

Copperbadge
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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 1

9 Aug 1992
Rome, Italy

Dear Andromeda,

Thank you for your letter dated 2nd August. I apologise for having been over a week in replying; the owl arrived, apparently rather exhausted, after I had left for Florence, and my inept landlord felt that it would clearly be pointless to attempt to send it onward. I am well, and Florence was interesting, if -- as all Italian cities seem to be -- overcrowded with tourists and automobiles. I cannot fathom the pleasure in strapping one's body into a deathtrap of steel and glass and hurtling oneself down the roadways at excessive speeds. Then again, I suppose Muggles must take their entertainment where they find it.

As soon as I finish this letter, I begin packing to leave; I must be back at Hogwarts early to prepare for the new school year and, as always, improve on the shoddy housekeeping the house-elves will have committed on my rooms in my absence. I shall be Apparating to France and traveling by broomstick across the Channel; I intend to lodge in a small seaside town that night, Apparate to London in the morning, and collect a few supplies in Diagon Alley before taking the evening train northward. I will be lunching at noon at the Leaky Cauldron, if you and your family would care to join me on the 12th. If not, I will stop by Tonks&Tonks, as I have a parcel to deliver.

I am, as I have assured you before and will continue to assure you, completely recuperated and in excellent health. If you continue to pester me on the subject I shall have no choice but to produce a Healer's note to that effect. In the same vein, I hope Nymphadora continues her recovery.

Give my salutations to your family, though I suspect you would have at any rate.

Severus Snape

Dear Neville!!!

OWL POST!!!

Sirius and Remus say Headmaster Dumbledore FINALLY gave permission for me to send you a letter now that we're going to be going back to school soon anyway, since my Hogwarts letter has arrived! Did you get yours? I can't tell you when I'm coming to Diagon Alley but I AM! To get books and supplies and new robes and to see you and everyone.

I missed everyone this summer but I had a lot of fun too! I'm sending you some drawings I did of Sirius being silly. And also one of Snakes snakeskins since if they shed them whole they're supposed to be really lucky. I got to help out in a bookshop in town and we went camping in the big stone circle near here for my birthday last week and this summer all the other boys and me made up a Football team and flattened a team from one town over at it even though we were smaller. Football's like Quidditch only without bludgers and a Snitch and played on the ground and you can't touch the ball except with your feet and head. I miss Quidditch.

Also someone bought a farm next to our house and they had HORSES! which I got to help feed sometimes. And I'm sending you some feathers too from the chickens they're keeping.

I have to go write to Padma and Draco and some other people now. Remus says to tell Andromeda to talk to Dumbledore if she wants to know when we're coming and they're going to move back in with her and Ted for the year unless they already let out the flat, but Sirius is sending her a letter anyway so I don't guess you need to.

OWL POST!!!!

Harry

August 12, 1992
12 Grimmauld Place

Dear Sirius,

I was so glad to have a letter from the three of you at last! It's good to hear that you're all well and apparently happy. I hope this letter actually reaches you -- Dumbledore says you'll pick it up at its destination, but you know how unreliable Muggle post can be.

We're all well here, more or less, though in some cases a bit less than more. I don't know if news had reached you but Dora had a fairly severe accident in early July, and has been off active duty with the Aurors; she was discharged from hospital on Harry's birthday, as a matter of fact, and she's been resting up here ever since. Not to worry, however. Though she's been in residence in what we all think of as "your" flat, she's moving out in a few days, since she's found a new position until she fully recovers and the Aurors are ready to put her back on duty. It may be some time, but the Healers are optimistic about a full recovery.

Neville also caught Kneazlepox, but it was a mild case and we all decided it was better he get it while young, so he spent a miserable, itchy week in bed and a slightly less itchy but still miserable week on the sofa, and now he's up and running around, as healthy as ever. He's been writing to his friends regularly and we had Padma Patil to stay in July, to keep him company while Ted and I were visiting St. Mungo's every day (what a sweet girl she is, though she does come up with all the really innovative trouble they get into). Draco's here now, and will be until

school starts; he seems well enough, but I suspect living alone with his mother and a handful of house-elves isn't good for the boy. She's taught him all the proper things for "a well-reared young pureblood" to do and say, but he doesn't seem to be very good with kids his own age -- barring Neville, and I assume Harry and Padma. I'm glad you'll be here before school starts; he's already asked after you twice.

