want to be an Auror."

"Lily *Potter*," Bill corrected her. "And the last time I heard, in addition to being married, she has a kid. Sirius Black mentioned it in his letter."

"Well, that's a way in which I *don't* want to be like her, I reckon. If anything happens to her, what's that poor little baby going to do? Do you honestly think his Quidditch-obsessed dad is going to know the first thing about taking care of him?"

Bill frowned. "*What* did you just say? Are you mad? What, do you think a dad doesn't change nappies and make meals and other things? Because I can tell you, my dad doesn't let my mum do everything. She couldn't, it's too much. He's right in there every day, and that's after working in his office all day or going on raids all night."

"And didn't you tell me that you were afraid he'd go to *prison* a couple of years ago? What if he had done? Where would you and your mum and brothers be then? Listen, it's not that I have something against having kids in general, but I do think that if you feel attracted toward having a dangerous profession, you have an obligation not to have kids because if anything happens to you—"

"The Carmichaels didn't have dangerous' jobs!" he growled at her. "They ran the post owl office in Diagon Alley! They minded their own business, day after day, and no one knows why they were killed!" Bill's throat felt tight.

Juliet looked up at him, her eyes shining. "Bill, I didn't mean to get into a row with you, today of all days." She slid her arms up around his neck and pressed her body to his; he remembered being with her less than an hour before, the feel of her soft skin, the noises that she was making for which *he* was responsible, the pride he'd felt as a result. Now he had to force himself to put his arms around her, when what he really wanted to do was push her away.

"It's just that—we're only seventeen. We have years to think about—certain things—" he stuttered. She nodded.

"Yeah. Years."

But as they held each other and looked out the window at their friends skating on the lake, Bill felt that a change had taken place between them, and not for the better. He held her tightly and felt her heart beat against his, but somehow, he felt now that she was a stranger, a stranger with whom he'd shared his bed.

He felt suddenly that he'd never really known her at all.

* * * * *

Severus' heart was beating a mile a minute. He leaned against the wall of the Leaky Cauldron, catching his breath, while Barty hailed a Muggle taxi. When one stopped, Barty opened the door and motioned for Severus to enter the car first. He did, reluctantly. When the driver started the car in motion again and asked them where they were going, Barty put his wand to the back of the man's fleshy neck and said, "*Just drive, if you know what's good for you.*" He kept his wand there, and the terrified man did just that.

Severus whispered to him, "*Why are we doing this instead of Apparating?*"

Barty Crouch grinned at him. "I want to have some fun, that's why." He surveyed Severus critically. "You know, for the bloke who recruited me, you're no bloody fun at all, sometimes."

Severus frowned as the driver wove through the London traffic, beads of sweat breaking out on

his forehead. *Pointless Muggle-baiting*, he thought. He had a general idea of what was coming.

At least it was better than committing murder.

He still had nightmares—as he imagined he would for the rest of his life—from the first thing they were told to do after receiving their Dark Marks the previous summer. Another Death Eater who was investigating a prophecy concerning the Dark Lord had learned that the people most likely to be involved in the prophecy, who could put the Dark Lord at risk if they were permitted to live, were three people in the same family. The family was named Carmichael, and the parents operated the Diagon Alley post office. They had three children, and the eldest son was supposed to be the third person in the prophecy.

Severus and Barty had been dispatched to the Carmichael home, just outside Edinburgh. The Dark Lord hadn't wanted them simply eliminated, though; he'd already sent Lucius Malfoy to speak to them about officially declaring their allegiance to Voldemort. He was cautious about just eliminating people who were supposed to be a danger to him. Whenever possible, he wanted to have control over his enemies. The Carmichaels had not responded well, and in fact, they seemed to be packing to move when Severus and Barty showed up at their door; their front hall was full of boxes.

Barty had been gleeful when they'd fought back; Severus had received a bad burn on his arm from Mr. Carmichael, after which Barty successfully struck him with the Killing Curse.

Severus watched the green light speed toward the man; he was of much the same age Severus' father had been when he was killed. As he laid there on the worn carpet in his own entrance hall, he looked completely and utterly surprised. Mrs. Carmichael was at the top of the stairs in her dressing gown, aiming hexes down at them. She caught Barty on the leg when his back was turned, while he was leaning over her husband, admiring his own handiwork. Barty turned to look up at her, his face dark with fury.

"Attacking someone whose back is turned is playing dirty," he snarled at her; Severus saw her recoil in the face of his anger. He aimed a curse at her, but she fled down the upstairs corridor. The two of them were up the stairs in a trice, following her. Severus felt the blood pumping through his body as he followed the younger boy; Barty clearly got a rush from this, a tremendous feeling of power. Severus, for his part, had bile rising in his throat, but he was trying not to let on.

They found the mother in her daughter's bedroom, picking up the little girl, who was still limp with sleep.

"Mummy?" she mumbled.

Severus froze. *Mummy*. The child only had a mother now. If they killed her mother, she'd be an orphan. He knew what it was to be an orphan. He couldn't do this, he just couldn't. Voldemort would have to kill him. He couldn't possibly be a Death Eater. Not if he had to turn children into orphans.

But before he knew what was happening, Barty was pointing his wand at the mother and crying, "*Avada kedavra!*"

Severus gasped as the green light struck the mother and she collapsed slowly, her daughter slipping from her grasp.

"*Munmeeee!*" The child's cry seemed to go on forever, and Severus couldn't believe it had happened, that the woman was lying there, dead, with her little girl staring down into her mother's open eyes and screaming.

Suddenly, a line of crackling red light hit the wall over their heads and they turned to see the two boys in the doorway of their sister's room. They hadn't donned dressing gowns and looked like their pajamas were rather old and out-at-elbow. The taller boy seemed to be around thirteen; he pushed his younger brother behind him with his left hand, still holding his wand in his right.

Severus felt he was in a dream as he watched Barty turn slowly, fury blossoming on his face again. "Did you just *attack me from behind?*" he demanded in a cold voice. "Well, it's not as though I don't know where you get it from. I had to teach your mother a lesson about that. I think she understands not to do that now," he added, gesturing toward the mother's body with his head. To his credit, the eldest boy lifted his chin and pointed his wand at Barty.

"I'm not afraid of you. I wasn't attacking. I was getting your attention," he said. Unfortunately, his voice hadn't finished deepening, and his timbre was still rather high. His voice cracked more than once when he spoke, and Severus thought, *He looks familiar...*

The boy seemed to be having the same thought. "Hey, I know you," he said to Barty. "You were a prefect in Ravenclaw, right? You took house points from me once. And isn't your dad—?"

"*Avada kedavra!*" Barty yelled again, with no warning. Severus fought the urge to cover his eyes as the curse hit home, and the brave boy who'd stood up to his killer crumpled in a heap, his younger brother staring in disbelief.

Barty Crouch looked up at the brother, a wicked smile twisting his lips. "I seem to remember

that your brother was a Gryffindor. Brave souls, those Gryffindors. Your brother died well." The younger boy was crying, steady streams of tears rolling down his face. The girl had screamed when her brother was murdered; she was still crouched by her mother's body, crying convulsively. "You and your sister are too young to have been Sorted. We'll do our own Sorting right here. If you die bravely, we can assume you might have been a Gryffindor, like your brother...."

Severus could take no more. "I'll take care of them," he said gruffly, stepping forward between Barty and the boy, his wand drawn. He nodded at Crouch. "You go. You can take full credit; you did the real work. I'll be along directly."

"What about the Mark?" Barty asked him with a raised eyebrow.

"I know how to conjure it. It will all be taken care of."

Barty nodded at him and with a wave of his wand, Disapparated.

Severus heaved a sigh of relief, but then he saw the faces of the girl and boy, regarding him fearfully. He was a Death Eater, his comrade had murdered their parents and elder brother, and they looked as if they fully expected him to finish them off now.

He swallowed as he regarded them. "Move over there," he directed the girl, motioning with his wand for her to stand with her brother. She rose shakily, and Severus could not help but think that the Sorting was indeed done; both Gryffindors, through and through. They held hands, looking at him with lifted chins as they waited for their deaths.

"It's better this way," he said softly before pointing his wand at each of them. "*Obliviate! Obliviate!*" As the memory charms hit them, they fell backwards. He closed his eyes to concentrate and waved his wand, Apparating to the garden outside the house. He didn't remember his own parents' deaths, not having been present; he didn't think it was a memory he *would* want. And this way, they wouldn't remember his face, nor Barty's. He thought of the two children, having no one but each other now as he pointed his wand skyward and cried out another incantation, his thoughts as dark as they'd ever been as he remembered the grief and anguish he'd first felt upon learning of being orphaned by Aurors killing his parents.

"*Morsmordre!*"

The light shot from his wand and a ghostly green shape flew up over the house: an enormous skull with a snake for a tongue, creeping slowly out of the mouth. He stared up at it, shivering despite the warm summer evening. He'd said he would take care of the younger children, and he had; he had prevented them from being able to identify the Death Eaters who had invaded their home. He hadn't said what he'd meant by take care of them.'

When he arrived at Barty's parents' house, where they'd agreed to meet, he found Barty sitting outside in the garden, idly using his wand to make bubbles float across the fish pond that ornamented the center of the rather formal landscaping. He reclined on a patch of lawn as he did this, looking rather pleased with himself. Severus felt like going off to retch, but he couldn't afford to. He threw himself down on the grass next to his partner in crime and stared up at the indifferent stars, hoping he could maintain his composure at least a little longer.

"So. Is it all done?"

Severus grunted in the affirmative. "Quite a nice Dark Mark I conjured as well, if I do say so myself."

"Well then," Barty said after a while. "We should go report."

Severus jerked his head up, having been watching London speed by the windows of the taxi while Barty still held his wand to the driver's neck. Somehow his memory of what Barty had said on the night the Carmichaels were killed and what he was saying in the taxi now had merged, confusing Severus.

"What did you say?"

"I said that after we have some fun with this bloke, we should go report."

Severus swallowed. "What kind of fun?" he asked nervously. The reason why they'd been bolting out of the Leaky Cauldron was that they had just destroyed the Diagon Alley business of a bookbinder who had been working on a book about their Master. Such a thing couldn't be allowed, of course. Severus was glad that they'd done it at night, on a Saturday, and that no people had been injured. The man would no longer have a way to earn his living, of course, but surely that was better than being dead? Severus had watched Barty fire the Dark Mark over the ruined building and the pair of them had Apparated to a room they'd already paid for above the bar at the Leaky Cauldron. They crept down the stairs and out the door leading to Muggle London when the pub patrons had all scrambled for the back of the pub, rushing to see what the noise was about. No one noticed them rush out the door. Barty was chuckling as they went.

"Why can't we just go report now?" Severus asked dryly, wishing Barty didn't enjoy mayhem quite so much.

"Because we're bloody having fun, that's why!" Barty informed him, putting his wand under Severus' rather large nose, looking at him darkly. The moment the driver felt the wand leave his neck, he abruptly turned to the right and caused the car to drive up onto the pavement part of the way, so that only the two left wheels were still in the street. "Bloody hell!" Barty cried as the driver opened his door and sprang out of the taxi, starting to run away from them as fast as he could. There was one man nearby, sitting in a doorway, looking as though he was very drunk and would be spending the night there. Impatient at having lost his quarry, Barty pointed his wand at him, outraged. Severus turned his head, unprepared for the vehemence of Barty's reaction, and a second later he saw not the filthy, drunken man who'd been before them but a dirty-looking beige ferret. Barty smirked.

"Go on then, you," he said to the ferret. "See how long you last with the feral cats of London on your trail." The animal looked up at the two of them for only a split second before skittering off as quickly as it could. Severus crossed his arms and glared at Barty.

"When you're *quite* done behaving like a twelve-year-old..."

"A twelve-year-old couldn't do that sort of Transfiguration, Sev. I'm rather fond of that one. And people like ferrets; maybe a little boy will make him his pet. Some ferret-loving lad could set him up in a nice cage and feed him table scraps. A better life than the one he *was* having, surely." Barty looked at him suspiciously. "You're not being protective of *Muggles*, are you Sev?"

Severus Snape sneered at him. "Of course not. You know me better than that."

Barty looked shrewdly at him. "Yeah, I thought I did. Then it turned out that you memory charmed those kids instead of cursing them properly."

Severus was feeling very irritated. "That was last summer! Are you still going on about that? First, they weren't Muggles. Second, I said I'd take care of them. That's what I meant. So they couldn't identify us. We did exactly what we were sent to do—eliminate the parents and elder son. The Dark Lord expects his orders to be followed to the letter. I had no desire to have him berate me for overstepping. After all—he didn't fault us for the younger children remaining alive, did he? Trust me, if he felt we'd made a mistake or hadn't followed his orders precisely, we'd have known."

He in fact hadn't known this when he'd decided to put the memory charms on the children, but after the fact, he'd had a private audience with Voldemort, which he didn't feel like divulging to Barty Crouch. Severus had thought he was going to be tortured, or worse, killed, for failing to put the Killing Curse on the younger Carmichael children, but instead Voldemort had commended him upon carrying out his orders exactly as he'd given them.

"I had not thought about whether to spare the others," he acknowledged in his strangely-hypnotic voice, gesturing carelessly toward invisible children, tossing invisible curses their way. "But I do rather like the idea of a sundered family. It is far more effective than simply getting rid of all of them; that breeds forgetfulness. The whole lot of them could simply be put out of everyone's minds if they had all been killed. This way, with survivors, that is not possible. They are constant reminders to everyone around them. And even though the children do not remember everything, they *do* know what happened. They know that I wanted their parents and brother dead and so it was done. They know to *fear* me, to fear to say my very name, lest it summon me." He chuckled; it was an awful sound. "People used to think that about the devil. And they thought they were so clever. 'Well, we shall call him Old Nick, he shall never know who we mean.'" More eerie laughter. "And now I am 'You-Know-Who.' And 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.'" He grinned at Severus, a ghastly effect. "You have helped to maintain that mystique, Snape. You are a good and loyal servant." He paused, surveying Severus closely. "Unfortunately, I had a dream that that was the wrong family." He shrugged. "I shall have Wormtail work harder to determine who the members of the Triangle are. You have served me well. You may go."

Severus had Disapparated back to his uncle's flat that night, first collapsing onto his bed, then crawling to the bathroom to spew into the toilet.

The wrong family.

His stomach had been roiling inside him and then it finally happened, the release, and he was depositing everything he'd eaten that day into the toilet.

The wrong family.

He couldn't believe this was happening. He was an accomplice to murder, and it wasn't even the right family! He had continued to retch and barely noticed when his uncle appeared in the doorway, looking disgusted with him.

"Told ye before, Saiverus. Ef ye can't hold yer licker, ye shouldnae even try." His uncle had left, shaking his head in disgust. Severus had let him assume that he'd been out drinking. If there was ever a question of where he'd been, he'd have something of an alibi. The previous summer, he had let his uncle think he was out drinking quite a lot. Sometimes he actually had gone drinking after

doing his Death-Eaterly duties. It helped to take the edge off the guilt—for a little while.

But he didn't think he would go to get a drink this evening; all they had done this time was to destroy the bookbinder's and turn a homeless drunk into a ferret. He and Barty watched the small animal disappear, running swiftly away from them. Severus turned to Barty. "I'm tired. I made my uncle think I went to bed hours ago. I need to Apparate back to my bedroom, so he doesn't suspect I've left the flat. I'll see you in a few days."

Barty nodded. "Good work tonight, Sev," he said with a grin. He slapped Severus on the back. "Get some rest; you've earned it."

With a *pop!* he Disapparated. Severus looked around cautiously, then climbed back into the taxi, to Disapparate from there. When he arrived in his small bedroom in his uncle's flat, he felt emotionally drained and yet too restless to sleep. He laid on top of the covers, fully clothed still, staring at the dark ceiling, wondering how on earth he could go on like this. How much longer would he be able to avoid really hurting or even killing someone? So far he'd managed to please Voldemort, but for how much longer would that be true?

As he had for more than six months, he saw again the faces of the Carmichael children, unflinching, in the moment before his memory charm hit them, when they were most likely expecting the Killing Curse. They had shown bravery beyond their years. Why couldn't he be like them and stand up to Barty, stand up to Voldemort?

Why? Because he'd be dead in a split second, that's why.

Voldemort had spoken of who was in the Triangle.' Severus didn't understand, but it seemed to have something to do with the prophecy he was so concerned about. For some reason the name 'Wormtail' was familiar to him, but he couldn't say why. He did know that whoever he was, he hated this Wormtail with a passion. Was he just incompetent, or was he having the wrong people targeted on purpose? Was he using the Dark Lord to carry out his own personal vendetta? Severus wasn't sure whether or not he hoped the real people in the Triangle would be found and killed, to put an end to it. At the very least, no more people would be killed mistakenly.

Whoever you are, you lot in this Triangle, he thought, I hope you bloody well take care of Voldemort soon. Before I'm sent to take care of you.

— CHAPTER SIXTEEN —

Redemption

Tuesday, 7 April, 1981

They crept round the edge of the Forbidden Forest, hoping that Hagrid's oversized boarhound, Fang, wouldn't hear or smell them. Hand in hand, they found the path they had used before, stepping lightly over gnarled tree roots and avoiding snapping twigs. The forest smelled of spring, small white flowers blooming even in the deep shadows beneath the canopy of the trees, while the grass in a large circular clearing they favored was positively bursting with wildflowers, spreading to the edge of the sun's reach like a carpet. They placed one of their blankets on the ground in the very center of the clearing, then spread another on top, under which they crept to remove their clothes, should any prying eyes be nearby.

Afterward, he lay on his back, staring up at the sky, the top blanket making him feel rather warm after his exertion, especially as it was an unseasonably warm day. A languorous peace fell over him and he ran his hand up her back, the sleek skin like silk under his fingers, urging her face down to meet his again. Her lips brushed against his and she opened her mouth, her bare breasts tickling agonizingly across his chest as he parted his lips and sank his fingers into her fine blonde hair.

She broke the kiss slowly, then put her elbow on his hipbone, supporting her head on her hand casually. She regarded him with some amusement in her icy blue eyes, tracing the red hair around his nipples with a thin, dexterous finger; he traced his own fingers down her throat to her chest, enjoying her quick intake of breath and giving her a sly lopsided smile. They didn't talk much, generally, at these times. They didn't talk much at all, and that was fine with him.

But suddenly, her eyes opened wide and Roxanne Maine-Thorpe's mouth dropped open as she stared over his head; normally this was a sight he quite liked, but then he heard slow, steady thudding footsteps behind him; someone had entered the clearing. He pulled himself up abruptly, turning to find a familiar face staring back at him.

"Hello, Bill Weasley. I sensed that you were here, but I see that you are busy procreating, so I will leave you....after I wish you my hearty congratulations...."

Bill pulled up the blanket on which he was sitting so that Roxanne was covered, and he pulled the top blanket onto his own lap. "Um, hello," he said to the Centaur. "We—we're not procreating, so no c-congratulations are n-necessary," he stuttered.

"Oh? I thought you were," the Centaur responded placidly. "I saw quite plainly." Roxanne's face lost all color; Bill didn't feel this was the time to go into Prophylaxis Potion and explain the difference between procreating and what *they'd* done.

"Well, technically, yes, but also technically, no," he said, realizing that he must sound mad; he was also trying not to think about the Centaur watching them together. "Anyway—"

"I am sorry. I did not mean to intrude. I will simply offer my congratulations and leave. Congratulations." Firenze gave a small bow of his head, turned, and began to walk out of the clearing, his gait slow and stately.

"I *said* there was no reason to congratulate anyone," Bill said irritably as the Centaur left. He was finding Firenze no easier to deal with now than when he was younger. The Centaur turned around. He raised one eyebrow and looked at Bill knowingly.

"I am not congratulating you because you have begotten a child. I am congratulating you because you have a new sister. We have all seen it in the stars," he said, looking up at the clear sky. "Mars was very bright last night, especially half-way between the darkest hour and the dawn...."

Bill's jaw dropped. "You know for sure that I have a new sister?" That would be brilliant, he thought. His mum would be thrilled!

"Of course," Firenze replied calmly. Bill frowned.

"Do you—do you tell everyone at the school when their mum has had a baby?" he asked, confused. Firenze was still perfectly unruffled. "Of course not, Bill Weasley." That was all.

Bill watched him turn and walk back into the forest without a by-your-leave, and it was a matter of just a few moments before he was gone from sight. Bill stared at where he'd been until all he could see were the still-vibrating branches that had been pushed out of his way. Bill looked furtively at Roxanne; he could tell she was bursting to ask questions—he rather had the impression that she'd never seen a Centaur in person before—but this wasn't their pattern, and she held herself in check. No longer caring who else might see him, he stood and dressed quickly, urging Roxanne to do the same. He'd learned that she was very skilled at all aspects of clandestine trysts—beginnings, middles and ends. They were soon creeping out of the forest again.

Neither one of them fancied anyone in Gryffindor or Slytherin finding out that they'd been sleeping together; they kissed briefly and went in opposite directions when they neared the lakeshore; Bill returned to the castle by the western shore, skirting the greenhouses, while he saw a distant blonde figure at the edge of the eastern shore. He had the shorter route, so he reached the oaken castle doors first, pushing them open hurriedly and running inside, trying to work out where Charlie was most likely to be so he could also hear the good news. Roxanne was already a distant—albeit pleasant—memory.

He needn't have worried about finding his brother; he had no sooner entered the castle than Charlie came hurtling down the marble stairs, stopping short when he saw Bill. "There you are!" Charlie cried, grinning. He frowned only for a moment at the blankets his brother was carrying, then looked up at Bill's face, refusing to be distracted.

"Good news!" Charlie said, waving an envelope. "Mum wrote to say that she had the baby."

Bill nodded. "Yeah, I know. I was just coming to find you."

Charlie stopped. "How'd you know? Professor McGonagall just gave me the letter from Mum; she didn't want to send it to just one of us or the other, so she sent Errol to *her*. I reckon Mum was knackered after all that or she would have told us sooner, and you know how Dad is, plus he was probably busy taking care of Percy, Ron and the twins."

Bill frowned. "Tell us sooner? Sooner than within twenty-four hours?"

Now Charlie was frowning at him. "What are you talking about? The baby's six days old now."

Bill took the letter from Charlie and read, in his mother's handwriting, that his sister had been born on the first of April at three o'clock in the morning. "Then why—?" he started to say, but on seeing the expression on his brother's face, stopped dead.

"Why what?"

"Erm," Bill hedged, not wanting to tell his brother that he'd been in the Forbidden Forest. He'd probably want to know why. The question rattled around his head though, it wouldn't be denied. *Why did the Centaur behave as though our sister had just been born?*

"Says they named her Virginia but are already calling her Ginny," Charlie went on. "Typical. I reckon they have to give us nicknames so we know when we've stepped out of line. I don't think I've ever been called Charles' or heard you called William,' except when we're in trouble."

"Right, right," Bill mumbled, staring at the letter. The truly queer thing about his mother's letter is that she really *did* sound as though she'd just had the baby. Had she written the note and forgotten to send it off with the owl for almost a week? But no; *07.04.81* was in the upper corner. She'd written it on the seventh of April. *Today*.

Charlie grinned at him. "Isn't this great? Another girl! Maybe Mum will cheer up now. She'll have little Ginny to fuss over."

Bill nodded, still trying to work out what was bothering him. "Hmm. Yeah, great," he said, distracted. He was jolted out of his thoughts when Charlie punched him on the arm.

"Hey—!"

"I just worked out why you've got those blankets. Who was it this time?" Charlie was practically glaring at him and there was an edge to his voice.

"What?"

"I said *who was it this time?* I should really tell Mum what you've become, I should. She still thinks you're so *perfect*. Shagging a different girl every week! Why'd you break up with Juliet, anyway? She was nice." His voice ended on a whine.

Bill grimaced. He'd actually only been with Roxanne since breaking up with Juliet, but he'd led Charlie to believe otherwise. "If you're so in love with her, *you* ask her to be your girlfriend," he said irritably, thinking of Juliet with a pang. He missed her, he really did, but the row that had led to their breaking up....It didn't bear thinking about. He had suspected that Charlie fancied her a little

as well and had been living vicariously through him a bit; their breaking up spoiled that. Charlie was flushing furiously now.

"As if she'd look twice at a fourth year," he murmured with his head down, so that it was almost impossible to hear him. "Not to mention that she still fancies *you*," he added more loudly. "Although I can't reckon *why*."

Bill folded up his mother's letter. "Shut up," he said to his brother without rancor. He wanted to figure out what was bothering him about Mum's letter and didn't really listen to anything else Charlie said to him as he went up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

He thought and thought about it. All during dinner, Alex kept trying to get his attention to talk to him about the Potions homework, and Bill just kept responding in grunts and monosyllables, chewing his food thoughtfully and staring into space. When they were walking back up to Gryffindor Tower, Alex said to him, "Would you like to come watch the next time Lowell and I shag? I know you've been dying to...."

"Hm?" Bill said, his eyes blank. "Oh, yeah, sure. Whatever...."

Alex crossed his arms and stood in Bill's path. "All right, if you were really listening to me, you'd *never* have agreed to that. What's going on with you?"

"What? What did you say? I'm sorry, Alex. I'm just....something queer about the letter Mum sent about the baby...."

"Oh, right. Congratulations again. That should cheer up your mum."

Bill nodded. "Yeah. That's what Charlie said."

"So what's wrong? You can tell me. You know where all the bodies are buried. I'll never tell," he said with a grin.

Bill actually looked at him this time, smiling at him, grateful for his friendship. "I know, mate. It's just—"

In a rush, he told Alex about being in the forest and talking with the Centaur. He didn't identify the girl he was with. Alex whistled between his teeth.

"Forest, eh? Rather dicey, especially when it's close to dark. Let alone after." Bill thought he sounded as though he might have tried this himself. "Anyway, listen; did the Centaur actually *say* that your sister was born just last night?"

Bill frowned, thinking hard. "No, not in so many words. It just sounded like—oh, I don't know. When I've talked with him before, nothing he said was really crystal-clear...."

Alex backed up and stared. "Um, spend much time talking to *Centaur*s, do you?" he said, swallowing.

"Long story," Bill murmured, starting to move again. "And I just can't see my mum waiting *six days* to write to us."

Alex shrugged. "She already had four kids to take care of under the age of *five*. My mum can barely cope with Oliver, and he's the only one she's got to worry about. He's constantly flying around the house on his toy broom, knocking into things. For a while, she was convinced he'd forgotten how to *walk*. In fact, I'm not sure I actually *did* see him walk when I was home for Christmas. He might have done, but most of the time he was on the broom. Mad about it, he is."

Bill laughed as they continued upwards. "Percy's already reading and always has his nose in books. You wouldn't believe the way he's going through everything on the living room shelves. Dad even said he caught him trying to get the twins to settle down by reading to them. The twins, of course, are the probably the real reason no one could write to me and Charlie for almost a week; they're always into everything. Ron's not even a year old yet. He's just started walking, but Dad says he's an easy little bloke. Plus, the twins never pick on *him*. Well, not much, anyway. They go after Percy, as a rule. Probably why he keeps to himself."

They hung about in the common room until rather late, and when Bill was dressing for bed, he had a sudden thought and went to his trunk. He pulled out the wad of letters his mother had sent him that term; he kept them tied up in a bundle next to his spellbooks and parchment. Halfway through his dressing, wearing an odd combination of his pajama trousers and an unbuttoned shirt, he sat on his bed sorting through them, finally coming to the one his mother had sent to him most recently.

Dear Bill,

First off, I should tell you that I haven't had the baby yet, in case that's why you think I'm writing. Don't worry! As soon as she arrives, your father and I will write to you and Charlie. I would dearly like it to happen now, but then I never did cope well with waiting for any of you.

Are you having to give out many detentions, as a prefect? I remember when I was in

school...

And she rambled on a bit about some school memories after that. Bill didn't really pay attention. In fact, he remembered that as soon as he'd seen that it wasn't about the baby being born, he'd tucked it away with the other letters, not really thinking about it. He looked carefully at the beginning of the letter again. *I haven't had the baby yet...* Why would she say that she was going to write to them as soon as the baby was born and then wait six days?

He stared and stared at the letter, trying to work out what was really bothering him, and then, giving up and starting to fold it up again, he finally noticed it. In the upper right-hand corner of the parchment, his mother had scribbled the date very faintly. It was hard to make out, but as far as Bill could tell it read *04.04.81*.

Now he knew what was bothering him.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 20 May, 1981

Sam Bell put down his fork and patted his stomach. "Oh, Tom's shepherd pies just do me in. You'll have to roll me back to the office, Lily," he added, closing his eyes.

Lily Potter threw her napkin across the small pub table, laughing. "You shouldn't eat so much at lunch, Sam. You'll fall asleep this afternoon, and you didn't get through half of that paperwork on your desk this morning." She took a sip of tea and looked at him smugly. "I've turned in *all* of my reports and started helping Gemma with hers. She's knackered; Neville's got her up all night, teething. I'm so lucky with Harry. He's got four teeth now, two top and two bottom, but he just chews on his stuffed Eeyore, never frets. Well," she amended, "almost never. Not about the teething pain, anyway. If we actually leave the room before he's fallen asleep, he gets terribly upset. I know we should let him drop off on his own, but—"

Sam nodded, draining his own mug of tepid tea. "Katie did that as well."

"But she doesn't anymore? How did you break her of it? We just can't bear to leave him in his cot, crying his eyes out because he doesn't want to be alone..."

He shrugged and shook his head. "She did try to get us to come to her a couple of nights after the first time, but she cried for a shorter time each night until she stopped altogether. The first time it wasn't actually intentional. One night, a little over a year ago, Trina and I just both reached our limit. We turned in, she was still awake and started bawling, and neither one of us could drag ourselves out of bed. Trina kept saying, 'What if something is really wrong?' And I told her that she cries differently when that's true, and if she was still crying a half hour after she'd started, I'd go in and see to her."

Lily raised her eyebrows. "So? How long did it take?"

"Exactly twenty-eight minutes before she was quiet as a lamb. I really dodged a bullet."

She laughed. "You did. And you know, I used exactly that expression the day before yesterday with Gemma, and she started ducking and bobbing about, wanting to know 'What bullet?' and 'How on earth could an armed Muggle have found our office?'" Lily rolled her eyes.

"We Muggle-borns will just have to keep confounding the others, I reckon," he said, laughing. "I shan't be changing the way I speak, so they'll just have to figure it out."

"Nor shall I," Lily said, raising her chin. "I do wish more Aurors were Muggle-born, like you. I feel a bit like I spend half my day just explaining the Muggle world and Muggle expressions to other Aurors. Last week, Fife wanted me to explain to him how tellybishon' works. As if I know!"

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that first you go to a shop that sells tellybishons,' you pay for one in Muggle money, you take it home to a house or flat with electricity, plug it in, turn it on and convert your brains to mush. He asked me—perfectly seriously—whether the part about converting your brains to mush was absolutely necessary to use the tellybishon,' and I said, no, not *absolutely* necessary, although it certainly helps."

Sam wagged his finger at her. "You shouldn't tease the purebloods, Lily. It's not nice." But he was grinning.

"Oh, but it's so *easy*, Sam," she replied, reaching in her robe pocket for her money. He put his hand up.

"Don't worry, Lily. My turn today, remember?"

She raised one eyebrow. "No, you did last time we partnered. You must be thinking of someone else."

He looked baffled for a moment, then said, his face falling. "Oh, that's right. When I was on duty with Ward on Saturday, he treated for lunch...." He trailed off, and the two of them stared at the table; Sam swore to himself he wouldn't cry, even though he would have minded Lily seeing him cry less than most people. Since she'd started working as an Auror she'd almost become like a little sister to him, and he and Trina got on very well with her and James as a couple as well.

"Are you on duty for the funeral?" she asked softly, lifting her eyes to his. He shook his head.

"No. I'm a pall bearer. They need plenty of help, after all. Three coffins."

She nodded. "I'm on duty with Dedalus Diggle. God, I wish it were anyone else. I'm afraid he makes me laugh too much. His clothes are just *too* outlandish. And this will *not* be an occasion for laughter," she said softly, her voice a little thick now. Sam nodded. "This is getting very-ominous. Three Aurors going missing in three month's time, and their families all killed...."

Sam sighed. "Makes you understand why Moody's so paranoid, though, doesn't it?"

"Definitely. I try not to let on to James how worried I am, but sometimes I just-I wake up with these nightmares, and I have to go and check on Harry. A couple of nights ago I ended up just falling asleep in the rocking chair beside his cot, with my face against the bars. James found me like that in the morning. It was just the night before that, you know, we got word that"

Sam put his hand over hers where it lay on the table. "There, there, Lily. Yes, it's more than a little unnerving. But we're all taking precautions, and trying to work out what they had in common, why they were targeted...."

She grimaced. "Gemma and Doris and I have been all through their work files, which cases they've been on, who they've arrested, and there's no set pattern. And we've all worked with all three of them-Ward, Harris and Johanssen-so if it's a matter of cases, we've all shared cases with them. Why were *they* targeted, and no one else?"

Sam looked very grim. "Not to be pessimistic, but who's to say no one else *will* be targeted? There are a lot more than three Aurors in the department. Maybe it's not a particular case, but a matter of all of the Aurors being systematically wiped out," he said quietly.

"By Voldemort?" she said, even more quietly.

"Right. And offing the families afterward is just his way of salting the earth, as it were."

She put her other hand over Sam's, so that it was sandwiched between hers. "Or maybe they're not trying to get rid of all of us, as that would be a lot of work, but convince some of us to just walk away, for the sake of our families," she whispered, then looked up at him. He saw how troubled she was. "I mean-if you thought Trina and Katie might be in danger because of this, what would you do?"

He drew his lips into a line. "I-I don't know. Try to tuck them away somewhere safe, I reckon....But you can't live in a cave, and I don't want to live without my family...."

"Nor do I!" she said with feeling. "And James can't just go off and hide; he has his career. Although now, every time he has a match I think about what a lovely target he would make, flying about a pitch, hundreds of people watching...."

"Well, even though it's not as important as playing Quidditch," Sam said, a smile starting to twist his lips, "Trina does like her job. You might not think that a barmaid is very important, but she has her faithful customers, and they tip her handsomely...."

Lily nodded. "I'd be the last one to say that that's an unimportant job. Especially at Maxwell's; that's the busiest wizarding pub in Birmingham."

"And that's saying something," he smiled. He squeezed her hand, then withdrew it. "Come on, unless you have a superstition about the last person I treated to lunch disappearing, let me get this one, Lily. All right?"

She frowned. "I'm not superstitious, you know that, Sam." She threw up her hands. "Fine. Far be it from me to turn down a free lunch."

He nodded at her and went to pay Tom, finding that his back was disappearing down a corridor leading to the private parlors. He decided to follow him, rather than wait for him to return, but suddenly, a hand pulled him into a doorway before he could reach the room where Tom had disappeared, and when the door slammed behind him, he found that the business end of a wand was pressed against his throat. It was long, as long as Sam's forearm, made of a glossy reddish-brown wood that shone in the candlelight.

He was surrounded by four people in hooded cloaks and masks; the largest one was still holding his upper arm, and he nodded to a shorter, athletically-built man, who took Sam's wand from his robe pocket, and, pointing at Sam's legs, cried, "*Locomotor mortis!*"

The hand was released from his arm; Sam had lost all feeling in his legs and fell over, trying to turn his body so that he wouldn't break his nose; he banged his cheekbone on the hard wooden

floor instead. He was also aware of banging his hipbone on the floor, but he had no sensation there, so it hardly mattered at the moment. On the other hand, where his cheekbone had made contact with the floor it was throbbing with pain, and he knew he'd have a bruise to heal later. If he was going to *have* a later.

He looked up at them, swallowing, trying to work out how he was going to deal with four of them at once when he had no wand, useless legs, and all he could think of was, *It's me. I'm next. And then they'll kill Trina and Katie...*

"What do you want?" he croaked out, wishing he could feel anything below the waist.

The man who had pulled him into the room crouched next to him and said, "You'll find out. This is just your introduction. We'll find *you* when it's time. Until then—think about your answer," he hissed at Sam, who noticed that a long blond hair had escaped from the man's hood. He jerked his eyes away from the hair to the man's eyes, which were difficult to see behind the mask, but seemed to be light in color. His hands were meticulously clean, soft and unlined; the nails were perfectly manicured and had absolutely no dirt under them.

"How can I think about my answer when I don't know the bleeding question?" he growled, looking over the man's shoulder to the wizard who had taken his wand.

The blond man laughed. "The precise question doesn't really matter, now does it?" he said silkily, amused. Almost lazily, he pointed his wand at Sam and said, "*Imperio!*"

Sam felt a feeling of complete peace flow over him; he felt free-floating and happy, not a care in the world. He was vaguely aware that the wizard who had put the curse on him was saying something, something about Lily, but another part of his brain was responding, *No. Why should I? I don't want to. You've got the wrong man.*

Sam shook himself and the fog seemed to lift from his brain. The wizard was holding his wand down by his side, clenching it very hard, so that his knuckles were quite white; he could tell that the curse hadn't worked on Sam. He'd successfully fought it.

Just when Sam had decided to lunge at him, the blond wizard suddenly raised his dark wand and disappeared with a *pop!* The man who'd been holding Sam's wand threw it down and raised his own wand at the same time as the other two men; they disappeared with a triple *pop!* Sam dragged himself to where his wand was and took the leg-locking charm off his legs, cursing himself for being ambushed. He might be dead already were it not for the fact that they largely seemed intent on playing with him—for now. If only he could remember what the wizard was telling him to do, something about Lily....

He heard footsteps in the corridor and Lily calling, "Sam? Sam, where are you?" He heard a note of panic in her voice. He staggered to his feet, which felt like they were full of pins and needles, and put his wand away.

"In here, Lily," he called, but not too loudly; he could hear that she was not far away.

While he was brushing down his robes, she pushed open the door of the room, frowning. "What are you doing in here? Tom came back to the bar and when he saw me standing about, waiting for you, he asked whether I was paying for us today. I told him that you'd gone to pay him, and he said he hadn't seen you...."

Sam could see that she was breathing rather quickly; he stepped forward and put his hand on her arm. "I'm all right. It's just—" He wasn't sure how to put it, and a part of him didn't want to admit that he'd been surprised by what were obviously three Death Eaters. He had his pride.

"What?"

He bit his lip. "Maybe—just as a precaution—I'll have Trina and Katie go off somewhere for a while. A bit of a holiday. Maybe even America. Trina has relatives there. She also has an aunt in Hogsmeade. Perhaps they should go stay with her for a while...."

Lily put her hand on his shoulder. "What's going on, Sam? What aren't you telling me?"

She was good, but he'd known that before he'd started training her to be an Auror. She saw right through him. He swallowed again.

"I was ambushed," he admitted. "Four of them. Death Eaters. They want me to think about my answer."

"To what question?"

He looked up at her. "They wouldn't tell me. But—I think I know."

She covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, god, Sam. If that's true—you should go away, too. But—" She stopped, clearly very perplexed.

Sam waited, but when she still didn't answer, he said, "What?"

"Well," she said slowly, staring into space, evidently thinking very hard. "It's just that you're Muggle-born, like me. Since when is Voldemort, who hates Muggles *and* Muggle-borns, recruiting

someone like you?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't know. That didn't even occur to me. Might be he doesn't know. Or maybe it's because I'm an Auror, so he'll have someone inside the Ministry on his side."

Lily swallowed and looked very distressed. "We should call a meeting this afternoon. This is serious. Ward, Harris and Johanssen didn't say anything before they disappeared, and look what happened...."

Sam looked grim. "You think we should? What if there's already someone in the department who's on his side? It might get back to those blokes who were here, and who knows what they'll do then? Just because we didn't know about it, that doesn't mean they didn't talk before they disappeared. Maybe that's *why* they disappeared and their families were killed, *because* they talked." Of course, Sam thought, he was talking to Lily already....

She paced, her hands held together before her mouth as she concentrated. "Then we'll just see what Alastor thinks. He's been around the longest. He'll know what to do. You're right; there may already be someone in the department who's acting as a spy."

They paid for their lunch at the bar, then Apparated back to the Ministry. They landed in a large circular underground space that was lined at the perimeter with doorways leading to the various departments. Especially in the current climate, Lily was glad that for security, among other reasons, the Ministry offices were scattered across the city of London in disused Tube stations which were inaccessible by non-magical means. At least no one could attack the Ministry of Magic in one fell swoop. It was a small comfort, though, when she thought of her missing comrades, and now Sam.

They went through the portal to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and past the clerk who sat in the outer office. He smiled at them and passed them through; Tobias was ancient and nearly toothless, nodding at them as they walked past his desk. But now, having a reason to suspect *everyone*, Sam looked at him shrewdly, and he saw that Lily was scrutinizing him as well.

Sam's heart was beating rather quickly in his chest as they reached Moody's desk; the old scoundrel was writing out a report, his quill scratching on the parchment as though it was as irritated as he looked. He muttered under his breath as he worked, and Sam pulled Lily aside, noticing that other Aurors in the office, also working at their desks, had taken notice of their approaching Moody.

"We can't do it like this. We don't know whether we can trust *anyone* here," he whispered. "Follow my lead." Lily nodded as Sam pulled back from her and said loudly, "No! I told you, Lily. I don't want to talk about it." He stomped to his desk and sat down, pulling a stack of folders toward him and dipping a quill in his ink bottle. Lily stomped to her own desk and sat grumpily, taking out a piece of parchment and beginning to write something on it. The problem now was that he didn't know how he was going to get Moody's attention. He hadn't thought it out completely.

Sam thought Lily was going to jump out of her skin when suddenly, Moody said, "Potter! Come here. I want you to look at this report. I believe you were involved in this arrest-?"

Sam didn't watch her walk to Moody's desk, but was aware of her movements as he wrote. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her leaning over the desk, reading something.

"Well, I can't really speak to that, as Sam was interrogating the prisoner at that point; I'd gone to check that the evidence was being properly catalogued," he heard her say.

"Bell!" Moody bellowed now.

Sam arranged his face carefully into a scowl. "What now?"

"There's something funny about your report!" Moody snarled at him. "Are you trying to send Death Eaters to Azkaban or get them off?" he demanded.

Sam stood, pounding his fist on his desk. "And do you enjoy calling me up on the carpet in front of the entire department?" All eyes were on them now.

"All right!" Moody growled. "I need a little something to nibble on anyway. We'll go to the commissary to have this out. I am *not* happy," he warned Sam, starting to move toward the portal, carrying the parchment. When Sam didn't seem to be moving fast enough for him, he glanced over his shoulder and shouted, "Move!" Sam and Lily sped up, following him through Tobias' office and then out into the large circular room again. They continued to follow Moody to the Ministry commissary, which was empty. Like the Aurors, most other Ministry employees only used the commissary as a last resort, as it was more enjoyable to get out of the office for lunch.

Moody turned to them. "All right. What is the meaning of this?" He held up the parchment he'd been working on at his desk; underneath what had been a narrative about his most recent arrest, in very large letters and what Sam recognized as Lily's handwriting were the words, "*URGENT: Sam and I need to speak to you without it seeming to the others that it's our idea.*"

Sam gaped. "When did you write that? I didn't see you using a quill at Moody's desk..."

Lily shrugged. "Simple transference charm. I was writing the words on the parchment on my

desk, but I arranged it so that they actually appeared on Alastor's parchment. I needed some way to communicate to him what we wanted without anyone else around being the wiser."

Moody nodded at her and his mouth may have been forming a smile, it was difficult for Sam to tell. "Smart girl," he rasped, then looked around furtively. "Listen, I'm not comfortable doing this here... What's that transference charm, Potter?" She taught him the charm and he nodded. "Fine. We'll go back to the office and have this out there—separately, at our desks, on fresh parchment." He waved his wand at the parchment in his hand and made Lily's words disappear. "Now. We haven't been gone long. Let's get back quickly so no one thinks they're missing anything." He nodded at Sam. "You were right to suspect a spy in the department. I won't say anything more right now; I haven't the evidence I need just yet, but give me time...."

They returned to their desks, discreetly casting the transference charms on their parchments and proceeding to hold their meeting under everyone's noses. Sam scribbled on his parchment, "We have a problem."

A messy scrawl appeared below this: "*That's obvious, Bell. Get to the point.*"

He hesitated a moment before dipping his quill in the ink and writing, "*I think I'm being recruited to be a D.E.*"

"You think?" came the reply. "*Don't you know?*"

"*It's complicated. I was told to think about my answer.*"

"*To what question?*"

"*That's what I said,*" Lily chimed in.

"*He didn't say. It was implied.*"

"*Dumbledore.*"

"*What?*" Sam frowned.

"*We need to talk to Dumbledore. After work. You both go to Hogwarts, separately, leaving at different times. I'll go now and speak to him. Potter, you wait until the end of the day. Bell, you beg off two hours before quitting time. Have you got a good broom?*"

"*Yes, the one I used in school for Quidditch. Don't use it much anymore.*"

"*It'll do. Potter, can you be there?*"

"*I don't think so. I've got to take over caring for Harry; our friend Peter is away, and James was taking care of him today, but he's got a match tonight and has to leave as soon as I get home.*"

"*Don't worry, Lily. I don't want you getting mixed up in this,*" Sam wrote. He thought of the wizard who'd tried to put him under Imperius, wishing he could remember....He'd said something about Lily....

"*If you're sure,*" Lily wrote; he saw that there were double lines between her brows; they only appeared when she was very worried.

"*I'll fill you in later,*" Sam promised.

Sam watched Moody storm out of the office, and he continued to sort through his files while surreptitiously keeping one eye on his watch. He was glad that Frank Longbottom was on field duty with Fife. He was also glad that Frank's wife Gemma had gone home early to relieve her mother-in-law, who was taking care of their son. Frank and Gemma would probably have picked up on there being something wrong, and Sam didn't want to involve anyone else, especially anyone with a child. Lily had crossed the room and was helping Doris Crockford with some case files while he continued to work. Five minutes before three o'clock, he put his work away and said to Lily, "I'm leaving for the day."

Lily scowled at him. "Some of us are going to be working for another two hours."

He scowled right back. "Good for you. I'm leaving." Resisting the urge to look around the room and see who was present, he hoped whoever the spy was believed their little antagonistic performance.

Sam strode to the door and Disapparated after he was through the portal; he went to his flat in Birmingham first, to retrieve his broom, and when he arrived in Hogsmeade he aimed for the area just behind the Honeydukes sweetshop. He made his way down the High Street to the Three Broomsticks, having decided that he needed a drink before he attempted to have this meeting. He was shaking from head to foot as he reached for the handle on the pub's door, then froze when he heard a familiar voice speaking loudly on the other side.

"What *you* want to do doesn't really matter, now does it?" the voice drawled with maddening superiority.

That's him, Sam thought. *That's the bloody sod who was at the Leaky Cauldron....*

His heart thudding painfully, Sam watched as the door swung outward and the owner of the voice emerged from the dim recesses of the pub. He thought he would faint when he saw the wizard

in question, but a split second later he could only think, *No. Not a shock at all. Should have known.*

Lucius Malfoy looked down his nose at Sam Bell. "Well!" he said to his companions, of which there were only two now. Sam recognized Crabbe and Goyle, who'd also been in Slytherin, a couple of years behind Malfoy. They were quite substantial in size and could have been two of the other three masked and hooded wizards in the pub. "Look what the cat dragged in and spewed up," he said, a lopsided smile on his face.

Sam forced himself to pretend to be amused. "It's been a long time, Malfoy," he said after a moment's hesitation. *Mustn't make him think I know he's the one.*

He saw Malfoy flinch and hesitate for a moment himself. "Yes, yes," he said very quickly after that, as though trying to convince himself that he hadn't had his wand against Sam's windpipe just two hours earlier. "It has, hasn't it? It seems only yesterday that I was beating you for the House Cup, wasn't it? Not to mention being named Head Boy...."

"It was nine years ago," Sam reminded him with a nod. "And I let the other prefects know that I didn't have any interest in being Head Boy. Still scratching my head over how I became a prefect."

Malfoy's smirk became more pronounced; Sam wanted to hex it off his face. "As I am, old boy, as am I...."

Sam tried to keep his breathing easy. "You'll remember, though, that while Gryffindor didn't win the House Cup in my final term, we *did* win the Quidditch Cup that year."

Malfoy tipped back his head, appraising Sam from beneath his almost-closed eyelids. "Yes, yes....A worthy adversary. In many ways you carried the team, I'd say. The rest of them weren't really up to their captain. But then, my players weren't either," he sniffed. "By the way, you can stop carrying your broom around; you're no longer the Gryffindor captain," he added, his mouth twisting in a sarcastic smile, nodding at Sam's worn-looking old broom.

Sam swallowed, actually glad that Malfoy had gone back to needling him, as he'd felt tense and extra-suspicious due to his brief compliment. *Don't trust him, don't trust him*, his brain shouted in the background.

"So," Malfoy said, crossing his arms and remaining planted in front of the pub door, as though blocking Sam's way. "What brings you to Hogsmeade?"

Sam nodded at the pub. "Drink. Long day."

Malfoy glanced up at the large clock visible on the top of the village hall, farther down the High Street. "Rather short one, I'd say, actually."

Sam grimaced. "Long enough for me. And Moody's been on my back again. Had to get away from him. Barking mad; sees dark wizards everywhere." He watched Malfoy's face carefully when he said this. He half-wished Moody would just show up now, firing hexes, but he knew that he'd already gone to Hogwarts to speak to Dumbledore.

Lucius Malfoy smirked at him, and Sam wished he dared to hex him. *You bleeding, effing Death Eater*, he thought, trying to maintain something close to a pleasant demeanor. *I won't let you destroy my family.*

I won't.

* * * * *

Peter paused, petrified. He could hear the voices on the other side of the door to the Three Broomsticks, the familiar rise and fall of Sam Bell's voice, the superior drawl of Lucius Malfoy. He couldn't afford for Sam to see him with Malfoy; even if Bell wasn't wise to the fact that Malfoy was a Death Eater (something Peter doubted), Sam trusted *Peter*, and Peter couldn't afford for that to change, even though he was coming to hate Sam even more than James.

He had taken care of little Harry and Katie while Lily, James, Sam and Trina had gone out together, more than once. He smiled and nodded as they kissed their precious little ones goodbye; he'd practically needed to boot them out of the flat. And he'd been fine with it at first, apart from muttering, "What am I, Mary Poppins?" as he cleaned sick off their chins and porridge off the walls.

What had been worse than being left behind was being included. The seven of them had all gone on a picnic to the park, and Peter had been trying to talk to James about Quidditch (James doing most of the talking) while Trina was playing with the babies and Sam and Lily sat apart, talking about their jobs.

Peter had watched her face, how animated it was when she was speaking to Sam, the way she'd laugh and put her hand on his arm, the way he'd respond with a mischievous grin and a playful tug of her hair.

James had noticed as well, so Peter knew it wasn't just him having an overactive imagination. Back at their flat that night, while he was curled up on the sofa, trying to get to sleep, Peter had heard them having a row about it. It was impossible not to hear it through the closed bedroom door.

"You're being ridiculous, James!" she insisted.

"Ridiculous, am I? The way you look at him...And around here it's always, 'Sam says this,' and Sam says that.' You'd think he was the only other Auror in the Ministry! You never talk about Frank Longbottom that way, or Moody, or any of the women. I'm bloody sick of hearing about SamSamSamSamSam!"

"Well maybe if you ever consented to have a conversation about *anything* other than Quidditch, I wouldn't *need* to talk to Sam so much."

"Aha!" James cried in triumph.

"What aha?" I said *talk*. That's all we do—talk. Are you implying we've ever done anything else?"

"You started off talking to Remus and Snape, too," he declared.

There was a long pause, then Peter could hear Lily's voice again, low and dangerous. Peter, for once, wouldn't have been James for the world at this moment. "How *dare* you—"

Without warning, the bedroom door had been flung open. Peter feigned sleep, his heart going a mile a minute. She crossed the small sitting room, opening the door to the flat.

"Lily!" James called after her. "Where are you going?" He sounded less adversarial now, and a bit scared.

"For a walk. I need to—to get out of here for a while. before I say or do something I'll regret." She slammed the door and the noise woke little Harry, who started howling in his cot. Peter continued to pretend that he was sleeping through the racket. James went to tend to Harry.

"*Ssh, ssh, Harry. everything will be all right. Mummy's just a bit upset right now. She'll be back, don't you worry. Ssh, ssh...*"

But Peter thought he didn't sound very confident of this. What if James was right? What if there was something between Lily and Sam?

Peter seethed, *Don't you touch her, Sam Bell.*

In the meantime, he'd continued to give Voldemort the names of people who might be involved with the Prophecy, but the Dark Lord was having everything vetted now by Seers, human and otherwise. After four Death Eaters had been captured by the Ministry while going after some Prophecy candidates later identified as incorrect, Voldemort had explained to Peter, "My servants have better things to do with their time; there are better ways for them to serve me than going to prison." He had said this after upbraiding Peter yet again for his incorrect information—upbraiding being his having to suffer the Cruciatus Curse again.

Many of the Seers did not even know they were working for the Dark Lord, as he sent his minions to them, rather than going himself. Finally, Peter hit the nail on the head. Draco Malfoy's birthdate made him a Moonchild candidate, and according to someone Voldemort considered to be a reliable Seer, *he was the Moonchild*. The only catch was that his father was Lucius Malfoy, Death Eater. The Dark Lord did not take it lightly that his servant's son might contribute to his fall, nor did he hide this from Malfoy.

It had been the first time Peter had seen Malfoy since he was a frightened first year and Malfoy was Head Boy. He tried to hide his trembling as he sat by Voldemort's right hand, while the Dark Lord spoke to Malfoy about his son's destiny.

Malfoy's shaking was barely visible; Peter had to stare at his hand on his snake-headed cane to see it. When he lifted his eyes he saw that Malfoy was glaring venomously at him.

"Oh, don't blame Wormtail," the Dark Lord said smoothly. "He heard the Prophecy when it was given and he has identified your son as one of the players in it, but I am not just taking his word for it. I have had a very competent Seer and Astrologer draw up a chart for you son. He is indeed the One-of-Three, anyway. Of that there is no doubt."

Sweat was running down Malfoy's pasty, pointed face. "Please, M'Lord. I fully intend to raise my son to be your loyal servant..."

Voldemort's eyes never left Malfoy's. "You can say that all you like, but at a certain point in his life he will do as *he* pleases, not as *you* might like him to do; he could even rebel against everything you do and stand for. I am certainly rebelling against *my* father with every fiber of my being, every day of my life.

"No, I am not just going to take *your* word for it, Malfoy. I need more of a *guarantee* if I am to spare your son. After all, there are two other people in the Prophecy, and they must all act in concert. If even *one* of them departs this world, the Prophecy is not fulfilled. Is does *not* have to be *your* son who dies. I will spare your son on one condition..."

"Yes, M'Lord. Anything M'Lord..."

"I will place an Obedience Charm on him. Some of my power will actually be transferred to him as a result. However, when he is older, if I give him a direct order, and he consents to do as I ask,

he *will* do it, if it is possible. And if he refuses—he will die. So raise your boy well, Malfoy. You *don't* want him questioning my authority when he's older, *do you?*"

"No, M'Lord. Thank you, M'Lord," he responded, bowing, his voice trembling. Out of the corner of his eye he looked at Peter; the hatred was almost palpable.

"Wise choice, Malfoy. Let us take care of it at once."

"N-now? M'Lord," he added hastily.

"The sooner the better," Voldemort had intoned.