So your flat will be free for you to use, and I've spoken to the headmaster about your arrival; we'll be waiting on the train platform with open arms and have a hot dinner ready. If there's anything you need -- toothbrushes, towels, that sort of thing -- let me know and I'll make sure we're stocked up. Give my love to Remus (tell him I'm fascinated by the book idea!) and of course, lots of hugs for Harry. He's quite the little artist, isn't he? His drawings of you are tacked up in Neville's room, and the portrait he sent me of Padfoot has a place of honour in the living room next to Neville's Herbology exam (full marks! Ted's very proud, you know he was always very good at Herbology also).

Love and impatience for you to arrive,

Andromeda

PS: We had lunch with Severus today. I thought Harry would appreciate knowing that his Professor seems to be in excellent health -- Italy was good for him. He left us a stack of photographs that Harry will enjoy, and brought Ted and myself a basket of amazing Italian foodstuffs.

I'm sure you'll be jubilant to know that his lunch was dampened somewhat by the news Dora had to tell -- but I'll let her tell you herself when you get here.

4 August 1992

Board of Governors, Hogwarts School
Ministry Department of Education, London
Ministry of Magic, office 2204
Sec'ty of Board Albert Potblack

To:
Nymphadora O. Tonks
12 Grimmauld Place
London

Ms Tonks,

It is my pleasure to inform you that, pending your acceptance of our offer (enclosed) and return of Board of Governors contract (attached) you are hereby employed as Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please notify us of your decision

as soon as possible, as the hiring deadline has already passed and this procedure is therefore highly unusual.

If you accept, you will be expected to arrive at Hogwarts School no later than the fifteenth of August in order to attend the Yearly Planning Session and file your lesson plans in a timely manner. Our information packet (book enclosed) will provide you with everything you need : train tickets to Hogwarts, credit at Flourish & Blotts for educational supplies, credit at Madam Malkin's or Tonks&Tonks for professors' robes, and codes of conduct for the school faculty.

On a personal note, Ms Tonks, allow me to tell you how much I enjoyed our meeting. To be frank, most of the board thought Gilderoy Lockhart was a much better choice, but I think Albus Dumbledore made the right decision in putting his support behind you, even though Lockhart was already all but signed. I wish you nothing but good luck in the coming year, and although I understand your tenure will be of temporary duration until your recovery is complete, I hope you will enjoy your time as a teacher at Hogwarts.

Sincerely,

Albert Potblack
Secretary to the Board of Governors of Hogwarts School
By appointment of the Ministry Department of Education

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Chapter 2

Years afterward, Harry Potter would describe his first school summer holiday in Betwys Beddau as idyllic. When Neville asked him what he meant, he was hard-pressed to say, but he finally settled for the explanation that it was the last summer when they were all children.

This may have been slightly inaccurate and was certainly ironic; it wasn't as though they were innocent babes in arms. In their first year at school, Harry and his small band had decapitated a dead man, painted several fifth-year Gryffindors with indelible green ink, and narrowly averted a catastrophe of massive proportions. Still, those had been...adventures.

At any rate, that time stood out in Harry's mind as a wonderful summer, despite his initial disappointment that he would not be spending it in London. He had a long list of books to read, and he spent whole days at a time basking in the sun with Snake, reading and practicing his drawing. He was allowed to run wild so long as he stayed within the borders of the town, and besides he had Padfoot with him almost all of the time. The natives of Betwys Beddau had missed the peculiar family -- the little black-haired boy and his likewise black-haired godfather, the quiet cousin who lived with them and worked at the bookshop sometimes, and their big black Newf who was always joining in the football games (such a clever dog). They were outsiders, of course, but the village owned them and was very proprietary -- they were, as one woman once said while discussing the finer aspects of Sirius Black's arse with a friend, Betwys Beddau's outsiders.

Whether Sirius and Remus were satisfied to leave London behind for a provincial Muggle village, they didn't say, but Harry thought Remus slept more calmly than he had in London. Which of course meant that Sirius slept better as well.

Despite the pleasant weather and the freedom to do exactly as they pleased, however, when the big brown barn owl fluttered down onto Sirius' shoulder and dropped a letter on top of the book he was reading, one day early in August, Harry felt as though someone had thrown them a lifeline back to wizarding civilisation.

"School letter!" Sirius said cheerfully, sailing it across the expanse of grass to where Harry was holding a solemn conference with several snakes who lived at the bottom of the garden. His habit of talking to snakes had unnerved Sirius, years ago, but since the snakes kept the garden free of rodents and Snake kept the house bug-less, he tolerated them. Today, Harry had translated, the subject concerned a shrub which had grown over the best basking rock, and whether Harry would consent to trim it back.

Harry picked up the letter and, with a hiss that sent the other snakes wandering off, opened it. Snake, in his place of honour on Harry's collar, slithered over his ear.

"Go on then," Sirius said to the barn owl which was still perched placidly on his shoulder. The owl shook itself and hooted at Harry.

"Letter for you, too," Harry said. He tossed a thick envelope to Sirius, and a smaller, slightly crumpled one on Remus' chest, where the other man lay sleeping. "Probably waiting for a return letter."

"All right then, but he doesn't need to use me as a perch," Sirius said. Just then another owl appeared, and landed on his other shoulder. "You bloody nuisances!"

"Look, it's Hedwig!" Harry cried, as the snowy owl ruffled her feathers cheerfully. The barn owl hooted at her and flew off, as if that was all he'd been waiting for in the first place.

"You're looking fine, Beautiful," Sirius said, lifting her onto his arm and stroking her head with a fingertip. "Did Andromeda take good care of you?"

Hedwig deposited yet another letter and flapped to the ground, landing on the stone back-porch where Sirius had been lounging. She pecked at the door, and Sirius opened it enough for her to slip inside.

"Come on, we'd better feed her. Wake the lazybones, Harry, would you?" Sirius asked, tucking the letters into his pocket and following the owl down the hallway into the kitchen at the front of the house. Harry nudged Remus, who followed them sleepily inside.

Sirius set out a bowl of water and another with some cold leftover mutton in it, which Hedwig ate daintily while they sat at the table.

"Let's see what the news is," Sirius said, peering over Harry's shoulder. "Letter, booklist, ticket -- looks in order, eh?"

Harry glanced up at him and grinned as he nodded his agreement. "What'd you get?"

"Letter from Dumbledore -- looks like some press clippings, probably about our disappearance -- and..." Sirius' brow furrowed. "Something from some art studio, forwarded on by Andromeda."

"Probably wrongly addressed," Remus said with a grin. "What's Andromeda say?"

"She doesn't, other than to write her," Sirius said, setting aside the letter from the studio.

"Dumbledore says...well, he says we're all right to return to London and get some of Harry's school things -- and we can move out of Betwys Beddau for the school year at least. Apparently there's been no sign of Pettigrew since the end of June."

"That doesn't seem right," Remus said. "If I were Peter I'd want all the publicity I could get. You know how he was."

"Mmh...could be a trap, but Dumbledore says he thinks he's being distracted by other things. Says to write back and let him know when we're arriving and the Tonkses will meet us in London."

"Distracted?" Remus rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's a rather big risk."

"Well, it's not my words," Sirius answered. "What's your letter?"

Remus turned the envelope over in his hands, studying it. "It's from St. Mungo's..." he slit the wax open and unfolded the parchment. "Hmm. Nothing important," he said, folding it and giving Sirius a significant look. "Due for a checkup, that's all."

Sirius nodded, and Harry looked confused for a moment before being distracted by the press clippings. "Look, Sirius, here's one about you."

Sirius accepted the article from Harry. "Wanted, Dead Or Alive," he read. "How utterly tasteless. Look, Moony, it's a wanted poster for me."

"Well, you did go missing and you neglected to notify the press," Remus chuckled. "It's a flattering photograph. There'll be a feeding frenzy among the society columnists when we go back to London. I'm starving," he added. "Who wants waffles?"

Harry grinned and ran into the kitchen, where they heard him clanging about as he unearthed several metal bowls in his quest for the waffle iron.

"I'm due for my five-year test," Remus said hastily, to Sirius, over the racket. "I'll schedule it for after Harry leaves."