Peter had been somewhat relieved by all of this; he wouldn't have to name other Moonchildren—especially himself. That was when he had begun to turn over in his mind the possibility of giving Harry's name to Voldemort, which he'd since done. If Lily and James could be convinced to raise him as Voldemort's servant, Harry would also receive the Obedience Charm, and Peter could tell Lily how it was his idea to save Harry this way (without revealing that it was he who had given Voldemort Harry's name in the first place). Lily would be so grateful to him....Yes. It would be a way for him to be her hero, to save her son. She would love him for it....

The problem was, Peter had been a little worried about being the one to talk to Lily about it. What if it backfired? It should be someone else, he decided regretfully, someone very close to her....

Sam.

Sam could convince her, of this Peter was sure. But Peter knew he'd need an incentive first. If other Aurors seemed to be disappearing at random and their families were killed...Sam might be more likely to see the wisdom in complying. So Lucius Malfoy, as the father of the Moonchild, was given the job of putting Sam Bell under Imperius, and Peter was supposed to check on his progress. Sam would then talk Lily into raising Harry as a loyal servant of Voldemort, and Harry would also receive the Obedience Charm. It was better this way, Peter thought. After all, if *Peter* asked her and she refused, she wouldn't actually be very well-disposed toward Peter, especially if she learned that it was his idea.

Sam Bell was the key.

* * * * *

"Well, as pleasant as this has been, I am expected at the school, I am on the board of governors, you know," Malfoy informed Sam archly.

"At your age!" Sam burst out before he could stop himself; they were the same age, after all, only twenty-seven.

"Yes, well I have just purchased over a thousand Galleons-worth of very rare books for the school library, as well as refurbishing the Potions dungeon and the Slytherin common room..." He paused in his bragging and looked down at his feet, then turned back and forth, staring at the ground as though he'd dropped something through a hole in his pocket. However, against Sam's expectations, he said, "Where the devil is he?" He turned and opened the pub door again, as though he hadn't just been talking to Sam, but there was no one on the other side very close to the door.

Sam took the open door in hand and entered the pub. "Well, if you'll excuse me, Malfoy, I came for a drink."

Lucius Malfoy nodded and watched Sam enter the pub, his eyes cold as ice. "Of course, old chap," he replied with a mock-jovial lilt to his voice. "Do enjoy your drink," he added, sounding more than a little sinister now, as though he were planning to poison Sam's drink from a distance.

Sam strode to the bar, ordering a pint from Madam Rosmerta, pressing his hand to the counter so it would stop shaking. What was Malfoy going to try to get him to do? he wondered. And Malfoy was going up to the school, so he couldn't go and join Moody now, to talk to Dumbledore. Going up to the school bare-faced as he was, Malfoy must have legitimate business, Sam assumed. Gloating inwardly, he was sure, after what he'd done to Sam at the Leaky Cauldron, and laughing up his sleeve at the way Sam had had to come running for a drink hours before he was supposed to be leaving his job.

Sam raised his glass to his lips and drank, thinking of his wife and daughter. How was he going to get out of this? There had to be a way....

But as he drank and stared at his own haunted eyes in the mirror over the bar, he couldn't see what the way out might be.

"*I don't blame you,*" the mirror said to him in a glum voice. "*If I looked as miserable as you I'd be drowning my sorrows, too.*"

* * * * *

Tuesday, 16 June, 1981

“Sam!”

Lily dashed into the small cell and stopped short. Sam Bell was sitting on the edge of the pallet, staring at his hands; he didn't lift his eyes to hers.

“Hello, Lily,” he said to the floor.

She strode across the small space and crouched before him, taking his hands in hers. “What happened, Sam?”

He pulled his hands away, finally lifting his eyes to hers. “That's already caused enough trouble, Lily,” he said hoarsely.

“What has?” she asked, moving to sit next to him on the pallet. He inched away from her so that their legs were no longer touching.

“Holding hands.”

“What?” she repeated. “Sam, I don't understand. They're—they're saying that you—that you killed Trina.”

Sam swallowed, picturing Trina's face again, the shock registering on her features as she flew backwards, through the French doors, over the balcony rail, taking the flowerpots with her...

“I disarmed her, but I—I didn't think about where she was standing, and she—she flew out the window—”

He choked, unable to continue. Lily let a small cry escape her and she put her arm around his shoulder, but he extricated himself again, and she retreated to the far end of the pallet, looking hurt.

“But why did you need to disarm her?”

He raised his eyes to hers. “She had put Cruciatius on Katie.”

Lily gasped. “What? Surely not! Why on earth—?”

“She was under Imperius.”

Lily froze, staring at him in shock. “She was? How do you know? Who did it?”

“Lucius Malfoy.”

Sam remembered Malfoy, just hours before, trying to put Imperius on him again outside the terraced Birmingham house where the Bells lived on the top floor.

“*You shall convince Lily Potter to raise her son as the Dark Lord's servant,*” the silky voice had intoned.

Sam felt light as air, carefree and incredibly happy. But a voice at the back of his mind said, *No; Lily would never do that. Stupid thing to ask her.*

“*Did you hear me? You shall convince Lily Potter—*”

Right. As if she wouldn't laugh me out of the room...

“*—to raise her son—*”

“NO!” he roared, breaking free of the spell.

He had stared into the eyeholes of the mask Malfoy wore; Malfoy was evidently still unaware of the fact that Sam knew who he was. The eyes narrowed.

“What did you say to me?”

“I said *no!* I will ask Lily no such thing. And—and I know—” But he stopped himself. *No. Don't warn him. Don't tell him. Let him find out when we raid Malfoy Mansion...*

The Death Eater laughed briefly. “Fine. We'll do it the hard way. You're her closest friend, you work with her quite frequently. If you won't listen to me, maybe I can have someone ask you to whom you *will* pay attention...”

Sam reached for his wand, but Malfoy had already disappeared with a *pop!* Sam whipped his head around, hoping that no Muggles had seen that. He put his wand away, hoping no one was seeing that, either. Running his hand through his hair, he climbed the steps to front door, a weariness quite consuming him. *Why on earth did Malfoy think Lily would ever agree to raise Harry to be a Death Eater? It was absurd. And he was a baby! Why him? Why Harry?*

Wearily, he climbed the stairs up to his flat. He could have Apparated to the landing outside their door, but their downstairs neighbor, Mrs. Farley, sometimes came upstairs to ask them to feed her cats, and he didn't like to risk it. He couldn't actually Apparate into the flat, as he'd had anti-Apparition wards put on it, for security. And the fire allowed communication only, not transportation, for similar reasons. As he dragged his weary feet up the stairs he thought how smug he would feel when raiding Malfoy's house the next day. He'd tell the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office there was something there in which they might be interested, as an excuse to enter, and then they'd have him. He smiled as he climbed the stairs, imagining Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban....

Before turning and beginning to climb the last flight, he thought he heard an odd popping noise

above him, and when he reached the door of their flat, he discovered that it wasn't closed all of the way. He'd no sooner pushed it open and entered his home than his wife was thrusting photographs at him and screaming hysterically, "*What is the meaning of this?*"

"Wha-what?" he sputtered, trying to close the door and work out what was going on. Trina stood in the entry with her arms crossed, tapping her foot, while he turned the photographs around to better see them.

All of them were of him and Lily. They were sitting at a pub table—it looked like it was probably the Leaky Cauldron—and his hand was sandwiched between hers and he was gazing into her eyes. She gazed back and then he lifted one of his hands to push an errant lock of red hair behind one ear, squeezing her hand when he had done that. He looked at the next picture; he and Lily were in a doorway, both of their wands drawn, and his arm was around her, holding her tight to his side. They were looking furtively at something outside the picture. Another photograph showed them holding each other tightly and crying, Sam smoothing her bright hair, her arms around his waist. He looked up at his wife.

"Where did you get these?"

"Never you mind where I got them. I want to know the meaning of this!" Her eyes were wild, but oddly, they weren't meeting *his* eyes. He kept trying to look her in the eye, but her gaze kept sliding away.

"The meaning of what? We had lunch in a pub, we were hiding from suspects in a doorway, waiting for a chance to strike and that last one—that could be from just about any one of the many funerals we've gone to in the last few months. You know how it's been. Ruddy awful; just the day before yesterday I was a pall bearer for a seven-year-old...But *you* know that. Why on earth are people taking photos of me and Lily and trying to make out that—"

But then he noticed the large trunk sitting in the hall. "Trina—what's this for?"

"I'm leaving!" she cried, her voice rising hysterically.

"*Leaving?* Why?"

"You've seen the bloody photographs! You have to ask why?"

Sam swallowed and ran his hand through his hair. "There's nothing going on between me and Lily. We're just friends. Those photographs all have perfectly innocent explanations..."

"Oh, I'm sure they do," she snorted, still not meeting his gaze. "I'm sure they do."

"Trina!" he pleaded with her. "Look at me, *please*. I love you, and I love Katie, and I am not carrying on with Lily Potter."

She crossed her arms and turned away from him. "I'll stay on one condition."

"Anything. Absolutely anything, darling..."

"*You shall convince Lily Potter to raise her son as the Dark Lord's servant,*" she said mechanically, in a flat voice that made Sam frown.

"Trina? Oh, god, Trina! Listen to me! Fight it, you've got to *fight it!* Malfoy was here, wasn't he? He gave you those photos..."

"*You shall convince Lily Potter to raise her son as the Dark Lord's servant...*" she chanted again in a singsong.

He shook his head, even though she had her back to him. "No, Trina. Lily would never do that and I would never ask her. Which does *not* mean that we're carrying on. She's my friend, that's all. *Please*, Trina. *Fight it,*" he said softly, desperately, turning her round and clutching at her shoulders.

She shook him off and pulled out her wand, backing up into the living room, where Katie was rolling around on the rug, happily playing with a rag doll. Trina lifted her large dark eyes to his now, but it was like there was nothing there. They were blank and unseeing.

"*Do it,*" she said, her voice completely like her own.

"*No!* Fight it, Trina! I love you! You have to fight!"

Katie was gurgling with glee, oblivious to the odd behavior of her parents. Trina looked down at her and a disturbing smile slid across her face. Without looking at her husband, she said, "Do it if you want Katie to be safe."

Sam's jaw dropped. "What? That madman has told you to hurt our daughter?"

"*Do it!*"

"*NO!* I won't!"

He wasn't prepared for it for a moment; she pointed her wand at Katie, his precious little Katie, crying the dreaded word: "*Crucio!*"

A blood-curdling scream was pulled from the child for a second that felt like an eternity; Sam's insides clenched and, without even considering any other course of action, he drew his wand and

pointed it at his wife, shouting, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Sam bent over, his head in his hands, his own voice echoing inside his head, wishing Lily would leave him alone with his grief, shame and guilt. He couldn't tell her what had really occurred, he just couldn't. She would blame herself then, and it wasn't her fault. It wasn't anyone's fault but Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

Lily was silent for a while. Finally, she said, "So. Lucius Malfoy just walked up to—"

"No. I never saw his face. But I know it was him."

"What do you mean you never saw his face?"

"He was wearing a mask."

Lily sighed, then rose and began pacing, wringing her hands. "Sam—that won't stand up in court. We need something that can be compelling evidence concerning who made Trina torture Katie....Although I'll testify on your behalf, as a character witness, and so will loads of others. You have an excellent record in the department. At the trial—"

Sam shook his head. "No trial."

She stopped abruptly. "What do you mean, 'no trial'?"

He lifted his face to her. "Do—do you have any parchment with you? And a quill?"

She hesitated, then drew what he needed from her pocket. He got down on his knees, spreading the parchment on the stone floor, the quill scratching away while Lily paced and muttered names of people who could testify for him. Surely he was going to have a trial—they'd never send an Auror to prison without a trial.

But then Lily saw that he wasn't writing down the list of names she was reciting. "*Accio parchment!*" she cried, making it fly across the cell and into her hand. She glanced at it, appalled.

"Sam! This is a confession!"

He nodded. "Yes. You don't need a trial when there's a signed confession. I've already put my name to that."

She glanced down at it, looking very confused. "But—but you didn't mean to—"

"You know the law as well as I do, Lily. There are loads of spells besides the Killing Curse that can cause death. If you cast a spell that results in someone's death—"

"But what about Katie?"

He sighed. "We've already drawn up a will. Did it soon after Katie was born. We named Trina's aunt as her guardian, should neither of us be in a position to raise her. She divides her time between London and Hogsmeade. Goes up north, generally, for the summer. Nice and cool there much of the time, comparatively speaking...." He couldn't believe he was talking about the weather. *His Trina was dead and he had killed her.*

"Sam—you—you *have* to have a trial...."

"Not if I don't want to. Not if I sign a confession." He nodded at the parchment in her hand. She held it up angrily.

"I'll rip it up!" she declared. He gave a small rueful laugh.

"Go ahead, Lily. I'll write another. And another...."

He closed his eyes, still crouched on the floor. *How could this have happened? What was going on?*

She crouched next to him. "Sam. You can't do this. Does this have anything to do with—"

"No," he said quickly, his voice hard. *She cannot know how involved in this she is.* "Just—just do me a favor, Lily."

"What?"

"Raise Harry to be a good man. Like James. Oh, I know he was a rascal in school, but—"

She nodded. "Yes. Of course. Why are you telling me this now?"

He pulled his lips into a line. "It's important. Promise me, Lily. Please."

She nodded again. "All right. I promise," she said softly.

He pointed to the parchment. "Please have my confession registered," he asked now, his throat feeling completely parched. He could barely get the words out. She nodded yet again and left without another word, while he curled into a ball on the floor and wept for the life he had taken, the life he had lost, and the life his daughter would have without her parents, all thanks to Lucius Malfoy.

* * * * *

"Oh, James!"

She had just popped into the living room and, seeing him sitting on the couch, she ran to him

and threw her arms around him, crying disconsolately.

"How-how's Sam?" he asked tentatively, not confident of a cheerful answer. She had talked to him by Floo about what had happened, before she'd gone to talk to Sam. He was glad Peter had gone to visit his mum; they could speak more freely than when he was in the flat.

"They gave him ten years," she said thickly, sniffing.

"Already! How did they organize a trial, and witnesses--"

"No trial."

"No trial!" He stared. "Why not?"

"He signed a confession."

They were both silent for a while. "One Auror's family after another...devastated. What's to become of all of us?" Lily whispered forlornly, her head on James' shoulder. He stroked her hair, shivering.

"I don't know," he admitted, looking down into her eyes, his heart in his throat. He wanted to ask her to stop, to quit, to do anything else but be an Auror--but he dared not. The decision had to come from her. He didn't say anything because he thought she might be close to making just such a decision, and if he indicated that he was in favor of her quitting, he was afraid she'd decided to do just the opposite....

They prepared for bed in silence, but when he had extinguished the lights, James found Lily reaching for him with a desperation that he hadn't expected. They lay together afterward, her head on his chest as was their wont, while he traced gentle circles on her shoulder.

"Maybe we'll have another baby," she whispered in the dark. "A little sister for Harry, perhaps." James grunted noncommittally. He was still afraid to speak, afraid of what would come tumbling out of his mouth. She was silent for a while before saying, "I love you, James."

He kissed her forehead, trying not to hide his relief that they weren't going to be getting into any protracted conversations about her career. He whispered back, "I know, love. And I love you."

"Do you know? I mean--yes, I'm upset about Sam. But you *do* realize that you and Harry mean more to me than any friend ever could? You *know* that, I hope?"

She sat up, looking at him intently. He couldn't see her face in the darkness but he could hear the catch in her voice. He cupped her cheek with his hand.

"I'm sorry I was jealous of Sam, Lily. Truly. I don't know what came over me. I just--I still wonder sometimes how it is you're with me, and then I don't feel safe, I suppose, as though I might blink and discover it was all a dream...."

She leaned down to kiss him, then whispered close to his lips, "I'm the one who should be wondering why *you're* with *me*, silly...."

He pulled her mouth back to his, kissing her deeply, feeling his desire for her start to move through his body again, but a split second later, Harry started fretting in his cot, and she pulled away reluctantly. She slipped into a dressing gown and went to the baby, cooing to him as she changed his nappy and then settling comfortably with him in the rocking chair, as he tugged at her breast and she gazed down at his contented face. James watched them both, feeling the fragility of the life they shared and thinking of poor Sam Bell, going off to spend ten years in Azkaban, his wife dead and his daughter as good as orphaned.

Nothing will ever separate us, he swore to himself, watching Lily and the baby.

Nothing.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 1 July, 1981

Severus pushed his lank hair out of his face and continued measuring out powdered dragon-scale for Madam Marsh. He thought longingly of being on the deck of the *Patricia*, as he had been the previous night. The dingy apothecary was stifling, all of the windows closed and the smell emanating from the combined potions ingredients forming a miasma powerful enough that Severus had had to resort to breathing through his mouth after putting a spell on his nose to stuff it up.

Only a minute after bidding Madam Marsh good day, the door to the shop opened again, admitting another blinding beam of sunlight into the tenebrous room. Silhouetted in this beam of light was a tall wizard in a pointed hat; from what Severus could see he had a rather long white beard and hair. Severus' breath caught as he realized who the new customer was.

Albus Dumbledore walked slowly toward the counter, making his way around the barrels of beetle eyes, bat wings and bicorn horns. He smiled gently at the young man he'd come to see.

"Hello, Severus. I received your owl. I am sorry I was not in my office when you came to see me. I had urgent business at the Ministry."

Severus swallowed, his eyes flicking nervously toward the door. He hadn't expected Dumbledore to come to Dunoon; he'd hoped to receive an owl in return.

"Ah, worried about someone seeing us together? I quite understand." He flicked his hand at the grimy window and the sign which showed the public that the shop was open flipped over, and Severus heard the bolt slide home in the door, locking it.

"Where is your uncle?"

"At the dock, seeing to various things. I don't expect him to return soon. I was to be in charge of the shop this afternoon."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very good. Shall we go up to the flat, so we can sit down and have a civilized conversation?"

Severus nodded and led the way to the door that concealed the stairs. In the flat, he waved his former headmaster to a comfortable chair and asked whether he'd like some tea.

"Sit, Severus. Let me take care of that." With a wave of his hand, a tea tray appeared in the air before him. When they each had a cup in hand, Dumbledore regarded the young man before him quite seriously.

"So. What is this trouble you've got yourself into, Severus? You weren't very specific in your letter."

"I-I'm sorry, sir. I don't know where to start--"

Dumbledore nodded and gave him a small smile. "Let's try the beginning," he said quietly, his blue eyes twinkling kindly behind his half-moon spectacles.

Severus swallowed, then began slowly. "In-in my seventh year, I was recruited to be a Death Eater."

Dumbledore nodded and looked back at him quite calmly. "Who did this?"

Severus bit his lip. Would he be believed? "Lucius Malfoy."

Dumbledore nodded again, as though this were no surprise. "Continue."

"I-I didn't need to do anything at first. Be available," he lied, afraid that his old headmaster would cease to believe him if he said that his job was to recruit Barty Crouch's son as a Death Eater as well.

"I assume that that changed, or we would not be having this conversation," Dumbledore said quietly.

Severus drew his mouth into a line and nodded. "The Dark Lord became aware of-of a prophecy. Concerning him."

Dumbledore's eyes lit up. "Ah, so he knows about that, does he?"

Severus' eyes also opened quite wide. "You know about it?"

"The person who gave the prophecy....she was at Hogwarts, you know. When it was given."

Now Severus' mouth was open as well. "No-I didn't know." They were silent for a few moments. "The thing is-he's been trying to find out who the people in the prophecy are. He's been getting this Death Eater to work it out for him-but he was naming a lot of wrong people. A lot of the killings you've probably been hearing about...." He swallowed. Dumbledore leaned forward.

"You are perfectly safe here, Severus. I promise you that."

He shook his head. "I-I haven't killed anyone. Not-personally. But-but I stood by-and I cast the Dark Mark into the sky over the houses afterward...."

Dumbledore looked as though he was choosing his words very carefully. "Can you tell me who *did* do the killing, Severus?"

He looked at the old man, his heart in his throat. "I could," he said slowly. "But I'd be killed."

Dumbledore nodded. "I am of course ready to offer you sanctuary at Hogwarts...."

Severus bowed his head slightly. "And-and I may take you up on that, eventually. But-there's something a little more important I need to speak to you about. It's not about people who've already died, people who can't be helped. It's about someone whose death can be prevented...."

Dumbledore sat up straight, clearly very interested. "Go on," he said urgently.

"It's-it's Lily's son. Lily Evans. Potter," he said quickly, hating the name. "Lily Potter's son. The Dark Lord believes him to be one of the people in the prophecy."

Dumbledore looked like he understood everything and needed no more. "Ah. I see."

"Lily and her son-and Potter too, I reckon-need to be taken off somewhere safe. They should also know-one of their friends is a traitor. One of them is working for the Dark Lord."

He'd never seen the headmaster of Hogwarts look so interested in anything he had to say. "Who is it?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't know. I probably shouldn't even know that much. If only I had

some way of being in the room when the Dark Lord is speaking with him, without his knowing I'm there...."

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. You don't want to be in the room. You want to be able to follow the traitor when he leaves. Voldemort—" Severus winced at the name, but the headmaster went on; "—he has ways of *feeling* that people are present...." He looked thoughtful.

Severus had a sudden thought. "Potter's Invisibility Cloak!"

Dumbledore frowned. "What?"

"Potter has an Invisibility Cloak. I saw—saw him take it off once. This is to protect his family. Surely he'd let me borrow it?"

Dumbledore looked very grim. "Better let me go to him with these concerns and ask to use it. Don't worry," he added, putting his hand up to forestall Severus' objection. "I'll really be acquiring it for your use. But James needn't know that. Do you really think he'd let *you*, of all people, borrow his Invisibility Cloak? Although," he added thoughtfully, "that explains a great deal of the things he was able to get up to when he was at school..."

"Of course, sir," Severus said, swallowing, hardly believing that he'd consented to be a spy. But when he'd heard about Lily's son....when he thought about them coming after her too....And what if *he'd* been required to do it? What if he'd been told to put the Killing Curse on her, or her son? If it were Potter, he thought he could manage it....but then again, James Potter had saved his life. It was a debt that rankled. *Well, he thought stubbornly, after this the debt will be paid, Potter. You saved my life; I'll do what I can to save your worthless life and Lily and her son.*

"When do you think you will have need of the cloak, Severus?"

He thought about it. "I never know when I'm going to be summoned. Better for me to have it as soon as possible."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'll go to James. I believe the Montrose Magpies have a game tomorrow night against the Wigtown Wanderers. They're no Puddlemere United, mind you, but you can't have everything...."

Severus stood, uncertain what to do. The headmaster also stood. "Thank you, sir. Thank you for believing me. I won't let you down."

Dumbledore nodded at him. "See that you don't," he said, surprising Severus. The old man extended his hand to him and Severus took it. When he had released his hand, Dumbledore said, "I'll let myself out. I don't like to Apparate into someone's home; terribly rude, I think, but Disapparating to leave seems perfectly civilized to me, don't you think so?" he said pleasantly, as though they hadn't just been discussing Severus spying on Voldemort.

"Yes, sir. I see what you—"

And, not making a sound, Dumbledore was gone.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 27 July, 1981

Severus Snape appeared on a vivid green hillside in the Welsh countryside. A little way off, he saw the cottage. It was stone, with a thatched roof. As he drew nearer he saw that it had picturesque diamond-paned leaded windows with flowered curtains, red-painted flower boxes overflowing with plantings. He swallowed, remembering his fantasies of being married to Lily, trying not to think of James Potter living the life he thought he'd been meant to have. He put his hand on the latch for the garden gate, hesitating. Flagstones bisected the cottage garden, leading from the gate to the red-painted front door. It had a golden lion's head for a knocker, he noticed. *How Gryffindor*, he thought, then tried to push this thought away. *We're not in school. We're adults. We can talk like adults.* But suddenly, all he could think of was, *Lily is behind that door.* He opened the gate and slowly walked to the door, raising the knocker once, twice, then waiting patiently. When it opened, Severus was unprepared for the sight of Lily standing before him, looking just as she had in school, holding a baby on her hip who bore a most unfortunate resemblance to James Potter, except for having Lily's vivid green eyes.

Lily looked surprised to see him. "Severus! I—what are you doing here?"

His face was very serious. "I need to speak to you Lily. It's very important."

She stood silently, bouncing the baby up and down to pacify him. He was waving his arms about and gurgling, then started struggling.

"Down!" he said, still struggling. "*Down down down down...*"

She gave in, placing him carefully on the smooth tiled floor, on his bare feet, and he went running into the cottage, wobbling back and forth. She was wearing a summery dress and Severus tried not

to stare. Memories of their times together in the dungeons came flooding back, memories of her skin beneath his hands....

He shook himself mentally, trying to concentrate on the present. The child was walking already; he hadn't realized he might already be that advanced. Severus had no idea what babies were supposed to do at various times in their development. As he looked at Lily, the one girlfriend he'd ever had, he wondered whether he'd ever learn about this first-hand.

"Severus, I don't think you should be here." She didn't say that they were running away from anything, but he knew that until recently they lived in a flat in Cardiff. Dumbledore had said he would recommend their moving to the old Potter cottage, their summer place before they were killed in James' fifth year. He knew that Dumbledore had told them that they were in danger, but he also knew that he hadn't told them the real reason. Lily had told Dumbledore that because she was an Auror, she was worried that she and her family might be targeted. So she'd taken a leave from work and Potter was attending fewer practices, whatever he could get away with, and they'd moved with their son to the country. James Potter was attending a Montrose practice today, however, and that meant Lily would be home alone.

"Please, Lily; hear me out. May I come in?" He hoped he could keep his voice from shaking.

She looked reluctant, but finally stepped aside and allowed him to enter. The cottage was divided in half, roughly, with the sitting room taking up one half and bedrooms, seen through open doorways, on the other. A doorway in the rear of the sitting room revealed a kitchen addition. Lily sat on a couch that was perpendicular to the empty fireplace. Severus settled uncertainly into a chair on the other side of the hearth, while the baby climbed up onto the couch next to Lily and starting flicking at her earring with his fingers.

"Ouch! Harry, stop. Go play; Mummy has to talk to her friend."

Her friend. Hopefully she really did believe he was a friend. He remembered the way he'd torn up the letter she'd written to him. Not for the first time, he wondered, *Could we have got past that? Did I really have to be so stubborn and proud?*

But the small child did not get down from the couch. He sat back next to his mother, sticking his lower lip out, pouting. Suddenly, they heard what was unmistakably the sound of a car; they both found themselves sitting up and staring at the door, and only when the knocker came in contact with the painted wood did Severus realize, *Death Eaters don't knock, or drive cars. It's nothing to worry about.*

Lily looked like she'd been a bit on-edge when she'd heard the car, too. She sighed and rose to answer it, saying, "Excuse me for a minute, Severus." She left him alone with the baby; Severus eyed him suspiciously, not knowing what to expect from him. He was unaccustomed to being around babies. He tried to think of a spell that would help if the child became-too friendly.

Lily was standing at the open front door, holding the edge tightly, her knuckles quite white, as though she would slam it any second. A somewhat shrill voice cut through the thick summer heat, chilling him.

"Lily, Mum needs you to do this! I don't care if it's illegal! Isn't it enough that Daddy died in that traffic accident last year? She's all we have left!"

It was Lily's sister, he realized. *Her father died last year? She didn't say anything....* Then he realized that she hadn't confided in him for a very long time. She used to talk to him quite a lot about her mother's cancer. It sounded as though her sister was trying to get Lily to cure her.

He could glimpse the sister if he leant over a bit, to see around Lily, standing in the doorway. He knew that Petunia Dursley was a half-dozen years older than Lily, and that she'd been in the wedding party (although the only one he'd looked at that day was Lily, so he didn't really have a memory of her sister). She looked a bit horsier than he expected, and far older than twenty-seven. Lily sounded as though she'd had this conversation with her sister before, and it hadn't sunk in then either.

"Petunia, there's a reason why the magical community tries to keep Muggles from knowing about what we can do. And I'm not even sure that I could help mother, even if I didn't care about breaking the law! When witches and wizards get cancer, they usually immediately remove the cancerous cells by magic, or transfigure them, but you said Mum has it all through her! How could I remove it without killing her? And I'm not permitted to, anyway. Petunia, we can only prepare ourselves for the inevitable..."

Lily's sister's voice shook. "I will prepare. You can stay here. Don't bother coming to the funeral. You won't be welcome. Not when you could have saved her and refused. What's the point of you being a witch if you won't save her? You know what you are, and that husband of yours? Unnatural. Abnormal. How can you not save your own mother? It's just—" But the severe-looking woman couldn't continue; she buried her face in a handkerchief and turned away from the cottage

door.

"Petunia—" Lily pleaded, but Severus hear the clicking, retreating footsteps, the garden gate slamming shut, a car starting up again. Lily returned to the couch after slowly and quietly closing the door.

She raised her eyes to Severus as he said, "I'm sorry if this is a bad time, Lily, but—"

"My mother is dying and I can't do a damn thing about it and my sister hates me because of it. Is that your definition of a bad time, Severus? Because that is my definition of an absolutely shitty time, thank you very much." Severus didn't know what to say. First she was afraid that her family was being targeted, so she moved to the country and all but quit her job, now she finds that being in hiding is preventing her from being at her mother's bedside. Tears were flowing silently down her cheeks. The child had gone into his room; he was playing on the floor with some blocks and stuffed toys.

Severus and Lily sat opposite each other, looking down, not speaking. Finally, he said softly, "I came here to warn you that the Dark Lord will be coming for you. Well, actually, for Harry..."

She looked up at him, perplexed. "What are you talking about? Harry? What could he possibly want with Harry?" He knew that she was confused because Dumbledore had only mentioned their being in danger because of her being an Auror; this was the first time she was hearing about any danger to her son.

Severus glanced toward the nursery, frowning; the child was arranging some stuffed toys in a row, an impromptu parade. He looked back at Lily.

"The Dark Lord keeps careful track of omens and signs. A seeress has predicted his downfall—she gave a prophecy which some centaurs helped interpret. The centaurs have pinpointed two of the three people involved..."

"Severus! You're not making any sense. What is this prophecy?"

He frowned. "Let me see if I remember all of it: The Dark Lord will be defeated by a triangle: a lion, a Moonchild and a flame-haired daughter of war..."

"And Harry is—?"

"Evidently, he is the lion. He is a Leo, correct?"

"Yes, but so is James. Harry was born a week before his birthday; James called it his early birthday present," she smiled feebly. "Who is the Moonchild supposed to be?"

"A family named Malfoy had a son last year a few weeks before Harry was born." He bit his tongue for a moment, before he could reveal that Malfoy was a Death Eater. That would just distract her. "July seventh. Which makes him a Cancer. Those born under that sign are also called Moonchildren. I know because I'm also a Cancer."

"And the flame-haired daughter of war?"

"The centaurs are still working on that one. The confusing thing is, some of the centaurs think that there are doppelgangers for each of the people in the prophecy. They think that the Dark Lord will be defeated twice, that there are two sets of people who fulfill the prophecy..."

"Defeated twice? Defeated means defeated, doesn't it?"

"That's why it's confusing...But the Malfoys have struck a deal. They are promising to raise their son to be a servant of the Dark Lord. He has promised not to kill the child, for now. I came to plead with you, Lily. Strike a deal. Save yourselves and Harry. Don't try to fight—you can't win." He almost choked on the words, worried about how risky Dumbledore's plan was. Get the Dark Lord to believe that he will be making Harry Potter his servant, then ambush him....But Lily and James couldn't know that was the purpose, or Voldemort would be able to tell they were lying. It was a balancing act.

"What? That's why you came here? To tell me to raise my son to be Voldemort's servant?" Severus drew in his breath at the sound of the name. "How do you know all of these things, Severus? I thought you were working at an apothecary in Dunoon. How do you know about prophecies, and Voldemort coming after us? How?" She had stood and was pacing around the room nervously. She glanced into the nursery; Harry had fallen asleep on the rug, his head pillowed on a stuffed bear. She went to him and picked him up so she could put him in his cot, but the movement woke him and he fussed. She shushed him, setting him down, giving him his bear. And then she sang to him.

*Sleep, my baby, on my bosom,
Warm and cozy, it will prove,
Round thee mother's arms are folding,
In her heart a mother's love.
There shall no one come to harm thee,
Naught shall ever break thy rest;*

*Sleep, my darling babe, in quiet,
Sleep on mother's gentle breast.*

*Sleep serenely, baby, slumber,
Lovely baby, gently sleep;
Tell me wherefore art thou smiling,
Smiling sweetly in thy sleep?
Do the angels smile in heaven
When thy happy smile they see?
Dost thou on them smile while slumb'ring
On my bosom peacefully.*

Severus listened to her, trying to shut out of his head an image he'd nurtured when he was younger, of Lily, rocking their child to sleep...When the lullaby was over, she closed the nursery door quietly, and he was surprised to see her turn to face him with blazing eyes.

"You're one of them, aren't you? You're a Death Eater." Her voice was cold and assured. He tried not to open his mouth in shock, but he thought his face probably gave him away anyway. *Does she think I've come to kill her?* he wondered. He knew he had to admit the truth.

"I was—but I'm not now, Lily. You must believe me! I was recruited at the end of my seventh year at Hogwarts, and for two years I was—cultivating a son of an official who is very high up in the Ministry of Magic..." She looked shocked. He swallowed; he hadn't even told Dumbledore this. "But then I heard about this prophecy, and you and James and Harry being targeted. I went to see Dumbledore, and he—he understood why I did what I did, and promised me I would not be punished, that I could be a spy, I could be useful." It wasn't worth mentioning, he felt, that when he'd first gone to see Dumbledore he hadn't been at Hogwarts. "I haven't hurt anyone, Lily." *I've stood by and watched young Barty Crouch kill, however...* "I recruited one young man who was angry with his father, and if it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else who recruited him. Please—promise me you'll say that you'll raise Harry to serve the Dark Lord. You don't have to mean it! Just say it! Save your life—Harry's life—James' life. Do whatever is necessary..." As he continued, he began to realize that it was all falling on deaf ears. She would never do anything he suggested.

She glared at him with complete and utter hatred in her eyes.

"Get out."

"Lily—"

"Get out now! Before I seriously hurt you..."

Severus swallowed. "If you won't cooperate, at least promise me you'll go into hiding. Find a safe place."

"Oh, we'll go into hiding, all right. Do you think we'd stay here, where you know where to find us? I can't believe you and I ever—ever—" she trailed off, looking sickened.

He swallowed, seeing her so repulsed by him. *Why did I ever let you go? How could I have let my pride be so important?* "Please, Lily. Don't push me away. I want to help."

But he was the last person from whom she was going to accept help. Now she had her wand in her hand; she looked angry enough to do the Killing Curse. "I said get out. While you still only have two arms and two legs." Severus did not think it was an idle threat. She had become a formidable witch and Auror.

He rose and left reluctantly, waiting until he was in the garden to Disapparate, watching her as she stood in the doorway of the picturesque little cottage.

She never lowered her wand.

* * * * *

Severus sat at the bar at the Leaky Cauldron, holding a glass with a very small amount of firewhiskey in the bottom. Suddenly the back door to Diagon Alley opened and Albus Dumbledore entered. He wore a grey traveling cloak over black robes; the cloak's hood was up, so that all that could be seen of his head was a sliver of his face, nonetheless recognizable. His spectacles glinted in the flickering candlelight and firelight in the pub. Severus could not see his eyes.

Dumbledore's nod to old Tom behind the bar was almost imperceptible. Tom gave an infinitesimal nod in return, and Dumbledore quietly proceeded down a corridor to one of the private dining rooms. Severus put a silver Sickle on the bar and, carrying his glass, walked quietly down the same corridor. He went into the same room as Dumbledore, hoping no one at the bar had noticed this.

The headmaster was seated at a dining table in the parlor; he had taken down his hood, revealing a grim expression. Severus sat next to him but did not look at the old man. He contemplated the

glass he'd brought with him for a moment before downing the rest of the firewhiskey, unable to stop a small gasp from escaping his lips, which he had to pull back from his teeth in response to the way the firewhiskey burnt his throat. He put the glass down with a thunk, still not looking at Dumbledore. Another silence followed.

"Should you be drinking that?" Dumbledore suddenly asked him.

Severus shifted his eyes toward Dumbledore but did not move his head at all. "No. Bad for my liver." He traced the rim of the empty glass with one long, pale finger.

Dumbledore finally broke his silence. "How did it go?"

Severus tilted the glass, gazing into it, wishing he had more. "Not well." He stared at a spot on the wall. "I told her about the prophecy," he said quietly. "She didn't believe me. But she understands that the Dark Lord believes it, that they're in danger. I think they're going into hiding. She-knows that I was recruited. I tried to tell her I wasn't Dark anymore, but she kicked me out..."

Dumbledore put his hand on Snape's arm. "I know you're fine, Severus. I will vouch for you before anyone who doubts that. There is a charm that will help them hide—the Fidelius Charm. I'll contact Sirius Black about it. He'll need to be in on it. They're closer to him than to Pettigrew. And Remus..."

"He's a werewolf! Do you know how many werewolves are serving him now? They're flocking to him."

Dumbledore sighed. "I'd like to believe Remus wouldn't do that—" he began, but he looked doubtful. "You go back to Dunoon, Severus. You've done what you can. If you hear anything, you know where to find me."

He stood abruptly and Disapparated without a sound.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 29 September, 1981

Lily stared out the window at the garden, her hand over her belly. She watched Dumbledore Disapparate silently, wishing she could feel the baby moving already. It was so comforting when she could first feel Harry; he had been engaged in such acrobatics inside her that she'd been convinced that she had another Quidditch player on her hands and he was already practicing flying. James had laughed at the idea.

She gazed at the now-empty garden; she couldn't get used to living in the country again, so far from the conveniences of Cardiff. Godric's Hollow was beautiful, but sometimes she had to get out of the cottage and walk through the woods; something about the little house gave her an odd feeling, made the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. She couldn't put her finger on it.

Without turning to look at her husband, she said, "Do you think he took it well? Our saying that we didn't want him to be the Secret Keeper? It was rather nice of him to offer..."

James was sitting on the couch, tickling Harry, making him giggle uncontrollably. "He agreed with us; since that spy of his told him that one of our friends is a traitor, if we didn't ask *one* of them to be the Secret Keeper, it would look fishy. Anyway, we thanked him for telling us about the Fidelius Charm. And he even said himself that he's keeping his ear to the ground—"

"—or his spy is," she said, wondering about this.

"Right. His spy is. And he'll tell us as soon as we really need to panic, as soon as we should enact the charm. He says that we're in no immediate danger, that since Harry's a baby, You-Know-Who isn't exactly in a tearing hurry."

"But he'll want to do it soon," she said, turning to him. "While he's still helpless," she said with a catch in her voice, watching James playing with Harry. The room filled with the music of baby laughter and she couldn't help but smile, especially when Harry grabbed a fistful of his father's hair and James' face contorted into a bizarre combination of pain and delight, as he didn't want to frighten Harry by screaming in agony.

"Do you need help?" she asked him, laughing, but before he bothered to answer, she crossed the room and prised the chubby little fingers from James' messy hair, so exactly like Harry's but even more abundant.

James sighed with relief, but a moment later he made a dreadful face. "Eew. Stinky Harry," he said, holding the laughing child at arm's length. "Maybe Mummy can take care of that—?" he said, looking hopefully at Lily. She rolled her eyes and took Harry from him.

While she was cleaning him, he gave several rather large yawns and rubbed his eyes with his little fists, making her heart turn over. When she was done, she held him and rocked him to sleep for his nap, even though they'd managed to train him to go to sleep on his own, finally. She just

wanted to hold him, to feel the warm little body against hers, to hear the soft breath sounds and watch the rise and fall of his chest. When she thought about what had happened to Sam and his family, she felt somehow that everything she cared most about was unspeakably fragile, and every moment she was with James or Harry had to be savored. *You have to live to see your new little sister*, she told him silently.

After she put him into his cot, gently removing his thumb from his mouth, she closed the nursery door softly and went to the kitchen, where James had made a pot of tea. As he poured for her, she murmured, "Thanks," holding the hot cup between her trembling hands, the warmth comforting her and calming her. She thought again of the news Dumbledore had brought them and she looked at James, who seemed to be thinking about it too; his face was very white. *How can one of our friends be a traitor?* she thought. It had only been a week earlier that they'd all been gathered in the cottage to celebrate Sirius' birthday, only a week earlier that they were oblivious to having had a traitor under their roof. Lily wracked her brains, trying to remember whether anyone's behavior had seemed off or out-of-character.

Lily had been glad to see Remus, and had wanted to have time to talk to him, to find out how he was; every time she'd seen him since Emil's murder, he'd looked so forlorn. She was very worried about him. But Cecilia wouldn't let her have time alone to talk to Remus; she'd cornered Lily in the kitchen for the *purpose*, it seemed to her, of having a row. Cecilia had come with Sirius, as they were seeing each other again after a separation of several months. Cecilia had told Lily that Sirius still fancied *her*, as though it was an accusation and Lily had actually *done* something to lead him on, which she'd told Cecilia she hadn't. Cecilia hadn't seemed satisfied about this and even suggested that perhaps it wasn't just Harry who was in danger—perhaps James was, too, because if both of them were disposed of, Lily would be on her own.

"James in danger? From Sirius?" she had said to her erstwhile best friend, incredulous. "If that's what you think of him, why are you seeing him again?"

Cecilia's eyes had gone wide at that. "Oh, trying to talk me out of seeing him for some reason?" she said suspiciously, making Lily throw up her hands. She just couldn't seem to get the hang of friendships with women. The loss of Sam suddenly felt even more painful, and she was determined to redouble her efforts to go off and talk to Remus.

"From Sirius what?" came a sardonic voice from the doorway of the kitchen. Sirius stood surveying the two of them with interest, as though quite amused that the pair of them might have been discussing him. Lily and Cecilia had both clamped their mouths shut, but despite her having implied to Cecilia that the very idea of Sirius being the traitor was utterly ludicrous, she couldn't deny that she was watching Sirius very carefully, especially after he'd gone and Cecilia had told her about some very suspicious things he'd done, things which had convinced her that he still fancied Lily rotten—including something about how inconvenient Harry was sometimes, as he monopolized so much of Lily's time.

We should leave Harry with someone we trust, like Aunt Othalie, and go away, pretending we're taking him with us....On the other hand, if we do that and someone finds out where he really is, or if they think we've got him and they kill us.... Lily met her husband's eye, her heart in her throat.

"Oh, god," she said. "Harry. If anything happens to us—Harry—"

James nodded. "Right. Good point. I mean, who's to say we can trust this spy? What if the spy is either lying to Dumbledore, being fed false information because You-Know-Who *knows* he's a spy, or is just plain *wrong*? What if *we're* the targets, not Harry? We need to make sure that it's all taken care of. We'll go to my dad's old solicitor first thing in the morning. He's ancient, but that's why he's good; he trained up under a wizard who knew both Muggle and wizarding law, and so did the solicitor *he* read law with, and so on, going back for generations. We should have done this already, made sure there was something in writing about this, but it's so hard to think about—about the possibility of—"

Lily nodded. "Yes, of course it is. But what will *he* say when we tell him that he's not the one named in the papers? Do you think he'll know that we suspect that he's the traitor?"

James frowned at her. "Why should *he* expect to be named Harry's guardian?"

"Why? Because even though you didn't bother to consult me about it, Sirius *is* his godfather. It's the usual sort of thing, isn't it?"

James dropped his jaw. "You think the traitor is *Sirius*?"

She drew her mouth into a line. "Who were *you* talking about when you said, Why should he expect to be named Harry's guardian? Surely you don't mean Peter...."

James spluttered, "Peter? A Death Eater? Only if he grew a spine, perhaps. I meant Remus, of course. Who else?"

"Remus!" she exclaimed. "Oh, come on, you can't actually believe—"

"Why not? Have you seen the *Prophet*? About all of the werewolves flocking to serve Voldemort now?"

She glared at her husband with a clenched jaw. "You mean that dreck written by that Skeeter woman? He would never do that and you know it. That's complete rubbish. He's one of your dearest friends in the world! How can you think he'd do such a thing?"

"How can you think it's *Sirius*? He's like a brother to me! Remus, on the other hand—"

She glared. "*What?*" she practically growled at him, feeling very protective of Remus, as though she was back in the cell at the Ministry and Frank Longbottom, not her husband, was the one at whom she was screaming.

James swallowed, seeing how fierce she looked. Well, he knew she was opinionated, and in general he thought that was appealing, her strength of mind. But right now....

"Well, I admit that the three of us—Sirius, Peter and I—could have been better friends to him since leaving school. We could have spent more full moons with him. He seems so separate from us all now. Perhaps it's our fault. Peter's been living with us off and on, although not since we moved out here, and we see Sirius quite a lot....But until the party last week, I can't even tell you the last time I saw Remus. And—I don't want to alarm you, Lily, but did you know he was accused of murder? Maybe the case didn't land on your desk because they knew you were, um, connected with him...."

Lily bit her tongue, wanting to know how James had heard about *that*. But she didn't dare ask. "I've had lunch with Remus about once a month, because I've made an *effort* to contact him. And yes, I heard about the charges against him," she said, "and the evidence pointed to someone else, who was subsequently caught. He was acquainted with the victim and it was obvious that it was a werewolf killing, so Remus was brought in for questioning. He was very broken up about it, you know. His friend was killed and he was being called a murderer! Not that you'd know about the friends Remus has made since we finished school," she added, finding it very hard at this point not to reveal Remus' secret.

James ran his fingers through his hair, which was already standing on end, as usual. There was no discernible difference. "I know you think it's our fault, Lily, that the three of us should be making time for him during the full moon. I'm not disagreeing with that. It's true. But it's not like he's come round much *asking* us to join him on those nights, either. He seems to have become quite self-sufficient." James couldn't deny that he felt a pang of guilt; they'd gone through so much to become Animagi. What was it for now?

"He doesn't want to impose!" she said, frustrated with this line of reasoning. "And he *did* ask you on the night his friend was killed. Or the night after, rather. It wasn't your fault you had a match to play, but still....Do you honestly think he prefers the Ministry lock-up? Or sitting in a dungeon at Sirius' house all by himself? I'd keep him company if I could—" Then she wished she could take that back; it sounded like something that would be all too easy for James to take the wrong way.

James examined her face, wondering what she meant by that. "Lily, admit it—you're not really capable of being rational about him. And you know how he felt about you—how he might still feel about you. I *heard* him telling you he loved you, when you were in the hospital wing. I could see he really meant it."

"That was years ago!" she interjected, frustrated.

He ignored her outburst. "Remus gave you up because he thought he didn't deserve you, but you should have seen him every minute you were with Snape. I could see that it was eating him up inside. He obviously regretted pushing you away...."

Her jaw dropped. "Are you saying that you think he still fancies me? James, I can tell you for a certainty that he does not. Yes, he cares about me, and I care about him, but not like *that*. He shall always be a dear, dear friend. These days I think I'm a better friend to him than any of *you* are."

He was shaking, trying not to hit or throw something. "Not like *what*? When the pair of you were supposed to be *friends*, you were shagging in the common room!" he burst out, his voice rising. He'd almost added like animals.' He was barely able to control himself now. "And he broke your *leg*!"

She stood and put her undrunk mug of tea on the table with a thunk and glared at him, shaking her head in disbelief. He was starting to frighten her now just a bit, even despite her Auror training. "I cannot believe you are bringing that up now. How long have you held that in? How long have you wanted to mention that?"

He rose and walked over to her, sensing that they were getting into very dangerous territory indeed. He put his hands on her arms, trying to be as gentle as possible. "Lily, I just mean—I think he's been in denial for a long time about how he feels about you. Every time Sirius tries to arrange a date for him with a nice girl, he manages to find something else to do. At the party, Sirius told me that he'd finally agreed to go out with Cecilia's old Hufflepuff friend, Arlene, and all Remus did was

talk about *you* the entire night.”

Lily looked a little guilty now, he thought. “He–he did?”

“Yeah. Oddly enough, they didn’t go out again,” he added sarcastically. “And there are other times when he lies about where he’s been and who he’s been with. I *have* tried to be his friend recently, for your information. Every time I suggest getting together, he’s already busy, and it’s a different ridiculous excuse every time. He’s been lying to me, Lily. I can tell–I’ve been friends with Remus long enough that I *know*. So–he won’t say who he’s associating with, he clearly still fancies you, and one of our friends is supposed to be a traitor who’s trying to get Harry killed, and for all we know, maybe me too. Why? Well, maybe it could be because our werewolf friend has become a Death Eater and thinks that if he delivers our son to Voldemort that I’ll be killed as another reward to him and you’ll be given to Remus....”

“No!” she cried, enraged. “Remus would never do that! And the reason he sometimes goes off with people you don’t know is–” She froze; she’d almost spilled Remus’ secret; it was becoming more difficult by the moment to keep it inside. Her husband looked at her expectantly.

“Well?” James prompted her. When she clamped her mouth shut, he threw up his hands. “Oh, that’s just lovely. So, one of my best friends has become a Death Eater and still fancies my wife, and it’s starting to look like she still fancies him, too.”

She was so angry with him she could barely see. “Do not talk about me in the third person, as though I’m not even here!” she said through clenched teeth. “I do *not* fancy Remus. I love *you*, you stupid prat!” she spat at him.

“Oh, really? He was your first, after all. I remember seeing the pair of you, kissing on the common room hearth rug. I remember the way you–” His voice caught, seeing how beautiful she was at this moment, even though she had dark circles under her eyes from the new pregnancy, the morning sickness that came well before the dawn and disrupted her sleep. Suddenly, he couldn’t bring himself to say it, to say that he remembered how she looked with Remus Lupin, letting him kiss her neck, throwing back her head with abandon, so passionate and free. *Remus was the first one to make her lose control that way*, he thought, his stomach clenching with this jealous thought. *I wish it had been me. I wish she’d never been with anyone else, even kissing anyone else, apart from me.*

“What?” Lily said at last, her eyes blazing. He felt deflated, the fight gone out of him. His hands hung by his side as he shook his head, his eyes closed.

“We can’t let this tear us apart, Lily,” he whispered. He felt out of breath, as though he’d run a marathon. He looked up at her; she stood looking back at him helplessly.

“No, we can’t,” she agreed, feeling like crying. “But I will not accept that Remus has become a Death Eater, that he would betray us.” She spoke quietly now, hoping that he was feeling calmer. “You see, the reason I started thinking it was Sirius was that when Cecilia came to the party last Wednesday, we had a little row.” She paused. “She’s convinced that Sirius still fancies me.”

James made a face. “*What?* That’s ridiculous. He was our best man!”

“That doesn’t mean anything!” she said impatiently. “All of the things you said about Remus trying to get rid of you and Harry to have me all to himself–what if that’s true about Sirius, instead? According to Cecilia–” She hesitated. Should she reveal this? It was rather private.

“Well, go on,” he prompted her, standing with his arms crossed on his chest now.

“She said he was crying out my name in his sleep,” she said quietly. “And that a few times, when they were eating dinner or just hanging about in her flat, he’d just call her Lily’ without even noticing or thinking about it. A couple of times he asked her what he’d done wrong, as he hadn’t any clue, and she didn’t tell him. He didn’t even notice,” she said again.

James’ eyes went very wide; he’d had no idea. Lily nodded.

“And Cecilia could swear that he said something about getting rid of Harry. She was terrified of letting on that she’d heard, in case he tried to get rid of *her*, for knowing too much.” Lily swallowed.

James took her in his arms, holding her tightly. “We’ll find out who it is, love, don’t worry,” he whispered to her. A nagging voice in the back of his mind said, *And it’s not as though he cares about breaking the law, with his flying motorbike. Nor does he care about killing someone; he almost killed Snape when we were in school, and although there were many reasons besides Lily that made Sirius feel like doing that, including the danger of his revealing Remus’ secret, Lily had been a large part of it. In fact, James reminded himself, Sirius used to have a complete meltdown whenever he saw Lily and Severus Snape together. He’d been furious about their relationship from the start. Not heartsick, like Remus. Furious.* James wavered, suddenly doubting his best friend, the closest thing he had in the world to a brother. *Could it be Sirius?* he wondered.

“Thank god for Peter,” she said with feeling. James nodded.

“That’s true,” he agreed. “I don’t know what we’d do without Peter.”

He held her tightly while their tea grew cold, both feeling glad that they had at least one friend other than Dumbledore on whom they knew they could always count:

Peter Pettigrew.

Destiny

Thursday, 8 October, 1981

Remus growled, his mouth on her throat. Her mouth was on his shoulder, and he thought he felt her teeth break skin. And then they were just panting, trying to get their breaths back. Remus kissed the skin he'd come very close to marking with his teeth, as she'd marked him. He withdrew from her, rolling over on his back, staring up at the dirty ceiling over the bed (he didn't want to know why it looked like some Bertie Botts beans were embedded in the plaster) feeling calm and relaxed now that his body was no longer completely ruling him.

He now had the freedom to gaze up at the ceiling, thinking about his life and how utterly cocked-up it was. He didn't have a steady job, only worked sporadically at a Muggle warehouse in Manchester. His parents worried about him, but he felt that there was almost nothing about his life that he could reveal to them. The previous month he'd gone all the way up to Hogwarts to spend the full moon in the Shrieking Shack, rather than the Ministry lock-up or Ascog Castle (where he probably would have been alone anyway). It was the eve of the full moon once more and even though he'd started seeing a slightly mysterious young man from Dublin, Padraig, he was back at the werewolf pub, where he'd been unable to resist the advances of a particularly fetching red-haired woman who was probably about ten years older than him. She gave her name as Mona, although he wasn't convinced that he should believe that, and he'd given his name as Moony, which had made her laugh (at least she wasn't laughing at his given name, though). He'd explained that it was a nickname from school, which was the truth.

Mona lay beside him, also staring up at the filthy ceiling. "Whew!" she said, still breathing hard. "I'm so glad those sodding Ministry of Magic wankers haven't managed to get this place closed down. I heard they were threatening to after that wizard was killed in that London pub. Did you hear about that? If it was a *normal* person, do you think they'd have been half so concerned? I just can't abide wizards..."

Remus cleared his throat and sat up on his elbows. "Er-why?" he ventured. He'd become accustomed to hearing anti-wizard and anti-Ministry talk in the bar downstairs, but he'd never really dared to ask any of the Muggle werewolves he'd met *why* they felt that way.

She sat up, looking amazed. "Oh, come on! *Why?* Try because they tell us what to do and where to go, but we've got no say in their laws and government unless we're witches or wizards, and have you ever met one of *them* who was one of *us*?"

"Erm—" Remus said awkwardly, but she wasn't really listening to him, just hurtling on. It was obviously a pet topic with her.

"I mean, it's bad enough that I was bitten to start with, and that I lost my best friend the same night," she said, a choke in her throat, "but then her brother hauls me off to this Werewolf Registry, and—"

"Her *brother*? What?" Remus was confused; he thought she didn't like witches and wizards.

"Oh, my best friend wasn't a witch," she said, realizing why he was confused. "Her brother was what they call a Muggle-born wizard. Is. Whatever. I didn't know about that until after I was bitten, of course."

"Of course," he said quickly. "What-what happened? Unless you'd rather not—"

"No, it's okay. I don't mind telling other werewolves. I was on a camping outing with some school friends. We were all getting ready to go off to university in a fortnight and wanted to have some time together before we went our separate ways. It was only supposed to be four of us: me, my boyfriend, Clive, Amy—my best friend—and her boyfriend, Luke. Then our parents decided they didn't want the risk of our having two shacking-up' tents, as my dad put it, rather than a boys' tent and a girls'

tent. So Amy's brother Edwin was supposed to come along as a chaperone. He's about five years older than Amy. Or was," she said with a catch in her voice. "That meant that we had to have three in one tent. No funny business.' So we were all asleep after spending the day hiking. Amy and I were in our tent, Clive, Luke and Edwin were in theirs, and we heard this—this weird *noise*..."

Remus swallowed, beginning to shake. He'd lived with being a werewolf for as long as he could remember; he couldn't imagine going from living a normal life, thinking you had a world of possibilities ahead of you, and then having all of that change in a moment. He'd never felt that freedom, that anything was possible for him. His life had always been about limitations.

"What happened?" he said hoarsely, unable to stop himself.

She swallowed, drawing her knees up to her chest. Remus was suddenly aware that she was naked in more than one sense. "It attacked Amy's side of the tent first," she whispered, staring at the wall. "I screamed and ran, just mindlessly ran. The wolf ran after me; it was too fast and got me on the ankle. But then—Edwin did something. I didn't realize until later that he'd cast some kind of spell, using a wand. I thought it was a weapon of some sort that he was holding. The werewolf released my ankle. I was able to run back to the boys and the three of us tried to get Amy out of the tent and into the car."

She put her head down on her knees. "So much blood...so *much*." Remus thought she might be crying, but he couldn't see her face. "And then, just as we'd got her into the car, the werewolf sort of shook off the spell Edwin had put on him—which I hadn't realized was a spell, since I didn't know about magic yet—and it started to come at us. There was no way we could have all climbed into the car and shut the doors quickly enough. Luckily, Clive pulled out the flare gun we had for emergencies..."

Remus frowned. "Flare gun? But surely you didn't have time to wait for help."

She lifted her face and laughed ruefully. "He didn't shoot it into the air. As the werewolf was coming at us, he shot it in the face, point blank."

Remus winced instinctively. "Still—that wouldn't kill a werewolf."

"No, but it stopped him long enough for us to get into the car and drive off. We didn't know that Amy had had her neck snapped. We thought bleeding was what we had to worry about. We drove to the nearest hospital..."

Remus's instinct was to put his arm around her, but he didn't know her at all, even though they'd just had sex. He remained where he was, not touching her.

"And *then*—" She ground the words out angrily, lifting her head. He could see that her eyes were blazing. "Then after we'd taken Amy to hospital and found out that she was *dead*, my bite was treated, and almost immediately after, Edwin threw me into the car, leaving Clive and Luke stranded. He basically *kidnapped* me. He was babbling things at me about his being a wizard and my having been bitten by a werewolf, and all I could think was that because of his grief over Amy he was barking mad, you know? I mean—nothing he was saying was making *any* sense. Wizards? Werewolves? I was starting to quite panic. I was in this car with a complete nutter who was mad with grief and I didn't know where he was taking me—"

"Where *did* he take you?" Remus dared to ask.

"To a pub. Except that I couldn't actually see it until he was opening the door. I can't really explain it. It's like I *knew* there was something there, I could sort of see it out of the corner of my eye, but as soon as I looked right at it, there was nothing there..."

Remus nodded. "Muggle-repelling charm," he said without thinking. She also nodded.

"Right. Thanks. I can never keep their idiotic terminology straight. Don't know how you do. So we went into the pub, and *that* was full of more nutters! People wearing purple or green cloaks and pointed hats; you should have seen it. I turned around to leave and he took out this *stick*, pointed it at the door and said something that didn't sound like English. I couldn't get the door open—and then I realized that I was pulling at a doorknob that was just mounted in a solid wall. There was no door there anymore. It had vanished."

Remus coughed suddenly, trying to pretend that he was just clearing his throat. "Erm, I've heard they' can do things like that..."

"Well, I didn't even know there was a they.' I mean—I didn't believe in magic or werewolves or vampires or any of that. It was *fantasy*! And then he dragged me to a huge fireplace and threw some dirt into it. The flames turned green and he pulled me toward it. Well, then I was certain he was mad. He was trying to kill himself and take me with him! I pulled back. It worked. I was able to keep him from the flames. I felt—strong. Stronger than I'd ever been. But he pulled out the *stick* again and shouted something. Pet-something. And I couldn't move after that! I felt him sort of pick me up like a large doll and step into the fire, and I thought I was going to die, of course. I kept waiting for a burning sensation, but instead we were whirling around and I just remember it being

warm..." She shrugged. "And from then on I've been owned body and soul by the bloody Ministry of Magic. You?" she added conversationally.

He swallowed. "I-I was very young when I was bitten. Don't actually remember anything about it." Which was true; everything he knew was from what his mother had told him.

She grimaced. "Poor kid. You want to do something now? There are a lot of us who are going to hear this bloke speak. But we could go have dinner first..." She rose and began to dress, evidently feeling quite refreshed. He shook his head.

"No-I'm meeting someone. He'll be waiting."

She nodded. "Right. Does he know-?" She waggled her eyebrows suggestively. He shook his head.

"We're not there yet."

He wasn't anywhere with Padraig. He'd even denied to Lily that he had a new boyfriend-of sorts-so that she wouldn't pump him for information about him, especially for information about how close they were. He'd had to lie to Sirius and James and Peter as well (when he'd seen them at all, which was as little as possible, to avoid having to tell too many lies), as he still hadn't told them that he was attracted to both men and women. And he didn't know quite how to approach the werewolf subject with Padraig, let alone the issue of his being a wizard. He only knew that sleeping with Mona had calmed him enough that he stood a chance of controlling himself when he saw him later.

A chance.

He'd immediately been seduced by Padraig's voice, and was embarrassed to have admitted to him, within a few minutes of meeting him, that his Irish accent made him go weak at the knees. *Oh, yes*, he'd thought after the words had escaped his lips; *just start swooning over him, why don't you?* It didn't help that he was about ten years older than Remus, with a world-weary smirk and light blue eyes which seemed to be glittering at him constantly. He had a heavy brow line, just stopping short of being one continuous stretch of hair, but somehow this was actually one of his most attractive features, rather than a drawback. His brows were very expressive, and in fact, Remus felt like Padraig was constantly smirking at him with his full lips and one raised eyebrow, which simply made Remus long to kiss him senseless, wipe the smugness off his face once and for all. He had a day-laborer's large strong hands, which Remus found it very difficult not to look at (they had, actually, met while working at the warehouse in Manchester). When Remus had seen him without his shirt he thought he'd attack him then and there, in front of all of the other blokes who also worked at the warehouse.

He thought about the fact that he hadn't been in touch with his friends for quite some time, not even Lily, but surely if something was wrong they would tell him....

"Are you sure you won't come?" Mona persisted. "He's supposed to be quite something. It's this wizard who thinks we werewolves have been screwed over by the sodding Ministry of Magic. He says we're powerful magical creatures and should command a lot more respect. Haven't you seen the notices down in the bar? Maybe with his help we can stop being second-class citizens. Make those other wizards and witches sit up and take notice."

Remus paled, holding onto the bed for support; he'd been in the middle of putting his trousers on and nearly fell over. "What? You-you don't want to go to something like that. Trust me. I-I thought you didn't trust wizards?"

She finished buttoning her blouse and pulled a jumper over her head. "Not generally, no. But he sounds like he's on our side. I rather like that. *Powerful magical creatures*. It's true. We're magical, we're powerful, and it's about time we stopped letting the effing Ministry walk all over us. Just because we're not wizards doesn't mean we're not human."

Remus tried to control his shaking. "Well, maybe I will come..." he said uncertainly. He'd find a way to tell Padraig he had to cancel. No one had asked him to be a spy, but he felt that he couldn't not go to the werewolf meeting; he had to know what Voldemort was going to say to the werewolves. Hopefully no one there would recognize him for a wizard. He hadn't come to the pub in his robes, just the shabby Muggle jeans, jumper and coat he'd worn to his job earlier. *No one must know that I'm a wizard*. Maybe he could give some information to Lily after going to the meeting....

"On second thought," he said to Mona, nodding, "I think I'll call my friend and cancel. Why don't we find somewhere to have our tea-the food here is dreadful-and then go to this meeting?"

She grinned at him. "Now you're talking! I don't know when I've been so excited; for the first time I'm almost glad to be a werewolf..."

Remus followed her from the room, thinking ruefully, *I wish I could say the same...*

* * * * *

Saturday, 17 October, 1981

Mother Crispin sighed, looking out her office window at the children playing in the yard. It was a beautiful autumn day, still warm, but with that bite in the air which required wool socks instead of cotton, jackets instead of cardigans. Some of the children—girls, for the most part—were shuffling through a pile of flame-colored leaves, laughing, tossing armfuls of dry, papery remnants of summer at each other and squealing with delight. Others were jumping rope or playing statues. The boys were on the front lawn, playing rounders. *The boys and Anna*, she reminded herself.

She could see Anna Burroughs—she'd chosen her own surname—standing in the distance, bent over, her hands on her knees, watching intently. The boy she was watching was standing uncertainly with the wooden bat on his left shoulder, waiting for the ball. When it was finally released, Mother Crispin felt like she was watching a meticulously choreographed dance. The ball hurtled toward the waiting boy, who started moving the bat at just the right moment to strike the ball with a sharp *crack!* He dropped the bat after a split second of taking in the fact that he'd actually managed to hit it, then began pumping his thin arms and legs, running flat-out with all his might.

In the meantime, the ball was arcing up, up, up. The boys were trying to move into position to catch it, shifting about on the grass rather uncertainly, squinting up into the painfully blue sky. The ball seemed to hang in mid-air for an eternity; all eyes were on the tiny spinning sphere. Finally, it was falling, falling...right toward Anna. Mother Crispin held her breath as Anna caught it. She laughed with glee, a sound the old nun heard far too seldom from her, and then Mother Crispin found that she was also laughing. The boys on Anna's side rushed her, lifting her to their shoulders, cheering. Her catch had won the game.

Mother Crispin could not help grinning; Anna had been especially morose since September. She had told Mother Crispin, the first summer that she'd been living at the orphanage, that she seemed to remember having a birthday party in August when she was younger, so Mother Crispin chose a birthday for her: the twenty-seventh of August. Anna had accepted it without comment.

She also seemed to have no opinion of her new school, which was the local comprehensive high school. The younger children at the orphanage were all educated at St. Columba's parish school, but now that Anna had turned eleven, she was too old for that. The orphanage could not bear the cost of older children attending St. Mark's Academy, which was very highly regarded but not cheap.

Anna had always done well in her studies, often coming top of the year. (She'd sulked if someone else had top marks), but she was also frequently reprimanded for being cheeky to the teachers (in the calmest, no-I'm-not-trying-to-be-cheeky way that there was). And sometimes, when other children did not observe the warning signs that she wanted to be left alone, odd things happened. A number of children, for instance, had decided to pull her plaits on the first day of school. They had all experienced violent shocks. Her hair simply seemed to be *crackling* with electricity. One boy who tried it *twice* found himself hurtling backwards across the room on his second try, his hands blackened and burnt and his shoes still standing where he'd been the moment that he'd tried to pull her hair. Little wisps of smoke were still emerging from the forlorn-looking shoes.

Anna had reportedly smiled sweetly at the teacher and said, "I'm sorry. I must have scuffed my feet a bit on a carpet somewhere. Perhaps it was back at the orphanage. I don't think anyone had better touch me for a while." She smiled again and the flustered teacher had agreed, although he'd regarded her with a great deal of suspicion and had spoken to Mother Crispin about it afterward. (The headmistress reportedly refused to go near the orphanage; it was rumored that Mother Crispin had put her in her place years ago, but no one knew more than that about the enmity between them.)

The hair-pulling incident had occurred during the French lesson, and Mother Crispin was not feeling very sympathetic toward Mr. Linden for allowing his students to pull Anna's hair and then responding as though the entire thing was Anna's fault.

"I don't see the point of belaboring this after the fact, as it is a *fait accompli*," she said to him impatiently. "After all—"

"A *what?*" the frail-looking man said in bewilderment, his watery blue eyes squinting at her in confusion.

She closed her own eyes, partly so she couldn't be distracted by his dreadful black wig, which she suspected he'd put on sideways, and counted to ten inside her head. When she dared open her eyes again she said, "I thought you were the French teacher?"

He nodded. "Yes, yes. I am. But you said something about fate, I believe." She looked blankly at him.

One, two, three, four, five, six, she counted silently again, focusing this time on Mr. Linden's rather ugly red and orange plaid bow-tie. "At any rate," she said briskly, knowing now that she shouldn't try to use French with the French teacher, "I will see to it that Anna does not scuff her shoes upon the carpet before going to school in the morning if you will see to it that your students

are paying attention to the lesson instead of messing about and pulling her hair. Good day," she added, dismissing him from her office as though he was one of her charges, although she was usually far less terse with the children; adults tried her patience in a way that children never did.

After she'd seen the French teacher out of the orphanage, stepping carefully around the girl who was diligently mopping the intricately patterned tile floor in the hall, Mother Crispin had stopped to watch the mopping process with keen interest. She'd never really considered how the building was kept clean; she knew that she paid a cleaning staff, but it was her assistant's job to hire and schedule such people. Sister Martha did an exemplary job of seeing to it that Mother Crispin never had to think about this and, as a result, she'd never thought about it.

She feared that she was unnerving the girl doing the mopping, especially as she kept watching Mother Crispin out of the corner of her eye, while simultaneously trying to appear to be utterly fascinated by her task. Not wanting to prolong the poor girl's discomfort, she cleared her throat and said, "Quite a job that is, I imagine."

The girl looked up in mid-swab and seemed like she was trying to pretend not to be startled. "Er, yes ma'am," she said uncertainly, returning to her work after a moment's hesitation.

Now Mother Crispin was trying to work out how to get out of the increasingly-uncomfortable situation. The girl was still eyeing her furtively as she worked. Mother Crispin was starting to fear that the unfortunate girl was expecting to get the sack.

"So," she said brightly, her voice sounding absurdly loud; there was a slight echo in the hall. "After the floor is dry, you put the carpets down again? Do you have someone to help you with that? Are they heavy?"

Now the girl straightened up and *stared* at Mother Crispin. "We—we don't have no carpets, ma'am," she said cautiously, in case, perhaps, Mother Crispin should suddenly accuse her of having stolen them. "We never have done," she added a little more stoutly. Mother Crispin frowned, staring at the floor; the pattern was a perfectly familiar repetition of ecru octagons and brown diamonds. That was the field design; centered before the door was a diamond of maroon, ochre, blue and white tiles, with a large tile in the center of the diamond bearing a cross design. This tile floor, as far as Mother Crispin could remember, had never been obscured by a floor covering of any kind.

"Not even a small one, here, by the door?" she persisted, even though she could see that there was no light rectangle of tiles near the entrance, as there should be if there had been even a small mat.

The girl looked somewhat defiant now; she had ceased her mopping. "Nuffin', ma'am. Not even a hanky-sized one." Mother Crispin felt like the girl was being fresh now and sniffed.

"Well, we probably should have something just inside the door, to catch the dirt and mud, especially when the weather is poor. I'll authorize Sister Martha to purchase something appropriate."

The girl hesitated before saying, "Yes, ma'am," more deferentially now, returning to her work.

Mother Crispin sighed as she watched the children carry Anna on their shoulders, saw the light in her eyes as she laughed. If only the girl could have a nice home, with a loving mother and father, maybe a pet...But none of Anna's placements had worked out, and some of the prospective parents had reported some quite odd occurrences in an effort to pull back from appearing to be interested in her.

She was startled by the sound of screeching tires and a soft thud, followed by a surprised-sounding yelp, and then silence. Most of the children seemed to be paralyzed, but suddenly, Anna jumped down from her victorious perch and raced for the gate that let out onto the street. Mother Crispin pressed her hand against the glass, straining to see; there was a small brown figure in the street, the car that had struck it long gone. As Anna bent over it, she realized that it was a dog, very likely dead. She drew her lips into a line, striding purposefully from her office, out of the building and out to the street. Being concerned about a dog was all very well and good, she thought, but at this rate Anna would be the next one to be struck by a car, just sitting there in the road like that!

As she approached Anna and the dog, surrounded now by the boys with whom she'd been playing rounders, Mother Crispin saw that someone else was there as well. A very pale blond man, his face a bit pinched-looking, as though he'd smelled something bad, was crouching by Anna's side, his hand stroking the dog's flank. Next to him was a thin, anxious-looking woman with darker blonde hair. She seemed to be looking at the children wistfully, especially Anna. They both appeared to be around thirty years old. The dog was utterly still, Anna's hands on its head and leg, which was bent in an awkward fashion. Anna had her eyes closed and appeared to be moving her lips.

Was she praying over the poor thing? Mother Crispin wondered. She'd never known the girl to have any religious impulses. All of the children went to mass on Sunday, but Mother Crispin didn't require any of them to be Catholics. A few older children had asked to be baptized, had learned their catechism and taken their first communion, but Anna wasn't one of them. Mother Crispin

was of the opinion that, Catholic or not, hearing Father Morton's homily would do them all some good. She was also of the opinion that if the orphans were forced to convert, it wouldn't be a true conversion. All she was doing was asking the children to listen to what amounted to a lecture and learn to behave in a church. If they went to weddings and funerals as adults at the very least they would need to know how to behave in a house of worship. Mother Crispin counted church attendance toward etiquette training. It was how you learned good form, regardless of your beliefs.

Anna opened her eyes, gazing intently down at the dog. Mother Crispin hadn't wanted to speak when she thought the girl might be praying, but she could stay silent no longer. Just as she was about to open her mouth to ask the blond man and woman who they might be, the dog's eyes opened, as though it had been shocked, and it struggled to stand. It was a bit wobbly on its feet at first, especially reluctant to put its weight on its left forepaw. As it tried out the idea of walking, it was growing in confidence, finally bounding back to Anna and licking her face, making her laugh again. It wasn't much bigger than a puppy. Overgrown puppy, really. The blonde woman was looking at Anna with a glow in her blue eyes, a *hungry* look that immediately put Mother Crispin on her guard.

"Is this your dog?" she said to the woman suddenly, her voice a bit more terse than she'd intended.

The man stood and held out his hand to her. "Yes, he is. I'm—"

"Well, you should keep him on a lead. Gracious! We all could have been killed, standing here in the road all this time."

"Why—why are all of these children here?" the woman asked uncertainly. The man looked around, frowning.

"I didn't think the Ministry had established another hospital here," he said in confusion. "And the children don't appear to be ill..."

Mother Crispin looked at him as though he was mad. "Ministry? I don't know what you are going on about. This is an orphanage," she explained, as though he was a simpleton. "I am Mother Crispin, the director."

The man's frown deepened. "So—you're not a nurse, then?" he fumbled awkwardly. "Then why are you dressed—like that?"

She was perplexed by this slightly imperious man, who was regarding *her* as though *she* was the oddity. In Mother Crispin's opinion, she looked exactly as she should. She was not accustomed to anyone regarding her in the unflattering, slightly leering manner of this young man.

"It so happens that I *am* a nurse," she said, her voice as taut as a bow; "it also happens that I am a nun. Surely you're heard of *nuns*?" she snapped, quickly losing what little patience she had left.

"Oh, oh yes. I've heard of them. Er, you. I mean—well. Well, that makes perfect sense, of course. A nun. An orphanage. I see. So many children. All very logical, yes, yes..."

He was positively babbling now. The woman, whom Mother Crispin took to be his wife, had crouched down and was speaking to Anna, who was eyeing the woman with trepidation. The dog was still very excited, but most of the other children had returned to the grounds of the orphanage, bored with the conversation between the adults.

A lead seemed to appear out of nowhere, and the man clipped it onto the dog's collar. Mother Crispin noticed for the first time how odd their clothes looked; they both seemed to be wearing long, dark raincoats, although there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The man straightened up again, mumbling apologetically, "The clip on the lead is faulty, I expect. We'll get a new one."

"See that you do," she sniffed. Anna stood uncertainly and Mother Crispin put her arm around the girl's shoulders; she was quite tall now that she was eleven. She'd been arguing with her teachers about what was written on the blackboard, and it turned out that she needed glasses. She hadn't had them for very long and Mother Crispin was still getting used to seeing her wear the spectacles; she seemed to be quite another person with them on.

The blond couple nodded to them, the woman giving Anna a piercing look. As they walked back to the orphanage, Mother Crispin had the peculiar sensation that eyes were boring into the back of her head, but she did not give in to temptation and look. Anna seemed to feel it too, but she could not resist looking over her shoulder. Her gasp finally made Mother Crispin whirl about, but there was absolutely nothing extraordinary to be seen. In fact, it seemed to her that she should still be able to see the blond couple, but they were nowhere in sight. It was as though they'd vanished into thin air.

* * * * *

The Leaky Cauldron was dark and noisy. Nils Anderssen tapped his fingers together as he waited

for Old Tom to bring their tea. This visit to England had *not* gone as he'd expected. They'd gone to Exeter to visit one of his old school friends and had needed to walk Napoleon, their chocolate Labrador retriever, who was still enough of a puppy to need frequent walkies' as his wife put it. For some reason that utterly escaped Nils, Philip Ramsay had chosen to live in a Muggle section of Exeter, and thus they had to go to a public park to walk the dog. Nils did not know how he could bear to live so close to Muggles, but there was nothing to be done for it. His wife was a bit stupid about the dog, in his opinion, as though it would replace the children they could never have.

Muggle butchers he thought, not for the first—or probably last—time. If she hadn't been hit by an automobile in London—when she had attempted to run away from her parents at fifteen, while on holiday—and been found by Muggles, she might have been able to have children. However, they had sliced her open and determined that if she didn't have a radical hysterectomy, as his wife called it (he trusted her—she had obsessed over this for years and he knew she probably had the right term), she would die.

They had always known that they wouldn't have children and it hadn't deterred him from marrying her. He had made trip after trip to Sweden to woo her, after meeting her at the Annual Broom Race. He had even moved to Sweden after they married, so that she wouldn't have to be far from her family. He loved her dearly and wanted her to be happy. And yet, on this first visit from Sweden to visit his sister Narcissa since she'd become a mother over a year before, his wife had repeatedly been reluctant to give up the baby when she'd been holding him for any length of time. His brother-in-law had become somewhat irrational about it, screaming at her for mollycoddling the boy. Frankly, it appeared to Nils that his sister would have liked to mollycoddle' her own son more than she was permitted.

Not that there was much holding of the boy now that he was an active toddler. Nils could see the wonder in his wife's face when she was watching little Draco weave about the drawing room at Malfoy Manor, holding onto things more for reassurance than support now that he could walk. She'd cried in her husband's arms that night, as she hadn't done for a long time, and he could practically feel her ache in his chest, the longing to be a parent. He knew that it didn't matter if he became a father, that he loved her regardless, but there were times when he had to admit to feeling a little twinge himself when he saw other parents with their children, and to see his nephew for the first time introduced a new brand of pain into his life. It had been so easy for Narcissa and Lucius. And Lucius seemed to take his son for granted. It seemed utterly unfair.

Napoleon slumbered peacefully under the table; he'd been rather bouncy still, when they'd entered the pub, but a quick sleeping charm had solved that problem. As they waited for the tea, his wife's face was animated as he'd never seen it; he worried that she was far *too* excited. When reality dawned on her, he knew, she would come crashing down again.

"You saw it!" she whispered fervently to him. "She *healed* that dog! She's a witch! She has to be! And living at a *Muggle* orphanage, poor thing..." She shuddered. "Lucius said that's how the Dark Lord grew up, in a Muggle orphanage."

Nils drew his lips into a line. He was more than a little nervous about the way his brother-in-law went on about the glorious Dark Lord, as though assuming that everyone around him agreed with all of his opinions. Narcissa, of course, didn't dare contradict her husband, although he hadn't had the impression that she particularly wanted to. His own wife was far more easily influenced in this regard than he would have liked. On the other hand, he had to admit that finally getting Muggle-borns out of the wizarding world had its merits. He'd heard that a wizard who was in training at the Swedish wizarding hospital had suggested trying to do surgery on injured patients. Thankfully, he'd been drummed out of the training program. Of course, he'd been Muggle-born. Typical.

"Yes, I saw it, darling. It's possible that she's a witch. But I asked her how old she is, and she said she's eleven. If she was a witch she'd be at Hogwarts already. Even the Dark Lord got his Hogwarts letter," he added, trying not to smirk.

She raised her eyebrow at his tone. "Don't patronize me, Nils. Maybe the Muggles kept her from going...."

He frowned. "How? And let's say that is what happened; she can't be a pureblood. If both of her parents died, there'd be someone in the wizarding community to take her, relatives, friends...At best she might be half-blood. She *could* even be Muggle-born," he added, making a face. He wasn't certain that his wife was listening. She had a faraway look in her eye.

"What we need to do is pretend that we want to adopt her. Pose as Muggles. We'll have to disguise ourselves so that nun doesn't recognize us. And then we'll be able to find out why she didn't go to Hogwarts, and about her parentage."

His jaw dropped. "Are you mad? Are you saying you—that you—"

His wife leaned forward avid, a light in her eyes he hadn't seen in a very long time. "I want her!"

she said, bursting with excitement.

"And if she turns out to be Muggle-born?" he said slowly. She shrugged.

"We just won't tell your sister and her husband. *She's a witch!* She-she doesn't belong with *them*. She probably doesn't even know what she is..."

He sat back and thought. "Oh, I don't know. She seemed to know what she was doing when she was healing the dog..."

His wife sat up again. "Wasn't she wonderful?" she gushed. "How many witches her age can do that? Who are *any* age? She's obviously very, very powerful. She must be at least a half-blood. Lucius said that the Dark Lord himself is a half-blood," she said, her mouth twisting mischievously.

Nils rolled his eyes and laughed. "So he did." He looked at her lovingly and took her hands in his. "You really want this, don't you?"

She squeezed his hands. "She *needs* us, Nils. I can feel it. We need to bring her back to the wizarding world. She can come back to Sweden with us, go to Durmstrang, a proper school—" Nils harrumphed, although he didn't argue with her; he knew what she thought of Hogwarts. Her eyes were shining now as she gazed into space. He squeezed her hands right back.

"I love you, Anna. You know that."

It would be odd, he thought, if the girl came to live with them; he'd heard the old nun calling the girl by the same name as his wife. Perhaps that was a kind of sign?

She looked at him affectionately. "I know, darling, I know," she answered; clearly he was saying that he would do anything necessary to make this happen. She had never felt more excited in her entire life. This day she had met a miracle, the girl who could be her daughter.

She was going to be a mother.

* * * * *

Saturday, 24 October, 1981

Lily and James sat side-by-side on the sofa, looking at their friends in the armchairs on the other side of the hearth. They had explained the Fidelius Charm to them both. Now came the hard part. Lily knew she had to do it; she was closer to Peter than James was. He would probably take it hard, but a decision had to be made. She tried not to think of the Muggle photograph Alastor had shown her, tried not to hear Remus' voice as he lied to her about why he'd been there with the other werewolves...

"Peter," she said softly, going to sit on the ottoman that separated the sofa from the armchairs. She reached for both of his hands and held them firmly in hers. "You've been such a dear," she said sincerely, looking into his small eyes. They gazed back at her, never wavering. "And we do appreciate everything you've done to help us. I-I don't want to worry about you, and if-if you were the Secret Keeper I know I should be *very* worried. Please understand. It's not that-that—"

"I understand," he said softly, looking intently at Lily. "Sirius is—he can take care of himself..."

"Oh, Peter!" Lily said quickly. "It's not as though you can't take care of yourself...It's just that James and I have gone over and over this...The Secret Keeper—if that person's identity were to come out—he would be a *target*. A target..." she repeated in a whisper. Peter nodded, swallowing.

It was better this way, he decided. He'd been having more and more nightmares about Lily dying, and James too, although that wasn't what bothered him when he awoke, sweating and screaming.

Lily. He just couldn't give up Lily....

Peter tore his eyes away from Lily and looked at Sirius. *You'd just damn well better be stronger than I was if you get tortured by Death Eaters*, he thought, trying not to glower at his friend. Sirius didn't know. When the Cruciatus had taken over your body, you would do anything to avoid experiencing that again....

But Sirius was staring into space; he seemed to be thinking very hard, his eyes narrowed as though he had in his sights some distant target. Lily and James noticed now, and James waved his hand in front of Sirius' face, saying, "Hello! Sirius! Padfoot! Come back!"

Sirius shook himself and blinked. "Sorry. Just thinking. Something Pete said earlier, in fact, when we stopped off for some petrol on the way here..."

James snorted. "What, you couldn't charm that bike of yours to work without petrol?"

"And why didn't you Apparate?" Lily added, frowning.

Sirius reddened slightly. "Well, we both agreed that we felt a bit-distracted. Didn't want to splinch ourselves." He turned back to James. "It's charmed to make do with just a little over a long distance, but it still needs a drop or two. Gives it that good authentic smell of burning oil," Sirius said, inhaling deeply as though he were taking a whiff of a fine perfume. Lily wrinkled her nose; as

far as she was concerned, his clothes reeked of oil. “Anyway, Pete was saying that it might be just a bit *obvious* for me to be the Secret Keeper. I mean, I’m your best mate, James. I was best man at your wedding,” he said, nodding at both of them, “and I have to admit, I tend to drop your name quite a bit at work,” he added, smiling sheepishly at James. “Best Chaser the Magpies have had for years, after all. Sorry I’m such a prat about that, but at a broom company, everyone is rather understandably obsessed with Quidditch.”

Peter swallowed. *No, Sirius. Don’t*, he thought desperately. Yes, he’d still been intending to try to be the Secret Keeper and give up Lily and James to the Dark Lord when they’d been flying over the Welsh countryside, but he finally had come to the realization that if he just plain *didn’t know*, he *couldn’t tell*. It would be easy. He could just explain that they were under the Fidelius Charm, that someone else was the Secret Keeper, and there you had it. He was off the hook.

And now Sirius was going to ruin everything. Why did he have to pick *now*, of all times, to start listening to Peter Pettigrew?

“See, this is how it could work,” Sirius said, sitting forward excitedly. “We’ll make out that I’m the Secret Keeper, at least that’s what we’ll tell people. With some people we pretend that we didn’t *mean* to tell them, as though it just slipped out. But I *won’t* be the Secret Keeper—it’ll be Peter,” he said, nodding at him. “And then, if anyone comes after me, I can’t tell them anything, no matter *what* they do to me. And who would suspect—” He stopped himself, for once seeming to realize that he was being incredibly tactless.

Sirius reddened a bit and Peter said, somewhat against his will, “That’s okay, mate. I know just what you mean.” His voice was very soft. Sirius nodded gratefully at him.

“Right. And Pete can hide just about anywhere, even if it does come out that he’s the Secret Keeper. He can just hole up somewhere in his rat form if things look very bad. It’s not as though anyone could tell him apart from any of the other rats in Britain.”

“Just don’t hang about with too *many* rats,” James said, as though it was all decided. “Don’t want to find yourself someplace where someone has a mind to call the local rat-catcher. Can’t have our Secret Keeper exterminated.”

Peter smiled ruefully, thinking of the Weasleys’ messy garden. “Oh, don’t worry. I have my hiding places,” he said, his voice shaking a little. He thought of the Prophecy again, of how he’d tried to outrun his fate. It was clearly no good; this was what his life had been leading up to. This *was* his life. He looked desperately at Lily, trying to imprint her face on his memory, hoping against hope that he could keep his lip from shaking. *Oh, Lily*, he thought, swallowing a sob in his throat. But suddenly all he could see was the face of Dead Lily, from his dreams, pointing her finger at Peter and asking *Why why why why why?*

But now Lily was the one who appeared to be miles away. He didn’t know that she was seeing the photograph again in her mind’s eye. Alastor had brought her a Muggle photograph. He had taken it from a distance, over a fortnight earlier, at a gathering of werewolves. Voldemort was speaking to them. If he’d been any closer, the werewolves would have been able to smell him, Invisibility Cloak or no Invisibility Cloak. And a still photograph was more useful for this sort of thing than a wizarding one; you could really see the moment in time, frozen, instead of having the people in the photo moving about confusingly, or deceptively (hiding behind each other).

There he’d been, right in the middle of the crowd of werewolves who were eagerly hanging on every word coming from Voldemort:

Remus.

And less than an hour after Alastor had brought the photo to her, she’d looked up to see Remus’s head in the fire, telling her that he’d learned some fascinating things while at a rally at which Voldemort had spoken to hundreds of werewolves. He said that he felt he ought to go, to find out what was going on, so he could tell her about it. But she’d sat there, thinking, *Is it really coincidence? Are you worried that you were seen?* She’d tried to be friendly and conversational, but when his head was gone again, she’d paced the floor, wondering whether she should believe him. He’d been so distant, and then, out of the blue, he suddenly contacted her to tell her he was at a werewolf rally. Had she been wrong about him? She felt so confused...

She hadn’t shown James the photo. But she had stopped defending Remus; she just couldn’t muster the same enthusiasm for it. Something at the back of her mind kept saying, *What if it’s him? What if he’s the spy?* All of James’s accusations against Remus took on fresh relevance, and she was hard-put to brush her doubts aside. On top of that, it didn’t help that she’d had nightmares, nightmares in which she was a girl again, and she was with Remus in the dungeons, but then she blinked and it wasn’t Remus coming toward her, it was a ravenous wolf, jaws dripping with blood....

She’d awoken screaming, refusing to tell James why. She shuddered to think of Remus touching her, when he might be the one who had turned spy. *What’s wrong with me?* she wondered. *Remus*

is attending rallies held by Voldemort; Severus is a Death Eater. Is it me? Did I somehow drive them to it?

She shook herself. *Don't be stupid*, she scolded herself. *Remus is over you, he said so at the wedding, and he was dreadfully broken up about that poor boy being killed...*

She stopped and drew in her breath suddenly, wondering whether she'd been incredibly stupid to have believed everything he'd said about that, and about being over her as well. The other three stared at her.

"Is everything all right, love?" James asked, rubbing her back gently. She turned to look at him. *No*, she thought. *Everything is decidedly not all right. If it were we wouldn't be planning to put one of our friends in danger to protect us from one of our other friends...*

Sirius cleared his throat. "So—why do you think Remus is the spy?" he said quietly, as though he'd read Lily's mind. Neither she nor James had said it outright, but Remus's absence spoke volumes. He clearly hadn't been invited. She looked guiltily at James.

"We have our reasons," she said, almost inaudibly. She and James hadn't really discussed it. He looked at her now, surprised; this was the first time she'd said anything that overtly suggested that she thought Remus might be the one. He continued to rub her back and she was grateful for the comforting physical contact; maybe she could stop feeling like the stupidest person on the planet for having slept with a werewolf, for having *trusted* him without question.

Her head ached; in the previous months she felt as though she'd gone round and round, thinking Sirius was the spy, worried that Severus was going to lead Voldemort to Godric's Hollow, worried about going to see her own dying mother, in case she was followed and her mother or sister were hurt by someone who wanted to strike at *her* by doing so. (She didn't get on with her sister, but she certainly didn't want her killed.)

She looked at Peter again, worried for him now. Even though the plan included carefully leaking to the world the fact that Sirius was the Secret Keeper, what if something went wrong? What if poor Peter found himself confronted with having to choose between torture or giving up their secret?

"You're sure about this, Peter?" she said softly, remembering Professor McGonagall being somewhat hard on him in school. Was it really fair for them to ask this of him? Then again, was any of this fair?

But he looked back at her unwaveringly. "Yes," he said firmly. The least he could do was try to give her a sense of security, of safety, so that she wouldn't be worrying all of the time. Even if it was a *false* sense of security. She nodded grimly and leaned forward quickly, giving him a kiss on the cheek that was over in a blink.

"Thank you," she said hoarsely. Peter didn't know what to say or do. Everything was completely unreal.

"So," Peter said, feeling a bit dazed after the kiss; "I'm—I'm going to be the Secret Keeper?"

Lily and James looked at each other with trepidation. They both nodded at him. Sirius clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's all down to you, mate," he said with a forced joviality. Sirius looked almost as nervous as if he were going to be the actual Secret Keeper; after all, it was quite possible that he would be facing torture, and he wouldn't be able to put a stop to it, as he wouldn't have the information that was being sought. He was agreeing to put himself in a very tight spot.

Peter gave a feeble smile to the other three.

Yes, he thought. *It's all down to me.*

* * * * *

Saturday, 31 October, 1981

Peter peered in the kitchen window. It was as he remembered it, a golden glow from the lamps on the dresser bathing the entire room. Washed dishes were drying in a rack next to the sink; the blue and white plates glinted on the wooden dresser, the teacups hanging on their hooks. Cookbooks were also on the dresser, stacked neatly, as well as framed photographs, next to the lamps. A wooden high chair was at the end of the table instead of a regular chair. A teapot was sitting on the table, the lid off, steam rising from it. They were waiting for the tea to steep. Peter remembered that Lily preferred doing it this way, instead of with magic. She said it tasted better. No one was in the kitchen save for Lily's owl, Calliope, in a large cage that hung near the stove. The bird was preening. The cage door was open and the window next to the stove was also open, so that the bird could come and go at will. It would probably leave soon to do its nightly hunting.

He backed away from the window, his heart was like a hammer in his chest. He had asked the Dark Lord to meet him in a nearby spinney, across a field from the cottage. To his consternation,

his Master had told others about it as well. Peter sincerely hoped that they wouldn't show up until later. As it was, he hadn't *wanted* to tell the Dark Lord about Lily and James, but he'd had very little choice....

He'd gone to hide in the Weasleys' garden in his rat form. Percy had been very pleased that he was back. The boy was five years old now and no less awkward than he'd been when younger. Peter hadn't seen the family for months, not since the little girl had been born and he'd carefully altered her birth certificate, as well as the memories of her parents, so that she wouldn't be considered a candidate for the Daughter of War. Now that autumn had come she was inside much of the time, but he had had a chance to see the new baby again when her mother had brought her into the garden on an unseasonably warm day. She and her year-old brother Ron had rolled around on a blanket near Mrs. Weasley while their mother had pulled weeds. Percy had sat with them, playing with Ginny sometimes (Ron didn't seem to want anything to do with him). When Mrs. Weasley had gone inside to see what Mr. Weasley wanted (they could hear his voice calling from the kitchen fire) Peter had crept out and Percy had introduced "Twitchers" to Ginny and Ron. Ron had petted his back tentatively, then shrugged, toddling off to find the twins, who were three years old now and far more interesting than a stupid rat.

Ginny had clapped her hands and squealed when Percy picked up "Twitchers" and lightly let her trace her finger down his back, but a moment later the twins had come running from the other side of the garden, knocking Ron over on the way. They'd been doing their twinly duty of getting as much dirt ground into their clothes as possible. Peter had squirmed out of Percy's grasp and fled back into the gnome holes, causing Percy to complain loudly of the twins, probably in hopes that his mother would hear him in the house.

The twins were not Peter's favorite people. If he'd thought about it in cold blood, he would probably have preferred for Voldemort to get his hands on him. Voldemort he could reason with, to a certain extent. Not so with the twins.

And so he lived (somewhat) peacefully in the Weasleys' garden.

Until this morning.

About an hour before dawn, Peter had been snoring in a gnome hole near the door that let out onto the garden from the Weasleys' kitchen. He slept a little better when in his rat form; his brain wasn't quite as complex as when he was a human. It was more given over to pure instinct. He had to watch out for gnomes who rolled him out of the hole, where he'd be in plain sight of hunting owls, although the owls he feared most were the ones delivering messages to the Weasleys, rather than their ancient retainer, Errol.

He wasn't at all prepared for his Dark Mark to start hurting.

First the pain woke him, his small, dark, beady eyes opening wide with shock. He felt his body trembling, and knew that if he lost control and became human again while still underground, it would be very painful indeed. (It was a mystery to him how the gnomes fit their rather lumpy, awkward heads into their own small abodes, but he reckoned that it might be a form of gnome-magic.)

Peter scrambled for the exit as fast as he could, feeling an excruciating pain go through his paw again; the second he was out in the open, he couldn't take it any longer and changed back to his human form, panting as though he'd been running for miles. He stared up at the starless sky, biting his lip to keep from screaming in agony, so the slumbering residents of the Burrow wouldn't hear him.

He was being summoned by the Dark Lord. It wasn't as bad as being put under *Cruciatus*, but it came very close. He closed his eyes again; once more, he could hear his Master's voice in his head, summoning him to the house near Little Hangleton. He had been out of communication with his Master for a fortnight. He was a bad Death Eater. Peter tasted blood from biting his lip. He pulled out his wand, taking a last look at the homely Burrow, thinking how he would miss it, even though he was seldom inside the house. (He didn't like to chance it, as Mrs. Weasley had very keen eyesight, unlike her husband.)

He concentrated, waved his wand, and when the landscape of England stopped rushing past him, he strained to focus his eyes again, finding himself outside a familiar house, standing alone in the grounds, a ramshackle garden growing wild around the foundations and an air of neglect over all. He went round the back and let himself in the kitchen door. The Dark Lord was expecting him and had not put additional locking charms on the door, just one that required a single well-chosen obscenity for the password:

Mudblood.

Peter managed to get the hated word out, thinking of Lily while he did so.

He had not been doing any additional work concerning the Prophecy; he had no names of po-

tential victims. He had simply been hiding and biding his time. But he could hide no longer; no matter where he ran, he would feel the Dark Lord summoning him. He'd thought of killing himself more than once, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Somehow a primitive survival instinct balked whenever the subject appeared in his mind. Added to that was the memory of the centaur calling him the Moon Child. He was needed. He was a necessary ingredient of the Dark Lord's fall.

Peter ascended the stairs slowly, his arm still throbbing, his Dark Mark black as ebony, as though it had been freshly burned into his flesh. He heard the hypnotic voice behind a partially-open door and pushed it, finding the Dark Lord standing with his back to the fire, which limned his tall figure from behind and made him appear to be even more formidable than usual. Standing to his right was the Death Eater who had recruited Peter (he always wore the same distinctive clothes, as well as the same slightly dented mask under his hood) and to his left was a taller Death Eater who somehow projected a quite regal bearing, despite the fact that his robes, mask and hood very effectively concealed his identity.

Peter started shaking. He did not have a good feeling about this.

"Wormtail!" said the seductive voice, dripping with honey. Peter started to feel himself weaken with just the sound of his name, his alter-ego. "Wormtail," the Dark Lord said again, "I have been looking forward to hearing of the fruits of your labors, but you have not delivered. Why is that?" he asked in the mellifluous voice. Peter trembled, looking into those reddish eyes, hearing nothing else, not the crackling of the fire or the wind outside.

"I-I have been unable to find out what you require, M'Lord," he said haltingly, hating the quaver in his voice.

A slow smile spread across Voldemort's face. He turned to the Death Eater on his right, Peter's recruiter, and said simply, "He lies."

The Death Eater nodded, and, without a prelude of any sort, pulled out his wand and pointed it at Peter, crying, "*Crucio!*"

A scream that seemed to come from somewhere else entirely erupted from Peter as he writhed on the floor, knowing nothing but pain, fire and knives and *pain pain pain*. He didn't even remember falling to the floor, but then he also didn't remember a time in his life when he *wasn't* made entirely of pain....

The Death Eater lifted his wand abruptly and, again without warning, the pain was gone. Peter would almost rather it would start and end gradually, so that he could get used both to its presence and its absence. His heart seemed to be galloping along uncertainly, almost as though it didn't dare to beat normally again, should the pain come back.

"You were saying?" the Dark Lord said sweetly, as though they'd been having tea and he'd interrupted Peter to fetch some more crumpets.

Peter swallowed. He'd thought he couldn't do it, but he had to. Maybe if he did, Lily would be safe. He'd saved the older Weasley girls; it was foolish to think he could also save the younger one. Trying to banish the image of the seven-month-old baby from his mind, he staggered to his feet and said, "I-I know where the Daughter of War is..."

The Dark Lord's eerie red eyes narrowed. "I thought you had disposed of those girls. Those Wee-Wheel--"

"Weasley," said the Death Eater on his left, as though he were uttering a name of utter filth.

"Yes, those *Weasley* girls."

"I-I have. I did. But-but it wasn't either of them. I think," he went on breathlessly, "it's-it's possible that the parents might agree to raise her to be your servant," he added, although what he'd seen of the Weasleys actually made him very doubtful of this. "But-but Lily has refused to agree to raise Harry as your servant, and now they're in hiding and I don't know where..."

The Dark Lord turned again to the Death Eater on his left. "Would you care to have the pleasure this time?" he said conversationally, as though discussing something eminently civilized. The Death Eater nodded and pointed his wand at Peter, who braced himself for the worst.

But instead of the Cruciatu Curse, the Death Eater repeatedly put the Passus Curse on Peter, naming, in Latin, the specific parts of the body that he was attacking. Peter felt pain pierce his arms, his legs, his stomach, he held his throat, his head....It wasn't like the Cruciatu, an overall pain. In its way it was worse, for just when he had convinced himself that he could take the pain in his foot, it was in his arm, and then his shoulder, his thighs, then the excruciating sensation of being kicked in the kidneys repeatedly, first the one and then the other....

He was on the floor again, taking deep breaths, waiting for the Death Eater to attack his lungs so that he couldn't breathe, so that he would be put out of his misery. *I know that voice*, he thought. He had known it as soon as he had said, *Weasley*.

"While it *may* be true, Wormtail, that you do not know the whereabouts of the Potters, I believe

you know who *does* know. I have heard rumors of their using the Fidelius Charm to protect themselves. It sounds like the sort of thing Dumbledore would have recommended to them," he spat contemptuously. "I have also heard that Sirius Black is their Secret Keeper. However, I have had some people observing Mr. Black, and he does not seem especially interested in this being a *secret* for some reason. He seems interested in telling quite a lot of people, as a matter of fact. Now why should that be? Does that strike you as very-*clever*? And my little birds tell me that Mr. Black is nothing if not clever, very clever indeed." He stepped toward Peter and held out his hand to him; Peter didn't dare refuse to take it. The Dark Lord pulled him to his feet but did not release his hand; Peter felt as though an electric current were connecting the two of them.

"So, why would a *clever* man like Sirius Black be so free with the information that he is the Potters' Secret Keeper if he truly wishes to keep his friends safe?" Voldemort asked with a whimsical lilt to his voice.

Peter swallowed. "I-I don't know, M'Lord."

The nod that the Dark Lord directed at the Death Eater on his right had barely registered on Peter before he was on his knees, still clutching Voldemort's claw-like hand, writhing and screaming with pain. He vaguely remembered the Death Eater actually uttering the incantation, but already that seemed years in the past, the very distant past when Peter's entire existence wasn't one of complete and utter agony....

And then, it was again abruptly gone, and the only sounds Peter could hear were his own labored breaths echoing in the otherwise still room. Even the fire didn't seem to be making any noise now as it silently burned. Everything else paled in comparison. The world without pain was almost like a dream to Peter; his suffering seemed like the only real thing to which he could relate now.

"Now then, let us try again," Voldemort said, a slight edge to the honeyed voice this time as he pulled Peter roughly to his feet once more. "*Why* would Sirius Black be so careless about telling the world at large that he is the Secret Keeper?"

"Because he's not," Peter said promptly, almost before the Dark Lord had finished speaking.

A slow smile crept across the Dark Lord's face, a most terrible sight; not because it was inherently ugly (although there was that) but because one knew that it meant that something dreadful was going to befall someone.

"Is it the werewolf?" Voldemort demanded sharply.

Peter swallowed, shaking his head.

"*I can tell you where to find them.*"

Peter heard his own words echoing in his head as he changed into his rat form and crept under the kitchen door, scuttling quietly across the stone flags toward the living room, where Lily and James were relaxing, having put Harry in his cot for the night. The nursery door was closed and Peter tried not to think of little Harry sleeping there, the boy whom he'd fed and burped, whose nappies he'd changed, whom he'd taken for walks in his pram through the parks of Cardiff...

Peter took a deep breath, looking around at the familiar room. It felt comfortable and safe, but Peter knew better. There was a cozy fire in the grate and golden pools of light from the lamps. He gazed at Lily from the shadow under a table. She and James were sitting opposite each other, Lily stretched out on the couch, reading a book, her hand laid protectively on her slightly rounded belly. Peter swallowed; he hadn't seen her wearing anything but billowing robes for some time, and hadn't expected this. *Lily was pregnant again.* She hadn't told him.

He felt a hot resentment burning in him for a moment, but then he thought, *No. That's perfect.* The Dark Lord wanted to kill Harry, and would. But Lily would still have her new baby, a new life. If Peter could have grinned, he would have. *And I'll be there for her,* he thought. *To comfort her and to help her with the new baby...*

She was wearing her nightdress without a dressing gown and Peter's mouth went dry as he noticed that her breasts were already larger than usual, because of the baby. Her red hair looked very dark in the firelight and lamplight. James sat in an armchair with his feet in slippers, propped up on the ottoman, the firelight glinting off his glasses. His hair stuck up at the back of his head as always, and Peter felt a seething hatred of James Potter roil through him as he wondered how on earth Lily could ever have wasted herself on the likes of *him*. He was holding a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and writing with a quill. *Must be doing the crossword,* Peter thought. James appeared to be writing rather fast. *Show off,* he thought resentfully, as though James had expected to have an audience for this.

Peter had seen enough. They were not suspecting anything; as far as they knew he was hiding somewhere obscure, their secret safe with him. *Of course,* he thought, *afterward I'll need to memory charm Lily, and Sirius too, so they both believe that Sirius was in fact the Secret Keeper....*

He'd thought it all out. The fact that Sirius had been telling everyone he could that he was their

Secret Keeper would work in his favor. After a few memory charms, there would be no one left who didn't believe that. Added to that was the fact that they'd altered the Fidelius Charm slightly so that anyone who had previously known the location of the Potters' house would forget it with the casting of the charm, and if the charm was broken, the memories would come flooding back. As soon as Peter told Voldemort where Lily and James were, Sirius would remember also, and he would know to come to Godric's Hollow.

Peter quietly scuttled into the kitchen again, across the flags and under the door. He ran across the moon-dappled field behind the house to a spinney on a slight hill. Once there, he changed into his human form again, then began pacing, waiting, waiting...

He screamed for a moment, then clapped his own hand over his mouth when the Dark Lord Apparated silently before him. Voldemort's eyes bore into his.

"A bit-jumpy are we, Wormtail?"

Peter tried to control his breathing. "Just a bit, M'Lord," he admitted. It was safer to be honest about little things like this. "I-I wanted to ask you for a-a favor, M'Lord," Peter said, his voice shaking. Voldemort raised one eyebrow in amusement.

"A favor? Really?" Peter thought it marginally possible that the great wizard might begin to laugh.

"Y-yes, M'Lord. If you-if you could spare Lily, I-I would be eternally grateful, M'Lord..."

Now the Dark Lord did indeed laugh, but it was a high, cold, cruel laughter that sent shivers up Peter's spine.

"And how grateful would you be if I spared *you*, my loyal *Moon Child*?" Peter gasped and then felt incapable of closing his shocked mouth. "Yes, Moon Child. I told you that I had been consulting Seers after your many botched attempts to find those named in the Prophecy," he said contemptuously. "I knew the Weasley girl was the second Daughter of War before you told me and I knew that your friend Sirius Black was the Lion. How very clever it was for him to try to make himself a target by calling himself the Potters' Secret Keeper, which made me think that he couldn't *possibly* be the Secret Keeper. However, he was something far more important. *The first Lion*. Talk about hiding in plain sight!" he added, chuckling gruesomely. Peter found himself unable to do anything but frown in confusion.

"But-but James-his birthday is the fifth of August, nineteen-sixty. His number is eleven. And he's an Animagus, which fits the beast-and-man part. And the Potters used to be called Pitter. They were coal miners, Muggle coal miners....It all fits," Peter trailed off in confusion. *But many of those things are true of Sirius as well*, he reminded himself. *Sirius is also an Animagus*.

Voldemort shook his head. "James Potter's birthdate does give him the correct number, and his sign-Leo-and status as a former Gryffindor would seem to make him a candidate for the first Lion, but according to my Seers, it is Sirius Black, whose birthdate also gives the correct results. He is also a former Gryffindor. And I understand that there is a collier background in his family as well, which led to the family name of Black.' But-I admit, there was something that baffled the Seers. They did not understand the beast and man' requirement. Finally, they put it down to his having a name which is the same as the Dog Star. They had also thought that there should be one more way in which he is a Lion, and have been unable to find out what it is..."

Peter frowned; he hadn't realized that Sirius's ancestors had also been miners, but it fit. *Sirius's ancestors*. Peter's eyes opened wide.

"I know what it is, M'Lord," he said breathlessly. "When I've been at the Black home-in the kitchen, they have a tapestry with their clan's shield. It's silver and blue, with a rampant lion. And-and he is an Animagus."

Voldemort nodded, his eyes narrowed. "So. Both Potter and Black can make themselves into animals at will. There you go. I knew there had to be something. The Seers were finding something wrong with almost everyone, but that clears up quite a lot. There was no problem with working out that *you* were the Moon Child, you know," he said silkily. "While you were off, busily pointing the finger at other people, my Seers told me about your parentage. Why," he said softly, "you are more pureblooded than *I* am, Wormtail. They told me your birthday very early on....they did readings on your behalf and saw your destiny..."

Peter swallowed. *Damn!* They must have looked up his birthday before he'd had a chance to change it in the Ministry archives! He had to say something to deflect Voldemort. At this point he was probably only keeping Peter alive until he could get the information from him about the Potter house, and then he'd be dead....

"But I'm not a pureblood!" Peter said quickly. Voldemort glared at him.

"Of course you are. You are descended from three of the four Founders of Hogwarts. All but Slytherin. *I* am descended from him, the greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

"But there's something you don't know!" Peter cried. "My mother—she isn't my mother!" He knew he was grasping at straws; Voldemort waited, but he didn't appear to have a limitless supply of patience so Peter hurtled on. "I've kept this quiet for years—my dad had an affair with a Muggle girl. She was only sixteen when I was born. Her family didn't want her to keep me. My dad agreed to raise me. He married an old friend to provide me with a mother. They altered my birth certificate so her name was on it. My dad didn't have any Founders' blood, the woman who's raised me was descended from families with Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw blood. When I went off to school my real mother decided that she wanted to be a part of my life after all, and I started going to see her during my holidays...." He swallowed. Would his Master be able to tell this time that he was lying?

Voldemort's eyes narrowed as he regarded Peter. "Why did you never correct me then, Wormtail, when I called you pureblooded?" Peter tried to calm his breathing; he was trying to catch him out. He knew Peter was lying, yet he continued to play with him. Or *did* he know? Peter couldn't afford to let his guard down.

Peter worried his robes between his fingers. "I—I wanted you to think I was pureblooded, M'Lord. Not just a half-blood..."

Voldemort drew himself up. "I am a half-blood, Wormtail, or have you forgotten?"

"Oh, no, M'Lord," Peter said quickly. "But—erm, you also have said repeatedly how you hated your Muggle father..."

A slow, eerie smile crept across Voldemort's face. "That is true," he admitted. With a nod he said, "Very well. You are pardoned for lying to me about your heritage. You were abandoned by your mother in much the same way that my mother and I were abandoned by my father. I will ask the Seers to check their work again..." Peter shook with fright; was his tale really being believed? He could never tell with his Master.

"Yes, M'Lord," Peter rushed to say.

"But—there is still the matter of the first Daughter of War. As far as my Seers can tell, they know her identity, and yet—her birthday does not work..." He looked piercingly at Peter. "You know who it is, don't you?" he said slyly. "That is why you have asked me to spare her..."

He knew it was Lily.