"I'll come with you," Sirius answered. "Maybe you ought to take Harry school shopping -- you draw less of a crowd," he said apologetically.

"It's a good idea -- well, we could always disguise you," Remus grinned, just as there was a splashing noise from the kitchen.

"Sounds like the milk spilled," Sirius said. "I'll go help -- sit, man, you're two days from the full moon."

"I'm not an invalid," Remus grumbled, but he did look grateful as he sank into the dining-room chair.

His movement stirred the press clippings that had spread themselves across the table, and he sorted them slowly into order, studying each one. Most of them were frivolous enough -- this person or that speculating about where Sirius Black had absconded to with his young godson. A few concerned Tonks & Tonks, the clothes shop that Andromeda and Ted ran out of the old Black house on Grimmauld Place, and one of them was a mention of Nymphadora receiving some kind of merit award. Most of the ones with photos attached featured Harry's face, or the classic Black profile that Sirius and Andromeda both shared; he paused when he came across one that had his own face, cropped from a photo someone had snapped of him and Sirius having dinner with Harry

last Christmas holiday. After a moment he separated that one out, held it flat on the palm of his hand, and gave it an intense, concentrated stare.

"What's burning in here?" Sirius asked, carrying in the first plate of waffles hot from the iron. Harry followed behind, precariously carrying a pot of honey, a jar of pumpkin preserve, and a butter dish.

"Nothing," Remus replied with a real smile. He dusted some fluffy white ash off his hands quickly, plucking the butter dish out of the air and allowing Sirius to present him with the best waffle of the batch.

Daily Prophet.....28 July 1992

SIRIUS BLACK'S MYSTERIOUS MANSERVANT: WHO IS LUPIN?

Rita Skeeter, Feature Columnist

Much has been written about handsome young playboy Sirius Black, heir to the Black fortunes and guardian of the Boy Who Lived. Black, who divides his time between an undisclosed summer chateau and a luxurious flat above the Tonks & Tonks department store owned by his cousin Andromeda Tonks, is considered an extremely private man. He has always declined interviews with various news sources and is demonstrably protective of his young charge, who will be entering his second year at the prestigious Hogwarts School in the autumn.

There is, however, a shadow hanging over -- or rather, following behind -- Sirius Black. His mysterious manservant, Remus Lupin, can often be seen in the background -- of photographs taken of Mr Black, of articles written about him and his godson. Hovering always in the shadows, the silent Mr Lupin appears as a sort of butler-bodyguard; he rarely speaks, never smiles for the photographs, and is almost never acknowledged openly by either Black or Potter.

Who is Remus Lupin?

Your devoted columnist has been hard at work uncovering information about Mr Lupin, which it must be said is carefully guarded; his medical file at St Mungo's is under lock and key, his employment history outside of Black's payroll is sketchy and vague, and his educational records are confidential. A fellow student of Black's at Hogwarts, Lupin is remembered by most as a "plain, quiet sort of fellow" and a "decent prefect", faint praise indeed for a Gryffindor whose friends included archvillain Peter Pettigrew and martyred hero James Potter.

Could it be that Remus Lupin has some sort of hold over an old school chum? Can it be blackmail, dear readers?

What dark secret does Remus John Lupin hide underneath his quiet exterior, and why does Black keep him so close? Is he merely a highly-paid confidential employee, or is he benefiting from

knowing where a rich man's skeletons are buried?

"Did you ever open the letter Andromeda sent on?" Remus asked, as he undressed for bed that evening. Sirius took a moment to appreciate the line of his spine as he bent to shed his trousers, then answered.

"Not yet -- put it around here somewhere..." he reached for the nightstand, where the letter was already doing bookmark service in his latest reading. "Probably some kind of junk mail."

"You'd think she'd know what to forward, though," Remus answered. He slipped the pyjama bottoms up over his hips and sat on the bed, falling back to rest his head on Sirius' stomach, comfortably. "I'm curious."

"Well, we can fix that," Sirius replied, deftly tearing off the end and shaking out a thin but expensive-looking sheet of paper. "They probably just want to sell me a portrait of myself. Dear Mr. Black, Heir of the Most Noble and et cetera et cetera, patronage of your excellent mother and father -- that's sucking up, that is, nobody who ever met my mother would say that -- understand that your thirty-third birthday is approaching and..." Sirius stared at the letter.