"You only need to get rid of one person in each Triangle!" Peter said quickly. "If you just get rid of Sirius Black and the child—"

Voldemort nodded, still smiling that eerie smile. He held his hand up to stop Peter. "I have in you a servant who is always at my beck and call," he said, tapping Peter's Dark Mark with his long, thin finger. "I can find you anytime I want. That is no small thing to me, Wormtail. And if one way I can reward my servant is to deliver a former Auror to him for—his amusement," Voldemort said, his mouth twisting unpleasantly, "then—if it is convenient to me, that is—I am happy to do so. So, then. You would need for me to get rid of her husband, I assume? A pity that he isn't the Lion after all; the bulk of my work would be done this night," he said with a sigh, as though being an evil Dark Wizard was just work, work, work.

Peter swallowed. "Yes, M'Lord," Peter said softly, sentencing his friend to death. He tried not to remember that James was the one who had always insisted upon including Peter in their schemes, that he might have spent seven lonely years at Hogwarts with no friends if it hadn't been for James...But James had Lily and Peter wanted her for himself...

"Very well, then, Wormtail. Tell me—why are we in this spinney, with no houses for miles around? Where may I find the Potters?"

"I—I could not give you an address, M'Lord, because, well—it's right there," he said feebly, pointing at the cottage across the field. Voldemort squinted, then opened his eyes wide.

"I can see it now," he whispered in wonder. Another shiver went up Peter's spine.

"Are there wards on the house?" he barked tersely.

"N—no, M'Lord. Because of—of the Fidelius Charm."

He nodded, all business now. "Right." He raised his wand and, without a word of thanks, Disapparated. Peter clutched at a tree and stared at the house.

In a moment he heard a scream and his heart leapt into his throat.

Lily.

* * * * *

James looked over his newspaper at Lily, who was unconsciously rubbing her rounded belly. He smiled at the sight of her before going back to his crossword puzzle. It was such a relief to be able to live with a feeling of utter safety. Dumbledore had been right; the Fidelius Charm was the way

to go. James hadn't thought that anything could give him such peace of mind short of the Dark Lord being killed, but knowing that no one could find them without Peter giving away his secret had made it possible for them to return to a kind of normal life, without all of the alternating bickering and tense silences that had marked their marriage in recent months.

When a tall wizard with eerie blood-red eyes suddenly and silently Apparated into their living room, grinning a ghastly death's-head grin, James thought he was dreaming for a moment. But the second that the wand was pointed at him, he leapt out of the way, his armchair now a blackened and burnt lump of coal. He was vaguely aware that Lily had screamed the moment he'd appeared.

"*Lily!*" he cried. "Take Harry and go! It's Him!" he added, feeling rather stupid for doing so. *Of course it was him. Don't fall apart now, James,* he commanded himself. He thought of his parents standing up to Voldemort. *I'll make you proud, Mum and Dad,* he thought.

He fired off a curse at the unnatural-looking man standing before him, but the wizard easily deflected it, stepping toward James, who was up against the fireplace; James could feel the hot flames behind him. He saw Lily hesitate; she needed to get Harry and herself (and the baby) to safety. This was no time for her to start acting like an Auror.

"*Go! Run!*" he shouted at her. "I'll hold him off—"

He realized how stupid that sounded as Voldemort drew nearer to him; James just knew that those eyes were boring into his, those odd red eyes, and he was only vaguely aware now of Lily stumbling from the room. James tried to draw him off and ran for the bedroom, but a split second before he got there, Voldemort had sent a beam of crackling red light at the door; it burst open violently, and where the spell had hit it a hole had been burned through the wood, ringed with fire. Voldemort seemed to be enjoying himself; he broke into a cackle of high-pitched laughter.

James swallowed, abruptly changing into a stag, which he could tell shocked Voldemort; he leapt over the furniture in a single bound, fleeing back toward the kitchen, distracting him, so that Lily could get out with Harry. He wasn't certain, but he thought he might have knocked over a lamp. When he'd reached the kitchen doorway he immediately changed back and fired curses at him, but they all went wild. He couldn't *think*. Flames were licking at the sofa; he *had* knocked over a lamp.

Voldemort turned his attention on him more thoroughly now, and James saw, beyond him, that Lily had dashed from the nursery and out the front door, past the fire that James had started accidentally. She was barefoot and still without a dressing gown, although the autumn night was very cold. He could hear Harry crying, woken abruptly as he was. But suddenly, he could no longer pay attention to his wife and child; Voldemort was pointing his wand at him and saying the word that James had never thought to hear directed at him:

"*Crucio!*"

He howled in pain, falling backwards, tripping over a chair. He lay on his back on the flags of the kitchen floor, his leg bent under him awkwardly, while it felt like he was being flayed alive, like every nerve ending he had was being slit apart by hot knives...

Lily stopped, clutching Harry to her breast, hearing James's cry. She stumbled on the path and fell, feeling the baby move within her. *No, no, no,* she thought desperately. *I can't just run and leave him...*

But a split second later the front window of the house was filled with a blindingly bright green light, Lily heard the familiar sound of speeding death (she'd been trained to perform the curse during her Auror training, although not on human subjects).

She knew that sound.

Tears flowed from her eyes, blinding her. She choked on her sobs, feeling unable to go on. *What had happened?* her brain cried out. *How did this happen?*

She ducked her head and instinctively covered Harry with her body as a deafening explosion rocked the ground beneath her feet and when she dared to stand again and lift her face to the sky she actually saw her own *roof* flying into the air, along with something large and green. Then she ducked once more as she heard stones and glass being expelled from the house, although a moment later she was aware of the fact that it wasn't coming from the front of the house. The front façade was still intact for some reason.

But even as she stood and looked in wonder at her house, no eyes for anything else, Voldemort appeared at the door, not the least bit slowed down, flames behind him. *James* she thought stupidly, having no thought for herself or Harry. *James was dead and now he would burn...*

As he advanced on her she finally came to her senses; there was no point in running, not now. She was shivering with cold and Harry was howling and squirming in her arms, trying to get down; she couldn't have gone more than a dozen feet at best. Instead she gazed up at the merciless face, hoping against hope. "*Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!*" she cried as her husband's murderer approached her menacingly. *Does he have any mercy in him at all?* she wondered.

Voldemort regarded her contemptuously. She'd had her chance to save the child; it was too late now. "*Stand aside, you silly girl,*" he spat at her. "Stand aside now..."

She sank to her knees and shook her head, clutching Harry. She no longer cared whether she lived or died. She wasn't meant to have this baby. She had to do whatever she could to save Harry....

"*Not Harry,*" she pleaded with him. "*Please no, take me, kill me instead--*"

She wasn't sure where the words came from. She'd been prepared to throw herself between a curse and a colleague. She'd been prepared to die for Sam on more than one occasion. But—would this insane man do that? she wondered. Would he kill her in Harry's place? Would that satisfy him? It seemed to be the only path she had before her at the moment...

"Not Harry—" she repeated tearfully. But then the wand was pointing at her and she heard the incantation, heard the sound of speeding death, saw the green flash rushing toward her...

Peter huddled by a tree. He'd heard James scream in agony, seen the flash of green light at the kitchen window. He'd seen the roof fly into the air as the Dark Mark was fired over the house. Now he heard the second incantation and saw the flash of green light in the sky over the house, reflecting from the scattered clouds. *Harry is dead,* he thought, feeling numb. *Little Harry is dead.*

Voldemort looked down at the baby, sitting next to his mother, seeming stunned. The child looked down at her fallen form, then up at the tall figure before him. *The stupid girl,* Voldemort thought. Ah, well. A small thing, in the grander scheme of things. He was waiting for the child to cry, but he did not; he calmly regarded his parents' murderer.

Peter froze in the act of leaving the spinney when he heard the ringing voice saying the incantation for the third time. *Nooo!* he thought. *He wasn't supposed to kill Lily!*

And he wasn't planning to kill Peter, either. Or so he'd said.

Peter immediately changed into his rat form and ran back into the trees, his small rat-heart beating rapidly, the sound filling his ears. But where, behind him, he expected to hear the rush of death, of *Lily's death,* he heard instead a far worse sound. An other-worldly scream cut through the night, the sound going on and on.

Curiosity got the better of Peter, and although his first instinct was to run *away* from that sound, he ran toward it, across the field and around the cottage to a vantage point where he could see the front garden. Voldemort was pointing his wand at *Harry,* who sat on the ground beside Lily.

Lily was dead!

But he couldn't dwell on this; a glow was emanating from Harry, a glow so bright it was almost blinding; The baby's body seemed to be absorbing the curse and assimilating it, then drawing on some core of power in him, altering it and sending it back along the crackling green arc of light connecting Voldemort's wand to him. Peter had no idea what was happening. The Dark Lord's tall, thin body seemed to lose corporeal mass and his wand dropped to the ground. Peter could see through him now, and while he seemed at first to be a grey ghost of the same size and shape as his Master, he very quickly dwindled down to a cat-sized cloud of smoke which flew up into the air, then blew over the trees, still crying out dreadfully, but finally receding with distance.

All was still.

Peter ran back to the spinney, his heart in his throat; as soon as he was safe within the trees, he changed back into his human form and Disapparated, planning to return to the Weasleys' garden. The Burrow wavered before his vision for only a moment before he thought of something, and he raised his wand again, Disapparating once more.

He landed in the road about thirty feet away from the garden gate, then began to run frantically toward the cottage. He ran awkwardly, stumbling up the garden path and coming to stand next to Harry; he stared at Lily's body, his Lily. *What had happened?* He'd killed her before Harry!

Harry was crying, a thin ribbon of blood dripping onto his nose, looking up at Peter expectantly. He knew Peter; Peter would make everything all right. But Peter felt utterly winded and also as though he were watching someone else, as though he weren't performing these acts but witnessing them. He stooped, staring at where the abandoned piece of wood lay. Without a body, the Dark Lord had been unable to continue holding it.

The wand.

Peter reached for it, placing it in his pocket, his heart thudding painfully. Then he realized that he was hearing thudding footsteps, and he quickly changed into his rat form again without any thought for the small child who had been his charge. He ran toward the spinney once more, thinking desperately, *I'll need some way to convince the others that I didn't lead the Dark Lord to his death.* How the wand would accomplish this he didn't know, but it was all he had. And then there was Sirius. He knew who the *real* Secret Keeper was....

But above all, what mattered most of all was that Lily was dead. *Dead.* Peter sat amongst the

trees, a small figure huddled under the dead leaves of autumn, watching and waiting. He knew that Sirius would come eventually, and he needed him, needed him to chase him and yet think it was his idea. He knew Sirius would want revenge, for he would be as grief-stricken over Lily as Peter felt. He also knew that he might need to wait for a while, as he had arranged for Sirius to check on him at Hagrid's hut that evening, on the Hogwarts grounds. Sirius would probably go there first. As time stretched on, he was repeatedly tempted to change into a man again while he waited, and every time he had to remind himself of one important fact:

Rats can't cry.

* * * * *

Severus blinked, looking around in confusion. Barty was standing on the crest of the hill, his arms crossed, looking completely in charge. Severus didn't like that look one bit.

"Why did you have us Apparate here?" he asked Barty, who smiled sunnily.

"So we could watch the show. Any minute now, right over there." He pointed down into the valley at a clump of trees that had smoke emerging from them as though there was a house in their midst. He felt Barty looking at him. "Oh, hadn't you heard? The Potters tried to hide using the Fidelius Charm, but it turned out their Secret Keeper was a Death Eater! How's that for luck? Plus, I heard that the same Death Eater got this Centaur to figure out who the girl in the prophecy is; you know, the 'Daughter of War'."

This didn't gibe with what Severus knew, information that he'd gleaned while under James Potter's Invisibility Cloak, but he kept his mouth shut. He couldn't reveal that he'd been spying. He'd heard that some Seers had learned about the girl. Perhaps the Seers were also Centaurs? Lucius Malfoy had come to another Death Eater with a report, and that Death Eater had gone off to Voldemort, leaving Malfoy fuming in the corridor. Severus had been unable to see the other man's face; he remained masked. It had been very difficult to restrain himself from cursing Malfoy then and there, to remain under the cloak, merely observing. He wasn't surprised, though, that misinformation was being given to some of the Death Eaters. It actually wasn't desirable for everyone to be able to tell the Ministry the same story, if they were caught.

Barty was still talking, and Severus tried to focus. "So she'll be next. Just wait for it; should be any time now."

Just wait for it? What was he talking about? But then he realized where he was, whose house was down in the hollow, although he couldn't actually see anything. The Dark Lord must have told Barty the general area to which he was traveling. Since the Secret Keeper hadn't told them where to find the house, they couldn't see it. In fact, Severus tried to picture the house in his mind's eye and realized that he couldn't. He had no idea what it looked like or where it was, not really. But Voldemort would, in a minute, and then Lily, James and Harry would be killed...

He whirled on Barty with wild eyes. "You mean, they didn't move? They just used the charm?" He remembered Dumbledore telling him about the charm, in the Leaky Cauldron, and indicating that Sirius Black would be their Secret Keeper. He wondered whether what Barty was saying was true. Was Black *also* a Death Eater? Had he given his friends to Voldemort? Severus remembered the way Black used to respond to his relationship with Lily. Had he been hiding his jealousy from his own best friend, James Potter, for years? Had he betrayed his best friend? Severus had always hated Black, but even he hadn't suspected that Black was capable of *this*.

"Damn!" he spat. "I told her to run, to go into hiding..." He had forgotten to whom he was speaking and wanted to bite his tongue as soon as the words escaped his lips.

Crouch eyed him suspiciously. "What are you saying? You tried to tip them off? They refused to capitulate! They still don't have to die, if they agree to the Dark Lord's demands! But they'll probably be stupid and fight..."

Snape wasn't going to listen to this any longer. He began to run down the moor toward the hollow, even knowing that he wouldn't be able to find the house without being told about it by the Secret Keeper. Suddenly from behind them, he heard Barty cry, "*CRUCIO!*"

The curse hit him full force from behind, sending him down onto the ground. Severus flipped over, pain flowing through him as it hadn't since his initiation, a scream torn from deep within him...

Barty approached Severus, still holding his wand on him. Finally, he flipped it up, breaking the spell, and Severus struggled to prop himself up on his elbows, panting, hatred for the boy he'd recruited possessing every cell of his body as he worked to get his breath back. In a split second, he relived every harrowing moment when he stood by and watched Barty Crouch kill someone, every time he'd turned a Muggle into a ferret for *sport*. As fast as he could, he whipped out his own wand and pointing it at Crouch, crying, "*Expelliarmus!*" causing Crouch to fly backwards, striking a large

boulder, while his wand went flying into the air and into Severus's waiting hand. Barty lay on the boulder, inert. He seemed to be knocked out.

But then suddenly, something different went roaring through his brain; suddenly, *he remembered where the house was*. He could picture it again, the neat little garden in front, the window boxes, Lily standing in the doorway, holding Harry on her hip...

He could only think of one reason for him to know these things: the charm had been broken. Black had told Voldemort the Secret. That was have been why it had left his mind in the first place, he realized. The charm had done it.

He rose a little shakily, still feeling the aftershocks of the curse. He'd mercifully forgotten just how bad that could be. He ran more slowly than before down into Godric's Hollow. But before he had gone twenty more feet, there was an explosion. It alarmed Severus and he twisted his ankle on the hill, falling. On the ground again, he raised his eyes to the heavens in horror.

The Dark Mark hovered over the hollow. Severus stayed where he was on the ground, feeling paralyzed; then another explosion was heard from the hollow, and an unearthly cry. *What in blazes could that be?* he wondered. He'd never heard anything like it, not even when he'd witnessed others being put under the Cruciatus Curse. It didn't sound even remotely human.

Severus forced himself to stand again, and once more he was running, operating on pure adrenaline. He went down into the valley, seeing the cottage now. He ran through the garden gate; it seemed to take forever. Lily lay across the flower beds before the cottage in her nightgown, the same look on her face that he'd seen on other faces, people Barty Crouch had killed. He didn't see James Potter, but he hardly cared about that. It was probably Potter's fault that this had happened, Potter and his arrogance! Potter who trusted Sirius Black beyond all reason, when at sixteen Black had been capable of murder! Sirius Black who had betrayed his best friend to the Dark Lord...

The baby was wandering around the garden, his finger in his mouth, crying piteously. There was a wound on his forehead and it was bleeding, dripping down onto his nose. Severus felt that he should have been shocked that Harry was alive, but he could not think about that now. He cared for one thing only. He sank to his knees beside Lily, gathering her still-warm body to him, cradling her, his anguished sobs combining with the baby's cries in the cold autumn night.

But in the midst of his sorrow, another thought was now fighting for space in his brain.

Sirius Black is dead.

A note about Annie and the Anderssens: The events described in this chapter are NOT those described in Chapter 8 of the Triangle Prophecy, although a dog is healed in both cases. The last chapter of this fic will make everything clear, and there will be information about this in the Triangle Prophecy as well. (I just thought I'd say something before all of you alert readers informed me that Annie healed the dog when she was twelve, not eleven.)

Sanctuary

Saturday, 31 October, 1981

“Hold on tight!”

Cecilia had been shaking with nerves as she climbed onto the back of Sirius' motorcycle and put her arms around his waist. Now she clutched him convulsively as he smiled over his shoulder at her; she shivered in the night air, not having expected this. They usually Apparated when they went out, but Sirius had said that he had an appointment later, and that it was someplace where he couldn't Apparate, and as long as he was taking the bike, he thought it would be nice for them to fly together, instead of going separately, one of them flying and the other Apparating.

He started the engine and let it warm up a little, breathing in the heavenly fumes that reminded him of why he loved the bike.

“Shouldn't we wear helmets?” she shouted in his ear, over the sound of the engine.

“No need!” he shouted back. “I've put a binding spell on the two of us; we're bound to each other and the bike. We can't fall off. No worries.”

No worries, he says, she thought, frowning. What if the bloody bike falls out of the sky, what then? She still wasn't convinced that anything other than brooms should be charmed to fly, and she wasn't even very fond of brooms, although Sirius loved to invite her to the testing grounds in Northumberland where his company tried out their prototypes. She'd tried riding on a new model just the week before, at his urging, and had promptly spewed when she'd landed and staggered off the thing after it had taken her on a nightmarish ride, looping crazily around the sky. Sirius had laughed, and after a few minutes, she'd laughed too, but it was forced. He just didn't seem to appreciate that she wasn't as enamored of flying as he was.

And now she was on a flying motorcycle! She tried to turn her anxiety into a joke. “Are you sure you *want* to be bound to me?” she said, batting her eyes at him as he continued to gaze at her over his shoulder. Suddenly, the look in his nearly-black eyes made her catch her breath as he smiled warmly at her.

“There's nothing I'd like better.”

As he turned to face front again, she felt like her heart had skipped a beat. *Did he really mean that?* She mentally scolded herself, reminding her more practical side that *this was Sirius Black*. On the other hand, she reminded that staunchly practical side, he *had* been spending a lot more time with her since Lily and James had gone into hiding.... As the bike took off, she couldn't help thinking about them, and the fact that Sirius alone knew where they were. How did he know the two of them wouldn't be attacked by Death Eaters in mid-air? How did he ever manage to feel *safe*?

“*What if someone sees us?*” she shouted in his ear, above the engine's racket.

“*I did the Chameleon Transfiguration,*” he shouted back, turning his head. “*We'll just look like the starry night sky if anyone looks up.*”

She felt impressed in spite of herself; Sirius always had run rings around everyone else except James Potter when it came to Transfiguration. She should have known he'd continue to work on these skills after finishing Hogwarts and learn a difficult spell like the Chameleon Transfiguration. For all she knew he'd learnt it *before* leaving school. It would be like him.

They sped across an inky blue sky scattered with stars, finally arriving at the inn where Sirius had made reservations. They'd never gone to this one before, but he said that he'd heard it was very nice for special occasions. She'd asked him what the special occasion was and he'd clammed up, as though he'd said too much. Cecilia felt butterflies in her stomach as she considered the limited range of things Sirius might consider to be 'special occasions.' His birthday had just passed the month before and they'd already celebrated that. Her birthday wasn't for another three months....

But her speculation ended abruptly when Sirius landed the bike in a carpark outside a medieval-looking country inn, and when he turned off the engine, the world seemed to be absurdly hushed and subdued.

Despite the slightly seedy air outside the thatched stick-and-daub building, it was a nice place inside, Cecilia had to agree, and the food and wine were wonderful. Sirius patted his stomach reverentially after finishing his lamb, looking quite delirious with happiness. She returned to speculating about what made this evening “special.” He’d never taken her anyplace half so nice—or pricey. What were they celebrating with such a sumptuous dinner, with wine perfectly matched to the food and a heavenly chocolate mousse coming for the desert?

Sirius gazed at her, seeing that she was clearly trying to guess what was on his mind. He almost felt like laughing, but that didn’t seem to be quite appropriate, somehow. He leaned back in his chair and surveyed her, how pretty she was when she was perplexed. He smiled at her and she smiled back. He knew that to make up for teasing her and making her wait he should be very, very nice to her in bed later, after he returned from checking on Peter, and he didn’t mind the prospect at all. He intended to enjoy being nice to her quite a lot. (He always did.)

He reached out to take both of her hands in his and continued to smile at her, and Cecilia’s breath caught as she realized what was going on. *Oh my god*, she thought. *Is he—? Is he actually going to—?* She felt like she couldn’t breathe. He didn’t take his eyes from her but looked at her unwaveringly, with a warmth and a love that took her breath away. *Is it possible to tame Sirius Black?* she wondered, then thought about how much she’d like to find out....

However, just as he opened his mouth, he shut it again, swallowing. He felt dizzy for a moment and for some reason, the image of James and Lily’s house in Godric Hollow burst into his brain, and the place where the house was located, as well.

He blinked in shock, and saw that Cecilia was also reeling, gripping the edge of the table tightly, her knuckles white. He stared at her.

“Are you—are you seeing it too? The house? *Their* house?” he demanded. She nodded, pale as a ghost, clearly not knowing what had happened.

But Sirius knew *exactly* what had happened.

He stood up abruptly and almost knocked the table over by doing so. “Sorry, love, I have to go. I—I need to check on James and Lily.” *And Peter*, he added to himself. *What had made Peter tell someone the Secret?* he wondered. *And to whom had he told it?*

“Do you think they’re all right?” she said nervously, then realized what a stupid question that was. He wouldn’t be leaving if he thought they were all right. He didn’t answer her question.

“I—I’m sorry. Listen, I’ll meet you at your flat later, all right? I’ll make it up to you—”

And before she knew what was happening, he’d left and she heard the sound of the motorcycle starting up again. She stared down at her plate, at the remains of her meal, wanting to be concerned, but finding herself thinking horrid thoughts about Lily instead.

He was about to propose! She just knew it. And thanks to Lily, he’d ‘had’ to go running off. *Well*, she thought bitterly, *I hope everything isn’t all right. I hope it’s about as bloody not-all-right as it can be...* Then she shook herself, angry that her petty jealousy could make her so ungenerous. *So he’ll propose later. Once he knows they’re all right, there won’t be anything to interrupt again....*

She paid the bill, as Sirius hadn’t left any money for this, and left the inn, going into some nearby trees to find a good unobtrusive place from which to Apparate. Once she’d reached her flat, she collapsed on her couch in a crying heap, sobbing until she’d utterly exhausted herself.

Still cursing Lily’s name, she settled down to wait for Sirius to return to her, but she was no longer certain that, if he *did* ask her to marry him, she’d agree to do it. Somehow she just wasn’t convinced that she wanted to look forward to an entire lifetime of always playing second-fiddle to Lily.

It didn’t occur to her that evening that if Lily and James were in danger, it was because Sirius, their Secret Keeper, had betrayed them.

* * * * *

Sirius saw the lights of Hogwarts finally and aimed downward, landing on the lawn near the front doors of the castle. He didn’t slow down and stop, however, but drove round to Hagrid’s hut, his tires cutting deep ruts into the moist soil.

A welcoming golden glow emanated from the small windows and Sirius wondered what he would do if Peter were there, safe and sound. The trouble was—Hagrid wasn’t to know Peter was about. Peter was supposed to be hiding at Hagrid’s in his rat form.

Sirius had been about to rap on the door, but he balled his hand up into a fist and pulled back

from knocking. Instead, he closed his eyes and changed into his dog form, sniffing around the foundations of Hagrid's house, trying to find any remnant of a scent that was reminiscent of Peter.

He found nothing.

This was bad, very bad. There was no sign of a struggle in the rear garden or anywhere else around the hut, and no sign that Peter—in his human or rat form—had been anywhere near Hagrid's hut. His scent would have been somewhere about one of the doors if he'd entered or exited the small house, since Apparition was not possible on the Hogwarts grounds. Peter had not come to Hagrid's at all, as far as Sirius could tell.

He changed back to his human form and returned to his motorcycle, straddling it and gunning the motor again just as Hagrid opened the door to his hut.

"Who's there, then?" Hagrid called into the night, squinting into the darkness. Sirius cut the motor again, sighing deeply.

"It's me—Sirius Black."

Hagrid grinned through his enormous wiry beard and strode over to Sirius, a large tankard in one hand. "Bless my boots, Sirius Black! What brings you back to Hogwarts this fine Halloween evening?"

Sirius nodded at the castle. "Is Dumbledore still at the feast?"

"The feast? Nah, ended a while ago. 'E's probably back in 'is office by now."

"Hagrid—had you ever been to Lily and James' house? Before they—before they went into hiding?"

"Nah, never did. Why?"

Sirius sighed again. "No reason. Listen, I have to fly. Someone I have to see..."

"Ye can' stay for a wee drink?" Hagrid asked enticingly, raising his tankard suggestively.

Sirius shook his head. "Some other time maybe." He started the engine noisily again and raised his hand to Hagrid before taking to the sky once more. As he flew over the castle, he thought he saw a smokey white bird-looking sort of thing emerge from a tower window and whip through the air toward Hagrid's hut. But he didn't have time to focus on this; he had to get to Wales very quickly. If Peter had spilled his secret there was no telling how soon before the information would be acted upon....

* * * * *

Albus Dumbledore rolled up the bit of parchment that had come sailing in through his window not five minutes before. He had no idea who had sent it, nor did he know whether he should believe it. There was no salutation, no indication that it was for him other than his last name being scrawled on the outside of the roll of parchment. The post owl didn't look familiar to him. He stared at it again.

The Dark Lord is gone, the Prophecy fulfilled. He killed James and Lily Potter, but he could not kill Harry Potter and so lost his power. Harry Potter lives—he survived the Killing Curse. I write this as a witness: The Dark Lord is gone and it is Harry Potter who vanquished him.

That was all it said.

Dumbledore turned it over, but the back of the parchment did not reveal any information about the sender. *...he could not kill Harry Potter and so lost his power....*

Dumbledore had already gone to bed for the night, tired and sated after yet another splendid Halloween feast. He had been sleeping peacefully when, quite suddenly, his mind had been invaded by the memory of where James and Lily lived, making him sit bolt upright in his bed. It had been unclear to him whether it was real or a dream, but he had risen and dressed again with the intention of going to Godric's Hollow—which he now remembered was their home—to make certain that everything was all right. He tried to reassure himself that he would find everything as it should be; if the Fidelius Charm had been breached, it didn't have to be Lord Voldemort who had been told the secret. It might have been anyone. He cursed himself for suggesting Sirius Black for the Secret Keeper; he had probably told his girlfriend about the house, or something like that. Or so Dumbledore had thought, until the owl had flown in his window.

He killed James and Lily Potter....

He shuddered to think of the young couple dead, their son an orphan. And if the letter was correct, then Lord Voldemort's followers would soon get wind of it and try to get their revenge. Many would, very likely, grow dispirited without their leader, but others....

Luckily, there was an easy way to check on whether James and Lily were alive. He wrote a quick note on a scrap of parchment lying on his desk: *Just checking.* He wrote on the back: *James and*

Lily Potter. Rolling it up, he tied it to the leg of the waiting owl that had delivered the anonymous note. He threw the bird out the window, saying, "That is for James and Lily Potter," just to make certain the bird knew its job. However, the owl wheeled around in the sky outside his tower and returned to the stone sill, cocking its head to the side, looking at him quizzically. He tried again, tossing the bird into the air and proclaiming again who the recipients were. If even one of them were still alive, the owl should be off, flapping its wings against the night sky, bound for Wales....

But it returned once more, and then twice more. Finally, Dumbledore sighed and removed the parchment from the bird's leg, crushing it in his hand as a single tear flowed down his long, crooked nose.

He killed James and Lily Potter, but he could not kill Harry Potter and so lost his power.

Why would Lord Voldemort be unable to kill a baby? he wondered. And how best to protect the child both from those who would harm him, for—somehow—doing something, or *being* something that led indirectly to Voldemort's fall, *and* from the notoriety that was sure to accompany the news that he had lived through what should have been, surely, a fatal attack? Dumbledore summoned a parchment from a pile of rolled up letters sitting in a basket on his desk and unrolled it carefully; it was from Lily, asking whether he would mind terribly going to check on her sister from time to time, unobtrusively observing her, to make certain everything was all right. Lily had explained that there was a rift between the two of them, even more so since their mother had died, and she didn't have much hope of furtively checking on her sister personally once she was under the protection of the Fidelius Charm. Dumbledore had written back to Lily, saying that he would try to check on Petunia Dursley from time to time and then tell Lily how her sister fared.

Now he wondered....would it work? Could Lily's relationship to her sister provide the protection that little Harry needed? Staring down at the parchment with the very ordinary Muggle address of *number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey*, he decided that he had very little choice. Harry needed a home, and surely, rift or no rift, his aunt would provide him with such a home?

But first—he knew that Lily and James were indeed dead, but he did not know whether Voldemort's power had indeed broken. The anonymous letter did *not* say that Voldemort was *dead*. Curious....

He wrote another "*Just checking*," note and addressed it to "Lord Voldemort." After attaching it to the owl's leg in lieu of the letter he'd attempted to send to Lily and James, the owl flew away from the tower, then began to fly in circles about fifty feet out from the castle tower, looking uncertain. Dumbledore frowned. Why wasn't the owl either attempting to deliver the letter or to return it? But no; it flew in circles, first one direction, then the other. Albus Dumbledore had never seen a post owl affected in such a manner. It was as though Lord Voldemort was alive *and* he was dead.

Finally, he decided that he needed to have mercy on the poor bird before it exhausted itself; he summoned it into his hands and removed the letter from its leg. He stared at the letter, trying to fathom the meaning of it all. *How can I truly tell if Voldemort is gone?* he wondered.

The scar.

He shuddered, remembering the last time he'd purposefully used the scar, over thirty-five years earlier. *Tom's scar.* Dumbledore sighed; he'd only meant to help Tom, he'd only intended to keep a confused and distraught young man from sliding deeper into the darkness that had, eventually, consumed him and given birth to Lord Voldemort. If only he'd known back then....

And he certainly hadn't intended to hurt the boy. *The boy.* He'd been a mere boy when he'd received the scar from Dumbledore. Did he still have it? Dumbledore wondered. It was the only path he had open to him; if Voldemort still existed at all, his scar would probably still exist, too. Dumbledore had to try, to learn what had befallen his former student. He closed his eyes and reached out with his mind for Tom Riddle, for the man Tom had become, for Lord Voldemort....

Are you all right, Tom? I'm concerned about you....Someone has told me that you killed the Potters, and tried to kill little Harry, and that this hurt you....Are you well? Tell me Tom...

In response to his concern, he felt a prickling of rage and anguish flit briefly through his brain. It was very hard to make out what was being communicated; brief phrases like *no body* and *less than spirit* came and went before Dumbledore sighed and broke the connection. He sat at his desk, tapping his fingertips together. Tom had been defeated, it seemed, but the experiments of which Dumbledore had heard, the attempts at immortality, seemed to have altered his being to the point that he couldn't really be killed properly, and he was now evidently something neither alive nor dead, neither human nor ghost.

That meant that he might eventually find a way to come back, Dumbledore knew. Lord Voldemort would try. And there was no telling how soon he would succeed.

In the meantime, his probing of Voldemort's mind—what was left of it—convinced him that, for the time being, he was not a threat. He smiled. The wizarding world should *know* about this, he

decided. They should know and *celebrate*. So, there was the matter of spreading the word; he hadn't been happy at all with the Ministry when Voldemort had first risen to power; the Minister had been far too slow to acknowledge the threat, to take action to guarantee the safety of witches and wizards throughout Britain. The 'new Dark Lord' had been considered a myth for some time, until, finally, one disaster too many had finally brought the head of Magical Law Enforcement and the Minister around.

Now, unless something was done to spread the word of the *fall* of Voldemort, the Ministry was again unlikely to believe the truth. Dumbledore knew just what he had to do to get around the Ministry's ingrained tendency to disbelieve news of this sort....

But first he would need to guarantee Harry's safety. He knew of only one person he trusted enough to take on the task of delivering Harry to Surrey. Stepping to his open window, he put his wand to his temple and then opened his eyes, flicking his wand at the night sky, as a wispy white-grey bird erupted from his wand-tip and sped its way across the grounds.

* * * * *

Severus Snape heard a strange *crack!* and looked around in a panic, suddenly remembering Barty Crouch and the fact that Barty now knew that he was not loyal to the Dark Lord, that he had tried to warn Lily. He gently laid her body on the ground and withdrew his wand, stepping carefully and silently around the corner of the still-burning house, ready to defend himself. Harry had fallen asleep some time ago, leaning against Severus, breathing deeply, and he wasn't disturbed by Severus leaving his side, simply turning over and putting his thumb in his mouth. The blood on his forehead had already dried and Severus could see that the wound there was in the shape of a lightning bolt.

He breathed a sigh of relief when, from around the opposite corner of the house stepped Rubeus Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, carrying an incongruous pink umbrella. That could mean only one thing: Dumbledore knew what had happened here. Dumbledore *always* seemed to know what was happening *everywhere*. Severus watched Hagrid walk heavily to where Harry lay by Lily's side, oblivious to the fact that his mother was dead.

"Oh, Dumbledore was righ'," he sobbed, upon seeing Lily. Hagrid took out a large spotted handkerchief and mopped at his eyes before crouching down to sit next to Harry, his umbrella across his lap. He pulled the sleeping baby into his arms, his eyes still streaming. "Poor li'l tyke. Ole' Hagrid's here now, never fear. You jest go on sleepin', an' we'll wait t'gether to get our instructions from Dumbledore. Don' you worry, Harry...." Hagrid said gruffly, through his tears. But a moment later, the sound of a siren rang through the night air—a Muggle fire truck. Severus looked up; the Dark Mark still hovered over the house. He thought of the corresponding mark on his arm and shuddered; who would believe that he, a Death Eater, lurking outside the destroyed Potter home, had not had anything to do with the attack? Only one person: Dumbledore.

He chanced another look at Hagrid, who was struggling to his feet, still carrying Harry and speaking to the sleeping child as though he knew what the enormous man was saying. "Well, li'l Harry, it looks as if the Muggles are coming roun' to see what's happened. The folk in the village proper must 'ave smelled the smoke. We'll jest take care o' this firs'...." Severus' eyes went wide as Hagrid aimed his umbrella at the sky over the house and cried in a booming voice, "*Deletrius!*" The Dark Mark dissipated and the sky over the house had only a dark cloud of smoke from the flames that still burned within its walls. Hagrid leaned over the sleeping child, saying, "Now, I'd appreciate it if you didn' mention that to no one, Harry. Righ'? Righ'," he said again, nodding. "Far as we're concerned, that didn' happen...."

As the fire company came over the hill, Hagrid crept out of the cottage's front garden and into the trees; Severus crouched down behind a shrub so that Hagrid wouldn't see him. Then Hagrid made him think of Hogwarts, where he knew he'd be safe....*after* he'd tracked down Sirius Black, the traitor who had sold Lily to the Dark Lord. Barty Crouch's words rang in his mind: *Oh, hadn't you heard? The Potters tried to hide using the Fidelius Charm, but it turned out their Secret Keeper was a Death Eater! How's that for luck?*

He could hardly see for his rage. Black hadn't even bothered to keep silent about the fact that he was the Secret Keeper; everyone knew, it seemed. And Severus had no reason to believe that Barty had been lying about Black. If he said Sirius Black was a Death Eater, then Sirius Black was a Death Eater. After all, *Barty* had had no reason to believe that Severus was anything but a loyal servant of the Dark Lord himself—he'd seemed genuinely surprised that Severus had tried to warn Lily....

The truck with the screaming siren pulled up outside the house and Severus raised his wand, Disapparating with a soft *pop!* that was not noticed by Hagrid, now hiding in the trees with Harry.

Nor was it noticed by the Muggles who were members of the Godric's Hollow volunteer fire company. He never saw them put out the fire and remove the bodies of Lily and James Potter, and the Muggles never knew that there should have been a third person present, a fifteen-month old baby who was now an orphan.

Hagrid watched the Muggles work from the shelter of the trees, feeling the comforting warmth of the sleeping baby in his arms. He couldn't help crying again as he watched Lily and James' bodies being taken away. It didn't take the Muggles long to complete their job, putting out the fire—which was already dwindling—and taking away the bodies. They prepared to leave again, shaking their heads, and Hagrid heard a few snippets of what the men and women were saying:

"Oil lamp, looks like. Knocked over. That's what started it," said a large authoritative woman with hair the color of steel.

"Shame. This old place had been empty for years, and then I even forgot it existed, but for some reason I remembered again tonight. Don't know why. But I didn't know anyone was actually living here again. Old Ed noticed it first....Never bothered to put in electricity, I reckon....shame...." said the old man with her, who seemed to be her husband.

"But what did she die of? Damn strange. Him, it's obvious, burnt like that. God, what an awful way to go. But what did her in?" said a younger man with a dark beard. He appeared to be carrying the pieces of the oil lamp to which the woman had referred.

"Dunno. There'll have to be an autopsy," the woman replied before climbing into the van.

"And the roof blown off like that. Damn queer."

"Shame, such a shame...." the old man muttered, following her.

Hagrid watched the Muggles drive off; the house smelt of both damp and smoke now, which was making his nose tickle. He wished he knew how long he would have to wait before Dumbledore contacted him with further instructions. Then he heard another noise, and it was a familiar and welcome noise, one he had heard not too long ago. It was a motorcycle, and Hagrid knew that Sirius Black was on his way. The thought made him smile and whisper to Harry, "Yer godfather's comin', Harry. Prob'ly tha's what Dumbledore'll be tellin' me ter do, give ye to yer godfather. So we can settle down, all three o' us, and wait tergether." The thought was cheering; he was growing lonely and fearful, his imagination running away with him the longer he waited. He remembered the image over the house, the dreadful Mark which was the calling card of the Dark Lord and his servants....

At last, the motorcycle noise grew very loud and Hagrid heard it touch down. A voice said, *Finite Incantatem*, and suddenly Sirius Black appeared before him on his motorcycle, looking around, appearing mystified to find no one present and a damp, smoldering ruin of a house.

Hagrid stepped out of the trees carrying Harry and speaking in a loud whisper. "Sirius! Righ' here! Dumbledore sen' me on to make sure Harry was all right'. I'm ter wait fer further instructions from 'im. Are you the instructions? Since yer Harry's godfather, I assume he's goin' with you...."

"Er, no. I haven't spoken to Dumbledore," Sirius said uncertainly, climbing off the bike. "Can-can I see Harry?" he choked out. He approached Hagrid and the enormous man leaned forward and placed the sleeping child in Sirius' arms. Sirius couldn't help the tears that rolled down his face, nor the sobs that escaped from him as he gazed down at Harry's peaceful visage, forever altered by the lightning-bolt-wound.

"Pull yerself tergether, man!" Hagrid boomed, patting Sirius on the back so hard he almost went right over, baby and all. But Hagrid was hardly 'tergether' himself; he'd begun crying anew, spurred on by Sirius' example.

"But-but Hagrid—" Sirius sobbed, gazing at Harry, "you don't understand. It's—it's all my fault—" He thought of the way Peter had looked when he agreed to be the Secret Keeper. He'd seemed resigned, and yet—was that just Peter masking his true feelings of elation? Had he been planning all along to make Sirius turn around and suggest that Peter be Secret Keeper? Or had it all been perfectly innocent, had Peter had every intention of protecting Lily and James? Had someone figured out that Peter was the Secret Keeper? Had he been tortured into telling? Sirius wouldn't know until he tracked him down. There was no way to know until then. *It should have been me*, Sirius thought, anguished. *Peter wasn't strong enough. I wouldn't have told. I'd have died rather than tell....*

"There, there," Hagrid said, pounding Sirius on the back again quite painfully as Sirius continued to cry over Harry. Sirius didn't know how much more comforting he could take from Hagrid before he needed to check into St. Mungo's to have most of his bones repaired. Sniffing loudly, he handed Harry back to Hagrid very carefully, so the baby wouldn't be disturbed.

"Listen, Hagrid, there's something I need to do. I can't wait with you for instructions. Before the trail grows cold—" If Peter was even still alive, Sirius thought with chagrin. He might have been killed as soon as he gave up the secret. *I hope he was killed*, Sirius thought bitterly for a moment, before

shaking himself. *No, no, not everyone can take torture....he may have tried very hard not to tell...* He kept going back and forth on this; he'd never suffered torture himself. He could tell himself repeatedly that he wouldn't have crumbled, but he'd never actually been tested. *I should have been the Secret Keeper*, he thought for the millionth time. *If anyone was going to be tortured unto death, it should have been me....*

"Trail? What trail? But you'll be needin' ter know where ter go ter get Harry! Wait just a bit. 'S'almost after midnight. I'm sure Perfessor Dumbledore'll be sendin' instructions soon..." Sirius nodded and sat down to wait with Hagrid. What he didn't know was that, across the field, hidden by the spinney, Peter saw them retreat back into the trees and sat down to wait, too.

Peter was waiting for the time when he would lead Sirius on his merry chase.

* * * * *

Sunday, 1 November, 1981

An old man in a grey traveling cloak entered the dingy wizarding pub just after midnight. The establishment was still doing a brisk business from Halloween revellers. A long white beard hung down the old man's front and his face was lost in the shadows of his hood. He stepped up to the bar, ordering a Firewhiskey. While he waited, he spoke to the wizard next to him without actually looking at him.

"Buy ye a drink? Ter celebrate."

The wizard had been flirting with a handsome dark-haired witch of about forty, and he was startled at being addressed by this stranger.

"Eh? And what would we be celebrating? I like Halloween as well as the next wizard, but—"

"Not ter celebrate Halloween. Ter celebrate the Dark Lord's fall."

"The what?" the man practically squeaked.

"Last nigh' You-Know-Who went ter Godric's Hollow ter try'n' kill the Potters. You know—James Potter played fer the Montrose Magpies, and fer England as well. And 'is wife Lily was an Auror. Well, You-Know-Who did indeed kill James and Lily, but when it came time ter kill their little 'Arry—'e couldn'. Somethin' prevented'im. Lost'is power, 'e did. Now 'e's gone, and we all 'ave 'Arry Potter to thank fer it, wee babe though 'e is..."

The wizard had turned around and was facing the old man now, staring so hard it seemed his eyes would pop out of his head. "What do you mean he *couldn't* kill Harry Potter?"

"'E tried ter put the Killin' Curse on 'im. And *that's* what did'im in."

"Well, of course that did him in! It's the Killing Curse, after all!" the man said in frustration.

"No, it didn't do 'Arry in! It did in *You-Know-Who*."

"But you said he was the one who *did* the curse," the man persisted, still not getting it.

Inside his enveloping cloak, Albus Dumbledore sighed. This was going to be more difficult than he thought...

But just then, the witch spoke up. "Are you saying that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is *gone*?" she cried. Suddenly, the pub was utterly quiet. "And—who did it again?" she asked.

"Harry Potter," Dumbledore said clearly into the silence, not bothering with the accent this time. The crowd began making noise again, a rumble of murmurs rippling through the Halloween revellers.

"*You-Know-Who is GONE?*"

"*Harry Potter? Wasn't there a James Potter who played Quidditch for England?*"

"*He survived the KILLING CURSE? No one's ever done that before!*"

"*Harry Potter..*"

"*Harry Potter..*"

"*Harry Potter..*"

Dumbledore smiled and nodded, slipping out the back door of the pub unobtrusively after putting two Galleons on the bar, far more than he owed for his Firewhiskey, which had remained largely untouched. He had made a start. He should write to Hagrid with his instructions before much more time passed, although he needed to make certain that Hagrid did not get to Surrey too quickly. There were other stops to make before he could go to Surrey himself. A groundswell had to be created, followed up by some hard news. He knew just the reporter to write the story, too. The more outlandish and unsubstantiated she thought it was, the better she would like it. It was a very delicate thing, gossip, and required careful planting and nurturing, more careful than the most finicky of Professor Sprout's plants....

He Apparated to the small yard behind the Leaky Cauldron and entered its dim interior, going to a corner table and pulling out of his cloak pocket a piece of parchment and a self-inking quill to write to Hagrid.

Dear Hagrid,

I am sorry to take so long to give you your instructions. On Tuesday evening at eleven-thirty I will meet you with Harry at number four, Privet Drive, in Little Whinging, Surrey. Until then I know that you will take good care of him. Do what is necessary—I trust that you have your umbrella with you. The city of Cardiff is also a good place to acquire various articles that you will find useful in caring for him.

I will need time to make some necessary preparations. I know I can count on you to carry out this task, but do not hesitate to contact me if you should encounter any trouble. This is of utmost importance, Hagrid. Keep your umbrella handy and your wits about you. This parchment is charmed so that only you can read it, but you should memorize the address in Surrey and burn this as soon as you have committed it to memory.

I remain your humble friend,

Albus Dumbledore

He quietly approached Old Tom, the barkeep, and asked whether he could use one of the pub owls to send a letter. They were usually for the use of patrons staying in the upstairs rooms, but Dumbledore put seven sickles down on the bar and winked at Tom, and Tom nodded, taking the parchment and disappearing into a back room. Dumbledore knew he would take care of it.

He retreated to his corner table again, licking the tip of his quill and staring into space, thinking. This letter was the more delicate, difficult letter. It required a great deal of finesse.

Finally, he put his quill to the parchment and began:

My dear Mrs. Dursley, he wrote, It is my sad duty to inform you of the deaths of your sister and her husband....

* * * * *

“Well, there ye have it,” Hagrid said, rolling up the parchment and then tossing it into the fire he’d kindled in a clearing from which he’d carefully removed twigs and dried leaves.

“There you have what, Hagrid?” Sirius wanted to know, crouching before the fire, idly poking the wood with a stick. He felt like a coiled spring, ready to strike, but he had no *target*, no goal, and a hollow feeling in his stomach was making him edgy and discontented. He wanted to be *doing* something, instead of babysitting Hagrid and Harry.

“I’m ter take’im ter number four, Privet Drive in a village called Little Whinging, in Surrey. Don’ know why—”

Sirius’ brow furrowed. “I think I remember Lily saying her sister lived in Surrey. They weren’t exactly close though....”

“Still,” Hagrid said confidently. “She’s his auntie. How could she not take’im in?”

Sirius thought of Petunia’s sour face and shuddered; how could he consign Harry to that woman? He’d never seriously thought about what it would mean, to be Harry’s godfather, yet Hagrid’s first instinct had been that Dumbledore must have sent Sirius to take care of Harry. It was what a godfather was supposed to *do*. How could he let revenge consume him to the point where he neglected his duty to Harry?

“Hagrid, I’m his godfather. I’ll look after him—” He swallowed; he didn’t know the first thing about taking care of a baby, but maybe Cecilia—

Cecilia! He’d completely forgotten about her! She probably would never want to get within a mile of him again after the way he ran off. And she’d very likely be rather miffed if she got the impression that he was relying on her to help with Harry....

But Hagrid wasn’t taking his offer seriously. “No,” he said reluctantly, shaking his head. “That letter said ‘e’s to go to his aunt an’ uncle’s.”

Sirius felt it was his duty to argue. “But Hagrid—” He knew he probably sounded rather half-hearted about it.

“No,” Hagrid said, louder still. “Dumbledore said, and that is *that*.”

Sirius nodded reluctantly; he thought again of Lily’s sister, and didn’t think *she’d* think much of the plan. But to a certain extent he could see why Dumbledore was doing this. She couldn’t very well turn a baby away, her own nephew, and she was very unlikely to think of Sirius Black as a suitable person to raise—anyone. And if he was free to go after Peter, he could make sure he was

brought to justice. If the Ministry didn't punish Peter properly—Sirius would do it himself. "How are you going to get him there?" he asked Hagrid, resigned.

"Oh, er, em," Hagrid said nervously. "I hadn' though o' that. I have a couple o'days, though. Dumbledore says 'e's seein' ter some other thin's fir's'."

"Why don't you take my bike?" Sirius said, waving at where it was parked at the edge of the clearing. "I won't be needing it." The bike would be cumbersome while tracking Peter; he would do better to change into his dog form and just follow a scent, and without the bike he could Apparate whenever he liked without leaving his beloved motorcycle in the middle of nowhere.

"Are ye sure?" Hagrid said, looking at it admiringly. "But—ain't it a bit small fer me?"

Sirius regarded Hagrid and his motorcycle thoughtfully. "You've got a point. But I don't think an engorgement charm or two would affect the works at all. Should function just fine—it'd just be *bigger*. Hang on."

He strode toward the motorcycle and pulled out his wand. "*Engorgio!*" he cried, pointing at the bike. It seemed to glow and vibrate, then it seemed to be stretching itself all over, until finally it was still again, considerably larger than before. But when Hagrid handed him Harry and stood next to it, it still appeared to be a toy beside him. Sirius handed Harry back and tried adding two more engorgement charms. They finally had something that looked like a good fit; Hagrid sat astride the seat, bouncing up and down a little while Sirius stood by, holding Harry in his arms, rocking him gently while Harry made small contented sounds in his sleep.

Sirius instructed him on how to operate the motorcycle, how to go up and down, faster and slower. "And don't forget—you'll be needing to make a lot of stops to change Harry's nappy and feed him and also just to let him run about and stretch his legs. He's been walking for months, you know," Sirius added with a catch in his voice, trying not to start crying again.

"I'll go when it's abou' two hours b'fore dawn," Hagrid said. "Let 'im sleep 'til then. I know a place I can take'im, we can spend the day there. We'll get goin' again after dark." Sirius nodded and reached out to shake Hagrid's hand, but as he did so, Hagrid said, "You runnin' off now?"

"I really have to, Hagrid. I can't wait any longer. I know where Harry will be. I can come get him there when I'm free to do that...."

"Well, if Dumbledore says ye can," Hagrid cautioned him.

"Of course, of course," Sirius said quickly.

Hagrid nodded. "All righ', then. Good luck an' all."

Sirius nodded. "Yes. To you, too." He Apparated out of the clearing, but he didn't go far, arriving on the far side of the singed cottage, so Hagrid could no longer see him; he immediately changed into his dog form and began sniffing around, not expecting much, but—

There it was.

Peter's scent. Sirius stopped and thought about it for a long moment. Yes, no doubt about it, it was *Peter*. Hatred welled up inside him; had Peter *been* here this night? Had he given up Lily and James to save himself, and then come to inspect the damage? Sirius ran along toward the spinney, his nose to the ground, all thoughts of Cecilia having long ago fled his brain.

Hiding in the trees, Peter was suddenly alert, seeing the large black dog heading straight toward him. He changed into his rat form and began pelting through the trees, frequently changing directions, his tiny heart hammering in his chest. He was dreading the moment they would have a real confrontation, although he knew it was inevitable. In fact, he *planned* for them to have a confrontation, and a dreadful one.

The hunt was on.

* * * * *

Maggie Dougherty awoke with a gasp, sitting up in bed. Valerie was perched on the footboard of her bed, waiting for her to awake, the morning sun shining through her translucent body. Maggie wasn't at all surprised to see the little girl's ghost.

"S-something has happened, Valerie," Maggie said softly. "And I have a strange feeling it has something to do with me...."

Valerie came to sit next to her on the mattress, making Maggie shiver with cold, although she did not ask her to retreat. She was smiling broadly. "Something *did* happen," she told Maggie, "something wonderful. I've been speaking to other ghosts all night...."

Maggie frowned. "You have? But I thought you usually stayed in our house."

"Not on Halloween," Valerie said sensibly, as though Maggie ought to have known this. "That is when spirits walk abroad. I was all over the country last night."

"Oh," Maggie said simply. Of course, she should have realized. "I had the strangest dream last

night..." she said haltingly. "I saw a man with long dark hair and a large nose holding a woman with long red hair. He was crying over her; I think she was dead. Did you meet any ghosts like that?" Valerie shook her head, although she also seemed to be preventing herself from saying anything at all about Maggie's dream. "But that wasn't all. After the man crying over the red-haired woman disappeared, the dream changed. It wasn't one of those dreams anymore where I'm watching other people do things, like on the telly; I was in it too, but I was swimming in some very cold water, with clothes on, and the same man was there again. He was up on the deck of a ship, trying to get me out of the water, telling me everything would be all right...."

She looked at Valerie. "What do you think it means?" Maggie was in the habit of having dreams about others and finding those dreams coming true; she wasn't often in her own dreams and when she was, she could never work out what they meant. Valerie retreated to the footboard again.

"I don't know," she said finally. "It could mean anything."

Maggie frowned at her; Valerie seemed to be hiding something—but what?

Suddenly, a swift-moving shadow flitted past her window. Something made Maggie spring to her feet and run to the glass, pressing her face against it. She watched the bird fly away toward the school; it was an owl! And it was flying about in the daylight!

"How curious!" she whispered.

She went to the calendar that was tacked up over her desk and flipped up the page so that the month of November was showing now. She stared at the first square. *All Saint's Day* it said. She stared and stared at it, remembering that she'd had a strange feeling about this day the year before, and the year before that. There was something about this day....

But a moment later, her mother called to her to make sure she was dressing for church, and all thoughts of what the day meant were gone from her mind as she checked whether her favorite tights had a hole in the toe and whether her blue cardigan had all its buttons.

If she hadn't had her memories of her early life taken from her, her life as Peggy Weasley, she might have remembered that this day was her ninth birthday.

* * * * *

Severus Snape paced the floor of Minerva McGonagall's office, waiting for her to return. He'd tried to accost her as she entered the Great Hall for breakfast, but she had recoiled, frowning at him, telling him to wait for her in her office. With a wave of her wand she had declared that some food would be waiting for him if he hadn't yet broken his fast. Then she had turned from him abruptly and entered the Hall, taking her usual place at the head table, next to Dumbledore's empty chair.

He climbed the stairs to her office slowly, wondering where Dumbledore was. It seemed that McGonagall didn't want both the headmaster and deputy headmistress to be missing from the Great Hall for a meal. When he arrived in her office he did indeed find a pot of tea and a tray of food waiting for him, but he had no appetite and let the tea, bangers and mash grow cold and the chilled fruit grow warm without touching any of it.

When Professor McGonagall finally entered the room, she surveyed him with a distasteful glare; he'd never been one of her favorite students, and while she knew Albus had been somewhat indulgent toward him, because of his medical difficulties, when he had retaliated against other students who had teased him she had been stern and unbending with him. In her book, there was *no* excuse for hexing another student in the corridors. That was *explicitly* against the rules, regardless of whether one was goaded into acting. That was what prefects were for, not to mention professors. Students weren't to take matters into their own hands.

She'd lectured him more than once about it, telling him that if everyone did as he had done, the school would collapse in absolute chaos. She'd never found him to be the least bit contrite, but he had also accepted his detentions without verbal protest. His protest was always in the tightness of his jaw when scrubbing bedpans in the hospital wing, or when writing line after line saying, "*I must not hex other students in the corridors.*" But unlike some students, he never complained to his uncle, and his uncle had never come to the castle ranting about his nephew having suffered a miscarriage of injustice. And yet—every moment that he bore his punishment, it was clear that the boy had thought *he* was the one being wronged, although he bore it all in silence. He was an odd one, Severus Snape.

Severus saw the expression in McGonagall's eyes as she entered the room, the one which said, *I thought I was rid of him*. No, he didn't expect to be welcomed back to Hogwarts by Professor McGonagall. But, unfortunately, Professor Dumbledore was not present.

"What brings you here this morning, Severus?" she asked briskly, folding her hands together atop her desk. He could see her eyeing the full tray of food out of the corner of her eye, and it seemed that it was an effort for her *not* to comment on this.

"I wanted to see Professor Dumbledore. It is a most urgent matter...."

She nodded. "I see. Well, the headmaster is not here presently. He left me a note last night, when he left the castle," she sniffed, clearly put out that he had not woken her to speak face-to-face about why he'd been called away. "You will have to settle for me."

"Yes. Well," he started to say, uncertain as to whether Dumbledore had confided in her. Did she know of his role as a spy? Did she know about the Fidelius Charm and Sirius Black? Black had been in her own house, and although he'd actually tried to *kill* Severus, for which he was certain Black *should* have been expelled, McGonagall had always favored Black (and Potter) in her Transfiguration lessons, and Severus had usually received only adequate marks. Her high praise had always been reserved for Black and Potter, and he was surprised to realize that this still stung.

"I-I believe that soon I will be in grave danger," he said quickly, before he lost his nerve.

She observed him from beneath half-closed eyelids, skeptically. "And why is that?"

His lips were drawn very thin; he had to do it. He had to reveal it to her.... "Because of this—" He pulled back his left sleeve and revealed the skin there, but to his surprise, the Mark was almost translucent; it was as though a stamp in the shape of the Dark Mark had been pressed to his skin and was now fading over time.

"Because of your arm? Come now, what is this about, Mr. Snape?"

Somehow, the Mark fading from view was heartening; it gave him courage to go on. "What I had thought to show you seems to have faded, Professor. You see, I bore the Dark Mark—"

She hissed through her teeth and backed up in her chair. He put his hands up in supplication.

"Please listen to me! I have already told all of this to Professor Dumbledore. He knows that—that I was recruited to be a Death Eater in my seventh year here at Hogwarts, and when I told him I couldn't go on, that I could no longer pretend to be a loyal servant of the Dark Lord—I became Professor Dumbledore's spy...."

She leaned forward now, observing the tortured young man before her. "You—what? You spied on You-Know-Who?"

He nodded. "I found out that James and Lily Potter and their son were being targeted by the Dark Lord. Professor Dumbledore instructed them in the use of the Fidelius Charm, but—but they were betrayed. They're dead. Except for the baby...."

She stood and paced as Severus had done. "How do you know this?" Severus drew his mouth into a line and would not answer, just looked at the floor. She did not wait for an answer. "That's why Hagrid is gone...." she whispered under her breath, not realizing Severus could hear her. She looked up at him suddenly. "Why did you come here?"

"I-I may need to take shelter here. There is another Death Eater who knows that I was not loyal to the Dark Lord. There is probably a price on my head now. I didn't know where else to go...."

She surveyed him skeptically again. "Well—until Professor Dumbledore can confirm your story about being a spy, I'm afraid I cannot just allow you the run of the castle. You will understand, I hope, why I need to lock you in here?" She held out her hand and he reluctantly took out his wand and handed it to her.

"Yes, Professor. I understand," he choked out, his face hot with shame. *I should never have let Malfoy browbeat me into being a Death Eater.*

She nodded in a business-like way and waved her own wand at the tray again, which was now supplied with sandwiches and a pitcher of pumpkin juice. "However, there is no reason for you to starve. Perhaps *this* selection will be more to your liking? I'm afraid I don't know how long I will be; I will need to ascertain that your story is true, and I must also find and speak to Professor Dumbledore." She waved her wand again, producing out of thin air a camp bed with a chamber pot under it. "I will tell Mr. Filch that you are waiting here for me and not to disturb you. I will also be contact a personal friend of the headmaster's who happens to be an Auror, to stand guard in the corridor. If you are innocent, you of course have no cause to worry..."

An Auror! "But—" he stammered. How was he going to go after Sirius Black if he was cooped up in McGonagall's office and being guarded by an Auror?

"What, Mr. Snape?" she said, daggers in her eyes. He sagged and pursed his lips.

"Nothing, Professor," he said quietly. "This will be quite adequate until you return. I can guarantee that you will find that what I have told you is true."

She nodded at him before closing the door, although she still looked unconvinced. It was only after she was in the corridor again that his words had their true impact on him. *James and Lily were dead!* She felt tears fill her eyes; poor young things! And now their little boy was an orphan....

Angrily wiping the corners of her eyes, she strode down the corridor to the headmaster's office, where she intended to write a letter to Alastor Moody, summoning him to the castle to guard Snape.

She was fairly certain that he would jump at the chance—she doubted, for instance, that he would put much stock in the rumors about James and Lily until he had solid proof before him. He would consider guarding a possible Death Eater to be far more important than listening to gossip. However, she *did* intend to spend some time listening to some gossip herself. It wasn't *always* wrong.

And then—she was determined to get to the bottom of what had happened in Godric's Hollow.

* * * * *

Monday, 2 November, 1981

"Did you see the front page of the *Evening Prophet*?" Alex Wood demanded of Bill Weasley through a mouthful of roast beef. He passed the paper across the Gryffindor table to his best friend; Bill's Head Boy badge gleamed in the candlelight as he took the paper and read the enormous front page headlines:

**Potters killed by Dark Lord, but where is he now?
Harry Potter mysteriously survives what should have been fatal attack**

"Whoa," he said simply, glancing down. He thought of poor Lily and James, dead, and, inexplicably, his nose started to run and he had to pull out a handkerchief and blow it. "Ruddy awful," he said thickly, at a loss for words.

"Isn't it, though?" his brother Charlie agreed, sitting next to him, shoveling massive quantities of shepherd's pie into his mouth. "Potter was an amazing Quidditch player—"

"Is that all you care about?" Bill said angrily, glaring at his brother.

"I didn't mean it that way. I just mean—he was so young, had so many years ahead of him—and now their poor kid is an orphan, too. Bloody hell."

Bill backed off, nodding his head, staring at the picture that was with the article; it showed a happy young family, mother, father and baby, all three of them smiling and oblivious to the fate that awaited them. Lily and James frequently turned and beamed down at their small son, and then Lily bent slightly and brushed her lips on the top of his head, which bore the same unruly dark hair that James sported.

Bill's nose was running again, and he blew it again, feeling irritated. "It's not fair, it isn't."

Charlie nodded. "It just never seems to stop. But what's this bit about their not knowing where You-Know-Who is? Who *cares* where he is? The less anyone sees of him, the better, it seems to me."

But then something in the article made Bill stop dead; he swallowed a half-chewed bite of food and stared down at the words:

That the Dark Lord went to Godric's Hollow because of a Prophecy predicting his downfall is merely rumor at this time, but speculation abounds that his mysterious disappearance means that the Prophecy was in fact fulfilled....

A Prophecy. A *bleeding Prophecy*. He thought of little Peggy, whom he hadn't seen in over two years. *Peggy's Prophecy*. It was real. It *had* to be. He looked down at the paper, but it was merely a blur now, because of his tears. Charlie was looking at him funny, but Bill shoved the paper under his nose and pointed in the general vicinity of the word *Prophecy*.

Charlie's mouth hung open in shock; this was unfortunate, as it was full of half-chewed shepherd's pie at the moment. Some girls on the other side of the time squealed, "Eeeeeew! Close your mouth, Charlie Weasley!" Charlie did, with a snap, staring back at his brother, his brown eyes wide as Bill nodded.

When he'd swallowed, Charlie whispered, "Peggy—"

"—predicted it, yeah," Bill whispered back. "She was the real thing, Charlie. A true Seer. And if You-Know-Who hadn't been trying to prevent his own death—"

"Right," Charlie said softly, thinking of his little sisters. He tried *not* to think about them much these days, and had plenty to occupy himself, being the captain of the Quidditch team now (although his mother had been disappointed that he hadn't been awarded a prefect's badge). But sometimes, when he saw the first years wandering through the corridors or hanging about together in the Gryffindor common room, he'd think, *Annie should be with them. She should have started school this term. It was hard, seeing the other eleven-year-olds and thinking, Annie would have wiped up the floor with them. She'd be at the top of every class, probably.*

As much as he and Annie had fought, there were times when he missed her dreadfully. When they were younger, he'd particularly wanted to hear her reactions to some of their Hogwarts professors when she started school; he was certain that she would have quite a lot to say about Professor Binns, and not a little to say about Kettleburn, as well, who often got Charlie to help him handle the animals that they were studying in Care of Magical Creatures. The poor old man didn't seem to want to touch most of them anymore and went about with bandages on all of his fingers all of the time. (There were rumors that two of his 'fingers' were really all-bandage.) Annie had always been able to make him laugh with her wry observations, and when he and Bill were at home with their parents and younger siblings lately, laughter seemed to be in particularly short supply (although the twins were showing signs of promise).

Bill looked at the article again, shaking his head. "What if You-Know-Who is really gone? What if it's all—*all over?*?"

Charlie brightened. "Dad's job might not be so dangerous anymore. If the Ministry rounds up all of You-Know-Who's supporters, you've probably got most of the people illegally putting spells on Muggle artifacts right there."

"True," Bill said, nodding. *And maybe if one of them confesses to—to whatever he did to our sisters, we'll at least know.... We'll at least be able to have a service or something....*

He didn't say this to Charlie. The official position in the Weasley home—although never spoken—seemed to be that someday Annie and Peggy were going to return. It was true that his mother had given their room to the twins, once they were no longer sleeping in cots in the big bedroom, with Mum and Dad. Ron and Ginny now slept in the cots, and soon his parents would have to consider adding onto the house, to create more bedrooms. There had been four, and Percy had taken the last spare one when he'd been moved out of their parents' bedroom upon the arrival of the twins.

As Bill stared at the paper, he felt a strange sort of pride well up in him. *If You-Know-Who is gone, it's my sister who predicted it, and predicting it seemed to lead to it.* That was something, at least. Her life meant something, brief as it was. For somehow, despite his parents' assurances that someday his sisters would come home, he remained unconvinced.

You did more than most people do in a lifetime twenty times as long, Peggy, he thought, picturing her as she appeared on the last day he ever saw her. He couldn't tell anyone about this, not even Charlie, but as he listened to the talk about the Godric's Hollow attack whirl around him, he felt comforted by the pride he was able to take in his sister, knowing that, in her way, she had changed the world.

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Peter ducked into the Leaky Cauldron, his hood obscuring his face. He had changed into his human form in the rear yard, knowing that Sirius wouldn't dare enter the pub as a dog. And unlike Remus, when he was in his human form, he didn't have the same enhanced sense of smell that he possessed as a canine. Peter did his best to disappear into the press of people around the bar, where he quickly and quietly ordered an ale and a pumpkin pasty; both came quickly and he started eating very fast.

He'd been on the run for Sirius for over forty straight hours. Several times he almost let weariness slow him down, but he wasn't ready to give in yet. He needed Sirius to be worn down with the chase as well—he needed him to be tired and irrational. He needed him to miss small details. And he also needed enough time to contact someone at the Ministry to make sure they were on the scene quickly when he and Sirius *did* have their confrontation—not immediately, but soon after it was all over. Peter had carefully planned what he was going to do while he'd waited in the spinney for Sirius to begin the hunt. He'd worn Sirius down but had got him to continue the pursuit. Now all he needed to do was make sure the Ministry officials were Johnny-on-the-spot when it really mattered.

He'd come to the conclusion that simply possessing Voldemort's wand wouldn't necessarily protect him from the other Death Eaters. And simply turning Sirius in to the authorities on the strength of so many people being told that Sirius was the Secret Keeper wouldn't work either if, in court, Sirius told the full story of how that was to deflect people from Peter. If Sirius was believed in court, Peter would be going to Azkaban for being a Death Eater and for being an accomplice to James and Lily's murders (and his role in other people's deaths might come out as well). No, Peter had come to the conclusion that he didn't just have to get Sirius to follow him so that the Ministry could easily catch him, he had to frame Sirius for yet another crime: Peter's murder. He had to fake his own death and then disappear. Then, even if the Ministry *and* the Death Eaters wanted to come after him, they'd think it was pointless. And it all had to be done where there were plenty of witnesses, in broad daylight. Only then would Peter be safe.

And I deserve to be safe, he thought. *If it wasn't for me, the Dark Lord would still be around.* He tried not to think about Lily, lying on the ground, staring up lifelessly....

He heard some talk around him, talk about the Potters, and pricked up his ears.

"That's right. I heard that Voldemort found out that little Harry Potter was going to be an even greater Dark Lord than he is, so he set out to kill him, while he was still a baby. And look what happened! Harry Potter survived the Killing Curse! No one's ever done that!" The man shuddered and took a swig of his drink. "I'd say that *someone* should try to off the lad *now*, before he *does* turn into the next great Dark Lord, but who would be able to do it without being killed themselves? If You-Know-Who himself couldn't do it?"

"Oh, come on. You're talkin' about killin' a innocent babe! I don't believe You-Know-Who couldn't kill'im because 'e was even more evil. I think it was 'cause Harry Potter was a greater *wizard* than You-Know-Who, not a greater *dark* wizard. I mean, look at Dumbledore. Everyone always said 'e was the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of, and you *know* that isn't 'cause 'e's evil! Quite the opposite. What we could 'ave on our 'ands is someone 'oo's even greater than *Dumbledore*. That'd be something, eh?"

"Just think!" a third wizard declared. "Harry Potter is only person *ever* to have survived the Killing Curse! He's the Boy Who Lived!"

The cry was taken up and repeated, until all around the pub, people were raising their tankards and declaring, "To Harry Potter! The Boy Who Lived!"

Suddenly, across the room, Peter saw someone familiar—a tall dark-haired witch with her hair pulled back into a severely tight bun, square-framed spectacles and an emerald-green cloak. *What is McGonagall doing away from Hogwarts in the middle of term?* he wondered. She seemed to be scanning the crowd with her eyes, too, over the rim of her wine glass, taking in everything with a steely glint in her eye but not joining in the boisterous toasts or trading gossip about the Potters; instead she seemed to be absorbing everything going on around her with great interest. He didn't like the idea of her possibly recognizing him, so he sidled toward the door leading to the Muggle street, his heart speeding up painfully when she glanced in his direction as he opened the door. He closed it quickly, leaning on it, trying to get his breathing under control. He opened the door again, a crack, and saw, to his alarm, Sirius Black striding across the pub right for him, looking him in the eye.

With a squeak of alarm, Peter fled toward the tube station, not bothering to close the door of the pub again, and he heard Sirius's pounding footsteps pursuing him, although he didn't dare turn around. Peter paused for only a moment to change into his rat form and then continued on toward the station and then below the street, scampering past screaming Tube passengers crying out, "*Rat! A rat!*"

Peter ran on, leaping off the platform and scuttling along next to the tracks, into the darkness of the tunnel between stations. He looked over his shoulder before the platform was out of sight, seeing Sirius staring after him with a murderous glare. Peter knew he dared not transfigure himself or pull out his wand to do magic around so many Muggles. Peter was safe for now.

And then he realized that running into the Underground was probably the smartest thing he could do. He could run through the tunnels to Westminster station and go directly to the Ministry, not bother with trying to find an owl to send a message. First, however, he had to think of the perfect spot for his confrontation with Sirius. Once he knew that, he could tell the Ministry where to look for Sirius and when, and he could go to the Diagon Alley post office to send a note to Sirius, luring him to the spot in question. As long as Sirius came alone, and not with someone else, like Remus Lupin, Peter would be all right.

Peter's small legs ran and ran through the London Underground.

* * * * *

Minerva McGonagall surveyed the people in the pub warily; all day, every person she had seen was saying the same thing, that the Potters had been killed and that Harry Potter had lived. *How extraordinary!* she thought, sipping her wine. She'd never heard of such a thing. She understood now—or thought she did—why Dumbledore had run off and left her in charge at the school without a by-your-leave. Of course, she had left her post, but the school would be fine. She had instructed one of the prefects to post a notice on her classroom door saying that Transfiguration classes would be cancelled until further notice. They'd probably think it was part of the celebration of You-Know-Who's defeat.

Of course, some people were doing far too much celebrating in her view. Since she'd departed Hogwarts, she'd seen numerous magical folk walking about Muggle streets, greeting perfect strangers (*Muggle* strangers!) with waves and hearty handshakes, declaring what a wonderful day it was since You-Know-Who had gone! She had been disguised in her cat form when she had seen these things and had had a fierce urge to scratch the legs of the half-wits who were being so *public*

about their glee.

She just wished she knew where Dumbledore was, and whether little Harry was going to be safe. Just as she wondered how to find out (from experience, she knew that Dumbledore surely would not tell her if he didn't want her to know), she thought of Hagrid, and knew that he would tell her, if he knew. Hagrid was rubbish at keeping secrets. She often wished Dumbledore could see that, but this time she was glad of it, as it would serve her purposes.

A small man in a hooded cloak darted quickly across the room and left through the door to the Muggle street; he glanced back into the pub for a moment and Minerva frowned; there was something familiar about those small, beady eyes....

She shrugged and rose to leave, just as a dark-haired wizard was pushing his way through the crowd and heading toward the door. At a quick glance, he looked familiar too, but she had already waved her wand and was gone from the pub with a soft *pop!*

She arrived in the Diagon Alley post office a moment later, taking out a piece of parchment and a quill and scribbling a very brief note: *Where may I find Professor Dumbledore?* She signed it and tied it to the owl's leg and paid for the owl to both deliver it and wait for a reply. Surely Hagrid would know. She intended to get to the bottom of this.

In the meantime, however, she Disapparated from the post office and set out for yet another wizarding pub she knew of. Although some people were being extremely imprudent about what they were saying around Muggles, she was actually starting to catch a little of the excitement of the wizarding world in celebration mode, and she was finding it quite fascinating to listen to the rumors on the way and try to put together a plausible sequence of events from what she was hearing. She sincerely hoped, however, that some of the rumors were wrong and James and Lily were all right. When she thought of her former Head Boy and Girl being dead, she had to dab at her eyes and blow her nose.

Still, everywhere she went, the rumors persisted, about the Potters being killed, Voldemort being gone, and it being Harry Potter who vanquished him....

* * * * *

Tuesday, November 3, 1981

Minerva McGonagall arrived on Privet Drive with a soft *pop!* She looked around at the identical houses, the nearly identical cars (as far as she could tell), and the neatly bordered lawns, shuddering slightly. She'd been bouncing from one place to another all night, going from one celebration to the next. Everywhere she went, the rumors were the same: *Last night, You-Know-Who went to Godric's Hollow and-*

She pursed her lips, taking a map out of her pocket and glancing down at it, then up at the neat suburban street, wondering why Hagrid had written back telling her that Dumbledore would be *here*. Unfortunately, she had neglected to ask Hagrid *when* Dumbledore was going to be in a particular place and so, of course, Hagrid did not give a time in his reply. The sky in the east was beginning to lighten and Minerva put the map down on a nearby brick wall; she then closed her eyes, feeling the transformation move through her quickly as she changed into a sleek tabby cat with markings around the eyes that bore a decided resemblance to her square-rimmed spectacles. She sniffed the air, not detecting Dumbledore's scent—or much of anything in the way of scents, for that matter, other than a clean sort of antiseptic *Muggle* odor. She wrinkled her small pink nose distastefully and leapt up on the brick wall to wait, giving a small feline sigh. There was no telling when Dumbledore would show up—he seemed to operate on a different schedule from all other people in the world. She would just have to wait.

The sky was dull and grey this morning, which was nothing unusual for November. Minerva began to see lights going on in the Muggle houses, although the glow of the street lamps was starting to fade as the blank, cloud-filled sky grew lighter still. She heard a baby's scream emanate from number four and ducked her head instinctively, putting one of her paws over her ears to block the noise. The screaming continued, shrill and sharp. She sighed again, hoping Dumbledore would arrive soon. She was already bored; the most interesting thing that had happened was that another cat—a large grey tom—had tried to pass her, and she had arched her back and hissed at him so fiercely that he glared at her only a moment with alarmed yellow eyes before fleeing Privet Drive in a grey streak. She settled down again to wait after that, sighing a little.

It wasn't that she *mind*ed Muggles in general, and in fact, she quite enjoyed observing them at times. She especially liked visiting Muggle-born witches and wizards to introduce them to the wizarding world for the first time.

A milkman drove around the corner, the glass bottles in his little vehicle rattling noisily before he parked and began toting the milk deliveries to the houses of Privet Drive. Minerva was closest to

number one, and when the milkman walked toward that house, milk and eggs in hand, he stopped to remark to her, "Here, now, Kitty, be good and don't knock over any of these here bottles and I'll have a nice treat for you before I go."

She looked up at him impassively, unblinking, but he didn't notice anything unusual about her and had moved on to the front door, setting the delivery down and then going back to fetch another delivery, whistling cheerfully.

When he'd completed his work on Privet Drive, he returned to Minerva and placed before her a small cup with a delectable scent coming from it. *yogurt*.

"Here you go, Kitty. There's a good boy. You'll leave those nice milk bottles alone now, wontcha?" He scratched her behind the ears and she purred at him for a moment before remembering herself, thinking that it was a bit unseemly. She did step forward, however, and tentatively licked the edge of the yogurt cup, the tangy creaminess making her cat-senses sing.

The milkman had already driven off as she whole-heartedly thrust her face into the cup, eagerly licking up every bit of yogurt. *What a nice man*, she thought as she ate. *Some Muggles are really all right*.

It wasn't that she actively disliked Muggles or looked down on them, but she did see them as a threat to the wizarding world and thought it best to avoid contact with them whenever possible. It wasn't a violent hatred of Muggles, as she knew some witches and wizards harbored. It was simply prudence, self-preservation. She detested Muggle-baiting or any suggestion that Muggle-born witches and wizards weren't as 'good' as other magical people. *Why*, she thought as she ate, *look at Lily, one of the smartest and most talented witches who ever-*

She stopped eating and looked up at the houses around her, remembering why she'd come to this place. *Please let it not be true*, she thought desperately. *Please let them be all right...*

When she had licked the last drop of yogurt from the cup, she set about the task of washing her face. Suddenly, the door of number one opened; a woman in a smart navy suit bent over to take in the milk delivery while a man with a briefcase walked past her, saying, "I'll start the car. Make sure you leave that note for Mrs. Thompson—I don't think our Hoover has been on speaking terms with the floor under our bed for at least a fortnight. You could make eight small kittens from the dust under there. What are we paying her for, anyway?"

Minerva had settled herself fully on top of the map while the man was speaking to his wife, so he wouldn't see it. He did, however, see *her*, and the yogurt cup.

"Well, well, well!" he said when he was approaching her. "Speaking of kittens, look who we have here! You look happy enough," he said to her, stooping to pick up the cup. "We have a clever milkman, we do. I reckon this is why our bottles weren't knocked over this morning, eh? Is it you who's been doing that?"

Minerva gave him her best indignant cat look. *It most certainly has not been me*, she thought, glaring balefully at him.

He stepped around the side of the house and placed the yogurt cup in a dust bin, then went to his car and climbed into the driver's seat. Soon, the motor was purring along, making Minerva wrinkle up her nose again, from the fumes. Finally, the woman emerged from number one, also carrying a briefcase, as well as a peculiar-looking tankard of some sort; the smell of coffee wafted toward Minerva and this scent she breathed in approvingly. She rather liked Muggle coffee and usually found it preferable to wizarding coffee. Wizards did tea well, she thought, some somehow they'd never quite got the hang of coffee, in her opinion.

The car pulled out of the driveway and moved off toward the village, joined by other cars at the cross-street. Well, that was something. They'd probably be gone most of the day, and hopefully Dumbledore would show up before they returned so they wouldn't find her still lurking about.

The screaming from number four had begun anew, making her wince and simultaneously think, *Spoiled brat*.

Then she thought her heart would leap into her throat as a large tawny owl flew down the street at eye-level (for humans, not cats). *What in Merlin's name?* she thought. People needed to be more careful; owl post usually arrived at Hogwarts during breakfast so that the owls could spend most of their flying time in the dark. It wasn't *forbidden* to send owls during daylight hours, but most people had the good sense to wait until after dark, especially when the owl was going to an area where a lot of Muggles lived.

She moved off the map and stared down at it again. Had she come to the right place? she wondered. Surely Dumbledore couldn't have any business *here*, or he'd have shown up by now?

The door of number four opened at length, and a beefy, neckless man with a rather large mustache emerged, carrying a briefcase very similar to the ones the couple from number one had carried. The screaming seemed to double in volume when the door opened, and Minerva winced again. She'd

almost grown accustomed to the sound when it had been muffled within the walls of the house.

The man started his car and began to back out of the drive. Minerva returned to consulting the map. Perhaps she was supposed to be one block over....

Some instinct made her look up suddenly and she found the man from number four staring at her through his car window. She froze, but when he looked away for a split second, she quickly sat on the map, so that it was no longer visible. The man quickly looked back and Minerva met his gaze again, unflinching. He looked *very* disturbed.

As he drove away, she looked up at the sign at the end of the walk leading to number one; sure enough, it read *Privet Drive*. She was in the right place. If it had occurred to her that the man could be watching her in his car mirror, she might have waited to check the street sign, but she wasn't accustomed to thinking about things like this.

She watched the other residents of Privet Drive leave their houses for the day. Men and women climbed into their cars and drove off to their jobs. Children left their houses wearing rucksacks, walking toward the village center, presumably to school. An elderly woman emerged from number five with three corgis on leads. Minerva stiffened as they drew nearer. The dogs all started straining at their leads, pulling their mistress along, rather against her will, but as soon as they were within a stone's throw of Minerva, she arched her back menacingly and hissed, glaring into the dogs' eyes. All three corgis looked very alarmed and started yelping excitedly, pulling the old woman past her as fast as they could. She watched them go with a smug satisfaction.

At length, a bony blonde woman emerged from number four, bumping a pram down the one step. In the pram was the source of the screaming Minerva had heard earlier. The baby was very round and his mouth was open and screaming once more.

"Calm down, my love, we're going to the park so you can play with your little friends and Mummy can see *her* friends," the blonde woman warbled to the screaming toddler.

Minerva sniffed disdainfully. *Just who is in charge here?* she wondered.

But even more disturbing than the interaction between the woman and her son was the fact that more and more owls were passing overhead, far too many for Minerva's comfort.

When mother and child were returning to number four, the toddler was walking beside his mother while she pushed the empty pram; with every step the overlarge, pudgy toddler kicked his mother in the shin, screaming, "*Want sweets! Want sweets!*"

Minerva had a strong urge to give the child a good scratch, but they had returned from the far end of the street and did not pass by number one before reaching number four. Minerva winced—she was doing a lot of wincing this morning, because of the residents of number four—as the mother attempted to placate the brat.

"Now, now, Diddy darling—ouch! Mumsy doesn't have any sweets with her—ow! But as soon as we're inside, my dumpling can have—oof!—all the sweets he wants—ouch! *Please calm down—*"

"Shan't!" he cried. "Shan't! Shan't! Shan't!"

She beamed at him. "Oh! You've learnt a new word! That's my clever boy—ouch!"

The child kicked her one more time before she was able to struggle inside with the pram. After the door was again closed, Minerva shook her head, disgusted. It was certainly no mystery as to why the child was so large if he was getting all of the sweets he demanded at such a young age (although Minerva couldn't begin to hazard a guess as to what that age was—it could be anywhere from one to three).

The street was relatively quiet during the balance of the afternoon (perhaps the brat was napping). Then, all at once, the residents of Privet Drive began returning to their homes. The man from number four returned before the couple from number one. Minerva had grown weary of sitting on the wall near number one for so long; she'd hidden the map under some shrubbery and had moved to sit on the garden wall outside number four so that she could hear the blonde woman and her spoiled son; she had a sort of morbid fascination with them, they were so dreadful.

However, this meant that the man who had seen her looking at the map that morning noticed her as soon as he pulled into the driveway of number four. He seemed distinctly unsettled by seeing her again; she had no way of knowing that he'd been accosted by wizards in the village when he'd gone to buy his lunch, or that he even knew wizards existed. She *did* think he looked remarkably suspicious for a typical Muggle (the sort who never noticed anything). When he was on his way to the front door of the house, he frowned and cried, "Shoo!" at her. Minerva gave him a stern look.

As it grew later, Minerva drew closer to the front window; she was momentarily startled when it was suddenly thrown open, directly over her head.

"Rather hot for November," Minerva heard the blonde woman say.

"Quiet, please, Petunia. I can't hear the news...."

But Minerva *could*, her alert cat ears swiveling around to take in all of it, now that the window was open. And she didn't like what she was hearing one little bit.

"Experts are unable to explain why the owls have suddenly changed their sleeping pattern," came an unctuous voice from the living room of number four. Minerva closed her eyes; some people had *no sense*, no sense at all. And *then* a different man's voice began talking about the weather, saying that "a downpour of shooting stars" had been reported in Kent, Yorkshire and Dundee. *Kent*, she thought. *Probably that Dedalus Diggle*. Minerva would have tutted if she could have; she understood that people wanted to celebrate, but this was getting *completely* out of hand. And the idiot Muggle evidently didn't even know when the Muggle holiday of Bonfire Night was going to occur—he was claiming it was 'next week' when even Minerva knew it would be on Thursday.

She walked to the end of the driveway, where she could no longer hear the Muggle news. She looked down Privet Drive, wondering where in Merlin's name Dumbledore was. If Hagrid had sent her on a wild goose chase, she would give him such a tongue-lashing when she returned to Hogwarts!

The front window of number four was closed again and the lights on the ground floor went out. Soon, however, the upstairs lights went on and Minerva was startled to find the beefy man staring down at her again. She turned and looked down Privet Drive once more; she didn't like the man in number four. He *noticed* things. Muggles weren't *supposed* to notice things. She hoped Dumbledore would come soon.

Finally, the lights were extinguished and, one by one, the lights in the other houses on Privet Drive also went out, leaving the street lamps and moon as the only illumination on the quiet suburban street.

* * * * *

Peter had done it; he had slipped into the Ministry and had unobtrusively written a discreet message to the head of Magical Law Enforcement himself, Barty Crouch, telling him where and when to find Sirius. And then he sent a note to Sirius, telling him that he was willing to talk, and to be at the appointed place half an hour before Crouch was going to arrive. It was perfect. And he didn't think he had to worry about Sirius trying to turn him in to the Ministry; if he knew Sirius, he was planning to kill Peter personally. And even if Sirius *did* think of trying to tell anyone that Peter was the one who'd told the Dark Lord where to find James and Lily, Peter had already told Crouch exactly the same thing about Sirius, in *his* letter. And on top of that, there were all of the people Sirius had been talking to about *his* being the Secret Keeper...Why, even Dumbledore probably thought the Secret Keeper was Sirius.

Peter raised his wand to Disapparate from the Ministry to the Burrow. His heart was beating very fast when he arrived and he swallowed nervously; he already chosen his refuge. He didn't relish the idea of spending the winter in the Weasleys' garden, but with any luck, he would be able to make his presence known to Percy again, and the boy might bring him the odd scrap or two for him to eat.

Peter walked to the warmly-lit kitchen window, remaining hidden behind the curtains. It was an unseasonably hot night, so the casement was open a crack and he could hear voices within.

"Oh, Molly! Can you believe it? You-Know-Who, finally gone!"

"Sssh! Arthur, I've only just managed to get her to sleep! Thank heavens Ron is such a good sleeper; I doubt Ginny ever will be...."

Peter shifted his head very slightly so that he could see Molly Weasley sitting in a comfortably padded rocking chair near the fire, cradling a small red-haired bundle close to her breast. None of the other children were in evidence, but it was rather late.

"I'm sorry, Molly. I just feel like a celebration!" Arthur Weasley was capering about the kitchen, raising a bottle of what seemed like butterbeer in a silent toast to a non-existent crowd. His wife smiled indulgently at him.

"I know, Arthur, I know," she said gently, leaning over to press a kiss to the baby's brow.

Peter stared at her. *She's all right*, he thought. And would continue to be, thanks to him. He stepped away from the kitchen window, drawing a relieved breath and closing his eyes. The Prophecy had been fulfilled.....

Prophecy. His eyes flew open again as he remembered the Centaur talking about the Prophecy. He had talked about the Dark Lord's *falls*, and the first Lion, the second Lion, the first Daughter of War, the second Daughter of War....

Peter swallowed. No, it wasn't over, was it? But *when* would it be? He thought of Harry, and of the Malfoy child, and of little Ginny Weasley and knew—it wouldn't be over until they were old enough to take up the mantle of responsibility. Which meant—

At some point, the Dark Lord would be *back*.

Peter shuddered. When that happened, surely he would find a way to locate Peter and punish him for what he'd done. Peter's breathing had sped up again in panic, as though the Dark Lord might appear in the Weasleys' garden at a moment's notice. *Well, he thought, if I help him, if I do things for him, maybe he'll forgive me....and then, when he's really back, they can get rid of him once and for all....*

He had a hard time imagining a son of Lucius Malfoy helping to defeat the Dark Lord, but then, he reflected, if, five years earlier, anyone had told Peter that he would become a Death Eater and be instrumental in bringing down You-Know-Who, he would have laughed in their faces....

Peter changed swiftly into his rat form and ran into a gnome hold to curl up to sleep. He had a big day ahead of him tomorrow. He had his own murder to fake and one of his remaining best friends to frame for it. Peter sighed. No one would ever know that if it wasn't for *him*, the Dark Lord would still be wreaking havoc. *Truly, no good deed goes unpunished*, he thought, as he settled down to sleep.

* * * * *

Dumbledore fought the urge to sigh while Professor McGonagall continued her tirade. She was dropping *very* broad hints about the rumors that had been going about—the rumors that *he* had helped to start. She wanted some confirmation from him, some indication of whether any of the rumors held an ounce of truth. She was also very incensed about the lack of common sense many people were displaying. Dumbledore blamed himself for that; when you started by rumor mongering, you were very likely to get overexcited people worked up into a state where they forgot utterly about not revealing themselves to Muggles.

To get her to change the subject, he offered her a sweet, but Professor McGonagall was undistracted by this. Finally, she then irritated *him* in turn by saying "You-Know-Who" one time too many.

"My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name?" When he said it, *Voldemort*, she flinched visibly. He pretended not to notice.

She tried flattery next, but he wasn't going to fall for that; she finally asked him outright about the rumors. She was so worked up that she said, "last night," instead of "Saturday night," but he could understand that. Two days after it had occurred, people were *still* repeating the rumors in pubs using the phrase, "last night," when describing what had happened. Dumbledore would make certain that the correct date went into the history books, however. He would make certain that a number of things went into the history books.

When he finally confirmed for her that the rumors were true, she gasped and he patted her on the shoulder to comfort her; it was the most physical he thought he had ever been with her. She was a very stand-offish woman. Her voice was trembling as she went on asking about Harry, and he looked glumly at her. Why, the normally-stoic *Minerva McGonagall* was getting quite choked up about it all. He reckoned that she had been very fond of the former Head Boy and Girl, more than he realized.

And then he had to admit that he also didn't know how Harry had been saved. He *did* have a strong suspicion, though, which he preferred not to reveal to Professor McGonagall at this time.

Dumbledore was quite amused, however (and having a hard time hiding it) when he explained to her why they were on Privet Drive. "I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

She simply exploded then, telling him about the horrid people who lived at number four. But he knew that he was doing the right thing, although Professor McGonagall doubted that everything Harry would need to know could be communicated in a *letter*. She—very rightly, he thought—pointed out how famous Harry would be. He agreed with that assessment and turned it around, making it another excellent reason for Harry to grow up away from the wizarding world. She seemed rather disgruntled about his doing this, but finally, reluctantly, agreed.

He was getting somewhat concerned about Hagrid being late. He wasn't *very* late, but soon it would be after midnight....

And then, of course, Professor McGonagall had to bring up whether it was *wise* to trust Hagrid with something so important. Dumbledore defended him, but was very grateful when a large, loud motorbike fell out of the air a few minutes later, bearing Hagrid, who was in turn bearing a bundle of blankets. Dumbledore was not surprised to learn that he'd borrowed the bike from Sirius Black. Yes, he thought. *Sirius Black. I think Sirius and I need to have a long chat....*

But he didn't say that to Hagrid. "No problems, were there?"

"No, sir - house was almost destroyed but I got him out all right before the Muggles started

swarmin' around..."

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall listened to Hagrid talk briefly about his flight and then leaned over the bundle to look at Harry Potter. When Dumbledore saw the lightning bolt-shaped cut, he drew in his breath for a moment. *Tom scarred him. As I scarred Tom...*

"Is that where-?" whispered Professor McGonagall.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "He'll have that scar forever." He hoped saying it would convince him that it should be so. *No one must remove that scar*, he thought. *Not if Tom isn't really gone....*

He quickly brushed off McGonagall's idea that he could do something about it. He *could*, but he *wouldn't*. Dumbledore just wanted to get it all over with.

After Hagrid had given Harry a great, whiskery kiss, he started howling like a wounded dog, causing Professor McGonagall to hiss at him as though she were still in her cat form; she started going on about Muggles.

Hagrid blubbered for a bit, for which Dumbledore didn't blame him a bit; he was an orphan himself, was Hagrid, and had his heart in the right place. Even McGonagall was somewhat moved and patted him on the arm to comfort him.

Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door, laying Harry gently on the doorstep and taking a letter out of his cloak which he tucked inside Harry's blankets. When he returned to the pavement, Professor McGonagall seemed to have something in her eye and Hagrid's shoulders were shaking. Albus Dumbledore was also feeling somewhat deflated and tired, feeling *old*. He suggested they go and join some celebrations; there were certainly any number to choose from, and had been going on around the clock for days already. At any rate, he had yet another element to add to the rumors he'd been so carefully spreading:

The Boy Who Lived had a scar.

Crime and Punishment

Wednesday, November 4, 1981

“I’m sorry—”

“No, I’m sorry—”

“No, me—”

They spoke in between kisses, desperate, hungry. Bill had been alarmed at first to realize that she’d followed him up to the observation deck on top of Astronomy Tower, but then he realized that there was really no one else to whom he could talk about how he felt. *James and Lily weren’t supposed to die*, he thought. *They were supposed to be what we all aspired to...they weren’t supposed to die....*

She had touched his arm tentatively, her hand, even through his cloak, feeling like fire in contrast to the cold breeze. She spoke softly. “I don’t feel like celebrating, either. I mean—yeah. It’s good that You-Know-Who is gone. But—everyone seems to have forgotten—”

“Yeah,” he said thickly, staring at a large bright star that looked like a teardrop, because his own eyes were full of tears. *Is it the Dog Star?* he wondered.

She sighed, leaning her head against his arm. “They always looked out for us. All of us. When I was a first year, it seemed that I was getting lost all of the time. Lily found me over and over and took me to whatever room I’d been unable to find....”

Bill nodded, putting his arm around her shoulder. He could feel the warmth of her skin through her cloak; she was shivering in the pre-dawn air. He turned and looked down at her, and without thinking, kissed her. After a moment of surprised hesitation, she responded, her lips parting gently, admitting him, and he pulled her to him, kissing her hungrily, his hand lacing into her hair, holding her face up to his.

“I’m sorry Juliet,” he said, breaking the kiss. “I’m sorry I was such a prat. I’m sorry I treated you so badly—”

She shook her head and pulled his mouth to hers again. After what seemed a very long time, he moved his mouth down along her jaw, whispering to her, “I’m sorry—”

“No,” she breathed, her voice ragged; *“I’m sorry—”*

“No, me,” he said moving his lips down her neck, making her gasp. She took his hand and led him back to the trap door going down to the classroom, with the clutter of astrolabes and telescopes, rolls of parchment with star charts and other detritus of Astronomy lessons. Windows faced outward in all directions, the sills slanting up toward the sky with small indentations that had been worn in the stone from generations of students resting their telescopes there to peer at the heavens.

“I’m so sorry,” Bill said again, pushing her cloak from her shoulders when they were standing in the classroom. She nodded, her fingers fluttering to his shirt buttons; he’d never put on pajamas the previous evening, but had just lain on his bed in his clothes, staring at the underside of his canopy with his hands behind his head, sleeplessly remembering James and Lily.

Near dawn he’d left Gryffindor Tower to come up to the Astronomy Tower, staring up at the stars and out over the grounds of Hogwarts, trying to fathom what it was all *for*. Why did they all try so hard to do what was right when succeeding meant not only that you would probably die, but be immediately forgotten? No one seemed to care that You-Know-Who’s fall had also been James and Lily’s fall, in a way. They were gone and no one could bring them back. But all anyone was talking about was their son, Harry Potter, who had survived the Killing Curse and who had mysteriously disappeared. Who cared about James and Lily?

I care, he had thought, staring at the sky.

He opened Juliet's blouse too roughly, making buttons fly. It didn't seem to matter to her; she shrugged it off as quickly as she could, pulling off her skirt after that. Everything seemed to take too long to Bill, but soon they were rolling on the floor on top of their clothes, he was running his tongue down the valley between her bared breasts, she was wrapping her legs around his waist, pulling him to her, they were rocking together, apologizing with both words and deeds.

Bill's head felt like it was exploding; he saw stars behind his eyelids, and he cursed himself. "*Damn, damn, damn, so sorry, so sorry*—" he repeated, crying again, kissing her on the forehead. He had tried to exercise some self-control—he'd never had this problem with her in the past—but had failed miserably. He rolled over next to her, tears still running down his face, and she put her head on his shoulder, feeling emotionally drained but unconcerned about not having achieved a release, like Bill. For all that he had, it didn't seem to make him very happy.

"Sssh, sssh. Stop saying you're sorry. It's all right. It's not like it's our only opportunity—"

"But that's just it!" he said angrily, starting to sit up. "You never know when—"

"—you're going to die? And how is that *more* true now than it was a week ago? Isn't it actually a little *less* likely now, with You-Know-Who gone? Do you think James and Lily did what they did to gain fame and glory? They did what they knew was right. Yes, we can all die any moment, any one of us. A blood vessel in the brain can burst and we can keel right over. But sometimes—" Her voice caught as she traced Bill's sharp jaw with her finger. "Sometimes you have to have some hope for the future. Some hope that—that things that aren't working out now will change. Hope that a friend who'd drifted away might come back...."

She looked into his eyes and saw fresh anguish there, a knowledge of how much he'd hurt her. She put her finger to his lips and pre-empted him. "Hush. Not one more *I'm sorry*. I know you are."

He held her face in his hands, wondering how he could ever have let her go. "You knew I'd come around? That I'd stop behaving like a prat? How did you know, when I didn't know myself?" He wondered whether she knew about Roxanne.

She laughed and slid over on top of him, the contact with her body making his own body start to respond again. He held her hips with his large hands, gazing up at her. "Who said you'd stopped behaving like a prat?"

That made him laugh, too, and he pulled her face down to his, kissing her ravenously, reaching between them to rub his thumbs across the hard points of her breasts, making her squirm atop him in a way that took his breath away. She broke the kiss and then backed up slightly, reaching behind to grasp him and guide him home. He gasped at the sensation, looking up at her expression of deep concentration. She didn't start moving, but leaned down again to kiss him again, gently, her tongue stealing into his mouth slowly and luxuriously.

He broke the kiss and gazed into her eyes. "So, if I haven't stopped behaving like a prat, what's this, then?" She smiled impishly and began to move her hips; sweat broke out on his upper lip from the sensation and he willed himself to have better control this time....

"It's a start."

* * * * *

It was very early in the morning, and the London street which Peter had chosen had various people moving about on it, but few cars. There was just enough activity that Peter could carry out his plan, using the spell he'd learned months earlier from the Death Eater who had recruited him (whose face he had still never seen). It was a powerful spell, and dangerous, but Peter *needed* to blow the street apart, needed the rats that lived in the bowels of London to emerge, so he could blend in with them. He would do everything in his power to otherwise minimize the damage. He hoped.

He'd thought of using the Dark Lord's wand for this; its weight against his leg, in the long side pocket of his robes, was a constant reminder of his part in felling the Dark Lord. But what if that didn't work? Spells were always most successful when done with the wizard's own wand. In school, Peter had had enough trouble with his spells. He needed to really *concentrate* on this one. He couldn't afford for it not to work.

He thought again of Lily, of the sacrifice she'd made, and remembered the last line of the little Weasley girl's Prophecy: *And love shall end the Dark Lord's reign*. Well, Sirius' love had done its part as well. He was willing to be the possible target, to let the world think he was the Secret Keeper, when he couldn't have given the information up if he'd wanted to.

What a pity it wasn't Sirius who died, instead of Lily, he thought, not for the first time. He looked down at his stump of a finger, shuddering; because of the spell he'd chosen and the potion he'd taken, it hadn't hurt to cut it off, and the end was now cleanly closed up. He reached into his other pocket, experiencing the very strange sensation of touching his own amputated finger with the hand on which it had former resided. He'd already planned for his clean getaway and fake

death. He also had some old robes he could drop on the street, robes with his own blood sprinkled liberally on them, charmed so that the blood would still seem fresh when found by the Ministry. (It had actually worked to his advantage that he'd bled much more than he'd expected to when he'd cut off the finger.) He *had* to go through with it—the Ministry officials would be showing up soon, and they needed to find everything just so.

And then—he saw him. He was standing in a shadowy doorway on the opposite side of the street, his hair matted and unkempt, as though he hadn't slowed down to wash for days—which he probably hadn't, Peter realized. Sirius' face was pale and drawn, dark circles under his unblinking eyes making him look slightly crazed. Peter swallowed, wondering whether he could really pull this off, whether he would be able to escape alive and trap Sirius into being arrested by the Ministry. Sirius hadn't spotted him yet, as he was hiding in an alleyway between two brick buildings, attempting to stay out-of-sight behind a large rubbish tip. A blood-red couch protruded from the tip; it was slashed to ribbons, perhaps by a cat, and its stuffing was spilling out.

It's now or never, Peter told himself, his heart thudding very fast. *Here I go—*

Peter straightened up suddenly and walked out into the middle of the street. There hadn't been any traffic for several minutes, and Peter was relatively confident that there wouldn't be more very soon—he had chosen this street especially because of the scarcity of cars but the presence—usually—of numerous Muggles. He needed witnesses, who would also be a reason for Sirius to feel constrained about doing magic himself. He needed a stage on which to enact his great drama, a way to be the center of attention without risking death by lorry.

Peter glared at Sirius when he reached the middle of the street; Sirius, he could see, hesitated for a moment, but then strode purposefully to the center of the street and faced Peter head-on.

"Hello, Sirius."

"*Hello, Sirius!*" he sputtered, turning from white to deep red, his fury taking over. "Why did you—how could you have—" His hand looked like it was itching to pull his wand out of his robes.

Peter shook his head pityingly, trying to maintain his confident facade, when he was quaking inside. "You have no idea of what's really going on in the world, do you, Sirius?" he said quietly. "You've never been able to see the big picture. With you it was always instant—or very nearly so—gratification. *I* was the one with *vision*. I was the one who saw how we could *use* those spells to create the Marauder's Map, and I who saw what the *map* could be used for....You thought you were so clever to make me the Secret Keeper and tell the world it was you. You couldn't really *see*...."

Sirius had his hand in his pocket, but glanced around the street, seeing the many Muggles moving about. They largely ignored Peter and Sirius, although one or two people's eyes seemed to linger a little longer on them before resuming their business. "So, then, you weren't tortured into giving up James and Lily?" Sirius hissed, furious, yet feeling impotent, with so many nearby Muggles. *Peter wants witnesses* he realized. *If I try anything here....*

Peter grimaced. "Well, yes and no. I went round and round. I understand now why the Prophecy said, 'What though they flee before their fate....' I tried to flee from my fate, I did...."

"Prophecy?" Sirius said, puzzled. Peter seemed not to have heard him.

"...I thought I could protect Lily, but I couldn't. I had even decided that I wouldn't object to your being the Secret Keeper, although I *had* tried to convince you that *you* were too *obvious* a choice. Once it seemed to be decided, I was secretly relieved. But still—I could not hide from destiny. No one can. I see that now...."

"What bloody Prophecy?" Sirius demanded, his hand moving about inside his pocket.

"...And then, for once in your life, you actually *listened* to me and told James and Lily that I should be the Secret Keeper. But what you don't understand is that even after I *was* the Secret Keeper, I still thought I might be able to keep the secret *to myself*. So I hid. But my Master summoned me. I had no choice...."

"We always have choices!" Sirius snarled at him. Then, as though what Peter said had finally registered on him, he gasped, "Your *Master*? Do you mean who I *think* you mean?"

Peter looked him in the eye, trying not to shake. "Yes. You see, I spent a long time gaining James and Lily's trust. Originally it was to be near enough to Lily to protect her. But in the end—it had its advantages."

Sirius stiffened and took out his wand; Peter wondered whether he'd gone too far. "Their trust in you was sorely misplaced!" Sirius whispered fiercely. "You even took care of Harry for them! How could you have done that, and then—"

Peter tried not to faint at the thought of what Sirius might do to him. *Breathe, breathe*, he instructed himself. *Sirius would never cast a spell here*, he tried to reassure himself. Still, Sirius was a formidable wizard, and if he *did* lose control, there was no telling what he might do. Peter tried to appear confident still, tried to keep his voice from shaking.

"You don't seem to understand, Sirius. *I* was the Dark Lord's right hand," he lied. "He relied on me for many things." That much was true—he was supposed to kill the Weasley girls. He was supposed to research the Prophecy.

"How dare you stand there in cold blood and—and *say* these things? What about your friends? What about *loyalty*?" Sirius' voice rose and Peter knew he was getting dangerously close to going over the edge. It was time to act; Peter quickly glanced at his watch; the Ministry should be arriving any minute.

"*Lily and James, Sirius!*" he shouted as loudly as he could, causing more than one person to turn their heads as they walked by. "*How could you?*" Sirius' face was a mask of confusion; he saw Peter take his wand out of his pocket and point it behind his back.

"*Obliterate!*" Peter cried, concentrating as hard as he could. Sirius' eyes opened wide as he watched the crackling purple light strike the building behind Peter, which bore a dirty marble facade; the building actually cracked down the middle, the crack continuing down onto the street, which opened up in a jagged line, Peter on one side, Sirius on the other side of the uneven fissure. Large chunks of stone fell from the facade of the building, striking two women walking below. Sirius noticed with horror that a *man* who'd been walking by the front of the building had also been split down the middle, like the structure behind him, and then his heart thudding painfully in his chest, Sirius whirled and saw that people on the other side of the street had also been killed in similar ways, not one but *two* people gruesomely bisected, while even more people had had debris from the building behind Sirius falling on them, killing them instantly. That building had also split in two, tilting dangerously against the building next to it, causing a woman who'd flung up the sash of her bedroom window to lose her balance and fall three stories to the pavement, where she appeared to have died upon impact. Sirius felt like he couldn't breathe; he'd never seen so much damage done by a single spell, and his mind could barely comprehend that it was *Peter* who had wrought this havoc.

The fissure in the middle of the street had widened to a crater. A geyser of water was gushing into the air from a ruptured pipe somewhere under the street, and a stink of raw sewage filled the air. In his horror, Sirius realized that Peter was no longer standing on the other side of the crater; numerous rats had emerged from the sewer and were running down the street, making the people who hadn't been killed scream at this new horror. Sirius looked around helplessly at the smoking ruins of the street, at the crying, bleeding people lying on the pavement, or weeping over someone else who'd been killed by Peter's spell.

And then he saw it: the finger. It was lying on the far side of the crater, where Peter had been, along with some blood-stained robes. *What is going on?* he thought frantically. His vision seemed to be clouded and he could no longer control his breathing; he thought he might faint....

Instead, hysterical laughter bubbled up from inside of him. *You win, Wormtail!* he thought, starting to realize what Peter had done. His laughter grew even more out of control. He knew that if he stopped laughing, he would start hysterically crying, instead. *Yes, Peter. You got the better of all of us. You sodding bastard.*

He couldn't stop, he just couldn't, even though he realized that the surviving Muggles were looking at him with very queer expressions. He was still holding his wand, his useless, useless wand. What did it matter, really? He might as well kill himself. He raised the wand; if only he could concentrate and stop the hysterics, the laughter that had taken him over....

A moment later, several loud *pops!* erupted on the street. There was a cloud of dust hovering over the debris that had fallen and was still falling from the buildings, which looked like they'd come through an earthquake; that and the geyser of water helped to hide the advent of the Aurors. A very stern man with a painstakingly neat mustache and what appeared to be *starched* navy robes strode to Sirius and confronted him, his wand out.

"Sirius Black! I arrest you in the name of the Ministry of Magic!"

Sirius stared at him, silent for just seconds, but he felt tears stealing into his eyes and had to stop that, so he burst out laughing again, right into the man's face. The wizard backed up, looking truly alarmed. Then he saw the finger, and robes.

"Who was that?" he demanded.

"Pe-Pete-Peter Pettigrew," Sirius managed through his hysterics. The stiff man looked horrified, both at what had happened to Peter and at Sirius' laughter.

Evidently, he had a low tolerance for people who had just been framed for murder laughing hysterically. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at Sirius, crying, "*Stupefy!*"

Sirius stopped laughing and fell to the ground, just barely missing falling into the crater. Barty Crouch looked down at him with contempt as Alastor Moody appeared at his side.

"Take him back to the Ministry. Don't revive him until I come. I'll be a little while here—it looks

like we have to do quite a lot of damage control, and I'll need to get statements from the surviving Muggles before the Obliviators wipe their memories. Remember, *don't* revive him until I get there."

Moody nodded, looking down at Sirius' body grimly, his lip curling in a snarl.

"He'll be lucky if I don't—"

"Moody! Just get him back to the Ministry! That's an order!"

Moody looked discontentedly at Crouch, but nodded.

"Yes, sir," he ground out. Crouch turned from him and surveyed the damage the street had taken. It looked as though it should be in the middle of a war zone, not London, England. *Maybe we can make the Muggles think it was a terrorist bombing*, he thought briefly, before rejecting this idea. That would be interfering with Muggle affairs; every time one of those really occurred, on either side of an unbreachable divide (no matter which divide it was) the other side tended to retaliate. He didn't want to be responsible for that. It was too dangerous.

Ah, well, he thought. *We can say it was a gas line. An accident. No one to blame. No retaliation.*

He glanced back at Moody, levitating Sirius Black's body, moving away, a smile slowly pulling across his face. He fought the urge to laugh, but remembering Sirius Black's laughter was a very effective deterrent. *You're going to make my career, Sirius Black*, he thought with satisfaction. *When word comes out about what you've done here, and that I arrested you—I'll be the next bloody Minister of Magic.*

* * * * *

Peter glanced at the house from behind one of the trees in the orchard. He was trying to hide behind a gnarled old apple tree, but its twisted shape made it a less-than-ideal hiding place. He liked the orchard; when he was living with the Weasleys, as a rat, he'd often been able to find fallen fruit that the birds hadn't yet taken. The largely leafless trees waved their branches in a brisk autumn breeze, the cidery smell of old, rotting apples that were probably lying under the fallen leaves perfuming the air with a combination of sweetness and rotteness. It was the smell of death.

Peter could see lights on in the Burrow, movement behind the kitchen window. He sighed, thinking of the warm and cozy house. Smoke curled out of the leaning stone chimney and the chickens clucking and pecking about the yard completed the welcoming picture. Finally, he once again said a silent farewell to living as a man and changed back to his rat form. *This is who I am now*, he thought, climbing over the uneven tree roots and starting to scavenge amongst the leaves for the old apples he could smell. When he'd had a quarter of an apple that was still a little crunchy, he made his way toward the house; he was startled when the door opened suddenly and Molly Weasley emerged, going to the pumpkin patch and fetching a large specimen to take inside. He had frozen and she didn't notice him, dun-colored against the bare earth that characterized the rest of the vegetable patch. Everything else had already been harvested.

When he reached the door, he found that she hadn't closed it quite all the way. He pushed inside and finally managed to get all of himself in. After the chilly garden, the house's warmth was a huge relief. The thought of spending the winter in the Weasleys' garden was very depressing; he needed to find a place to hide in the house, a place where Molly Weasley wouldn't notice him.

He heard a heavy human step and dashed under the skirt on an armchair's slipcover, shaking violently. Lowering his head to the floor so that he could see under the skirt, he saw heavy brown brogans treading the threadbare hall carpet leading to the kitchen. "Molly! Are you making your scrumptious pumpkin bread?" There was the sound of a smile in Arthur Weasley's voice.

"Yes, Arthur, and I'm making two loaves, so there'll be enough for both the family and the party. Lucy Lovegood said she'd bring her chocolate-pumpkin cookies. I just love those, don't you? She has the same problem with her husband I have with mine though—can't keep him from eating up the lot before someone else has a chance at them." There was a laugh in her voice; Molly Weasley also sounded like she was in good spirits. Peter dared to poke his nose under the chair skirt and looked through the living room and kitchen doorways into the warm kitchen, where he could see little Ginny Weasley in a highchair, merrily slapping the tray with the palms of her hands, making a terrific racket. She laughed with glee. Her brother, Ron, was also in a highchair, but he seemed to be doing his best to struggle out of it, sinking down and discovering that the strap around his waist kept this from happening. He frowned spectacularly.

"When are the Lovegoods getting here?"

"Shouldn't be long now. Lucy said she'd help me get ready. I don't know when I've thrown a party on such short notice! Thank goodness the twins are still asleep. I shouldn't be able to get anything done if I had them to worry about as well..."

"And thank goodness for our Percy," Arthur added; Peter saw him pour himself a cup of tea.

Percy? Peter thought. *Where is Percy?*

He turned his head and immediately saw; Percy was lying on his stomach on the hearth rug, nose deep in a book. Sometime since the last time Peter had seen him, Percy had been fitted for glasses, which reflected the firelight and made it difficult to see his eyes. Peter glanced into the kitchen again, where Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were busy discussing the party they were going to be having shortly. It seemed rather out-of-character for them to host a party, but with a jolt, Peter realized the likely purpose of it.

They were celebrating the Dark Lord's fall.

The others seemed to be adequately occupied, so he ventured out from under the chair and across the room to the silent, reading five-year-old, waiting patiently. When Percy looked up from his book and saw Peter, to his relief, Percy recognized him and grinned broadly. This revealed the missing gaps in Percy's smile, where he'd recently lost teeth. Combined with his new glasses, the missing teeth made him seem more than a bit awkward.

"Twitchers! You're back! I thought you'd gone for good!" He paused, then touched Peter's front paw with his finger, very lightly, where Peter was also missing a finger in his rat form. "You've been hurt! What happened?" He looked grim for a five-year-old now, and rather thoughtful. "Well, it looks like it's already healed over. You've got a scab. That should be your name now!" he said, looking excited as this revelation came to him. "You should be Scabbers! That's better than Twitchers, isn't it? Scabbers," he said again, trying it out. "Definitely better. I'm reading a story that has rats in it, Scabbers. Want me to read to you?"

He changed his position, sitting with his legs folded under him now, lifting Peter onto his lap. "It's a poem actually, and in it, there are people trying to get rid of rats, but you'll see what happens to *them*," Percy said with a slight lisp, probably due to the missing teeth, Peter reckoned. Otherwise, Percy seemed remarkably advanced for a child of his age. "Mummy said we're not going to have lessons today, because of the party, but I want to go on reading anyway. It's a good story. I think you'll like it," he said companionably to the rat, who was nestling down on the boy's worn corduroy trousers quite comfortably.

The fire crackled and sent a delicious warmth into Peter as he listened to the comforting cadence of the small boy's voice, trying to forget about what he'd done to Sirius, to James and to Lily. *It's all to the good*, he told himself, looking around the shabby but nonetheless inviting room. *The Weasleys are happy about it*, he thought. *They're having a party. And other people are happy about it, too.*

He tried to dwell on how happy people were now, the parties they were planning, the Death Eater attacks that would cease, as he listened to the small boy tell him about the Pied Piper of Hamelin leading the villagers' children away from the town in retribution for their not having paid him to remove the rats....

*"Willy, let me and you be wipers
Of scores out with all men—especially pipers!
And, whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice,
If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise!"*

* * * * *

Vernon Dursley's hand slipped and he cut himself with his straight-razor. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence for him to cut himself while shaving (he already had three cuts this morning alone) but this was more along the lines of a gash, thanks to the blood-curdling scream that had emanated from below.

He couldn't imagine what might have happened. Suppose there was something wrong with Dudley and he had to be rushed to Dr. Forbes, in the village? Or worse—to the hospital in Guilford! Vernon hastily wiped the rest of the shaving cream from his face and lumbered down the stairs, crying out, "Coming, my dumpling! Coming!"

The front door was open, the last thing he'd expected, and his wife had dropped the empty milk bottles she'd been planning to put out, causing them to shatter on the hard brick step. Vernon's heart was in his throat; he couldn't imagine what had happened. As far as he could see, unless the street had blown up, or one of the other houses on it, there was no reason for her to be standing in the doorway like this.

But when he arrived next to her, he saw the reason—a small blanket-wrapped bundle was sitting on the step, a tuft of black hair peeking out from amidst the blankets. A small hand clutched what looked like a large, creamy envelope with curling script on the front:

*Mrs. Petunia Dursley
4 Privet Drive
Little Whinging, Surrey*

His wife was shivering, and he didn't think it was just because she was still in her dressing gown. He bent and gingerly picked up the envelope, wondering why this seemed to terrify his wife even more than the fact that someone had evidently deposited a *baby* on their doorstep. He turned the envelope over and saw a crest on the back which had been pressed into a purple wax seal. He couldn't make out the images on the seal, as the baby's hand had been clutching it and his body heat had caused the wax to soften.

Vernon heard a hiccupping noise and looked down; the baby had awoken, and was glancing around with large green eyes that looked disturbingly familiar....

Almost immediately, another noise met their ears: the sound of the milkman driving onto the street, his milk bottles rattling along behind him. Petunia gave a cry and bent down to scoop up the baby before the milkman came to a stop in front of number four. *Normal* people did *not* have babies on their front steps! *Normal* people's babies were in their houses, asleep in their cots.

She slammed the door quickly, leaning against it, holding the baby at arm's length as though she was afraid of it. The baby didn't like this a bit and started yowling at the top of its lungs. Vernon noticed that there was a jagged scar on the baby's forehead; it was probably not very bright, he thought. Probably banged into things all of the time. And it obviously didn't come from responsible parents. Who left a baby on a stranger's doorstep when they could no longer cope? Wastrels and criminals, *that's* who. To quiet the yowling, Petunia Dursley held the baby closer, although she made a face at having to do so; his nappy obviously hadn't been changed in some time. So she changed her mind; instead, she thrust the baby at him and snatched the letter from her husband's hands.

"His nappy wants changing. Use one of Dudley's," she said shortly, looking at the envelope with trepidation. *She* knew that seal. This could mean nothing good.

Vernon Dursley was horrified at the prospect of changing the strange child's nappy; now he was the one holding it at arm's length. "But-Petunia! I don't even change Dudley's nappies!"

"Well, it's time to start!" she snapped, breaking the seal with shaking hands and taking the heavy parchment out of the envelope, her heart in her throat.

Vernon drew himself up; his wife was behaving very strangely. "This isn't our problem," he said authoritatively, while thinking, *What did we ever do to deserve this? What?* "We'll just call the police and they'll come to collect the brat, put it into some care facility with the other brats abandoned by their drug-addicted parents...."

His wife gasped and sat on the stairs suddenly. He wasn't sure why, though. She'd heard quite a lot on the news about the drain on society, on decent, *normal* people, represented by drug addicts and criminals. She knew all about these things, and shouldn't be shocked by his talking this way. But after a moment, he realized that she was gasping because of the letter, not his comment about drug addicts. She raised large frightened eyes to her husband and spoke in a small, quivering voice.

"We have to keep him."

* * * * *

Thursday, 5 November, 1981

Severus Snape paced the length of his cell and back again, seething. He shouldn't have gone to Hogwarts first, he saw that now. It hadn't been his first instinct, either. His first had been to try to find Sirius Black. The problem was, he'd thought Dumbledore would be at Hogwarts, that that was why he had sent Hagrid to Godric's Hollow. They could go after Black together. Black would surely have other Death Eaters with him, and Severus wasn't a stupid man; he knew what his fellow Death Eaters could do. He didn't want to take chances. He hadn't reckoned on McGonagall not trusting him, nor Dumbledore being gone. He hadn't expected her to call the most paranoid Auror at the Ministry to keep watch over him.

All he'd been doing was opening the window to let some air into McGonagall's stuffy office, and the next thing he knew Moody was storming the room with his wand drawn, stunning Severus before he could say a word. When he awoke he was in a cell, presumably at the Ministry of Magic, and he hadn't seen a soul since arriving. Some food had been magicked into the cell, but that was all. He patted his robe pockets for the millionth time; they'd taken his wand, and he felt sick without it. *I want my bloody wand back. Give me my wand back!* he thought. Sometimes he broke out in a sweat, thinking about not having it.

Suddenly, he heard the bolt slide back and the door swung open slowly. He felt the cold in his chest first, then the coldness of mind and the voices of all of the people he'd seen Barty Crouch kill were howling in his head, along with Barty's voice, crying the fatal curses, and flash after flash of speeding green death....

He could dimly see that Alastor Moody was standing in the doorway, flanked by two dementors. He turned to them, looking no more disturbed than if they'd been little old ladies, and dismissed them with a wave of his hand. They glided away, and, little by little, Severus started to feel close to normal again. Normal for him. He'd found that he had few happy thoughts left, so the dementors didn't spend much time lurking outside his cell, trying to feed off them. He couldn't give them what they wanted, so they left him alone, for the most part.

He stared at Moody, who limped into the room, one of his legs making a loud clumping sound. He had moved surprisingly fast when he'd entered McGonagall's office, all things considered. Severus knew of Moody's reputation. He knew not to say anything to him. Moody sat on the pallet, the noisy leg stretched out straight before him, now revealed to be a wooden one with an elaborately carved foot, as though it were a piece of furniture. (Maybe it was *from* a piece of furniture, Severus thought.)

"Hello there, Snape," Moody growled out suddenly. Severus noticed that he didn't have his wand drawn. Was that meant to lull him into a false sense of security?

"Rather a nasty shock, I imagine, waking up here instead of Minerva McGonagall's office at Hogwarts," he said in a gravelly voice.

Severus wasn't sure what he was up to, and surveyed him through narrowed eyes.

"You would imagine correctly," he said stiffly.

Moody gave off a laugh that sounded a bit like a sick dog. "Minerva tells me that you're a Death Eater. You've got your nerve, haven't you? Walking into Hogwarts and announcing that...."

"Dumbledore knows all about that!" he said impatiently. "I was looking for him! I've been spying for him, I *told* McGonagall...."

"Yes, yes. So she said," he replied in a low voice, clearly not believing this. "Or rather, so she said *you* said."

So McGonagall doesn't believe me either. That explains why she called Moody. "Listen, just talk to Dumbledore and you'll find out the truth....I was trying to get his help running down Sirius Black. He's a Death Eater and betrayed Lily and James Potter. It's his fault they're dead...."

Moody grunted, as though reluctantly admitting that Snape seemed to know what he was talking about. "You don't need to worry about finding Black. He's in custody. Since yesterday morning."

"Yester-Why didn't anyone tell me?" he demanded angrily, approaching Moody, but stopping when he saw Moody's hand move toward his pocket.

"You're a relatively low priority at the moment, Snape. We've been keeping you fed. You'll wait. Everything's in a bit of an uproar at the moment...."

"How'd they catch him?" he said anxiously.

Moody shook his head. "Not clear. Apparently his friend, Petty, Pettigrew--"

"Pettigrew," Snape offered, remembering.

"Right. Pettigrew. Evidently he tracked Black down and confronted him about betraying their friends. Terrible--he was a little bloke, I hear."

Snape nodded, blinking back his confusion. "Right. Not large," he said slowly, resuming his pacing, having a very hard time imagining Peter Pettigrew confronting Sirius Black. "Why was it terrible?" he finally dared to ask.

Moody sighed. "Street blasted apart. About a dozen Muggles killed, some in ways I won't tell you unless you want to stop sleeping for a few years. And it was all with one spell. Black has clearly been learning his Dark Arts from the master. Blew Pettigrew to bits, too. All that we found of *him* was a finger and some bloody robes. His poor mum was in a right state."

Snape stared in disbelief. *Black did that!* He drew his lips into an angry line. "Nothing you could tell me about Sirius Black would surprise me in the least," he said in a low voice. Moody looked at him in surprise.

"Oh, I see how it is. No love lost there, eh? What's the matter--he got into daddy's good graces and you didn't? Is that why you turned *spy*?" Although he said this, he still sounded skeptical about the 'spy' part.

Severus swallowed; he couldn't say too much. Barty Crouch, Jr. had the run of the Ministry because of his father and could get into his cell in a heartbeat. If he thought Severus was going to turn him in, he would, too. He already knew that Severus had warned Lily. He might have thought that was just because of having been her boyfriend, though. Severus was starting to rue

the moment he'd told McGonagall that he was a spy for Dumbledore. If Barty found out he was in custody, his life might not be worth a Knut.

"Please—I need to see Dumbledore. He'll vouch for me. But—could you not tell anyone else about my being a spy? Please?" he whispered.

Moody looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Why?" he growled, clearly suspicious. Severus decided that the closest thing to the truth would be the best idea.

"I can implicate someone in the Ministry." That wasn't strictly true, but Barty had as much access as someone working for the Ministry. "Someone who's a Death Eater, who told me that the Potters' Secret Keeper was also a Death Eater. I'm afraid that if he finds out I'm here, I'll be dead. I don't want to say anything more right now."

He reached over with his right hand and kneaded the skin of his left inner forearm with his hand, a convulsive movement he'd repeated many times since being taken into custody; Moody noticed and stared at the arm carefully.

"Had the Mark, did you?" he said suddenly. Severus was jolted.

"You know?"

Moody nodded. "I'm one of the few who do. It's faded now, isn't it?"

Severus nodded. The old man rose and clunked his way to the cell door and pounded on it twice with his fist. "I'll see if Dumbledore is free yet. He's being questioned about Black. Be patient," he added gleefully, with a twisted smile, as though knowing that this was most likely to agitate Severus. *Patient!* He'd been nothing *but* patient! Rotting in a Ministry cell, waiting for someone to remember that he'd been charged with nothing, he hadn't even been questioned....

The dementors came to open the door again; Severus could feel the cold before they opened it this time. He surveyed the unflustered Moody.

"How—how do you keep from being affected by them?" he choked, his vision starting to blur.

Moody gave him a crooked smile, which was missing more than a few teeth. "Strength of mind. Practice. And—I'm not what you'd call an exceptionally happy person. I don't give them much to work with," he growled.

Severus nodded. That last part was also true of him, to an extent. But he still felt the icy coldness in his chest, his mind and vision clouding when they drew too near, voices that came not from without but from within.

Moody left with the dementors and Severus Snape went on pacing, waiting for Dumbledore.

* * * * *

"So you are saying that to the best of your knowledge, Sirius Black was the Secret Keeper for James and Lily Potter."

Albus Dumbledore nodded reluctantly. "Yes. I suggested that they use him, in fact. He is—was—James Potter's best friend. They were like brothers," he said quietly.

Barty Crouch snorted, the hairs on his precisely-trimmed mustache quivering only slightly. "If we're talking about Cain and Abel, yes."

"This is no time for jokes!" Dumbledore said sharply. "Do you think that a dear friend betraying another friend is *funny*?" His voice suddenly seemed very loud, filling Crouch's painstakingly-neat Ministry office. Crouch appeared not to have heard. In the corner, a young man with short, straw-colored hair, not much more than a boy, really, scribbled what they were saying onto a long scroll of parchment.

"So, you suggested Black as the Secret Keeper. Why is that?"

"I already told you. He and James were very close. In addition to that, he has a brilliant mind. Sirius and James came top of their year in many things, except for those areas in which Lily—" He stopped suddenly, bowing his head.

"What can you tell me about Pettigrew?" Crouch said suddenly. The young man was smirking as he wrote.

Dumbledore looked placidly at Crouch. "Why do you ask?"

Crouch shrugged. "Well, for a start, was he also in Gryffindor, with the others?"

"Yes. They were all in Gryffindor."

"All?"

"James, Sirius, Peter and Remus Lupin."

"Lupin, Lupin....That sounds familiar," he mused, then shook himself. "Why do you reckon it was Pettigrew who went after Black? He certainly showed his Gryffindor stuff, didn't he?" Crouch said cheerfully.

"I don't know why, specifically. *Perhaps* he was rather upset that one of his friends had betrayed two of his other friends!" Dumbledore's voice rose once more. The boy in the corner was smirking again.

"Why wouldn't he get this Lupin to help him, then? Two against one. Better odds, that."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I don't know. I haven't any idea where Remus is. Perhaps Peter didn't either...."

Crouch's eyes lit up. "Wait! I know why that name is familiar. He's a werewolf! Arrested a couple of years ago as a murder suspect!" He looked very pleased with himself for remembering. "Ah, well, that explains why Pettigrew probably didn't ask him for help. He must be one of You-Know-Who's people as well; perhaps he and Black went in together. If Pettigrew had taken Lupin along, it probably would have been one against two, not the other way round...."

"Remus Lupin is not—"

"—a Death Eater?" Crouch smirked now. "And when you recommended Black as the Potters' Secret Keeper, were you aware that *he* was a Death Eater? Are you aware that a number of other former Hogwarts students who finished school in recent years are *also* Death Eaters, and that we have them in custody?" He said this as though their being Death Eaters was Dumbledore's fault.

"Of course I do not know that, Barty. You have been remarkably unforthcoming about information of that sort until it suits you to divulge it," he said smoothly. "But I daresay that I would not be surprised for *some* former Hogwarts students to turn out to be Death Eaters, unless Lord Voldemort has been *importing* all of his followers."

Crouch and the young man both drew in their breaths at his use of the name; Dumbledore scrutinized the boy, who looked back defiantly. He recognized him now; he hadn't realized he was working *here*, in *this* office. It seemed a strange thing for his father to do; he'd never previously shown a bent toward nepotism (if anything, his natural tendency seemed to be quite the opposite). The boy had been a prefect who had finished school two years earlier. He hadn't been Head Boy, though, and had been more than a little bitter about that, too, Dumbledore remembered.

"One of the Death Eaters we have apprehended was brought in *from Hogwarts*. He is a former Slytherin and has been making the ludicrous claim that he has been spying for *you!* What could he mean by that? That last time I checked, *you* were not the Minister." He surveyed Dumbledore through narrowed eyes. "He and my son were friends for a time, but Barty tells me that he eventually began to suspect what the Slytherin was up to, and that he even tried to recruit him. My son! A Death Eater!"

Dumbledore swallowed, but answered calmly. "That might either have been part of his cover, something he'd been commanded to do, or something that occurred before he changed his mind about his loyalties. Or more than one of those things. Whatever the case, I can tell you that Severus Snape—for it can only be he to whom you refer—is again loyal to the Ministry. You must have misunderstood the part about his 'spying' for *me*. I have a number of friends who are Aurors, and I keep my ear to the ground, giving them whatever information crosses my path that may prove useful. Sometimes it crosses my path in the form of another person, such as Severus. No one is 'spying,' for me." He said this very calmly, looking up into Barty Crouch's face, seeing that this martinet of a man did not believe this, but had no proof to the contrary beyond the testimony of a young man whose credibility was suspect because he had admitted to having once been a Death Eater.

"And how do you know that this Slytherin did not ever feed you false information, knowing that you were going to be passing it on to Aurors?"

"Because everything he has told me since he confessed the error of his ways has proven to be of great use to—the Aurors. And if he had not told me of the danger to the Potters, they would have been completely unaware of it."

"Hm...And *that* turned out well, didn't it? You recommended Sirius Black to be Secret Keeper, and *he* turns out to be *another* Death Eater!"

Dumbledore's eyes were very hard as he looked at Crouch over his half-moon spectacles. "Believe me when I say that that will haunt me for the rest of my life, Barty."

Crouch appeared not to have heard this. "Of course, considering that You-Know-Who is now gone, and that it is all through Black's betrayal, one could look at this as something in which you had a hand. And I *have* heard that you are the only one You-Know-Who ever feared...was it because you knew his Achilles' Heel? The key to his defeat? After defeating Grindelwald, I shouldn't be surprised at all..." His voice was dripping with suspicion. The young man's quill scratched.

Dumbledore glared at him for a long moment before bursting into laughter, removing his glasses and wiping his eyes with the end of his beard before replacing them across his long, crooked nose. Crouch looked quite affronted by his laughter.

"Oh, thank you for that Barty. One thing I needed today was a good laugh. Are you seriously suggesting that I am angling to be the next great Dark Lord myself? Because I can assure you that I am not. I am content to be a humble school headmaster. I do not yearn for the power of which you speak..."

"A *humble* headmaster, is it?" Crouch said, still sounding very suspicious. "A *humble* headmaster who holds in his hands the future of every child in the wizarding world! Who shapes the minds and futures of every magical person born in the British Isles! That's more than a little power, in my book!"

Dumbledore looked calmly at him. "In its way, yes, it is. And I have endeavored to use that power with utmost responsibility. If there is anyone who feels I have not, I should be delighted to hear the citations of times when I was derelict in my duty."

Crouch sputtered, then suddenly Albus Dumbledore found himself with an accusatory finger pointing in his face. "You were derelict in not informing the Ministry that a Death Eater had confessed to you! He should have been taken into custody and—"

"No," Dumbledore said quickly. "His life would have been in great danger. I worry that it is in danger now; I understand that there are Death Eaters that have infiltrated the Ministry." Suddenly, the young man dropped his quill and quickly summoned it back into his hand, resuming his writing. "Now that their leader is gone, they may wish to go underground again and forget that they were ever so misguided as to follow Voldemort. But underground or not, they will still be here unless something is done to find them..."

"Death Eaters in the Ministry!" Crouch cried, indignant. "That is preposterous!"

Dumbledore stood now. "No more so than for them to be in any other job!" he bellowed. Crouch backed up slightly. "Lord Voldemort had his people in every level of wizarding society! To think that the Ministry is immune—*that* is preposterous!"

Crouch swallowed and backed up a little more.

"Now—if you are quite done, may I please see Sirius Black?" Dumbledore asked, suddenly placid.

"No," Crouch said tersely, without hesitation. "He is not receiving visitors." Crouch's jaw was set; Albus hadn't been confident that he would be permitted to do this, but it had been worth a try. He nodded, conceding defeat on one matter.

"What is to become of him?" he said sadly.

"He's going to Azkaban for the rest of his life," Crouch answered with a cruel offhandedness that belied the severity of the sentence. Dumbledore's eyes widened.

"Without a trial?"

"He's as good as confessed! Keeps talking about it being all his fault, laughing fit to kill....What do you think a trial would accomplish? Yes, he could do that for an audience. Or we could have mayhem in the courtroom when someone tries to blow him up—"

"Blow him up?" Dumbledore frowned.

Crouch leaned toward him and spoke in a confidential whisper. "Between you and me, the Howlers have been flying thick and fast around here. For Black. He's lucky he hasn't been blown up already. We've got a special detail on handling owls for him. Bloody hell, we're lucky some of our own people haven't been killed. There are some who are *not* happy that Black betrayed his friends, if you get my meaning. He'll be far safer the sooner he's in Azkaban....Not that he deserves to be. Someone like *him* makes me wish we still had the death sentence. But at any rate, dementors can't be hurt by exploding Howlers, no matter what someone has put in them—they're very useful that way. Not that Black *deserves* to be safe, as I said, but the rest of us will be safer, too. It's a bloody menace, keeping him here. Innocent lives are at risk..."

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "I see. And he said—he said it was his fault?"

"I said so, didn't I? Yes, he keeps repeating that. And you wouldn't believe the job we had in London yesterday, cleaning up Black's mess! Of course, we also told the press that we collected him on Sunday, to keep the Howlers from flying at *us*, as well. Yesterday would have been considered an unforgivable delay. The Howlers that have been arriving here for Black are bad enough—we don't need more. Between you and me, I still think we got him into custody in good time, and saying it happened a few days earlier is neither here nor there. In fact, I even told the *Prophet* that it was lucky we kept it hushed up for as long as we did, or there would have been even more Howlers. And I made certain I told the reporter that none of the Howlers are reaching Black, so hopefully they'll stop coming." He grinned, very pleased with himself. Dumbledore did not comment. "Oh, and Pettigrew is getting the Order of Merlin, First Class. Posthumously, of course. Poor little bloke evidently didn't know what he was up against..."

"Yes, very sad," Dumbledore said sincerely, remembering Peter Pettigrew. How very surprising that he had decided to run after Sirius. His magical abilities had never been up to James and

Sirius', or even Remus'....

"Well, if you'll just show me where I can collect Severus now, we'll be going...."

"Collect? Snape? What makes you think that is happening? And where would you be taking him?"

"To Hogwarts."

"What for?" Crouch asked, suspicious again.

"To be my new Potions Master." *Hopefully, when I offer Severus the job, he'll see the sense in it...and my current Potions Master will go along with the idea of beginning his retirement...*

"Potions Master! What's wrong with the one you have now?"

"He wishes to retire," Dumbledore said, shrugging and throwing his hands up helplessly. "As I am the one vouching for Severus Snape, it is only appropriate that he should be my responsibility, so, as he has extensive experience with potions from working in his uncle's apothecary, assigning him the post of Potions Master seemed like the right thing to do."

"And your current Potions Master just *happens* to be retiring," Crouch said, clearly unconvinced.

Dumbledore smiled sunnily at him. "That's right." *And hopefully, I can also keep him safe from Death Eaters—whether they are in or out of the Ministry.*

Crouch looked like he might reject the idea for a moment, but finally he nodded and waved him to the door, then addressed the young man. "Show Professor Dumbledore to Snape's cell and take care of the details of releasing him into his custody." He turned back to Dumbledore. "All I can say is—you'd better be right about Snape. If a single parent comes to me complaining about the Hogwarts Potions Master being a Slyth—I mean, a Death Eater—"

"Being a Slytherin and being a Death Eater are not synonymous, Barty. You should know that. Evidently, at least one Gryffindor was a Death Eater," he said sadly. Crouch nodded.

"I would never have seen that coming. A Gryffindor serving You-Know-Who and a Slytherin spying on him. It's like the world turned upside-down."

Dumbledore shrugged. "As I said, Voldemort recruited followers from all walks of life. Remember what I said about Death Eaters in the Ministry, Barty. Look to your own house," he said ominously.

The straw-haired young man seemed to be choking on something; he dropped his quill again, and the parchment on which he'd been writing rolled onto the floor and across the room, unfurling as it went. Crouch lazily waved his wand at it and caused it to roll backward across the floor and leap onto his large mahogany desk.

"Don't dawdle, boy. I need you to draft a memorandum to the department when you return." He looked significantly at Dumbledore. "No stone shall be left unturned. Everyone in magical law-enforcement is going to be questioned in detail. If there are any Death Eaters here, we'll find them and deal with them *most* severely." He seemed to have changed his mind about Death Eaters in the Ministry being 'preposterous.' "It is one thing to be a Death Eater—it is another to pretend to be a loyal employee of *this* department." He partially unrolled the parchment on his desk and frowned. "And we'll have to get you one of those newly improved automatic quills, boy. Your penmanship is terrible. I'll be glad when my clerk returns from his holiday." He rolled up the parchment again and put it in a drawer. Together, Dumbledore and the young man moved toward the door.

They walked down the corridor and quickly arrived at the doorway to the central portal hub; stepping through, they were actually going from an abandoned Tube station in the southern part of the city to a hidden part of Westminster Station, below the Houses of Parliament. They didn't go through any of the portals leading to other Ministry departments, however, in other abandoned Tube stations, but walked down another corridor, finally arriving at the holding cells, and Severus Snape's cell in particular.

"I'll get a guard," the young man said, starting to move off. Dumbledore shook his head.

"Don't bother. I'd rather we didn't have to deal with *them*."

Dumbledore put his hand to the door, causing it to swing open a moment later, striking the stone wall noisily. The boy's face went white. "You see?" Dumbledore said. "I could have done that from the start, but I didn't, did I? I went to your father and got *permission* to take Severus with me. If he was your friend, I'm surprised that you didn't speak to your father on his behalf." He looked penetratingly at Barty Crouch's son before turning and walking calmly into the cell. Severus was asleep on the pallet, looking pale and drawn; he was so exhausted that the door striking the wall had not wakened him.

"Speak on his behalf!" young Crouch cried, incredulous. He glared at Snape as his dark eyes opened slowly and he started to sit up in confusion. "As if I would speak up for a bloody *traitor*!"

When he saw who was in the room with him, Severus sat up quickly, tense and poised to leap out of the way of unfriendly curses. The confusing thing was—Dumbledore was also present.

Dumbledore *and* Barty? It didn't make any sense to his sleep-addled brain. *Perhaps I'm still dreaming*, he thought groggily.

Then Barty's words sank in: *A traitor*. He remembered Barty putting the Cruciatus Curse on him, on the knoll overlooking Godric's Hollow....

"What's happening, sir?" he asked Dumbledore, licking his dry lips and trying to pretend that he wasn't keeping careful track of Barty out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm taking you back to Hogwarts with me, Severus. And offering you a job. We can discuss the details once we are back in the castle. We only need to fill out some forms and retrieve your wand. Come along. Your ordeal is over," he said gently, nodding at him.

Severus swallowed, looking back and forth between Dumbledore and Barty, but he stood and followed the two of them into the corridor, keeping a close watch on his former co-conspirator. In the office of Prisoner Processing, he and Dumbledore both signed forms saying that he was being released on Dumbledore's testimony and into his custody. He was given back his wand, which felt wonderful and right to be in his hand again. When they were about to leave, however, the elder Crouch appeared in the doorway.

"I wonder, Dumbledore, might I have another brief word with you? It is about Pettigrew's O.M."

"Of course, Barty," he said, nodding, following Crouch into the corridor. Severus was left standing awkwardly next to the son, to whom he'd pretended to be a friend for so long; he looked down at him and found, to his great consternation, that the other young man was looking right back.

"*Don't think you'll be safe there*," Barty hissed at Severus suddenly. "Or that you'll be believed if you tell anyone about *me*. I know where your uncle lives, too. You will *not* live to regret being a traitor to our Master." With a final glare at Severus, he strode from the room, just as Dumbledore returned.

Severus looked over his shoulder at the Prisoner Processing clerk first, then said under his breath, to Dumbledore, "Sir, Barty just said to me—"

"*I know*," the old man said quickly, looking around cautiously. His voice was very low and even. "*I heard everything*."

"But—but how could you?" Severus said in disbelief. "You were in the corridor and he wasn't speaking loudly...."

"It is unimportant how. I heard. Let us make a side trip to Dunoos before going to Hogwarts. Do you think your uncle could be convinced to close up the shop for a while and take a little holiday?"

Severus nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me—thank your former friend for being rather a dunce. *Now* I understand why he called you a traitor. And why you didn't dare reveal his name."

Severus frowned. "What?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I merely meant that the one you truly betrayed was Lord Voldemort." He looked at Severus for a moment. "Do you know what I have in my office?"

Severus opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. He'd only been to Dumbledore's office a few times during his time at Hogwarts; the first time had been to find out that his parents had been killed by Aurors.

"Well, a lot of things, sir," he said haltingly, vaguely remembering the clutter that was the headmaster's office.

"No, no—I meant my phoenix. You saw my phoenix, didn't you?"

Severus nodded. "Yes. Yes, I remember the phoenix."

"Did I have occasion to tell you his name? My memory is failing me." Severus shook his head. If he'd been told the name of the phoenix, it had fled his brain. "His name is—Fawkes. A famous traitor. He is burned in effigy every year on—why, *this* day. I just realized!" he added brightly. "Tonight is Bonfire night for Muggles. They will have celebrations all over Britain, celebrating the defeat of a traitor. Had you never wondered why wizards do not observe this holiday?"

Severus shook his head again. "I—I just thought—it's a Muggle festival, sir—"

"I am merely saying, Severus, that one person's traitor is another person's freedom-fighter. Fawkes was actually a wizard, helping a group of Muggle friends who were being persecuted for their religious beliefs. He was supposed to have attempted to blow up—well, the very thing that is far over our heads at this very moment: The Houses of Parliament. There are also those who think that there never was a Gunpowder Plot, that the real plot was to frame one of the rebels—it mattered not who. In that a wizard does not *need* gunpowder to blow up anything, it is highly unlikely that he did what he was accused of, but that can never be put into Muggle history books, now can it? Not to mention that there are very few people who *want* to know the truth. The legend is far more important.

"At the time, there were those to whom Fawkes was a hero." He smiled at Severus. "One man's traitor is another man's freedom-fighter," he said again, giving Severus a penetrating look. "Fawkes did not really die, you know," he said in a conspiratorial whisper. "Well, he did die eventually, of course, from ripe old age. He escaped his captors. The Crown couldn't admit that they hadn't managed to properly kill Fawkes, that he'd got away. So they pulled some poor soul out of one of the prisons, killed him properly, and claimed it was Guy Fawkes. And today, Muggles still celebrate the defeat of the most notorious traitor ever...."

Shaking his head and sighing, he said, "Ah, well. We need to be off. There is much to do."

"Yes, sir. And—thank you again, sir."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at him and he afforded Severus a gentle smile. "You are quite welcome, Severus. You are *quite* welcome."

* * * * *

Wednesday, 23 December, 1981

Alex followed Lowell Faulkner down a dingy alleyway between two buildings in Knockturn Alley that seemed ready to collapse at any moment; they probably would have, too, he thought, were it not for the fact that there was probably some magic holding them together. He and Lowell were making their way to a pub where they'd gone before; the publican didn't ask any questions about their only wanting a room for a couple of hours. Just in case anyone noticed them, they walked with their hoods obscuring their faces and usually entered the pub through the back door. Alex would have been very shocked to see anyone he knew in Knockturn Alley (and he knew that they would be shocked to see *him* there) but they took the precautions just the same. You never knew when—

"Bloody hell!" Lowell's voice exploded next to him, making Alex jump. The alleyway led to the gate to the meager back garden of the pub. But someone else was already opening the gate. Alex and Lowell hung back in the alley, crouching next to a large dustbin, watching.

The person holding the gate open was a young man with yellow straw-like hair. Alex's jaw dropped. "Lowell! Do you see who that is? That bloke from your house who was seeing Snape!"

Lowell nodded, and under his hood, Alex could see him turn even whiter than he already was. "I see him," Lowell whispered.

"I wish I knew how Snape fooled Dumbledore into hiring him. You are so lucky you're already out of school! And here's his *boyfriend*. Isn't it weird? We've never seen anyone we knew before. But now—"

"Sssh!" Lowell hissed at him. "Shut up!"

Alex clamped his mouth shut, fighting the urge to argue, but too fascinated watching what was going on. From the edge of their vision, bounded by the building against which they cowered, three wizards appeared. No, two wizards and a witch. All three of them were levitating bodies. (Did no one notice *anything* in Knockturn Alley? he wondered.) The woman was levitating a very small boy, no bigger than a toddler, while the other two were levitating a man and woman who were still clutching brown paper-wrapped parcels and some bags with names of Diagon Alley shops on them, as though they'd tired of doing their Christmas shopping in the normal fashion and were now deciding to be novel and do it horizontally.

Alex swallowed, watching the three bodies be guided through the gate. "What is this?" he said aloud. Lowell did not hush him this time. The gate closed behind the strange party.

"I think this is something we don't want to mess in," Lowell said with a shaking voice. "Let's go. Today—this just wasn't meant to be—"

"Go!" Alex cried out, louder than he meant to. "It looked like those people were being kidnapped. The Ministry is still trying to round up Death Eaters, you know—"

"Yeah, well, that's great for them, but it's not *our* job. Let's get far away from here before they come out again and figure out that we saw them." Lowell took out his wand.

"But we should at least get some help—"

With an abrupt *pop!* Lowell was gone. *Bloody hell*, Alex thought. *Why can't he ever remember that I can't Apparate?*

He was of-age now, so, legally, he could. If he could pass the test. He'd tried *four* times, and had decided not to try again out of sheer embarrassment (he suspected that he had already brought far too much amusement to the employees of the Department of Magical Transportation). He had decided that he was sticking to brooms; it was a time-honored way for witches and wizards to travel, he'd argued to Lowell. The problem was—he hadn't brought a broom with him. He'd Flooed to the Leaky Cauldron and met Lowell outside Quality Quidditch Supplies. Of course, he could go back

to the Cauldron, Floo home again....But somehow he just couldn't. He had to find out whether the man, woman and child he'd seen levitated through the gate were all right.

He crept down the alleyway, his heart in his throat, holding his hood well beyond his face with his left hand while he reached into his pocket with his right, feeling better when his fingers were wrapped around his wand. He withdrew it slowly, keeping his hand down so that the wand was hidden amongst the folds of his cloak. When he reached the fence enclosing the yard, he searched the wood planks for a knothole, and when he found one, he pointed his wand at it carefully, whispering an incantation under his breath, hoping it would work.

It did; the small piece of wood fell into the yard, and Alex froze for a minute, hoping the noise wouldn't alert anyone to his presence on the other side of the fence. If they were Death Eaters, they'd probably throw curses first and ask questions later (if they asked questions at all).

But when he nervously stepped toward the fence and put his eye to the hole, he realized that no one had probably heard a thing when the small oval of wood had fallen; no sounds of any kind could be heard from the enclosed yard.

Alex's jaw dropped. He could see three wizards putting a curse on the man, while the one witch trained her wand on an auburn-haired woman with a pleasant, round face, guarding her but not cursing her. The man and woman were now lying on the ground. Alex could see the crackling amber light connecting the wands to the victim. The witch, had dark, heavy-lidded eyes and jet-black hair; one of the wizards cursing the man was very young, and Alex recognized him as Lowell's former housemate, Barty Crouch, Jr. The other two men, who looked so similar to each other that Alex assumed they must be brothers, were laughing as they trained their wands on the poor man.

Then they broke the spells and seemed to be talking to the victims, gesticulating wildly. The man was shaking his head and looked like he was saying *No!* repeatedly. The woman looked defiantly at their captors, speaking with a hatred on her face such as Alex had never seen. But she was interrupted in mid-word, it seemed, when the curses began again. This time they were both being cursed, two curses for each victim.

Not a sound emanated from any of them. Alex could see their lips moving when they were saying the curses, and they seemed to be able to hear each *other*, but Alex could not hear them. The man and woman being tortured had their mouths open in silent screams, while their bodies contorted under the spells being cast upon them. *What curse is it?* Alex wondered. But almost as soon as he thought it, he realized there was only one likely answer.

Cruciatus.

Each victim was experiencing *two* Cruciatus Curses at once, and earlier the man had had *three* on him at once! Alex saw with horror that the child, who was just a baby, really, although he could walk, was sitting apart, crying dreadfully, his face contorted and red, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, but squeezing tears out all the same. Once again, not a sound reached Alex's ears. Watching the eerie tableau before him, Alex was starting to think he'd gone deaf.

Maybe, just maybe....Could he do something to get them to stop cursing the poor man and woman? The curses were continuing, the faces of the victims barely recognizable as human anymore, nor their bodies, which were writhing and twisting in ways Alex would previously have sworn that human bodies *couldn't*, and the woman was scratching with her nails at her own arms, marking the skin, producing ribbons of blood....

I have to do something, Alex thought, not caring anymore what happened to him. He couldn't just stand by and watch this. He pointed his wand through the knot-hole and cried, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Immediately, the screams of the man and woman and the wails of the baby assaulted Alex's ears, the sound bouncing off the buildings around them and echoing painfully. *It was a silencing charm*, he realized. The charm had confined the noise to the enclosed space behind the pub. That was the spell he'd managed to break through. Unfortunately, the man and woman were still being tortured. The man was pulling his own hair out now, in clumps, as his body bucked and writhed and his howls continued unabated....

He put his wand through the knot-hole again; the torturers were continuing their work as though nothing had changed. They had no way of knowing that the silencing charm had been broken, as they were hearing just as much noise as before.

Cold sweat broke out on Alex's brow as he was now forced to listen to the man and woman's pain. *How can those monsters just stand there, smiling and laughing, torturing people like this?*

"*Stupefy!*" he cried, at a loss for what else to do. His spell hit home, though, striking one of the two identical men, making him fall over and break the connection between his wand and the woman. He pulled his wand out of the hole and put his eye to the wood, alarmed to see the other dark-haired man walking toward him, a dark fury contorting his face. Alex swallowed, backing away from the wall. *They don't train us for this at school*, he thought desperately. *They tell you what*

to do when a bloody madman is coming at you with murder in his eyes....

Alex started running back down the alleyway, wishing again that he had been able to pass his test, wishing with all his heart that he could Apparate. He heard a cry behind him: "*Avada Kedavra!*"

He heard the splintering of the wooden fence as the curse struck it; glancing quickly over his shoulder, he saw the wizard stride through the opening he'd made, his wand pointing at Alex again, who turned to face his attacker now, grasping his wand tightly, realizing that if he was killed by being struck in the back, he would be known for a coward....

I am not a coward, he thought grimly, wishing he had the nerve to walk *toward* the man, instead of just standing still. He was quite a formidable man, burly and substantial-looking, and could probably do a good deal of damage even in a purely physical fight. The man threw a curse at Alex and he leapt to the side, colliding painfully with the dust-bins behind which he and Lowell had been hiding earlier. The wizard took advantage of his being jolted by this and cursed him again.

"*Crucio!*"

The scream that was ripped from Alex was a sound he had never known he could make; pain coursed through his body as though it had taken the place of his blood, it was part of him, it was what made his heart beat. It was now the sole purpose of his brain to make him feel pain, endless pain....

Then, all at once, it was gone; the wrench of the pain being pulled away from him was nearly as bad as the onset of the curse, as though one of his limbs had been amputated. Alex was curled in a ball on the dirty alley floor, and standing over him was his best friend's father. Mr. Weasley crouched beside him now.

"Are you all right, son?" Mr. Weasley said grimly, his hand on Alex's arm. Another wizard stood beside him, much older than Bill's dad, with a wizened face and grizzled hair. He was rather frightening-looking, and Alex realized from things that Bill and Charlie had said that this must be the infamous Auror Alastor Moody.

"Um, yeah. I reckon I'll be all right," he managed to say. "The yard-behind the pub-they're still-" He pointed in the general direction and Mr. Weasley nodded. Moody strode down the alley with a strange *thunking* sound, his wand at the ready, robes billowing out behind him. Alex was still trying to get his breath. He wasn't certain how long the curse had been on him, but the thought of experiencing that for as long as the man and woman had was just-unthinkable. *I'd want to die*, he thought, remembering the woman clawing at her own body, perhaps wanting to induce even more pain, but pain from a *tangible* source, a pain she controlled herself.

Alastor Moody saw a dark-haired woman and a wizard who seemed to be a mere boy torturing a man he recognized instantly, despite the way his features were contorted with pain.

"*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" he cried, and the woman and boy froze and fell over, breaking the spell on Frank Longbottom. Frank stopped screaming abruptly, but did not recover like the boy he and Arthur had found in the alleyway. He and his wife lay staring up at the sky, their eyes vacant and unseeing, and it was only because Moody saw the very subtle movement of their chests as they breathed that he knew they were both still alive.

"Arthur! Come here!" Moody called down the alleyway.

Arthur Weasley looked down at Alex; he'd known this boy since he had started going to the Hogsmeade village school with Bill, and the thought of someone putting the Cruciatus Curse on him was appalling. He'd had Alex in his house more times than he could count. He put his hand out to him and asked him gently, "Can you stand?"

Alex nodded, looking a bit green; he took Mr. Weasley's hand and gripped it tightly, standing unsteadily. Mr. Weasley looped Alex's arm around his shoulder and together they loped down the alleyway to the yard where Moody was standing amidst the bodies, plus the baby was still crying loudly, his very round little face screwed up and very red. Mr. Weasley went to the baby, picking him up and bouncing him on his arm with a practiced air, shushing the boy and saying, to him, "There, there, now, we're going to take good care of your mummy and daddy, don't you fret...." He looked at Moody. "What's his name? I know Frank and Gemma by sight, but I don't think I ever heard their son's name."

"Nigel, Neil, something beginning with 'N,'" Moody said carelessly.

Alex leaned unsteadily on part of the fence that was still standing. He pointed a shaky hand at the stunned figure of Barty Crouch, Jr. "That's-that's Barty Crouch," he managed to say. Mr. Weasley frowned at him, still bouncing the baby up and down on his arm.

"Barty Crouch? Are you sure you're all right, laddie? I know Barty Crouch, and he-"

"Not the Ministry bloke," Alex interrupted him, speaking with great effort. "His son."

A hand on his shoulder made him turn his head; it was Lowell. Alex wished so many other

people weren't around; he wanted to hug and kiss him, he was so happy to see him again. Lowell smiled shyly at him.

"You said once that Bill's dad worked for the Ministry. I remembered how to get to the Department of Magical Transportation, from when I took my test, and I just asked the bloke there how to get to Mr. Weasley's office. Lucky thing he knew who I was talking about, since I didn't know his first name or the department he works for."

Alex *really* wanted to kiss him now. "So you went for help?"

Lowell shrugged. "I didn't know what else to do. You couldn't Apparate, so—"

Alex heaved a sigh of relief. "I thought you were just running away! I thought—"

"That I'd abandoned you?" Lowell squeezed his shoulder. "I wouldn't do that. I'm not much for dueling, or anything, but I tried to get back here as fast as I could after I told Mr. Weasley that help was needed here. He said he would bring an Auror. I—I waited a few minutes after they left to come back...." he said, hanging his head. "I'm sorry about that. I'm just—just not—"

"It's okay," Alex said softly. "I'm all right."

"All right! Why are you shaking like that if you're all right?"

"Well—the Cruciatus Curse—"

"*Cruciatus!*"

"Hullo?" Mr. Weasley was trying to get their attention. He was still holding the baby. "Would you mind terribly taking him for the moment? I need to help Alastor."

Lowell hesitated at first, then took the squirming baby, holding him awkwardly against his chest. Suddenly, a *pop!* exploded in the small yard, and a young blond wizard appeared, wearing royal blue robes that seemed to be the same color as his bright, snapping eyes, and a matching wizard's hat, trimmed in gold braid. He looked a bit of a clown, and yet, the moment he arrived, he began turning back and forth spasmodically, pointing his wand first at Moody, then Mr. Weasley, then Lowell and Alex, although if this behavior was designed to make him look threatening, it was completely at odds with the rest of his appearance. He was also, oddly enough, smiling broadly the entire time he was waving his wand about and seemed to have double the normal number of large, gleaming white teeth. The ludicrous combination of the wizard's clothes, smile and behavior caused Alex to be somewhat frightened of him. Had a nutter escaped from St. Mungo's? he wondered.

"All right, all right! What's going on, what's going on? Who needs a memory charm?" the insane wizard asked genially.

"Are you an Obliviator?" Mr. Weasley asked him. "Did someone tell you to—"

"Oh, no, no one told me to come," he said brightly, ceasing the wand-waving and straightening up. "Gilderoy Lockhart!" he announced, and it took Alex a moment to realize this was the wizard's name. "I pride myself on keeping my ear to the ground. I check in with the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office on a regular basis, as memory charms are so often needed when Muggles buy items that have been charmed or cursed, and Perkins said his partner had been called away to this Knockturn Alley pub, and I said to him, 'I know just the one you mean, Perkins old boy, always full of disreputable sorts.' And so here I am!"

Alex, Lowell, Moody and Mr. Weasley looked at each other uncertainly. *He certainly likes the word 'I,'* Alex thought.

Mr. Weasley grimaced. "Ah, so *you're* Lockhart," he said slowly. "Perkins has mentioned that, erm, you've come round from time to time—"

"Yes, yes, very helpful, that Perkins!" Lockhart gushed. "He keeps me quite busy at times. Good bloke," he added with a dazzling smile.

"Yes, Perkins does his best to, erm, keep you *busy*," Mr. Weasley said, winking at Alex, who was surprised, after his ordeal, that he had to suppress laughter. Mr. Weasley's partner clearly tried to keep Lockhart out of the way, most of the time. "But—he didn't *tell* you to come here, did he?" He looked like he would very likely be cross with Perkins if this were true.

"Oh, no, not as such. He just told me where you were, and I took it upon myself to—"

"Enough dawdling!" Moody bellowed suddenly. "Frank and Gemma need medical attention. And so does that lad, I'll warrant," he said, nodding at Alex. "Arthur—you take him to St. Mungo's and send two ambulances back. I'll keep watch here with this one—" he said, gesturing with his head at Lockhart, "and the other lad. The child seems all right for now...."

Mr. Weasley shook his head, looking at the baby. "Poor little bloke. Seeing his mum and dad tortured like that....You're quite right, Alastor. I'll take Alex with me and send the ambulances." He gave Alex a small smile. "Come on, then. This pub is probably on the Floo network, and—"

"Erm, no. No, it's not," Alex said quickly, then wished he'd bitten his tongue. He had clearly been to the pub before. Mr. Weasley raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, really? All right, then. There's a little shop just down this alleyway, they sell sweets, and I know for certain that we can Floo from their fire." He nodded to Moody.

"All right, Alastor?"

"All right, Arthur," he said gruffly, giving Lockhart a distasteful look out of the corner of his eye.

Moody watched them depart for the sweetshop, the boy leaning heavily on Arthur Weasley's arm. He sighed and bent over the Longbottoms, shaking his head, then straightening up. He wasn't certain how long they'd been waiting, when suddenly, behind him, he heard a voice cry, "*Obliviate!*"

He turned and quickly grabbed Lockhart's arm; the spell moved from the baby Lowell was holding to Lowell himself before Moody managed to force Lockhart's arm up to the sky. He extracted the wand from the wizard's grasp by hand, not bothering with a disarming charm, and felt a mighty urge to put a good hex on him.

"What do you think you're doing, you pillock?" he bellowed at Lockhart.

"The—the little bloke. Weasley said—he saw his mum and dad tortured....Just trying to help. We don't want him traumatized for the rest of his life, do we?"

"He's a baby!" Moody shouted at him. "Are you trying to turn his brain to mush? You can't put a full-fledged memory charm on a child his age! Are you mad? I'll see to it you get the sack for this!"

"But—but—"

"Sod off! I don't need the likes of you here...." An ambulance appeared in the alleyway quite suddenly. Moody grunted. "And not before time, too," he grumbled. "All right, you lad," he said to Lowell. "Bring the wee bairn. He'll need holding on the way to St. Mungo's...."

Lowell looked at the grizzled old man in confusion. "Who are you? Where am I? Why am I holding this baby?" he sputtered. Moody turned to glare at Lockhart.

"See what you've done now! This lad's been hit by part of your bloody memory charm." He put his hand on Lowell's arm, telling him, "There now, you've been memory-charmed, but I don't think it was for very long. A little bit of your recent life has probably dropped out of your brain is all. My name is Alastor Moody, this little one is Nigel Longbottom and you're behind a pub in Knockturn Alley. I'm sure you'll be right as rain again once we get you to St. Mungo's—"

"St. Mungo's," he repeated, squinting and clearly thinking very hard. "Hospital."

Moody smiled gruesomely and nodded at him. "That's right. Hospital. What's your name, lad?"

"Lowell Faulkner. Ravenclaw," he said automatically. Moody beamed.

"Excellent! You seem to be all right after all." He turned to Lockhart. "No thanks to *you*," he added to the blond wizard, whose smile had completely faded. His arms hung limply by his side. "Now, can you just *stand there* and *not* cause any more trouble? Just wait for the other ambulance. You *can* do that, yeah?" Moody turned to Lowell again. "Come along. He likes you," he told the boy, watching the baby play with a tassel on his hood; the Longbottoms' son didn't seem any the worse for wear, but it might be too soon to tell, Moody knew.

As they moved toward the ambulance, Lowell said to him, "What am I doing in Knockturn Alley? I've never been before. My mum and dad will kill me when they find out I was here."

"Ah, well, perhaps we needn't tell them, eh?" He sighed. Evidently the young man had forgotten just enough that he would be useless as a witness to the crime. That left them with the other lad, who was shaken up from being tortured....

"Not tell them? Okay," he said agreeably, sounding much younger than he looked. Moody reckoned he was about seventeen or eighteen, but for some reason his voice was pitched higher now than it had been, as though he were speaking in a falsetto.

"No, we don't need to tell them," he repeated, shaking his head. He levitated the stunned bodies of the Death Eaters into the back of the ambulance and climbed into the front with the young man and the baby just as another ambulance arrived at the side of the pub. He started to watch the orderlies from St. Mungo's levitating the Longbottoms' bodies into the back of the other ambulance, feeling sadder than he remembered in a very long time, when suddenly the ambulance in which they were riding disappeared from Knockturn Alley and he could no longer see the place where Frank and Gemma Longbottom had lost their minds.

The Guardians

Thursday, 31 December 1981

“Well, why *can't* Yvonne watch him?”

“*She* would like to go to a party tonight as well, dear. Oh, I knew we shouldn't have left this for the last minute....”

Petunia Dursley chewed her lip as she smoothed down her already-smooth emerald-green evening dress. Surveying the source of their problem, her mind raced for a solution. That source was her nephew, Harry Potter, sitting on the living room carpet hemmed in by a hinged wooden fence that Vernon had built that could be moved from room to room, confining him to a squarish space roughly three feet to a side. He played listlessly with an old sock of Vernon's and eyed his cousin Dudley (who had the run of the room), one corner of his mouth twisting downward as he regarded Dudley's vast collection of toys.

Dudley had at least a dozen toy lorries and a large train set that he was entirely too young to appreciate, in addition to a yellow school bus that he could straddle while pushing along with his feet (in theory—his body did not actually permit this activity), several footballs, a basketball, and a toy tennis racket with which he enjoyed striking everything within his reach (Harry, the furniture, his parents, Harry, his other toys, Harry, etc.). His favorite toy, however, was a set of plastic food, the parts of which were arrayed around him, as though he was trying to decide what to eat first. Other toys that didn't resemble food or weapons (soft stuffed toys, mostly) were piled into an overflowing box bearing the legend “DUDLEY” in large red letters.

Petunia Dursley had actually given Harry one or two of Dudley's cast-off toys when he'd first arrived two months earlier, to stop his yowling. However, the moment that Dudley had seen Harry given a ratty old bear or a car with a missing wheel, he had howled even louder than his cousin until the toy was taken from Harry again. She only tried this a few times before giving up. Each time, she removed the toy very promptly, as she never wanted to upset her son in any way. If she had to choose between upsetting Harry or Dudley, the choice was clear. Thus she'd had to endure nearly a month of Harry's demanding screaming before he finally seemed to get the message that *things were different here*. No matter how much he cried, he didn't get more food. He didn't get toys. Even when he tripped and fell (a frequent occurrence), he was not comforted.

Two months later, Harry seemed to have far fewer expectations than when he'd arrived; he seemed to understand that there was no point in drawing his aunt's attention. She never did anything beyond checking his nappy or feeding him in the course of feeding the rest of the family. Even his baths were quite cursory, consisting of being scrubbed raw with a very rough flannel while Dudley, with whom he had to share the tub, splashed soapy water in his eyes. When he cried, his aunt just scrubbed harder. To make it more difficult to hear him in the night, she had put his cot in the cupboard under the stairs. Unlike Dudley, Harry had no nightlight. He saw nothing but pitch blackness all night long. She had relented, however, on Dudley's old bear, which was the one bit of comfort he had in the cot (and Dudley couldn't see that Harry had the bear). As the cupboard was quite warm and had no window, he didn't have a blanket.

Vernon paced the floor, his face red above the starched white collar of his evening clothes. “I *need* to go to this party, Petunia! Bringing Dudley is one thing. People will eat him up! Nothing like breaking the ice with a baby, especially such a fine specimen as Dudders.” He beamed at his son, wearing a smaller version of his father's formal clothes, except that his shirt front was damp with drool while Dudley chewed happily on a piece of plastic pizza. “How can anyone say no to you when you've got a baby with you? I'm counting on making business contacts there, and *that* one could kill every deal I want to make,” he growled, pointing an accusing finger at the scrawny Harry.

“Yes, dear, I know....” she wavered, frowning deeply at Harry's messy black hair and his thin,

wan face with the too-large green eyes, just like her sister's. In the meantime, Dudley had reached under the couch and found a pig puppet of which he was fond; he used the puppet to pick up the toy food and then snatched the plastic hamburgers and fried eggs and put them in his own mouth, laughing uproariously about this, as though he'd got the better of the pig. Petunia gave him a loving smile; he was such a *happy* child! Harry, on the other hand—she had never seen a more surly, malcontented baby in her life.

Vernon turned and glowered at Harry. "I *knew* we shouldn't have kept him. I just knew he'd be more trouble than he was worth!" He continued to glare malevolently at Harry, his complexion deepening from red to purple. "We should have chucked him out on the day we got him! Let him be the government's problem!"

Petunia looked around nervously, as though afraid that someone could hear them. "You know we can't do that, Vernon!" she hissed at him. "You remember the letter—"

"Letter!" Vernon said, raising his voice and making his wife wince, as though the invisible entity would hear. "You call that a letter! *Parchment*, and *green ink*. And it was *hand-written*! Who writes letters by hand these days, I ask you? A *proper* letter is on white stationery, and it is *typed*. In *black ink*. And no bleeding wax seals!"

"Yes, dear," she said quickly and softly, staring nervously up at the chandelier, as though it might attack them for having this forbidden conversation. "Perhaps you should take Dudley and I'll stay home—"

"Stay home! And have prospective clients think I'm a pathetic single father? How am I supposed to take care of Dudders without you there? He's to break the ice, but I can't bloody well have him with me the entire time I'm trying to broker a deal—"

"Well, I'm sure there will be other women there who could take him off your hands temporarily—" she began, but found herself feeling very uncomfortable with this idea. Other women putting their hands on her precious boy? The thought was starting to make her feel ill. Someone was apt to make off with him, if they spent any time with him at all! Who wouldn't want such a beautiful, healthy baby boy? She'd heard that boys just like Dudley fetched quite a price on the black market, a memory which made her shudder. No, she just could not countenance letting Vernon pawn Dudley off on other dotting women at the party, you never knew who was really in the black market baby business....

Just when Petunia had opened her mouth to protest Vernon's plan, the doorbell rang. She closed her mouth with a snap and stared at Vernon, who strode angrily to the door as though the doorbell-ringer was obviously determined to ruin their evening. After a moment's hesitation, she followed him. Petunia was standing a little behind her husband when he swung open the door, prepared to begin an angry tirade. The smallish old woman facing them, however, had other ideas.

"You have a brat who needs babysitting?" said a terse, shrill voice. Petunia and Vernon looked at each other, wide-eyed. *The answer to their prayers was on their doorstep!*

"Erm, yes, Miss—"

"It's Missus, if you don't mind. Mrs. Arabella Figg. And don't get any ideas about calling me by my first name. You're young enough to be my grandson, and in my day, we showed some respect for our elders. I go by Mrs. Figg. Where is he?"

Petunia looked uncertainly at Vernon, her eyebrows raised. The old woman was covered in cat fur down one side of her shabby old brown coat, her grey, wiry hair was askew beneath a green knitted tam, and she seemed to have come out wearing carpet slippers. Her face was ancient and lined, giving the impression that there might have been actual features there once, before they had sagged and drooped into the present configuration.

She pushed past them, immediately spying Dudley on the living room floor. He was attempting to eat a large realistic-looking plastic roast chicken, gnawing enthusiastically at a drumstick, his blond hair gleaming like a helmet on his large, neckless head.

"Huh!" she said, sounding impressed. "What a good-looking, healthy boy! Can't imagine he'd be much trouble...."

"Oh, no!" Petunia cried immediately, before an incorrect impression could take root. "He isn't the reason we need a babysitter; he's going with us. It's *him*," she said, her lip curling as she pointed an accusatory finger at Harry. She wondered for a moment whether this woman had pushed her way into the house to steal Dudley. *She's probably part of another black-market baby ring!* she thought, realizing that Dudley might even be in danger in his *own home*.

Mrs. Figg turned a gimlet eye on the thin, pale child, her mouth twisting. "Oh," she said in a flat voice. "I see the problem." She folded her hands on her large, battered brown faux-crocodile handbag and sighed. "All right, I'll do it. On condition that I watch him at my house and that I can take that little fence along, to keep him away from my *things*. I charge a pound an hour. I'm not

running a charity, you know. Half up-front.”

Petunia and Vernon looked at each other, trying to hide their elation; the woman was dirt cheap! And she didn't *appear* to be trying to steal Dudley (not anymore). They didn't want to seem too eager, however, should she raise her ridiculously low price. “Well, all right. I suppose as we're in a bit of a spot,” Petunia said. “I'll get some nappies—”

Mrs. Figg held up her hand. “No need. Been a nanny for years, have everything I need. Retired now, but I make a few extra quid on New Year's Eve. Just need a pram to get him there; never did like *holding* them too close.” She leaned toward Petunia, who wrinkled up her nose; the woman smelled strongly of cabbage. She pulled a card out of her pocket and handed it to Petunia. “My card; everything you need to know is there.”

Petunia glanced carelessly at it; the woman only lived a couple of streets away and her telephone number was printed in very small type, plus the legend, *Expert and Experienced Nanny. Ask the Prince of Wales*. Her hand fluttered to her chest. “You—you worked for the Prince and Princess of Wales?” she quavered.

“You mean the ones we have now? No, not as such. When *he* was a lad.”

That was all she said. Petunia hesitated, unsure whether this old woman might not be *too good* for Harry. *The Prince of Wales' nanny!*

“Well? Where's that pram? Don't you have a party to go to?”

Petunia handed the card to Vernon, who put it into his pocket without looking at it while Petunia trundled the pram down the hall from the kitchen. When she returned, Mrs. Figg was surveying Harry through narrowed eyes. Petunia's heart skipped a beat; now she was wondering whether this was a good idea for another reason. What if Harry *did* something when he was at Mrs. Figg's, and she discovered their great and horrid secret?

Just the day before, Dudley had got into Vernon's golf bag; he'd tried to eat a ball, which had lodged in his throat. Petunia heard him gagging and hurried into the living room from the kitchen, where she'd been cleaning. Just as she was entering the room, Harry had put out his hand and stared hard at Dudley; the golf ball went flying out of Dudley's mouth, through the bars of the enclosure, and into Harry's waiting hand. He immediately dropped it, wiping his hand on the carpet, making Petunia scream at him in annoyance.

After she had returned to the kitchen with Dudley on her hip so that she could give him a snack (he was obviously hungry) she wondered what she had just seen. Had Harry *made* the ball come to him? Or had Dudley simply managed to expel it at that moment, causing it to be projected across the room and into Harry's hand?

She looked at Harry now; he'd put his hand into the sock and was moving his fingers and thumb inside it like it was a puppet. He gabbled nonsense at it, ignoring the rest of them. Mrs. Figg made a harrumphing noise. “Look at that! Do you allow that? I certainly don't. *Using imagination*. Dangerous! I won't stand for it, I hope you understand.”

Vernon strode angrily across the room and took the sock from Harry's hand. “We most certainly do *not* approve of imagination,” he growled. Harry looked listlessly at him when the sock was removed. Petunia held her breath for a moment, but the conditioning of the previous two months held and Harry did not burst into tears. Petunia thought that Vernon also hesitated for a moment, in case this woman should find out about Harry. She could see the internal struggle on his face—go to the party, show off Dudley and make good business contacts, or guarantee that no one outside number four, Privet Drive would find out their deepest, darkest secret. Finally, she could see that the party had won out; he looked down at his white shirt-front and his fine, handsome son. They were going.

“We should be back by one-thirty or two,” Petunia said, placing Harry into the pram and shoving his arms into a jacket that Dudley had outgrown almost a full year earlier; it was far too large for Harry. “He's had his tea and it's nearly his bedtime. He can just sleep in the pram; then we can wheel him home again without waking him and having him fuss—”

“I know how to manage children,” she snapped, taking the folded-up fence from Vernon with one hand and wheeling the pram toward the front door with the other. She glared at Vernon until he sprang into action, opening the door for her. On the threshold, she paused, put down the fence, and held out her hand to him, palm up. “I said half up-front. If you're not getting back until two, that's four quid right now. Although we might as well say five, as it's a nice round number.”

The palm waited. Vernon pulled a five-pound note from his pocket and stuffed it into her hand. She immediately plunged it into her pocket and picked up the fence again. In a trice, she had bumped the pram down the one front step and was rapidly walking away from them, the squeaky wheels very loud in the still, frosty evening. Petunia looked uncertainly at Vernon once more, wondering whether *he* (not Vernon, the 'he' who had written the letter they'd found with Harry)

would be angry that they'd done this. She didn't want one of *them* to have any reason to come calling, after all.

Vernon was convinced that, over time, they could 'squash' what they assumed would be Harry's 'natural tendencies' out of him. Petunia wasn't so sure; she hadn't told Vernon about the golf ball incident. Perhaps it was too soon; perhaps over time....

She shook herself and went to get her wrap, so they could drive to the party. Her spirits lifted as she realized that she wouldn't have to think about Harry for hours and hours. *How freeing! How lovely!* Grunting a little, she heaved Dudley up onto her bony hip and planted a kiss on the top of his round, blond head.

He probably just spit the golf ball out on his own, she found herself thinking as Vernon backed the car out of the driveway. *I just need to make certain that he has more to eat. Surely if he did have enough to eat, he wouldn't be putting so many things into his mouth. Harry probably did nothing at all except catch the golf ball. Perhaps he might eventually prove to be useful, playing cricket*, she reflected. He already had that lanky, athletic look. A *normal* child would be interested in a *normal* sport, like cricket. Not that idiotic thing his father had done, flying about on a broomstick....

At the thought of flying on broomsticks, she gasped and tried to blank her mind. She did *not* want to think about that sort of thing. Vernon looked to his left for a moment, then back at the road. "Everything all right, Petunia?"

"Oh, yes, of course, Vernon. I was just thinking—we need to make certain our little Dudley has enough to eat so he won't put other things into his mouth."

Vernon nodded sagely as he drove. "You can never feed'em too much, in my opinion." He turned the car onto the motorway and glared at the other cars before him.

"Yes, dear," Petunia said softly, hoping everything was all right at Mrs. Figg's house. Hoping that Harry was behaving as *normally* as possible. Hoping that Mrs. Figg would never suspect that she was baby-sitting for the son of a witch and a wizard who had been murdered by an evil dark wizard who had tried and failed to kill Harry himself.

* * * * *

"You can go now," Arabella Figg said tersely to her brother after carelessly throwing Vernon Dursley's homemade Harry-fence into the cupboard under the stairs. Alastor had been staying with her other charge during the time it took her to walk to Privet Drive and return with Harry. A thin, pale, blond boy of about the same age as Harry was hitting Alastor Moody's carved wooden leg with a stick that Arabella immediately recognized as her brother's wand. "Alastor! What do you think you're doing, letting him get his hands on your wand like that? Whatever happened to your bloody 'constant vigilance?'"

Her very elderly brother, his face even more war-worn than his sister's, had been distractedly staring at her television, something she'd never yet experimented with herself, having lived in the house for less than a day. At present, a woman in a shockingly short dress was dancing about her kitchen with her cats, and all of them (the cats included, who walked miraculously on their hind legs) were singing at the tops of their lungs about how wonderful the tins of cat food were that they all carried in their hands (and paws). He gawped at the screen. His sister screamed his name again and he finally noticed that the child had somehow transfigured his beautiful carved leg (it had come from his mother's old grand piano and always reminded him of her) into a spiny cactus.

"No, Draco, no! Mustn't touch wands! No no *no!*" she cried, snatching it from his determined grasp. Harry was in the pram still, where she had parked it in the hall just inside the front door. He enjoyed this performance a great deal, laughing and clapping. Having an appreciative audience made Draco laugh, too, and he pointed gleefully at his handiwork. However, in doing so, he pricked his finger on a cactus spine; after a shocked three seconds, his face turned deep red and his mouth opened in a blood-curdling howl. Arabella Figg sighed; she took out her wand and picked Draco up under the arms, touching her wand to his finger for a moment to take the pain away, then waving her wand carelessly at her brother, restoring the wooden leg. Draco was starting to calm down, taking great gulping breaths, tears still streaming down his face as she gently bounced him.

"There now, little dragon, you're all right," she said in a more tender voice than anyone else in the world ever heard from her. She carried him into the hall and stood beside the pram so that Draco could see Harry and Harry see Draco. After their initial 'bonding' over the hilarious transfiguration of Alastor's leg, they regarded each other silently, suspiciously. Wary green eyes met clear grey, and then Harry patted Draco's arm, smiling amiably.

Draco slowly smiled back and Arabella, satisfied, turned to carry Draco into the dining room, which was not yet furnished. She returned to fetch Harry, and after setting him on the carpet next to the blond boy, waved her wand, endowing the room with a plethora of toys appropriate to two

toddlers. Harry's eyes went wide, but like all children his age, magical or Muggle, he didn't question it or fear it (many things seemed to magically appear and disappear, as far as he could tell). Soon the two of them were crowing over this toy or that, and in no time, they'd developed a game of building tottering structures with brightly-painted wooden blocks and then demolishing their creations by ramming toy cars and lorries into them. This was hilarious, evidently. The pair of them erupted into high-pitched squeals of laughter as they scrambled to rebuild and destroy again.

Arabella returned to the living room, shaking her head but smiling over the antics of the two small boys. Her brother was watching some sort of drama now; the actors didn't sound British. After a moment, Arabella reckoned that they were American. The men were all wearing very large outlandishly-shaped hats and everyone was saying "y'all" a great deal. Two men were standing facing each other in the middle of a dusty road, surrounded by rickety-looking wooden buildings with large square fronts.

"What are they doing?" he asked her.

"I'm not sure. They look like they might be about to duel."

"But they're Muggles, aren't they?"

"Muggles duel. They don't use wands, but they duel. I *said* you could go, Alastor. I need you back at around midnight, in case those Dursleys are early. Got your potion?" Her brother took out his flask and raised it, nodding. "Good. I'll put one of my hairs in it just before you take it. Then you can return Draco before anyone at the Malfoys' is aware of our being gone, and the Dursleys won't see him here when they come for Harry."

"And if I happen to see anything to send Lucius Malfoy to Azkaban while I'm there...."

"Oh, no you don't. I can't have you seeing something that only *I* would see and having him think that I betrayed him. Albus didn't put me there to spy on Lucius Malfoy; he put me there to watch over Draco. Better to let Malfoy believe he's getting the better of the Ministry. If he were ever to do anything truly dangerous, I would alert you and Albus. But with You-Know-Who gone, Albus doesn't believe Lucius is likely to engage in any Death Eater-like behavior. He's already been questioned and released; it's officially on record that he was under Imperius, even though *we* know that's codswallop. I've got my eye on him when I believe it's necessary. Keep your nose out of it."

She'd been caring for Draco since he was born, thanks to Albus having talked her into applying for the job. The fact that she'd been working for him as an operative was not widely known. She'd been in Slytherin House when she'd been in school (the same year as Lord Voldemort himself), so Lucius Malfoy had welcomed Arabella Figg and her no-nonsense approach to child-rearing. He'd said that his wife tended to be too 'soft' on Draco and he wanted to toughen him up. *Just as bad as that Dursley pillock*, she thought. *Both boys will turn out to be utterly insufferable at that rate*. She didn't think that Narcissa Malfoy's tendency to spoil Draco was any better.

Her brother looked grumpy, even for him, watching the men begin to duel with their strange metal wands. "Well, I can just wait here and watch the telly thingy--"

"Oh, no you don't. Out! Come back later. Albus didn't set up this house for me to have my brother sit about watching Muggles dancing with cats and dueling. I'm here to watch Harry. You shoo before I turn that leg of yours into something far worse than a cactus."

He grunted in protest, but finally left. She turned to watch the boys through the archway to the dining room. Draco was having some difficulty building another structure to be knocked down, and looked up at her hopefully.

"Nanny Bella! Help, Nanny Bella!" he piped at her.

Harry looked at her now. "Nanny Bella--" he echoed, making her gasp.

"Oh, no you don't. I told your aunt and uncle that *they* couldn't call me by my first name. I'm not having you doing it. They'll think I'm soft. You call me *Mrs. Figg*." She sighed, realizing that this was probably pointless. She was going to put a memory charm on him before he returned home anyway, so it didn't really matter what he called her before then. She didn't like putting memory charms on someone so young, but she was very good at doing just enough to erase a small part of a person's recent memory. She would have to do the same to Draco, so he wouldn't remember Harry, either. She went to Draco and helped him with the blocks before returning to the living room and sitting in one of the armchairs Albus had provided. The television was off now; she might try it again eventually, but for now she had something far more interesting to watch.

Harry and Draco played together for over an hour, stopping for a snack, before they both fell asleep in cots she conjured with a wave of her wand. As she tucked them in, she drew in her breath at the enormity of the responsibility that had been given to her. Albus had told her that the boys were both in a Prophecy about the final fall of Voldemort. *Final fall?* She'd thought You-Know-Who had *already* fallen. But Albus had shaken his head and said no; the wizarding world was experiencing a temporary reprieve only. Someday *he* would be back, and until then, Harry and

Draco needed to be safe. It was going to be her job to watch over them both. At the same time, when necessary.

As the new year approached, Arabella Figg sat back and stared at the cots in her dining room, listening to the sleeping boys' deep breaths. She hoped she would be dead by the time You-Know-Who regained his power. She had no desire to know what price these two tiny boys might pay to finally defeat the great Dark Lord whom she had once known as a boy named Tom Riddle.

* * * * *

Thursday, 9 April 1982

"Very good, Percy!" Molly Weasley said, beaming at the five-year old. He had been reciting his Latin declensions and had got everything perfect. She hadn't remembered having this much fun when actually teaching a classroom of unruly children, but then, none of them had been her own son, and Percy was in particular a very studious child, his mind thirsty for as much information as she could pour into it. Sometimes she worried that he was leaping ahead of her ability to teach him; she was a bit rusty, after almost twenty years away from the classroom. And she had ample distractions in the form of Fred and George, who were nearly four years old, as well as Ron, who would have his second birthday in just over a month, and Ginny, who had just passed her first birthday.

She sometimes wondered whether she should tell Arthur that she'd changed her mind, it was all right for Percy to go off to the village school, as Bill and Charlie had done, and as Peggy and Annie had done before they disappeared. But the thought of sending any of her children away ever again made her heart ache so, even when it was only for a day and they'd be back again after school. She couldn't bear it. Yes, it was difficult with the younger children to manage as well, but Percy was an easy mark for her teaching. She could set him a lesson, send him off to do it, and when he returned half an hour later, she knew it would be perfect. He even did perfect work when they were doing sums, despite this not being his favorite lesson. He set his mind to it and did what was necessary.

Molly sighed and patted his head fondly; she really worried about being able to cope with teaching Percy *and* the twins in September, besides keeping track of Ron and Ginny. Ginny had developed a predilection for finding the most obscure places to hide in the house. Molly had been searching high and low for her more than once, her heart in her mouth, before finding the little imp under the ottoman or behind the curtains or under the kitchen sink. Each time, Molly held her little girl tightly, vowing never to let her out of her sight again. If anything ever happened to Ginny, she just knew she couldn't bear it, not after Annie and Peggy. Not that she wanted anything to happen to her boys; she loved all of her children dearly, and that was why none of the younger ones would be attending the village school, as their four oldest siblings had done. She was not letting any of them out of her sight until it was time for Hogwarts. She knew they'd be safe there. Dumbledore would never let anything happen at Hogwarts.

"All right, Percy-love. You've been a very good boy today. Now I have to feed Ron and Ginny, so you find a book to read, there's a good boy," she said again.

Percy nodded and walked solemnly to the bookcases flanking the fire in the crowded living room. His mother took Ron and Ginny from the hearth rug, where they'd been playing. The twins were upstairs, having a nap (supposedly—every so often, Percy heard tell-tale thumps overhead). After perusing the shelves, Percy quickly came to the conclusion that he'd read everything worth reading in the house. He went to the kitchen.

"Mummy?"

"Yes, Percy, dear?" she said, placing bowls of porridge in front of Ron and Ginny.

"Where do Muggles go for books?"

"Where do Muggles go for books? Why, to bookshops, I reckon. We'll go to Flourish and Blotts, in Diagon Alley, when you get ready to go off to Hogwarts. If you need new books, that is. With any luck, you'll be able to use Bill and Charlie's old ones."

"That's it?" he said, disappointed. "Bookshops?" Shops meant you needed money. Even at five, he knew that. And Muggle bookshops meant you needed Muggle money.

"Well, they also have libraries. There's one in the village, near the shops. You've seen it. No, Ron! We don't eat porridge with *fingers!*" she said with exasperation, waving her wand at the messy toddler, who was busily smearing porridge on his face. Ginny had been spooning her own porridge into her mouth, but now she started giggling uncontrollably at seeing what Ron had done, and decided to put her spoon on her chin instead of into her mouth. This produced more giggling from Ron, and Molly was soon involved in cleaning and scolding the pair of them, while they continued to laugh gleefully. She never heard her five-year-old son ask whether she would take him to the village to visit the library, nor the front door closing after he left the house, having failed to get a response.

Peter noticed, though. Sitting in Percy's pocket, he could tell right away that they were outdoors. It was a brisk spring day, and although Percy had put on a jacket, Peter was riding in his trouser pocket, so he didn't benefit from the jacket's warmth. He put his nose out of the pocket, very cautiously, then decided that Percy was just going to play in the garden. He curled up in the bottom of the pocket and resumed his nap.

He'd had a good life, surprisingly, since Molly had discovered him in Percy's care a few months earlier. Percy had begged and pleaded with his mother to be allowed to keep "Scabbers." He'd shown her how clean he was, told her that he'd been letting the rat sleep in his bed with him, and he hadn't brought any fleas or other rats into the house. Peter had sat up on Percy's hand and looked pleadingly at Molly Weasley, hoping she wouldn't consider hexing him while Percy was holding him. His heart had been beating very fast and if he'd been in his human form, his knees would have been knocking together. He had climbed up Percy's arm and perched on his shoulder, lightly gripping the fabric with his toes to keep from falling. Percy had stroked his fur, speaking softly to him.

Molly had sighed and thrown up her hands. "All right. You have a tame rat. He's *your* responsibility, Percy, and no one else's. Understand? I don't want to be finding him underfoot. And under no circumstances do I want to see him in my kitchen."

"Yes, Mummy," he'd replied happily.

After a time, Peter realized sleepily that Percy had been walking for far longer than it took to merely go out into the garden, so unless Percy had taken it into his head to walk round and round the garden, they had left the grounds of the Burrow. He put his nose out of Percy's pocket again and discovered that they were, in fact, entering a village. Percy was waiting patiently for a car to go through a roundabout, walking sedately along the pavement as though he went to Ottery St. Catchpole by himself every day.

Peter pulled himself back into the pocket, his small heart thumping even more rapidly than usual. *Molly Weasley is going to have a fit!* After the girls disappearing, for Percy to go off on his own would send her over the edge! Peter felt very angry and was tempted to bite him, to see whether it would bring him to his senses. It was bad enough that he, Peter, had caused their family so much grief and pain, but if anything happened to Percy....

Peter poked his head out of the pocket; Percy was opening a glass door, entering a stone-clad building, as though he knew just what he was doing. Usually, Percy spoke to "Scabbers" at great length about his plans. That Percy had kept *this* in his head was a bit alarming to Peter; he thought he always knew what to expect from Percy. Of all of the children, he was the only one Peter would have called almost boring in his predictability.

Today, Percy Weasley was specializing in being unpredictable.

Peter hazarded another look at his surroundings; there were shelves and shelves of books, and some squashy-looking brown armchairs and sofas made of cracked old leather. They seemed worn and comfortable, and when he entered the hallowed space, he felt Percy take in a deep, bracing breath, as though he'd achieved his heart's desire.

Percy looked around the reading room, smiling happily. He pushed his glasses up on his nose (he'd only been fitted for them a month earlier and was very pleased with how much better the world looked) and approached the librarian. She was an elderly woman, white hair pulled into a bun, her shirtwaist pockets bulging with pens and cards. Percy watched her open the back cover of the top book in the stack before her and pull a small card from her pocket, inserting it in another pocket glued to the back of the book. Closing it, she dropped it into a metal bin and reached for another. She looked dreadfully efficient, but somehow also friendly. Moreover, Percy was of the opinion that anyone who worked in a library must love books as much as he did, so she would of course be friendly to him.

Luckily, this assumption proved to be correct. Percy planted himself before her and said politely, "Excuse me, madam." She looked up (and then down) in surprise, an indulgent smile spreading across her face as she beheld the small would-be reader before her.

"Yes? What can I do for you, lad?"

"I was wondering where the children's books are," Percy said clearly, only a slight lisp marring his speech. She put down the book she'd chosen and stood, reaching over the desk for his hand, which he gave her. "Come with me. I'll show you."

He had slipped his small hand confidently into hers without a second thought; as much as his parents had attempted to inculcate in their children a suspicion of strangers, Percy couldn't bring himself to assume anything but the best of this nice old lady. For the first time, as he walked beside her, he felt a small pang at having come to the village on his own. But he'd *told* his mother what he was going to do. If she hadn't wanted him to, surely she would have said something? In his

eagerness to go to the library, he had failed to notice that she was too preoccupied with his youngest siblings to be aware of what he'd said. It simply did not occur to him that his mother had no idea where he was.

The librarian's name was Mrs. Williams. She smiled warmly at him as she directed him to a shelf with large picture books. He looked up at her. "Do any of these have poetry? I like 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin.' Do you know any books with poems like that one?"

Goodness, Mrs. Williams thought. *Prodigious*. She steered him away from the picture books, having heard this. "Why don't you try here, instead?" She reached up and took down a copy of *Peter Pan*. "Have you read this one?"

Percy stared at the wonderful picture on the cover of a pirate ship in full sail, shaking his head; he thought it looked *wonderful*. Gazing up rapturously at Mrs. Williams, he said, "I don't have to pay for it, right?"

She laughed. "This is a library. Of course you don't have to pay for it."

"Good. May I read it now?"

She scrutinized him with interest; he was a funny little thing. "Of course you may. Make yourself comfortable." She waved her hand at a nearby squashy armchair, and Percy happily scrambled up onto it, turned around and opened the book on his lap, preparing to start. Mrs. Williams gave him one last smile before she returned to her desk.

Peter, for his part, waited for a few minutes before poking his head out of the pocket again. Percy had removed his jacket, which was on the seat next to him (it was a very large chair and he was a very small boy). Peter crept out of the pocket very slowly and unobtrusively. Percy was oblivious, already immersed in the lives of the Darling family. Peter ducked under the jacket when he heard nearby footsteps, then took a chance and leapt onto the floor. He ran under the chair, but that afforded him little shelter (there was no skirt). His heart thudding very quickly, he paused under the chair, glancing around for security risks. Seeing none, he made a dash for a pair of long bookcases protruding from the wall behind the chair. Running all the way to the wall, where the bookcases stopped, he paused once more before he returned to his human form.

Peter could not be seen by anyone else in the library from his current location, including Percy, who wouldn't have recognized the human Peter, in any case. If, however, Molly or Arthur Weasley saw him, they might recognize him. He'd seen his own photograph in the newspaper when Sirius had been sentenced to Azkaban, and again when he had, posthumously, received the Order of Merlin. He'd also seen the photograph of his grieving mother, tears streaming down her face. No, at all costs, he must make certain that neither Molly nor Arthur saw him. He took out his wand and waved it, before an unsuspecting Muggle could suddenly stumble into the aisle. Less than a minute later, he re-materialized with a *pop!* in the old orchard at the edge of the Weasley property. The orchard was generally empty when the oldest boys were at school.

Changing back to his rat form (he didn't dare get closer to the house in his human form), he ran like lightning across the orchard and garden, finally reaching the kitchen door. He slipped under the door and saw that Molly was busy at the large table, waving her wand over a bowl. Ron and Ginny were still in their high chairs, messily eating biscuits and making more than a bit of noise. Peter chattered as loudly as he could, but Molly couldn't hear him above Ron and Ginny. Finally, knowing how very risky it was, he went over to Molly and quickly ran across her foot, getting out of the way before she kicked him.

She let out a blood-curdling screech and stepped back from the table. Peter ran for the hall, hoping she would follow him. She glared at the rat, pulling out her wand. Peter swallowed, scampering into the living room so that she could see that Percy wasn't there.

"Percy!" she cried, stomping angrily toward the rat. "I told you I didn't want to see that rat in *my kitchen!*" She looked around the empty room. "Percy?" she said, a little uncertainly this time. Peter ran to the front door and looked at her expectantly. She narrowed her eyes, looking down at the rodent. "Where is he, then?" she said to him, as though she suspected he could answer. She glanced at the family clock; for Percy, it was pointing to "traveling." Peter scratched at the door and she opened it; he ran down the path a few yards, then turned and looked at her, waiting for her to follow. She started to, but a loud clatter was heard from the kitchen and she dashed back into the house. Peter heaved a small rat-sigh and also returned to the house; he found Molly crouching before the fire, Arthur Weasley's head sitting in the green flames there.

"I'm sorry to ask, Arthur, but I can't find Percy, and I can't leave the other little ones...." Her voice was full of worry and self-reproach. Arthur Weasley looked very grim.

"I'll be right there, Molly."

His head disappeared from the fire and barely a moment later he had *popped!* into the messy Weasley kitchen. "All right, Molly, where was the last place you saw him?" he started to say to his

wife, but Peter didn't have time for this. He tugged at the hem of Mr. Weasley's robe with his teeth, trying to get his attention. Molly cleared her throat.

"Now, Arthur, you're going to think I'm daft, but I think the rat has been trying to *tell* me where Percy is. My problem is that I can't just run off and leave the—"

"Yes, Molly, I understand," Arthur said, stooping to stroke Peter's fur firmly. Peter scampered for the door, then paused to wait for Arthur Weasley. When he followed, Peter proceeded down the path to the dirt road leading to Ottery St. Catchpole. Arthur diligently followed the small creature, but Peter was getting rather tired out; his legs were far smaller than Percy's, and he hadn't had to get to and from the village on his own in rat form before. Arthur Weasley seemed to understand that he was tired; he picked him up and stroked between his ears. "All right, then, Scabbers. You know where your lad is, do you? We'll go to the village, and if I'm wrong, you just tell me somehow. Got it?"

Peter resisted the urge to nod; instead he turned his face toward the village and sat patiently in Arthur Weasley's grasp. When they were near the village shops and Arthur was passing the library, Peter started squirming, and finally, Arthur put him down on the ground and watched him. Peter ran to the library door and Arthur nodded, picking him up and putting him into a deep robe pocket.

Arthur Weasley had never entered the Muggle library in Ottery St. Catchpole. He hadn't even known it was there. He didn't generally like to go to places where there were a lot of Muggles because Molly told him that he tended to gawp, and the Muggles, in turn, gawped at him. That was what had occurred when he'd taken his children to work and had to travel with them on the Underground. He experienced a feeling of intense conspicuousness now that tingled along his scalp as he walked to the desk, his footsteps echoing on the stone floor. He was grateful that he wasn't wearing a wizard's hat today.

He smiled ingratiatingly at the white-haired woman at the desk, thinking of Molly back at the Burrow, going frantic. After the girls....

"May I help you?" the old woman asked Arthur with a friendly smile. *Muggles are always so friendly and ready to help*, Arthur thought with satisfaction. *Don't know what so many wizards have against them....*

"Erm, yes. I'm looking for my son. Small lad, about so high," he said, holding his hand at what he thought was the right height, before thinking better of it and moving his hand up and down uncertainly for a minute. He gave the woman a lopsided smile and put his hand into his pocket, encountering the rat, about whom he had forgotten. "Well, you know how they grow," he said feebly. "At any rate—small lad. Five years old. Bright red hair. Rather like, well, mine," he said, pointing needlessly at his own head. "And glasses. He's just got them. And, well, freckles. And—clothes—damn! Oh, excuse me. It's just that—I forgot to ask my wife what he was wearing. She's quite frantic. The twins were upstairs for their nap, she was feeding the babies, and she thought Percy was in the living room—"

"Twins and two other babies? Gracious! She has her hands full, I reckon. Percy? Is that his name?" She brightened up. "I think I can help you, sir."

He heaved a great sigh of relief at these words. "Oh, thank you so much, ma'am. I just—I couldn't possibly go back and tell her—"

"You shan't need to," she said, patting his arm. "Come with me." As she led him along, she said, "Are you the new choirmaster at St. Catchpole-in-the-Meadow? How are you getting on with Canon Dickerson?"

"Erm, fine, thank you. Just fine," he said, confused about this line of questioning.

"Really? After the way he treated the last choirmaster, the vestry wasn't certain they could get someone new, but no one else is ever willing to do all of the work Canon Dickerson makes time for...."

Arthur understood now that she was talking about the local parish church; he and Molly had taken the children there once for a Christmas Mass, to hear the choir. It had been quite nice, he remembered, but oddly enough, the words to the carols weren't quite the ones he remembered. He had decided that Muggles used different ones. But it had been a little jarring for him, and the Muggles had stared at his and Molly's robes, so they hadn't gone back. He remembered with a pang that it had been the four eldest children only: Bill, Charlie, Annie and Peggy. Percy wouldn't be born for another eight months.

When they entered the children's department, Arthur immediately saw Percy sitting in the large armchair, a book across his lap as he followed the words with his finger, his lips moving ever so slightly. He didn't take notice of anything else going on around him.

"Percy!" his father said loudly, before the librarian abruptly hushed him.

Percy looked up, his eyes widening when he saw his father. "Daddy! What time is it? Am I late?"

I told Mummy where I was going and that I'd be back for tea."

Arthur shook his head. "Mummy didn't know, Perce. We were both very worried." His heart was going very fast, but he was also enormously relieved; nothing had happened to Percy. No one had snatched him away from them. He was all right. He would not have to tell Molly that another one of their children had disappeared from the village.

"She didn't know? But I told her. Anyway, if she didn't know, how did you find me?"

Arthur looked uncertainly at the librarian, then leaned close to whisper to Percy. "*Scabbers led me to you.*"

Percy looked astonished. "He *did*?" He patted his pocket, realizing for the first time that it was empty. "Where is he?"

"*In my pocket,*" Arthur said very softly. "Now, give the book back and we can go," he said in a normal voice.

Percy's face fell. "Oh. Right." He sighed and closed the book, running his hands wistfully over the cover. "I don't reckon I'll be allowed to come again..."

"Whyever not?" Mrs. Williams demanded, her eyes flashing at Arthur Weasley, as though he was the enemy of intellect and learning for preventing his son from coming to the library. "You *could* get a library card, dearie. Would you like that? Then you could take some books home to read and bring them back and get some others."

Percy's face lit up, and Arthur had to stop himself from laughing. "Oh! Can I, Dad?"

"Of course, son, of course. *If* you wait until I can bring you, or Mum. You're not to come on your own again." He smiled and kissed his son on the top of his carrot-colored head. Percy hugged the book to his chest happily, then followed Mrs. Williams to her desk to make it all official. Arthur took off his glasses and ran his hand down his face, feeling very old and very tired. He felt some wiggling in his pocket and took out Scabbers the rat, using his hand to shield him from view. "Thanks to you, we've got our boy back, Scabbers," Arthur whispered to him, stroking his fur. "I reckon it's a good thing you and Percy became friends, yeah?" Scabbers cocked his head to the side. *Almost as though he can understand me*, Arthur thought for a moment before shaking himself and reminding himself that a rat didn't have a very large brain, after all. He'd become very attached to Percy, that was all. It really wasn't *that* extraordinary.

He put the rat back into his robe pocket; it finally dawned on him that it was because of the robe that the librarian assumed he worked as the parish choirmaster. He'd have to remember that, it was a far better story than any he'd thought up previously, when he'd gone out among Muggles in his wizarding robes. Usually he was mistaken for a priest, but she undoubtedly knew the rector, so her mind had gone to the next likely candidate.

Percy bade Mrs. Williams farewell at the door, clutching three books to his chest. Besides *Peter Pan*, he also carried *The Wizard of Oz* and *Mary Poppins*. "Did you know, Daddy, that Muggles know about magic? It's in these books," he said to his father after they had left the village and were back on the dirt road to the Burrow.

Arthur smiled. "Well, you might think so to read those, but because they're children's books, grown-up Muggles don't take them seriously. And you'll find that the way magic works in the books isn't the way it *really* works. Muggles wrote them, after all."

Percy frowned. "So, do the Muggles who wrote the books believe in magic?"

He nodded. "Probably. Many do. But most Muggles don't, and that's why, even when Muggles *have* seen real magic, they often don't say anything, in case other Muggles should think them mad. Or they're really worried about being mad themselves and convince themselves they saw something else. Or they write about it—usually getting a lot of things wrong—but say that it's a story that they made up. It all rather works out for us, in the end. You can still enjoy the stories, of course."

Percy nodded, clutching his books with a proprietary air. "I think Scabbers is a magic rat," he said suddenly. Peter, riding in Arthur's pocket, heard this and stiffened in fear.

"Why do you say that, Perce?"

"He must have known that Mummy didn't know where I was and he went back home to tell her. He led you to the library in the village. Do most rats do that sort of thing?"

His father laughed. "Probably not. Maybe you're right," he said, humoring Percy and getting into the spirit of the fantastic books the boy had selected. "Maybe there's a race of magical creatures that hasn't been discovered, because they *look* just like rats, like Kneazles looking like cats or Crups with trimmed tails looking like normal dogs."

Percy nodded sagely. "Must be. I mean, it took me ever so long to get to the village from home, but you got there really fast. Do you think Scabbers can Apparate?"

Peter thought he might faint; the child had hit it on the head, almost. He *was* magical (although

not a magical creature), and he *had* Apparated back to the Burrow.

"Don't be silly, Percy. Only witches and wizards can Apparate, although house-elves can get about in a way that's a bit like Apparition. And then there are phoenixes...."

"Well, we're just lucky I have the smartest rat there is, aren't we?" Percy said, smiling up at his father. Arthur ruffled his bright hair and grinned back at him.

"That we are. That we are...."

After a homecoming that was part celebration and part scolding from Molly, it was time for tea. To his astonishment, Molly created a place of honor for "Scabbers" beside the hearth, with his own freshly-baked biscuit and his water in a slightly chipped china saucer. He not only was not being ejected from her kitchen, he was being given his own special place in it. Later, when she was tucking Percy into bed and kissing the top of his head, she reached out her finger and stroked Peter's fur, whispering, "*Thank you for helping us to find him,*" before kissing the sleeping Percy once more and gently closing the door.

In the dead of night, Peter scrambled to the edge of the bed and, after making certain that Percy was deeply asleep, changed into his human form and looked down at the peaceful child with a sigh. Everything had turned out all right. Peter walked carefully to the door, opening it only half-way, as it tended to squeak past that point. He went to each bedroom in turn, even Molly and Arthur's, checking on them all to make certain they were safe. He stopped beside Ginny's cot, stroking the red curls for a moment, his chest hitching as he thought of her older sisters. At least they were alive, because of him, he thought. At least they were still together, and in a good home. He remembered the nice family of which Lily had spoken, the poor couple who had lost their little girl to cancer.

It's better this way, he thought, gazing down at Ginny, who sighed and rolled over in her sleep, her thumb in her mouth. *And someday, you shall help to bring down the Dark Lord, little Ginny.* First, he knew, his Master would need to rise again. He might have to help him do that. He shuddered, remembering the wisp of life blowing over the trees....

Until then, Peter Pettigrew thought, gazing down at the peacefully slumbering baby, *I'll make certain that nothing happens to you or your family.*

* * * * *

Saturday, 1 May 1982

Maggie Dougherty sat straight up in bed, trying to get her breath. She'd had the dream again. The dark-haired man pulling her out of the water, his fingers pulsing with a red light at the edges....but she wasn't a little girl in the dream, she was a woman. She was all grown up. And then she was sailing, the salty wind in her face, and she was laughing, and he was beside her, also laughing and smiling, a pink glow suffusing both of them....

Maggie shook her head, watching herself in the slightly cloudy old mirror hanging over her dresser. She wasn't sure whether the mirror or the morning light gave the impression of there being a delicate silver-grey glow around her. (Or something else.) She was very clearly still a little girl, with her orange hair in a messy tangle over her head, her thin face pale and drawn. It was all very strange. Why should she keep having this dream?

She'd been to a wedding with her parents the previous weekend, a cousin of her mother's. Someone had told her that if she slept with a piece of wedding cake under her pillow, she'd dream of her future husband. She hadn't put the cake under her pillow (it had seemed a messy, unsanitary thing to do), but was she doing that anyway?

Maggie frowned, remembering the man's face very vividly from her dream. He certainly wasn't what you would call handsome, with that beaky nose and those dark, brooding eyes. *You'd think I'd pick someone a little better-looking,* she thought. When he smiled, he wasn't too bad, though, she remembered. She also recalled that he had a nice laugh. He was terribly pale and thin, and more than a bit bossy. She *definitely* remembered him being bossy, when he'd been trying to get her out of the water.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by her mother appearing at the door of her bedroom. "Good morning, Mags! I told Mrs. Matthews we would help her set up for the jumble sale, remember? Are you still interested in running your little booth? Or would you rather dance around the Maypole with your friends?"

They other children weren't really her friends, so she had no interest in the Maypole, but Maggie smiled at her mother, whose aura pulsed a clear turquoise. This meant that she was cheerful and organized, Maggie had worked out even before looking in a book at the library about this. She much preferred her mother this way, rather than with a muddy blue or sulfur-colored aura. She was glad that her mother wasn't melancholy or ill at ease. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time her mother hadn't been rather cheerful.

"Yes, Mummy," she said smiling nervously.

"All right, then. Breakfast in ten minutes. Don't you love the village fete?" she trilled as she left. Maggie smiled after her mother and scrambled out of bed, immediately straightening and smoothing the sheets and blankets and then laying out her costume. She was going to pretend to be a Gypsy fortune-teller. Checking a chart on her wall with a diagram of the palm, she reminded herself of what the different line configurations meant. That, the information she'd memorized about aura colors, and the *feelings* she sometimes had when she was around people should allow her to put on a good show. It was all for charity, she reminded herself. It would be fun. For once she wouldn't have to bite her tongue when something leapt into her mind. For once she'd have a reason for acting like 'a freak,' as some children at school called her. She had a small circle of near-friends, but even they sometimes thought she was rather queer. Only Valerie didn't.

Valerie appeared now, coming through the door of the wardrobe. "Good morning, Valerie," she said briskly to the ghost as she donned a swirling flowered skirt that was her mother's; cinched with a belt, it fitted Maggie with only a little bunching around the waist. The hem swept the toes of her trainers in a satisfyingly gypsy-like fashion.

"*Good morning,*" Valerie answered mistily, drifting over to perch on the footboard of the bed. Maggie turned, hearing a note she didn't like in Valerie's ghostly voice. Not for the first time, she wished that she could 'see' ghosts the way she could 'see' live human beings. But ghosts had no aura, no real future, so she could perceive nothing about her mood or what would become of her in the same way that she could for the living.

"Everything all right?" Maggie asked the girl-ghost while she wound a bright green scarf around her head. She pinned her mother's large hoop earrings to the scarf, next to her ears. She'd pleaded with her mother to pierce her ears, but was told that she had to wait until she was sixteen. (This was a lifetime away, as she wasn't yet ten.)

"Yes. That's just it. Everything's so all right...." Valerie trailed off. Maggie frowned; Valerie faded for a moment, then reappeared, faded, then came back.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—I think it's time for me to go," Valerie whispered, sounding like someone speaking from a distant room.

Maggie whirled, eyes wide. "Go? Oh, no!"

Valerie nodded. "I've put it off, but I can't any longer."

"Why?" Maggie wished she could touch Valerie somehow, clutch at her and keep her.

Valerie gave a shrug of her transparent shoulders. "I stayed because I was worried about my parents. I wanted to look after them. But now...you are their daughter. You look after them. And they look after you. You're a family."

Maggie couldn't stop the tears streaming down her face. "But you're part of our family."

Valerie shook her head. "Not anymore," she said, her voice sounding even farther away. She shimmered in the morning light. "I've got a place where I can go. There are a lot of ghosts there. It's a school. I would have gone there when I was eleven. If I'd lived to be eleven...."

"Where is it? I thought you would have gone to school here in Appleby Magna."

"No. It's a different sort of school. I died too soon to find out about it. Our parents....they seem destined to have special daughters, even though they're not special themselves. Maybe it's the house. Another girl lived here; she went to the school. You'll like it. You'll go there someday. Because you're special, too."

Maggie frowned. "Special how?" And how could she say her parents weren't special?

"I think you know. I cannot say more now. It is time for me to go...."

"No!" Maggie cried, clutching at the empty air where Valerie had been.

"*It's all right,*" said a disembodied voice that sounded less and less like Valerie's. "I know you shall do a good job of watching over them...."

Maggie choked on her tears, turning round and round, looking at her empty room. Valerie had been there for her from the start. She'd had her to talk to for so long. It almost didn't matter anymore that she couldn't remember anything from her early life.

"Maggie!" her mother called, entering the room. Seeing Maggie's tears, she pulled the girl to her, no longer having to stoop to embrace her, as Maggie was quite tall now; the top of her head was just under Mrs. Dougherty's chin. "What is it, dear?" she said softly.

Maggie shook her head; she couldn't tell her mother that she was crying because Valerie had left, when she'd already gone through her own mourning for her. "I'll be okay," she said, hiccupping noisily, drying her eyes with the end of her green headscarf. "I just need to go up to the attic and get that old shawl to finish my costume."

Her mother cupped her chin with her hand and surveyed her. "You look like a rather pale, blue-eyed Gypsy," she joked, grinning. Maggie laughed for a moment, in spite of the hollow feeling she had, where Valerie had been. Someday she might find something or someone to fill that space. She tried not to think about what dreadful color her aura was.

Maggie crept up to the attic, carefully lifting her mother's flowered skirt as she climbed the stairs. She made her way over to an old trunk draped with a paisley shawl; removing the shawl, she saw that the trunk had chipped gold initials on it. *L.G.E.* She'd never looked in this trunk before. The shawl had always draped the trunk like a genteel tablecloth, and she'd never thought about what might lie underneath. A large padlock sealed the trunk, and Maggie's heart dropped; she had been about to open it. It wasn't every day that you came across a mystery in your own house! But there was no telling where the key to the lock was. Maggie took the padlock in her hand; it felt heavy and substantial and she grasped it tightly, wishing fiercely that she could open it....

She leapt back with alarm when the lock seemed to melt like butter in her hand. She stared at it for a second, then dropped it on the floor with a thud; it still *seemed* to be heavy, solid metal. There was nothing keeping her out of the trunk now. Maggie approached it cautiously, stepping over the discarded lock. Lifting the lid, she found a lot of dusty old books. *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*. Ugh, she thought. Gardening. The others looked like schoolbooks. One said, *A History of* and then nothing else, for the cover had been partially burnt. The pages also emitted an acrid, burnt smell. Perhaps these things had been saved from a fire. The gardening book was a bit charred at the edges, too, although not so badly as the history book.

Amidst the half-burnt detritus in the trunk were some old letters and postcards. One such collection of letters, which seemed to have been written on old-fashioned heavy parchment and written in a lovely flowing script with ink that had browned over the years, was bound by a faded green ribbon. Maggie was able to make out the address by squinting:

Miss Lily G. Evans
10 Highgrove St.
Appleby Magna, Leicestershire

Lily G. Evans lived here, Maggie thought. Her things had never been removed. Maggie looked at the shawl in her hand again and realized that it wasn't nearly as dusty as the other things in the attic. Then she remembered that, the previous November, the owner of their house had come with some things she wanted to store in the attic. Mrs. Dougherty had been surprised, but the terse, unpleasant woman merely said that there had been a death in the family and that they had no place to put her sister's old school things in their house. So Mrs. Dougherty had admitted her (she was the landlady, after all) and Mrs. Dursley had ascended the stairs to the attic, coming back down rather quickly. She left again right after that, declining Maggie's mother's offer of tea.

Maggie felt like an intruder now, thinking about poor Lily Evans. She moved to replace the bundle of letters in the trunk, but a photograph fell out of the bundle. Maggie gasped, frozen. It was the man in her dream! She picked it up and turned it over. In neat, flowing script, were the words *Severus, June 1977*.

Was that supposed to be a name? she wondered. *Severus*?

Perhaps it was a place. They might have gone to a town called "Severus" and she'd written this on the photo. If they'd gone to Monaco, it might have said, *Monaco, 1977*. But as she stared at those dark, fathomless eyes, she couldn't help think that the name Severus had more to do with *him* than wherever he'd been in 1977.

Then the man in the photograph turned his black eyes directly at her and one corner of his mouth turned up slightly. Maggie gasped and dropped it, backing away. She clutched the paisley shawl to her, wondering whether she was just still reeling from losing Valerie. After a minute, she walked back to the photograph and stooped to pick it up; surely she had just imagined that the man in the photo had moved. But the photograph was no longer of a young man with long, lank dark hair, a beaky nose and dark brooding eyes. It was instead a photograph of a bookshop. The young man was nowhere to be seen.

She shook her head, wondering what had happened. Had thinking about the man in her dream made her imagine that he was in the photo? Had she fallen asleep? She tried to see him in the picture, and realized that the background *had* been the bookshop. Now the shop appeared to be the subject of the photo. Shuddering, she dropped it back into the trunk. She closed the trunk but couldn't lock it again, unfortunately. She pushed the broken padlock under a low dresser, so it wouldn't be seen.

Hurrying down the stairs to her bedroom again, she felt like her heart would burst out of her chest. *He was in the photo, he was*, she thought. *And then he wasn't. But first, he moved.* It was insane. She was daft, barmy. She was going mad....

"Maggie! I told you to get down here!" her mother's voice came up the stairs.

"Coming, Mum!"

Maggie was not sorry to be getting out of the house for the day. She was starting to wonder whether she really wanted to know the secret behind the strange photograph of the dark-haired man. She ate her breakfast and sat silently in the car while her mother drove to the fete. She smiled and nodded at people all day and received a number of visitors to her Gypsy fortune-telling booth. Once, when she had a very strong feeling that Mrs. Slocum's husband was going to leave her for another woman, she refrained from mentioning it. Another time, she did not tell Mr. Eggles that he had a white aura; how do you tell someone they may die in a matter of hours? She had pulled her hand away at first, then forced herself to grasp it tightly again, to look up into his old, lined brown eyes. "Is there anything you feel you've forgotten to do?" she'd asked him cautiously.

"Oh, no. Everything is quite in order," he'd said, smiling. She'd nodded at him.

"Good, that's good, because soon-soon you'll be busy. Too busy for—a lot of things...."

She'd barely been able to get the words out; she exclaimed over his long life-line and correctly told him that he'd been married twice but the one time he'd *almost* married someone, that was the one he really regretted. He'd been very impressed, but suddenly, the responsibility of what she was doing seemed overwhelming.

She didn't want to know more about the people in her community. She managed to get through the rest of the day, somehow, but it was starting to make her ill, staring at palm after palm, the sometimes-horrid fates of her neighbors laid out before her. It had never bothered her before, seeing people's auras, and they thought it was just a game she was playing. It was cheering to see the pretty bright blue auras of the children dancing around the Maypole, but now she was finding it difficult not to pass judgment on someone with an orange aura, wondering whether he'd walked all over a co-worker to get a promotion. She wondered whether a woman with a deep black aura was ever going to unburden herself and tell someone her deep, dark secret....It was too much for a nine-year-old girl.

At length, her mother noticed that she was pale and trembling while she was looking at Mrs. Lowgrin's hand. Except that she wasn't looking; she could bear it no longer. She squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered, "*No more, no more, it's all too terrible...*"

And her mother had hushed her and packed her off in the car, tucking her into bed at home with a hot water bottle and a mug of hot chocolate, then reading to her. Maggie looked at her mother; her aura was a turquoise glow again, suffusing everything her mother touched. She missed Valerie, but she knew that the ghostly girl was right; the Doughertys had finally managed to get over their daughter's death. They had someone new to care for. And in turn, by letting them, Maggie was taking care of them.

"Thank you for bringing me home, Mum," she whispered when her mother tucked her into bed. But she didn't just mean that she was grateful for returning from the fete.

"You looked like you needed to come home," her mother answered gently.

Yes, I did, Maggie thought. I needed to come home here to be with you very much. And you needed for me to do it, too.

"Good night, Mum," she whispered, closing her eyes in contentment. She knew that she wouldn't always be able to hide from her abilities, but for now she was content to let them lie dormant. Valerie had said she was special, and would go to a special school one day. One day was fine with her, as long as it wasn't this day. She was content to wait.

* * * * *

Friday, 14 May, 1982

Juliet Hathaway packed her potions supplies, watching Bill Weasley as she did so. He was on the other side of the room with his potions partner, Roxanne Maine-Thorpe, laughing at something Roxanne had said. Next to her, Alex Wood jostled Juliet's arm; she nearly spilled a highly-corrosive acid onto her bag, catching the heavy vial just in time.

"Oh, bloody hell. I'm sorry," Alex said earnestly. "I'm so clumsy."

Juliet smiled at him. "It's all right. My fault. I wasn't paying attention." She finished packing up and looked closely at Alex, who was dawdling, eyeing the apprentice Potions teacher suspiciously, as though he wanted to hex him. Juliet shook her head. "I don't know why Professor Dumbledore hired him, either. He makes me so *nervous!*" she whispered. "Always pulling faces every time I measure anything, or add something to the cauldron. He's got me second-guessing myself every time. Twice I almost reached my hand into the potion to try to snatch something back."

Alex didn't take his eyes from Severus Snape. "Good thing you didn't, or you might not *have* a hand now. He's a bloody Death Eater," he said quietly, barely moving his lips. "That's what I don't get." As they left the Potions dungeon, he continued, "He should be in Azkaban, not here at Hogwarts trying to ruin people's lives. If he's supervising my N.E.W.T.s, I definitely won't get Potions, that's all I can say."

Juliet stopped just outside the door, noticing out of the corner of her eye that Bill was waiting at the end of the corridor while talking to Roxanne. "What makes you say that he's a Death Eater?" she hissed anxiously. Over Alex's shoulder, she saw that Snape was striding through the classroom, making notes on a piece of parchment, presumably concerning which students didn't do an adequate job of cleaning. Snape always seemed to be intent on taking house points, especially from non-Slytherins.

"You don't know? He was very, *very* good friends with Barty Crouch's son. When Lowell and I were together—" He choked on these words, the lump in his throat almost preventing him from continuing. He pulled her down the corridor, away from the door. "We saw them together *a lot*," he whispered, looking back at the doorway in case Snape should come through it. It was so *obvious* that they—well, that they were like *us*. I know he was Lily Evans' boyfriend, but *she* was killed by You-Know-Who. Coincidence? Not bloody likely. Who do you think probably led him to her and James? I bet Snape was told when he was still in school that his job was to deliver her to be killed. Why would she be with *him*, anyway? Remember that whole disaster when he broke up with her? Did you really believe that? He probably put her under Imperius and then ended it when he was told. I mean—can you imagine Evans being with him of her own free will? I don't fancy girls, but even I could see that she was too pretty for him."

Juliet shook her head as they walked slowly toward Bill. "I still can't believe Crouch went to Azkaban. I mean, I never liked him when he was in school, always giving detention to anyone he didn't like, but to *torture* someone into insanity...."

Alex snorted. "I'm not surprised. When I used to go to the Ravenclaw common room he was a complete prat. Worse than prat, actually. He looked at the pair of us like he knew just what we were up to. I was always waiting for him to 'slip' and expose us to the entire school. Still not sure why he didn't, actually. It was the sort of thing he *would* do."

"But you said he and Snape were together," she said, looking nervously over her shoulder.

Alex shrugged. "That wouldn't have stopped him. You can be a bastard and fancy girls or boys. Doesn't matter who he sleeps with. One of the only bits of news I've had in the last year that made any *sense* was finding out that that son of a bitch was a Death Eater. I just wish Lowell and I had said something when we first found him hanging about with that filthy Slytherin. Much as I hate Snape, though, it's probably a draw whether he corrupted Crouch or Crouch corrupted him. Could have gone either way."

Juliet swallowed. "Corrupted? You mean—"

Alex made a face. "No! I meant which one got the other into the Death Eaters. Get your mind out of the gutter, Miss Hathaway," he added, grinning.

Juliet flushed deep red. "Sorry. I get it now." She looked up at Alex. "I'm sorry about Lowell, too," she said softly. "Has he shown any improvement at all?"

Alex sighed, remembering his last trip to St. Mungo's. "Not really. All he knows is that he couldn't *possibly* have been my boyfriend because he *doesn't fancy boys*, as he keeps saying." He frowned deeply. "Of course, he doesn't even remember any of his magical training, so I reckon mentally he's about ten years old or younger. Still—"

She nodded. "That doesn't make it any easier, I'm sure."

"No," he said firmly. "It doesn't. I reckon that little kid is lucky he didn't get the full force of Lockhart's memory charm. Of course, he's not so lucky to have his parents in St. Mungo's even worse off than Lowell. But at least he still has a chance at a normal life."

Juliet knew that his opinion was that Lowell didn't have this same chance, and she put her hand on his arm sympathetically. Just when they'd all thought that life was going to be better, that You-Know-Who was gone, the Longbottoms had been attacked. And then there were the other trials, Death Eaters coming out of the woodwork, some of them even working at the Ministry (although no one believed that Ludo Bagman was doing anything but showing poor judgment, and he'd got off). The trials were still going on, and the claims of being under Imperius. It seemed that it would never end.

They had reached Bill. He turned away from Roxanne; she gave Juliet an appraising look and a smirk before turning, leaving without a word to her or Alex. Bill grinned at Juliet and put his arm around her shoulders. "How'd you do, Jules? Didn't let old Snape get to you, did you?" he said cheerfully as they climbed the stairs to the entrance hall.

"Only a little," she said quietly, not looking at him.

The more strained their relationship became, the more Bill tried to hide his unease under a forced joviality; everyone seemed to be aware of this but Bill himself. He and Juliet went through the motions of being a happy couple. They entered the Great Hall together now for lunch, choosing adjacent seats at the Gryffindor table. Alex sat to the left of Bill and started talking about Quidditch. Juliet assumed that he wanted to go back to his usual not-thinking about Lowell Faulkner. After arriving with some other fifth years, Charlie sat next to Juliet, giving her a shy grin, which she returned. She knew that Charlie still had a bit of a crush on her, and she didn't mind, really. When she was feeling uneasy about her relationship with Bill, it actually gave her a nice warm feeling to know that Charlie cared, though she didn't feel the same way about him. He was very sweet, she thought; talking to him usually made her feel much better if she was down. She didn't burden Alex with her problems, knowing that he had plenty of his own, and Mary Ann and Jack were usually off on their own. Jack had proposed to Mary Ann during the Easter holiday.

Juliet looked at her plate; somehow, she didn't remember piling it so high with food. She felt ravenous, but suddenly, the sight of it was making her stomach churn within her. She put her hand to her mouth, bolting from the Great Hall, making it as far as half-way up the marble stairs before it happened. Afterward, she looked down in horror; the sick was all over the marble and had splattered her shoes and the hem of her robes. She held onto the banister, taking great gulps of air, trying to get her bearings, her head spinning. Just as she thought her legs would collapse from under her, she felt herself being supported and embraced. She looked up into Bill's face, gazing down at her with love and concern. She realized vaguely that there had been three sets of footsteps following her; Alex and Charlie were standing on the steps as well. Alex cleaned up her sick with a wave of his wand.

"Are you all right?" Bill demanded. Juliet nodded.

"I just-must have caught something. I tried to get to the hospital wing before this happened. I'm sure she'll have me right as rain in no time," she said brightly, hoping Bill would go. *I can't tell him*, she thought. *I can't tell him how stupid I am.*

"I'm taking you to the hospital wing," he said. He scooped her up in his arms and walked up the stairs, followed closely by Alex and Charlie, who opened the infirmary door when they reached it. Juliet put her arms around Bill's neck when he picked her up, burying her head on his chest so he couldn't see her face, which was red with shame.

Madam Pomfrey nodded when Bill placed Juliet on a bed, then pulled the curtain around it and shooed them away. The three boys left the infirmary, to Juliet's enormous relief.

"What happened, dear?" Madam Pomfrey asked her, all business.

Juliet bit her lip. "I was sick on the stairs," she said truthfully.

The matron nodded. "Ate your lunch too quickly, I reckon?"

Juliet shook her head. "I didn't eat anything at all." And then, she finally did it; she said the reason why she was sick.

Madam Pomfrey eyebrows flew so high they nearly disappeared into her hair. "I see," was all she said, her lips pursed. This happened rarely, but at least the girl was near the end of her seventh year. *I remember giving her the potion*, she thought.

Juliet didn't want to talk very much about it with Madam Pomfrey, though. "There's no reason why I can't finish the term. It's almost June, after all. I'll be fine," she said firmly.

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "I've got just the thing for you-perk you right up, and it's very safe. But it wouldn't hurt for you to stay here for the rest of the day. It is Friday."

"All right," she agreed. "I only have History of Magic, and then nothing."

"Well, there you go. You'd only be napping at your desk in Binns' class anyway," Madam Pomfrey said, wondering whether one of the boys who had come into the infirmary with her was to blame. "You might as well do that here, in a nice bed."

Juliet sank back against the pillows gratefully. "Thank you."

After Madam Pomfrey had gone to her office, Juliet was vaguely aware of the infirmary door opening and closing. A hand separated the curtains around her bed and she looked up in surprise.

It was Charlie. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in a lesson?" she asked him.

Charlie sat on the edge of the bed, reddening. "I wanted to be certain you were okay."

Juliet examined his face, wondering whether she should tell him. She so *longed* to tell someone. Madam Pomfrey knew, but then, she knew everyone's secrets. That hardly counted. She couldn't really *talk* to her about it.

"I'm all right," whispered, feeling very tired, "but thank you for checking on me." She put her hand over his. *Bill didn't come to check on me*, she thought.

"No, you're not okay," Charlie said softly. "Not really. What's going on, Juliet?" he said urgently, his dark eyes large and worried. "Something's wrong, I can tell."

She clamped her mouth shut, swallowing. "You have to promise that you won't tell *anyone*," she finally said. Charlie clasped her hand with his strong, calloused fingers.

"I promise," he said hoarsely.

"Most of all, you can't tell Bill. That's my job. Eventually. *You* are not to."

Charlie's eyes opened wide. "Oh my god! You're going to have a baby!"

"Sssshh!" Juliet said quickly. "Do you want the whole school to hear?"

Charlie looked torn. He gripped her hand. "Sorry. I just-when?" he sputtered, at a loss.

"Middle of December."

"Back then?" he said, shocked. "But-but you don't-"

"No," she scowled. "I'm only about two months. The baby's going to be *born* in the middle of December."

"Oh," he said, feeling stupid. *Of course she's not more than six months pregnant!* Her belly was still flat as a board. He realized that he'd been looking at her body and averted his eyes, trying not to think of *how* she'd conceived.

"What-what happened? Weren't you and Bill-"

"Taking precautions. Yes, for a bit. We were so on-again, off-again, that when we got back together last November, I forgot that I was overdue for more potion. It lapsed when Bill and I weren't together. Then we were just lucky for months, so I still didn't remember. Then-well, in March, our luck ran out-"

Charlie nodded, trying not to think of Bill touching her. "So why haven't you told him?"

She sighed and stared at the curtain around the bed. "Two reasons. First, I'm not terrifically anxious to tell him how absolutely stupid I've been. He thought I was keeping track of this, and I completely forgot. At least-at least I *think* I did."

Charlie frowned. "I thought you said-I thought you knew for sure."

"Yes, I'm definitely going to be a mummy in about seven months. I mean-I *think* that not taking the potion was forgetting, and not something else."

He looked even more confused now. "What else could it have been?"

She removed her hand from his, looking guilty. "Well, I've been thinking about it and wondering whether I had a subconscious desire for this to happen. To keep Bill here."

Charlie wasn't certain he understood. "He would stay, if you told him."

"Yes, he would," she said gloomily. "Out of obligation. But not to be with me. I don't *want* to go to bloody Egypt and he knows it, but he's so excited about the Gringotts job, he doesn't care. I-I don't want to give him a better excuse. At least-I think so-"

"So, you think you might have done this on purpose, to get him to stay, but you're not sure that you did? I still don't understand," Charlie said quietly, his head swimming. She took his hand again and smiled at him.

"Neither do I. But that's why you can't tell him, Charlie. Bill knows how I feel about his going off to Egypt. If he decides to stay, I'll tell him. If he doesn't-"

"What will you do? Will your mum and dad turn you out?" he asked, worried.

She shook her head. "I doubt it. But I may leave Britain. I'm not sure I want to go through this here if I'm not with Bill. I have an uncle in British Columbia, near a dragon reservation. I've asked him whether I might come to live with him. He knows I'm a witch, but not about the reservation. I could apply for a job on the reservation, pushing papers. Anything that doesn't actually involve working with dragons," she laughed.

"I wouldn't mind working with dragons," Charlie said eagerly.

"I know you wouldn't." She smiled tenderly at him. "Maybe you could come to visit me, if your parents aren't too worried about you traveling on your own."

"Maybe," he said, his voice catching in his throat. "That would be nice."

"Yes," she agreed sleepily, still holding his hand as her eyes closed. "Would be nice..."

He stayed by her side after she was sleeping peacefully, still holding her hand, and trying not to be too stupidly optimistic about the last thing she'd said before falling asleep.

* * * * *

When Juliet opened her eyes, the infirmary was dark. Madam Pomfrey evidently hadn't checked on her, for Charlie was still by her side, fast asleep. He sat in his chair, his head on the edge of the mattress, still holding her hand. She gently withdrew her hand and brushed the hair from his brow,

looking at his peaceful face. He appeared to be very young when he was in repose like this, with his snub nose and freckles, his messy orange hair the texture of straw. He hadn't started shaving, like Bill, and she knew this was a sore point with him. He was making a valiant effort to grow facial hair, but the soft down on his upper lip was a very pale blond, virtually invisible, and the hairs on his chin and along his jaw were just as fair. He wasn't as tall as Bill, and two more years to catch up probably wouldn't make any difference. Unlike Bill, however, he had developed broad, strong shoulders and thick sinewy arms from hours of Quidditch practice. She didn't know how many times she'd seen him hanging straight-armed from his broom, then swinging himself back up onto it without any apparent effort.

Why couldn't she have fallen for the other brother? she thought. Charlie was sweet and uncomplicated. His life was Quidditch and magical creatures, having a full stomach and working himself to exhaustion before dropping into bed. She knew that he also blamed himself for his sisters going missing, like Bill, but unlike Bill, he hadn't torn himself apart over it. He hadn't alienated everyone he knew afterward. He'd gone on with his life.

It failed to register on her when Charlie opened his eyes; she was still stroking his hair absent-mindedly. When he sat up, she was surprised, and pulled her hand away abruptly.

"Don't," he whispered, reaching for her hand again. "It's nice."

But Juliet kept her hand pressed against her stomach, not giving in. She didn't want to be unfair to Charlie. "Walk with me back to the common room?" she said softly.

He helped her to stand and they walked out of the infirmary, hand in hand. She felt very tired as she climbed the many stairs, and finally she had to rest in the Charms corridor. She and Bill had sometimes come here to be together, in the Charms classroom. His talent with Charms made it one of his favorite places, and he conjured up beautiful accommodations, while also assuring that no one would be able to get into the room while they were using it. (He also guaranteed that they wouldn't even want to; one of his cleverer spells was similar to a Muggle-repelling charm; anyone who thought they had wanted to enter went off thinking they had a number of other things to do instead.)

"Can we just go in here, to rest a moment?" she asked Charlie, pointing at the classroom. However, just as they were about to enter, Juliet froze, hearing a familiar voice.

"I *told* you, Roxanne, Juliet and I are together again....Stop that! Stop—" A moan met their ears, then the sound of furniture moving; it seemed that someone had been pushed against a desk, making it scrape the floor. "I said *stop!*" the voice repeated.

"Are you sure? You were starting to sound like you liked that. I remember everything that you like," a seductive voice purred, followed by the sound of fabric rustling.

"Put that back on! Now! I don't want to hex you, but I will if I have to!"

"Ooh, what kind of hex?" the woman's voice wanted to know. "I know some really good ones....some very *interesting* ones...."

Juliet couldn't stand it any longer; she pushed the door open and beheld a nearly-topless Roxanne Maine-Thorpe (she still wore her bra) sliding her arms around Bill's neck. Bill's eyes widened in horror as he saw Juliet enter with Charlie, and he thrust Roxanne away from him. Charlie felt it would be a strain to close his mouth, which was open in shock.

"Bill!" he said, disgusted. "Are you mad? A Slytherin? You've got Juliet, and she's—"

"*Charlie!*" Juliet said sharply, turning to face him with blazing eyes.

He clamped his mouth shut before he could say any more, not trusting himself. *You don't bloody well deserve to know what's going on, brother of mine*, he thought. He didn't hate his brother, precisely, but he never knew that he could feel such a strong dislike for him as at this moment. "A *Slytherin?*" he repeated, as that was safe.

Juliet glared at the other girl. Roxanne didn't bother to put her blouse on. "Could you please leave? I don't think he wants to shag you now, and we need to talk," she snapped.

"We weren't doing anything! We haven't, since you and I got back together!" Bill said hurriedly. "I never cheated on you," he added, sweat flying from his brow.

Juliet put her hands on her hips. "No, but after we broke up I *waited* for you to decide to come to me again. You could have at any time! I didn't pressure you. Instead you were with *her*, is that it?" Roxanne was smiling sunnily at this; Bill sheepishly nodded. Juliet rolled her eyes and snapped at Roxanne, "Would you just sod off, you stupid *tart!*"

Roxanne picked up her blouse from a nearby desk and put her arms in the sleeves, buttoning it slowly. "I wouldn't want to be indecent. Might get a detention from the Head Boy," she said suggestively, giving Bill a very clear look before swaggering away.

Juliet sat, feeling tired. She felt tired all of the time, due to the baby. Bill stood before her

awkwardly, unable to meet her eyes. "You know, if you really want to be with her, it's very simple," Juliet said in a quiet, even voice. "I've asked you before not to go to Egypt. If you stay here or come to Canada with me, we can still be together. If you insist on Egypt—well, you have the freedom to do what you like with little Miss Slytherin, as we won't be together." She tried to focus on Bill's Head Boy badge and will herself not cry.

"Canada!" Bill said. "Why Canada?"

"I have an uncle there. If you don't want to marry right away, I understand. That far from my mum and dad—and yours—it wouldn't matter. Uncle Emory doesn't care about that sort of thing; he's been living with a married woman for twenty years. Her husband wouldn't give her a divorce. The thing is—if we stayed here, we'd probably have to get married. Our parents would probably insist on it." She saw Charlie nod vehemently.

"Married! Who said anything about getting married?" He looked panicked. "And if we're going to live together without being married, why *not* Egypt?"

Juliet pursed her lips. "I don't want to live in Egypt. I want to be near *someone* in my family when—" She swallowed and looked at Charlie, who raised his eyebrows. She sighed and bowed her head. Yes, he would do as she wished if he knew. But that wasn't how she wanted it to be. He'd resent her for years afterward, feeling that she'd trapped him. She looked up at his face. "I love you, Bill. Do you love me enough to do this?"

Bill ran his hands through his hair, making it stand on end. "Of course I love you, but if *you* loved *me*, couldn't you stand to come to Egypt? What's this about needing to be near family? And do we have to do this in front of my little brother?" Charlie bristled.

Juliet felt as though her heart had stopped. "Does that mean that you've made up your mind? You're going to Egypt?" *It had to be a dream, a nightmare....*

Bill swallowed. "I've already accepted a position. I leave on the first of July. I signed a five-year contract. *Why* can't you just—"

"I hope you and Roxanne will be happy together," she said stiffly, standing with difficulty. Charlie sprang to help her, glaring at his brother. She leaned heavily on his arm.

Bill stood in shock, unable to process what had happened. "Why are you doing this?"

Juliet turned at the door. "When did you sign the contract?" she asked softly.

"Last month," he mumbled, looking at his feet.

Juliet stared. "You only told me a week ago that you'd got the offer." Her words echoed in the large empty classroom. Bill didn't answer or meet her eyes. She turned and leaned on Charlie's arm again, not saying another word. Bill was also silent.

They didn't hear Bill's footsteps behind them, but reached the corridor outside the Gryffindor common room without running into anyone else. Juliet opened her mouth to give the password, but found that she couldn't; instead, her voice cracked and a helpless sob escaped her. She threw her arms around Charlie, crying into his shirt. He pulled her to him uncertainly, his chest hitching. His robe was open and she was warm against him, her tears wetting his clothes. He could only make out a few words through her sobs.

"I can't believe this is happening—I love him so much, Charlie—"

He patted her back and the top of her head, feeling her trembling in his very bones. "I know," he whispered to her, not knowing what else to say. *"I know."*

* * * * *

Tuesday, 31 August, 1982

Nils Anderssen watched his wife and the girl who was now his daughter while they ate their breakfasts. The summer sunlight shining in the breakfast room windows glinted off the two golden heads as they chatted happily and drank their tea. The girl's hair was the product of a potion, and she'd agreed to it with no argument, as they both had blond hair; she'd said that the old nun who ran the orphanage used to have gold hair.

He could see already how fond his wife was of her. It was going to be a wrench to send her child off to school the next day. She'd been with them for less than a week, and already Nils couldn't remember what the house had been like without her running from room to room, exploring, her voice chattering non-stop with questions and comments.

Unfortunately, school couldn't be put off. His wife would have had the girl wait for at least a month or two if it could be managed, but she needed to make up for lost time. They could visit the school as frequently as they liked, the headmaster had said, even take her home for weekends. It meant more traveling, but he felt that it was a good idea for them to see her more often than just the holidays, as they'd just become her parents.

Luckily, the Swedish Ministry of Magic did not have the same laws about underage magic that the British Ministry did. Immediately after bringing her 'home,' he'd taken her to buy her first wand in Stockholm, and she'd been practicing spells almost constantly ever since. Although shockingly ignorant of some things, he'd also found her to be quite prodigious in other ways, and was starting to think that it wasn't a ludicrous idea for her to enter Durmstrang as a second year, considering her innate talent. She'd had a good grounding in Latin and Herbology, as well as magical history. She'd been living with Muggles, so she might have done well in Muggle Studies, but Durmstrang did not teach this.

Perhaps, he thought, the headmaster could arrange for extra tuition for her in the areas in which she was lacking, until she caught up. From what he'd seen, it shouldn't take long for her to surpass the rest of the second years. He could do it on the weekends himself, if it came to that. He'd seen that she was a fast learner. The idea appealed to him; it was very satisfying to them both when she'd mastered something new. He was rather enjoying the unfamiliar paternal pride that swelled his breast when he watched her glowing face, showing off to her mother something that he had taught her. She was a remarkable girl.

Not surprising, given her parentage, he thought. She was pure-blood, after all, even if her family left something to be desired. Not for the first time, he thought about life's unfairness. That a Muggle-loving family like the *Weasleys* should have children so effortlessly was galling when he and his wife couldn't do it at all, and *Muggles* were to blame. He hadn't known from the start that she was a Weasley; that had taken detective work. And once he'd found out, then there was the lengthy decision-making process....

It hadn't been lengthy for his wife. She didn't care about her parentage. He'd had his doubts. There were many things to consider. He'd worked at gathering information unobtrusively. At a small wizarding pub in Yorkshire, he'd tried to feel out the barman.

"Did they ever work out what happened to that girl who disappeared? I forget when it was now," he'd started off, hoping that his vagueness would be rewarded by greater accuracy in the response. But the barman evidently never heard any conversation that wasn't about the Quidditch League or people paying him for drinks—or he just wasn't in the habit of paying attention to conversations about other topics. He'd squinted at Nils.

"Eh?"

Nils had shaken his head, not really having expected to find the information he sought so quickly and easily. He was on his sixth pub, in a small village in Suffolk, when he finally received a response to his question. It wasn't exactly an answer, but in its way, it was more informative. He'd evidently been asking the wrong question.

"A girl?" the garrulous old barmaid had said while wiping what seemed to be a perpetually cloudy glass. "Just one? There was that case a few years ago, of course, down near Exeter. Two girls, sisters. Just disappeared into thin air...." She shook her head. "Was there another one then? That's awful...."

Nils had swallowed, trying to hide his excitement. *Exeter*. It *had* to be the same incident. So, their prospective daughter had had a sister who'd disappeared with her. He'd pushed his glass carelessly toward the barmaid, asking for another pint.

"Do you remember the family name? I seem to have forgotten it," he said as he counted out Sickles after silver Sickles, aware of her small, greedy eyes upon his busy fingers.

"*Weasley*."

He'd wracked his brain, trying to remember where he'd heard that name. Why was it so familiar? He didn't think it was because he'd heard about the girls; he'd been in Sweden. No, there was some connection to his sister, he felt sure....but what could it be?

"Right," he'd said to the barmaid. "Weasley. Father's—what is he again?"

"With the Ministry. Went on a lot of raids. He's been responsible for putting more than one Death Eater into Azkaban, let me tell you." She leaned forward and whispered to him, "Some say that's why his poor girls disappeared. A message to *him*, y'see?"

Nils nodded, swallowing his beer. It didn't fit. At least one of the girls was alive. Nils thought about his brother-in-law, Lucius, who bragged quite freely—in private—about being a Death Eater, part of the Dark Lord's inner circle. It seemed to Nils that it was out-of-character for a Death Eater to kidnap two girls and send them to live in a Muggle orphanage if the father was as annoying as this Weasley. He knew that the usual way was for bodies to be found afterward, the Dark Mark hovering over the house.

He wanted to ask his brother-in-law about it, but didn't dare. Lucius' position was rather precarious in the months after Nils and his wife first met the girl in Exeter. After the Dark Lord had fallen, Lucius had had a lot of questions to answer at the Ministry. He'd claimed that he was

under Imperius, although Nils knew that quite a lot of gold had changed hands in order for this to be written into the official record. Those who were on the receiving end of the gold had no real interest in Lucius Malfoy's guilt or innocence; it only mattered that he could pay for silence, and pay handsomely. The problem was with those who hadn't been paid; one had to make sure all mouths stayed sealed. Sometimes permanently.

Nils brought it up very casually, when they were visiting during the Christmas holiday. "By the way, Lucius, I heard the name Weasley in a pub the other day, and couldn't remember why it seemed so familiar. There was something about it—"

Lucius dropped the large carving knife just as he was about to slice the joint for their dinner. He glared at Nils, then at Narcissa. "Did you put him up to this?" he demanded of his wife. Her hand fluttered to her throat.

"N—no, Lucius, of course not. Why would—"

"Why *would* you try to get your brother to upset me by mentioning the name of my father's murderer?" he growled, resuming the carving; the joint was in danger of looking like it had been clawed apart by badgers, he was hacking at it so angrily now.

"Sorry, old boy," Nils had interjected quickly, before blame could be attached to his sister. "How stupid of me. That is obviously *why* it seemed familiar....How very stupid...."

"Yes," Lucius agreed, throwing the meat onto a serving plate. "How very, very stupid," he spat, glaring at his brother-in-law. Later, in Lucius' study, Nils broached the topic in a different manner. He considered Lucius Malfoy very carefully, wondering whether he *might* in fact have a soft spot for two little girls who hadn't exactly chosen their father.

"Did it ever cross your mind to get revenge on Weasley?" he'd asked casually, over cognac. His wife and sister were up in the nursery with Draco and his nurse, Nanny Bella, a sour-looking old witch. Nils wouldn't have let her near a child of his, but apparently, the most important thing to Lucius was that she'd been in Slytherin and didn't believe in mollicoddling. Lucius stood at the mantle and laughed, swirling the amber liquid in his snifter. After dinner he was expansive and no longer showed signs of erupting.

"Of course it did, of course. And in a way—well, I didn't do it myself, but—"

Nils sat up anxiously, then thought better of it and slouched comfortably against the back of the leather armchair, before Lucius could turn and see how eager he'd been. "But what? You put a hangnail hex on him?" Nils had said with a forced disdain.

Lucius' pale eyes glowed with an eerie light. "No. There was this prophecy, you see, about the fall of the Dark Lord. According to another Death Eater who'd had a conversation with a Centaur, one of the people in the prophecy was a daughter of Weasley's. Didn't matter which one. So I recommended to the Dark Lord that Weasley's daughters be—disposed of. I never did work out how he did it so cleanly....there wasn't a single trace of them, and all owl post came back as well. He either killed them or spirited them away to another planet, but killing is easier. Weasley knew how *I'd* felt then!" he declared, his eyes wild, while Nils struggled to maintain his facial expression.

That was all he needed to know. He'd gone to the offices of the *Daily Prophet* after the New Year, looking for old editions that had come out during the investigation of the girls' disappearance. He'd finally found what he was looking for, an *Evening Prophet* from April of 1979 with photographs of the girls and a detailed description: *Annabel Weasley, called Annie. Born the first of September, nineteen-seventy. Four feet three inches tall, weighing about four stone, blue eyes, bright orange hair*

....

He had stared and stared at the photograph. *It was her.* The girl at the orphanage. He tried to work out *why* she was living there, but didn't want to risk returning to the orphanage to find out. On the day she had saved their dog, he, his wife and the dog had escaped quickly by using the *Tempus Fugit* spell, as they couldn't Apparate with the dog. He didn't like using this spell, but his wife was more cavalier about these things than he was. However, while they were using this spell, it had occurred to him to take a mirror from his wife's pocket and draw the memory of the incident from the nun's brain, so that she would not remember any of it. He'd kept the memory preserved in the mirror, just in case he should ever need to restore it, but if he returned to the orphanage and eventually did return that memory to the nun, it would seem odd to her to have two memories of meeting him for the *first* time.

He hadn't learnt how to use such Dark Magic at Hogwarts, but his wife had taught him a thing or two since they'd been married, as she'd had a thorough grounding in the Dark Arts at Durmstrang. He knew that the British Ministry wouldn't look well on using *Tempus Fugit* at all, let alone near Muggles, and that to assault a person's brain and withdraw memories against their will, especially from a Muggle, was worthy of a prison sentence (but not a life term). He might have been able to get away with merely memory-charming her, with the excuse that she'd seen magic, but the problem

was, it was *the girl* who had done the magic, when she'd healed the dog. Which would only draw attention to her. Somehow, even before he knew that her life had been in danger, he didn't want the Ministry to notice her. She was *their* secret, a witch living among Muggles. A possible daughter for them. And while it occurred to him, very briefly, to use the spell to just take her, he didn't want her to suffer from its effects, as he and his wife would. He also didn't think there was any point to taking her by force; she should *want* to come with them.

He eventually used a charm to alter his features to visit with the nun. He specifically asked whether there were two red-haired sisters, as his wife was interested, he said. She said no, only one. There had never been another one? he had persisted. She allowed that, yes, two had come in at once, but they weren't sisters and one had been quickly adopted.

He thought about this interview for months, finally coming to the conclusion that whoever had taken the girls had not been able to bear the thought of killing them. *Lucius wouldn't have hesitated*, he knew. But then, the Death Eater who did the kidnapping probably hadn't had his father killed by this Weasley. He'd looked into the background of the Weasleys over the following months, trying to learn everything he could. Finally, he was satisfied that if he and his wife adopted the girl, they could teach her to be a true Anderssen. All indicators pointed to the girl having been memory-charmed so that she couldn't remember her early family life. Knowledge that she had acquired in school remained intact, but the rest just seemed to be gone from her mind.

They'd made contact with her again, at school. Nils did not want to tell her that she was a Weasley, as he was afraid that she would want to return to her family (and her life might be at risk again if she did that). She'd been called to the headmistress' office because, she was told, a couple who were considering giving her a scholarship to St. Martin's Academy were there. They had heard that Anna Burroughs was an excellent student and wanted to meet her before deciding. When she was left alone in the headmistress' office with them, she stared, dumbfounded. "But-but you're the people with the dog!" she said immediately, when the headmistress had gone.

Nils looked at his wife; she was smiling. "Yes!" she said, coming forward to take the girl's hands. "And you-well, brace yourself. What we have to tell you may be a bit of a shock. You see-you are a witch, and I'm one also. My husband is a wizard. Do you understand what all of that means?" The girl hesitated for a moment, then shook her head. "It means that you can do magic! Isn't that wonderful?" She beamed at her.

"Who-who *are* you?" the girl asked cautiously. Nils thought it interesting that she didn't question being a witch, nor their being a witch and wizard.

"We're here to take you away to live like a proper witch, with a proper magical education," his wife had told her. "The idea of living like this, with *Muggles*-!"

"You-you're what?" The girl had frowned. Nils had stepped forward.

"We're adopting you. Only-only if you want to come away with us, of course. I mean, if you *want* to go on living in a Muggle orphanage--"

"It's not that I want to, so much as--" She stopped abruptly, and Nils noted that she hadn't asked the meaning of "Muggle." *How much does she remember?* he wondered.

"Who are you? Where are you from? Where do you live? Why do you want to do this?" The words spilled out in a rush. Her color had risen, and Nils wondered whether she was afraid. Perhaps she knew that she and her sister had been targeted, years ago? He and his wife explained that they lived in Sweden and couldn't have children, that when they learned that a witch was in a Muggle orphanage, they'd felt it their duty to give her a proper home and education. She nodded at their explanations.

"But do you know-do you know why I never received a Hogwarts letter last year?" she'd whispered. Nils had looked uncertainly at his wife; he hadn't thought about it. The Death Eater who kidnapped her must have owl-proofed the girl. This gibed with Lucius' saying that the owl post had come back, indicating that the girls were dead.

"What is your name again?" he asked her, genuinely wondering what she would say.

"Anna Burroughs."

He nodded. "How long have you had that name?"

"Since I came to live at the orphanage."

Tapping his fingers together thoughtfully, he said, "Well, then, no one at Hogwarts would have known to address a letter to you that way, would they?" He did not bring up the fact that she knew about Hogwarts. Some stray words, like "Muggle" and "Hogwarts" must have stayed in her mind, unaffected by the memory charm.

"I reckon," she'd said softly, biting her lip. "Would I live in Sweden if you adopted me?"

"Yes," his wife had said eagerly. "And you would go to my old school, Durmstrang. Much better than that *Hogwarts*....no *Muggle-borns* at Durmstrang, you know."

The girl shook her head. "I never heard of it. Where is it?"

"Ah, that would be telling. Don't worry, we'll take care of getting you to school. What do you think?" The girl looked up at his wife, and Nils could practically see the wheels turning in her head. "Would you—could you be our daughter and come away with us?"

"We have the same name," she said suddenly. "Anna and Anna. That would be confusing, wouldn't it?" She hadn't answered the question.

"Well, you're little Anna, so you could be Anita. Nita for short. There! That works well. Nita Anderssen. That would be your name. Do you like it?" His wife was shaking.

She bit her lip again, thinking. "It's all right," she said grudgingly. "But I don't speak anything other than English. What do they speak at Durmstrang?"

"Do I sound like I can't speak English to you? Oh, English has been the standard at Durmstrang for some time now. Everyone speaks at least one other language, of course, but they've had a British-raised headmaster for decades, and he's just hired his nephew, who went to Hogwarts with my husband's sister, to fill the open Charms position. You'll have to learn Swedish, of course, and you should probably also know German and a little Russian. But you're a bright girl. That shouldn't be a problem for you."

Nils had forgotten about Karkaroff hiring his nephew. Igor had been in the same year with his sister Narcissa, and had been arrested for Death Eater activities. He'd gone to Azkaban initially, but was released when his testimony before the Ministry netted them some more Death Eaters. Igor knew he wouldn't be safe in Britain after that, because of people like Lucius (even though he'd done everything in *his* power to avoid prison as well), so he'd fled to Belarus, to his uncle, Professor Sergei Karkaroff, headmaster of Durmstrang. Would Karkaroff recognize "Nita" as the missing Annie Weasley? he wondered. What if *Igor* was the one who had been charged with kidnapping her?

"Would we go right away?" she asked suddenly. Nils and his wife looked at each other.

"No—why?"

"It's just—if it was sudden, like, Mother Crispin would—she'd be sad. And you know that she doesn't remember you and your dog at all? She seems to think it never happened...."

Nils looked at his wife again, then the girl. "We know. I removed the memory from her mind and saved it. Not long before we come to get you, I can restore her memory, so she'll remember us when we come and say we want to adopt you. And that way you'll be able to just pack all of your things and come away with us."

"There's usually a day-visit first. If that goes well, other visits. It's not all at once."

Nils had nodded, and they'd talked for a while with "Nita," who was able to give them all of the information they needed about applying to adopt her. She didn't want to go until after her birthday, which the nun thought was in late August (Nils didn't let on that he knew the real date), as the old nun evidently had a special present for her.

Plans were made and the end of August drew nearer. Nils found that restoring to the nun the memory about the dog was easy; due to her confusion, she appeared to believe that the incident had occurred within the last week. When Nils and his wife appeared in her office to talk about adopting "Anna" she was hesitant at first, but wouldn't tell them why. Finally, they were driving away from the orphanage; the girl was waving to the old nun through the back window of the car, tears streaming down her face. They did not go to the address in Exeter that they'd given the nun, but drove directly to London. They gave "Nita" the potion to dye her hair before continuing on to France, which they reached by way of enchanted ferry. From there they took an illegal Portkey to Sweden. He didn't want their movements to be traced. As it was, they had created numerous false documents concerning "Nita's" birth and adoption.

"What are we going to do today?" Nita asked her mother, grinning. "It's my last day of freedom, after all, before starting school." She scratched Napoleon behind the ears; the dog had adored her from the start and now slept on her bed every night.

"Anything you like!" Anna Anderssen said to her daughter affectionately, making Nils smile. He'd never seen his wife so happy. It was a good thing they were going to be bringing Nita home every weekend. Their daughter laughed.

"Anything?"

His wife put her hand on the girl's, looking like she considered herself to be the happiest woman in the world. She had never thought she would be a mother, and now she was.

"Anything."

* * * * *

Friday, 31 October 1982

“Happy birthday!”

Charlie hugged Juliet, not too firmly, because of her belly, and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled at him, awkwardly holding his gift to her in one hand. “It’s really something for the baby,” he said sheepishly. She grinned and tore open the paper, then opened a small white box. Charlie wished he had a camera to capture the look on her face when she squealed and held up the tiny dragon-skin boots that were nestled in the box.

“Oh, they’re so *wee!*” she exclaimed, grinning at him now. He felt his stomach flop; he was pleased that she liked them. But he glanced at her left hand, at the wedding ring there, and knew that he had to accept this state of affairs. The flopping stomach couldn’t be helped, nor other physical manifestations of his feelings for her. But he hoped eventually he would stop feeling this way. It had been very difficult, when he’d first arrived at the reservation in British Columbia, to learn that she had been married *one week* before his arrival. That had been two months earlier, and although he liked her husband quite a lot (Brendan McDonald was one of the best handlers on the reservation), he couldn’t help the jealous resentment that welled up in him when he saw them together. He wished he *didn’t* like her husband.

She wore a delicate gold amulet hanging from a chain around her neck, and she clasped the amulet now, rubbing her fingers over the raised design thoughtfully. “What’s that?” he asked her. Somehow it had a familiar look, although he’d never seen it before.

She smiled, looking down. “Oh, that’s Brendan’s present. He says it’s supposed to be the Gryffindor lion. Doesn’t it look like the one on the keystone over the hearth in the common room? He liked the idea of giving me something connected to Hogwarts, even though we weren’t there at the same time.”

Brendan McDonald was neither Canadian nor American, but British, having grown up in the Midlands. He was about twenty years older than Juliet, born the same year as Charlie’s mother. Much as he liked Brendan, Charlie still had a nagging feeling about their marriage. It just seemed wrong. Brendan had liked Juliet from the start, when she came to work in the main office at the reservation as a clerk. She had done what no one had previously managed, to organize the reservation activities. There was no longer any question about who was managing which beast at what time. All species were given precisely the right food. Days off were carefully rotated. And she had seen a gap in the workforce, a gap which she proposed could be filled with an apprentice. She’d suggested Charlie, and written to him to tell him that he had an open invitation to spend a year at the reservation, if he wanted to wait to finish his schooling.

He had, of course, taken it the wrong way that she was inviting him to British Columbia for a year. She had wanted another familiar face around besides her uncle when the baby came. She didn’t feel about Charlie the way she had once felt about Bill. The way she pretended to feel about Brendan, now.

“Charlie,” she’d said as soon as she’d greeted him in the reservation office. “I have something to tell you. Please sit down...” She’d waved him into a stiff wooden chair and carefully lowered herself into another. She was five-and-a-half months pregnant now. With Bill’s child. Charlie forced himself to look at her face when he sat.

“Yes, Juliet?”

“Well,” she’d said, nervous, her left hand spread protectively over her belly. He’d seen it, he had, and yet it hadn’t registered on him. “You see, Charlie, the thing is—I’m married.”

The ring. Now he saw it, *really* saw it. The ring. Married. *Married!*

When he didn’t say anything, she went barreling on. “I know it seems sudden, but Brendan has been a dear since I got here, and he asked me when I was feeling very vulnerable...”

Charlie stared at her. “But—but I thought—Bill—” he sputtered. “I mean—he just did it because of the baby, didn’t he? How is that different from telling Bill about the baby?”

“Because it’s not Brendan’s baby. He’s not marrying me because he thinks he has to. He wants to be with me and—well, he rather thought the baby would make it less likely I’d say no. But still—he’s marrying me because he wants to be with *me*. Brendan will be a wonderful father. This is all for the best, it really is. I hope you can be happy for us.”

Numb. He’d felt numb. She’d barely known the man—the *old* man—for two months, and she’d married him! It was utterly unreal. He had no idea what to think. He’d quickly hugged her and congratulated her. The more he had become friendly with Brendan McDonald, the more difficult it had been to resent him, too, which made Charlie feel a bit grumpy at times. He didn’t *want* to like the bloke. He didn’t want to not hate him.

Charlie looked at the gold amulet now, holding it in his hand. It felt warm to the touch, and

when Charlie grasped it, he felt a calm reassurance flood him. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. "Wow! That's some amulet. It's—"

"—magical. I know. We have no idea where it came from, though. I reckon someday I'll give it to Natalie, perhaps when she goes off to Hogwarts. Even though she'll be born here, Brendan and I both want to return to Britain when it's time for her to go to school."

"Natalie?"

She smiled. "The midwife in Vancouver says it's a girl, and that's the name we've chosen. Do you like it? It means 'Christmas,' but she'll probably be born a couple of weeks before that. Anyway, I think it sounds nice. *Natalie McDonald.*"

Charlie gasped. "You mean—"

Juliet sighed. "Charlie—how on earth can I give her the Weasley name? Brendan will be her father in every way that counts, once she's born. And you'll still be her uncle."

"But I can't tell Bill."

She drew her lips into a line. "Please don't. If anyone tells him, I think it should be me."

Charlie nodded, holding out his hand to her, trying not to hate the way everything had turned out. Juliet seemed perfectly happy; why couldn't he be satisfied? *Because you had some romantic idea that you'd come here and she'd decide she loved you after all, that's why.* The voice in his head was rather annoying, and he closed his eyes, trying to ignore it. Opening his eyes again, he looked earnestly at Juliet, taking her hand.

"I'm glad you like the boots. I want to do whatever I can to be a good uncle."

She smiled, put her hand over his and placed it on her belly, making him gasp; he could feel movement. The *reality* of the unborn child, his niece, was jolting.

"You will be a good uncle, I think, Charlie. You will be."

* * * * *

Monday, 1 December, 1982

He ladled the glutinous potion into the flat flasks and put a stopper in each. Wrinkling his nose at the stale cabbage-smelling stuff, he put one flask in each robe pocket and turned to his wife, who watched him anxiously from the doorway. She was wan and pale, as she had been since their son's trial. Wasting away month after month with grief for her boy, her beautiful boy who had screamed for mercy, who had sworn he was innocent....

His wife was where their son got his looks, except for his eyes, which were his father's. Now her once-vivid yellow hair was dulled, far more grey than yellow in it, and her eyes roamed around the room aimlessly, as though she wasn't really seeing it. He was losing more of her daily, and he dreaded the day that she was lost to him completely, the day he had to bury her in the cold ground, the day she would be but a memory....

"You're sure about this?" he asked her for the hundredth time. She nodded slowly. She'd begged, pleaded with him. She knew she was dying without her boy, and that she'd also die *there*, in that hopeless place, with no happiness left in her, nothing good. But at least she'd know she had *saved* her boy, her innocent boy. He'd be able to live, and not in a prison for a crime he did not commit. And she could die on her own terms.

He swallowed, watching his wife. *A crime he did not commit.* He didn't know *what* he believed about his son's crime. One of the boys who'd testified against him told of seeing his son torture Frank Longbottom, while the other had denied all knowledge of it. It was impossible to say what had occurred. Dumbledore hinted strongly that he knew of a young man who could testify against his son, if necessary, concerning other Death Eater activities, but the conviction had been handed down without that.

The co-defendants, all from the Lestrangle family, had not only owned up to what they'd done, they'd *bragged* about it. Mrs. Lestrangle especially. But the boy did not pledge his life-long loyalty to You-Know-Who, did not brag about what they'd done. He cried out to him imploringly, *Father! Father!* And he'd ignored his own son, he'd *had* to, even when his wife fell down in a faint because she was unable to believe that he would sentence their son to live with the dementors in Azkaban for the rest of his days.

Barty Crouch crossed the room and enfolded his wife in his arms. "It's time to go, love."

"Go? To Banff? Is it finally time?" Her face glowed with anticipation, a rare flush on her pallid cheeks.

"Yes, it's time to go to Banff," he confirmed. It was a short trip by Floo to the district office in Banff; in the past, Bartemius Crouch, Sr. would have requested and received a Portkey to make

the trip. He hadn't felt quite so much like throwing his weight around since being shifted into the Department of International Magic Cooperation, however. His assistant, Weatherby, had obligingly come with him, but it was a cut in pay and prestige for them both, and Barty was still trying to get his bearings.

When they emerged from the fire in Banff, a young man in shabby brown robes and a scrubby light-brown beard was waiting to use the fire to leave; for someone so young, Crouch found it odd that he had a lock of white hair that bobbed over his brow. The young man turned again to the District Supervisor.

"You're sure? I can't just—"

"Told you. That prisoner is not to receive visitors except of the most official sort. And you—what made you think *you* would be permitted? A filthy—"

"I know what you think of me," the young man practically growled. "I'm going."

Before the young man could throw Floo powder into the fire and depart, he heard the supervisor say, "Ready to visit your son, Mr. Crouch? Very good. Right this way...."

Barty Crouch felt the young man's eyes glaring at him resentfully as he stepped into the fire; he had rather odd eyes, with a reddish light to them. After he whirled out of sight, the district supervisor introduced Barty to the Aurors who would accompany them. Normally a dementor or two (depending upon how difficult the prisoner was) would also ride in the boat, but since they were visitors, not prisoners, that was deemed unnecessary. Normally Azkaban prisoners didn't get any visitors at all, but Barty had been afforded this privilege as a favor from the Minister of Magic himself. He knew it was their only hope.

The trip across the North Sea was chilling to the bone; dementors would have been redundant, he thought, as they moved across the water to Azkaban fortress. It rose out of the black water, a mountain of despair, the place where his wife would soon die, very likely. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as they approached the prison; her face glowed with hope. *Enjoy that while you can*, he thought, knowing that the dementors would remove that hope from her in short order. *At least she would know, in death, that she had freed her son from this place.*

After the boat grounded on the sandy beach in the grotto beneath the fortress, they climbed the stairs to the cells, the two Aurors going ahead. They didn't seem to relish coming here and were sweating profusely in the cold air. Barty wasn't sure he had any happiness or hope left for the dementors to feed on, which was just as well. Nonetheless, when they'd reached the top and he felt the presence of so many of the creatures around them, he felt a cold penetrate his chest, as though he'd been sliced open by an icicle.

You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law so that we may pass judgment on you, for a crime so heinous—

Father, Father...please...

—that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court. We have heard the evidence against you....

Father, I didn't! I didn't, I swear it, Father, don't send me back to the dementors—

You are further accused of using the Cruciatu curse on Frank Longbottom's wife, when he would not give you information....I now ask the jury—

Mother! Mother, stop him, Mother, I didn't do it, it wasn't me!

I now ask the jury to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban....

No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!

Suddenly, he felt like he'd received a blast of cold water in the face. He jerked his head up; the first thing he saw was a face staring through the bars on a cell door. It was a vaguely familiar face, with dark, deep-set eyes, long black hair framing a grimy visage.

He shook himself and looked away from the prisoner; one of the Aurors was standing over him, handing him some chocolate. "Here, eat this, Mr. Crouch. We've sent them away from this corridor. They won't bother you and your wife while you're visiting with your son. We'll be here at the end of the corridor, to make sure they don't come again. We've given them the parchment explaining that it's official Ministry business. But you never know. We've brought plenty of chocolate, as a precaution."

Chocolate. He should have thought of that. He should have brought a supply of chocolate that his wife could eat. "Do you have some more?" he asked. The Auror nodded and removed a large block from his pocket. Barty Crouch nodded at him and took his wife's arm, feeling the prisoner's

eyes on him again but willing himself to ignore it. He followed the other Auror to his son's cell and waited for the door to be opened.

When he entered, his wife a heavy weight on his arm, he didn't see his son at first. Then he spotted him, curled up in a corner, shivering, looking like a pile of rags. *This is my son?* he thought, appalled. And yet—he knew that he'd done what had to be done. He couldn't have shown any preference to his son in court. There was nothing but evidence against him, the one boy's testimony, and no evidence in his favor, no one to give him an alibi, or even to give him a favorable character reference. It wasn't as though he hadn't tried; he'd gone to a number of his son's former housemates, from Ravenclaw, and all of them had said that they'd never liked him and didn't really feel like they knew him. If anyone had asked them to name former students who would be likely to turn to He Who Must Not Be Named, they wouldn't necessarily include his son's name, but if asked whether he was a Death Eater, they also wouldn't automatically say, "No, of course not!"

It proved to be rather simple to administer the Polyjuice Potion to his wife and son and to switch their clothes. After they'd each drunk a small amount of potion from the caps of the flasks, Barty redistributed the potion by filling up the flask that would be staying behind, since his son only needed enough to get to the mainland again, while his wife might need every drop she had. Each of them pulled out some of their own hairs to give to the other, to add to the potion afterward. They embraced, mother and son, and it was strange to think that the person who looked like his wife was really his son, and vice versa.

No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!

Well, she'd done as her boy asked, hadn't she? Had there ever been a more dedicated mother? Barty looked at her, wearing their son's face; he leaned forward and kissed the pale brow bordered by yellow hair, just like his mother's. She nodded to them and went to sit in the corner again, the chocolate he'd given her hidden under the dirty robes.

When the Aurors came to let them out, they didn't bat an eye. His son, playing the role of his own mother, leaned heavily on his father's arm, just as his mother had done. Barty looked forward stoically, wishing he had some more chocolate, feeling again the eyes of the dark-haired, dark-eyed prisoner standing at his cell door. He was glad when they reached the grotto again and were on their way back to Banff. On the way, he handed a flask to his 'wife' when she started to look a little peculiar at one point, saying, "Here, dear, I think you need a drop of this." His son had taken the flask and, after surreptitiously putting one of his mother's hairs in the cap, filled it with potion and drank.

Barty Crouch didn't breathe easy again until they were back in their own home, the door securely locked. He put his son to bed in his old room and sat watch over him while he slept, blinking when the potion wore off and he saw his son before him once more. Until that moment, he wasn't quite sure he had actually done it. He helped his son escape from Azkaban. His mother's last wish. He, Bartemius Crouch, Senior, formerly considered to be the next Minister of Magic, had committed high treason, had broken wizarding law....

Well, he thought, pulling out his wand, I'm about to do it again, aren't I? He pulled out his wand just as his son was waking. Barty held the Invisibility Cloak in his other hand and the house-elf stood in the doorway, ready to do her duty; she had already received detailed instructions concerning his son's care and keeping.

In some ways, he knew, the life his son would live wasn't going to be much better than Azkaban. He would have no job, no chance to marry and have children, or even friends. His days would be circumscribed by hiding and sneaking about his own house in an Invisibility Cloak. It wouldn't be a normal life. But on the other hand—there were no dementors here, and Barty wouldn't have to watch his wife die of grief.

It was all for the best, and no one need ever know. It was Unforgivable, yes, but he had himself given Aurors permission to use Unforgivable Curses on Death Eaters in dire circumstances, with no consequences. Even though the new head of Magical Law Enforcement had changed that rule, surely *this* could be called 'dire circumstances.'

Not that anyone was ever going to find out.

Barty Crouch took a breath, looking into his son's eyes, which were a mirror of his own.

"Imperio!"

* * * * *

Monday, 15 December, 1982

Bill crumpled the parchment in his hand, the desert winds whipping at his face. He'd grown his hair long since arriving in Egypt almost six months earlier, and now he usually pulled it back into a

ponytail. This didn't really help to keep the sand out of it, however. He changed his mind suddenly and tried to smooth the parchment out again, but it was proving difficult in the wind. Growing impatient, he pointed his wand at it and it was once more flat and pristine. He reread the letter from Charlie.

Dear Bill,

Just thought you might like to know that Juliet is going to have a baby. She and Brendan are over the moon about it. According to the midwife it's a girl. I'll be a sort of uncle to her, Juliet says. It's strange for her to be with him, but I reckon I'm getting used to it.

I hope you have a good holiday. Mum and Dad said you aren't planning to go home either. I've already told them that I'm definitely going back for my sixth year next September. After the O.W.L.s I really needed some time off. Some of my mates left school last June and have already started working. I reckon I wasn't too keen on not having you there and my mates as well. But after working here on the reservation for the last three months, I'm actually missing school. Even Binns. Never thought I'd say that!

This is hard work, harder than I ever imagined. I still think this is what I might want to do, though. And Brendan says he'll give me a glowing recommendation when I finish school and want to go to work at a reservation somewhere. In future, though, I might want to stick to Europe. Six thousand miles away from home might as well be sixty-thousand. We're in the middle of nowhere, too, as the dragons can't get too close to Muggle towns. They have no Floo network here for travel or talk, and even owls have huge distances to travel with the post. They use Peregrin falcons more often. Makes me think of old Booth. How is he? Heard from any of your old mates?

Don't let the goblins get to you. They sound right nasty. Think I'll stick to dragons. At least I can throw a hex at them when they get annoying. Write back soon.

*Your brother,
Charlie*

Bill folded the parchment neatly this time and put it into his robe pocket. The sun was setting over the desert and the night cold was starting to set in. *Juliet is going to have a baby. She and Brendan are over the moon about it.*

Initially, Bill thought he had been shocked that Charlie wanted to leave school after his fifth year to study dragons. Then Charlie had decided to go to the very same reservation where Juliet was working, and had written to Bill to tell him of Juliet's marriage.

Two months. She'd married him after knowing him for *two months*. Bill still couldn't believe it. It was unreal, like watching someone *else's* life fall apart. This couldn't be happening to him, could it? Juliet was married. She was gone from his life. She was going to have another man's baby.

He slowly began to walk down the steps of the temple where he'd been standing; a group of other charms breakers sat around a purple magical fire at the base of the temple. A chill wind blew some sand around his body and he instinctively clamped his mouth shut, so he wouldn't inhale any of it. *It's just as well,* he thought, squinting against the sandy wind. He wasn't ready to settle down, but evidently Juliet was. He'd thought they were interested in the same things, but it turned out he'd been very wrong.

He watched the moon rise over the desert amidst a crowd of stars and he pulled his robes around himself for warmth. One of the wizards sitting round the fire had started playing some eerie music on a primitive flute, and the sound seemed very loud on the night air.

Perhaps someday he'd find someone else like Juliet and he would settle down. Someday. But today, in the here and now, that time seemed very far away. And yet—it was very hard not to think about what might have been. The life he might have had with Juliet.

He gazed up at the sky, strolling casually away from the campfire. Somehow it seemed so much larger here, over the desert, than it had at home. The crescent moon sailed over distant pyramids, silvering their peaks. Bill swallowed, surprised to find himself so immobilized by the news that Juliet was going to have another man's child. *It wasn't supposed to be this way,* he thought. None of it. Alex's Lowell wasn't supposed to be in St. Mungo's, his sisters weren't supposed to disappear into thin air, Orville wasn't supposed to be blown up in a sweet shop, Lily and James weren't supposed to die and leave their infant son an orphan. Juliet was supposed to be at his side.

Bill continued to gaze at the sky for a long time while the flute wove an intricate melody that seemed almost to become part of the desert, a natural-sounding, meandering song of both regret and hope. He drew a great shuddering breath, glad that the others couldn't see his face, couldn't know his pain....

The stars hung low and bright in the sky, quivering with the music, and so full of promise that he had to weep.

— *THE END* —

Notes: The words that Barty Crouch, Sr. hears when the dementors draw too near to him are by JK Rowling, from chapter thirty of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, pp. 516-517, UK edition (scattered excerpts). If you are wondering who the prisoner is who watches Crouch enter and leave the prison, reread chapter twenty-seven of *Goblet of Fire*.

Thanks to Dan, Emily and Rena for the beta reading and to everyone who commented on Chapter 19. I hope you enjoyed reading the prequel to *Harry Potter and the Psychic Serpent* as much as I enjoyed writing it. For convenience, there is a link below to the first chapter of *Psychic Serpent*.