"And?" Remus prompted. "Bit nervous about thirty-three, are we?"

"It has come to our attention," Sirius read, "That you have not yet made an appointment with our studio, and we would like to inquire if you plan on doing so in the near future. Our patented Dorian Gray portraiture process, as we are sure you are aware, preserves the youthfulness of the Wizard painted well into his tenth or eleventh decade if handled with proper care, but requires two to three weeks to complete. Due to your family's long history with the Broosh & Chakle portrait studio, and your approach to the age when portraits are generally taken, we are pleased to offer you the same service -- oh bloody hell, I remember this now..."

"Who're Broosh & Chakle?" Remus inquired, studying the dismay in Sirius' face.

"Dead," Sirius replied. "It's just the studio name now. They do portraits like my mum's -- d'you remember?"

"Vaguely. Didn't it shout nasty things at you when you went with the appraiser to have the house looked at, after she died?"

"More than nasty," Sirius said grimly. "I had some specialists in to remove it. There's a charm done so that the portrait does most of the aging, and the subject stays more or less the way they are until the portraits begins to disintegrate or they die. It's not perfect, but it's popular with the noble families. My father had his done at thirty because he thought he looked respectable enough to get good tables at the best restaurants and young enough to get the waitresses on the side," Sirius sighed. "It's a petty vanity."

Remus sat up and smiled at him. "Going to do it?"

Sirius looked shocked. "Of course not, why would I? I'm not a lecher or a bigot, and I don't need to hide those things like they did."

"Yes, but..." Remus shrugged. "I mean...you shouldn't not do it just because your family did it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Remus took his hand, weaving their fingers together. "I don't care if you look thirty-three the rest of your life or ninety-three. But you are extremely handsome, Sirius -- "

" -- Moony -- "

" -- and if you throw away that letter, I want it to be because you don't want it, and not because of anything your family did or didn't do," Remus continued. "Your family shouldn't haunt you the rest of your life."

"They don't," Sirius said sullenly. He sat up too, resting his forehead against Remus', one hand reaching up to stroke through his hair. "And I like grey hair," he added teasingly, separating out the silvery strands that were beginning to thread more and more through the pale brown. "Do you want me to have one done?"

"Merlin, I told you. I don't care," Remus answered. "But I'm sure you can afford it, and it's a family tradition that does you no harm, and I think it would be sweet, in a rather vain fashion, which is really the phrase that best describes you at any rate."

Sirius gave him a light slap on the cheek for that, and Remus laughed.

"Sleep on it," he advised. "See what you think tomorrow."

Sirius sighed and laid back again, and Remus curled around him, drawing the light summer blankets up over their bodies.

"I was thinking of charming it brown," Remus said after a while.

"Charming what brown?" Sirius asked sleepily.

"My hair. It doesn't mean anything, it's just the lycanthropy. I could charm it out pretty easily."

"I like it."

"Liar."

"I told you I did," Sirius said. Remus snorted. "I do. Makes you easy to pick out in a crowd."

Remus laughed, then, and said something about something Sirius didn't quite catch, because he was slipping down into sleep.

When Draco Malfoy arrived at the train platform, Andromeda Tonks had taken one look at him and silently cursed her sister. He looked healthy enough, but he was pale and more gaunt than any twelve-year-old ought to be; clearly Narcissa wasn't feeding the boy properly, and the first thing Andromeda did once they were home was sit him down and bring him and Neville tea while Ted made some rather enormous sandwiches.

"Doesn't she feed you?" Andromeda asked, as Draco eagerly tackled his second turkey sandwich. "I know you have house-elves who cook."

"Yeah," Draco said, after swallowing and setting his sandwich down. Never let it be said she hadn't taught the boy manners, at any rate. "She's been remodeling. The kitchen was the last to go."

"Remodeling? Why?" Andromeda asked, faintly amused. "It's not as though she does a lot of entertaining, Draco."

He shrugged. "Why's she do anything? I don't know. Anyway, it means she spent the summer shouting at the workmen who were doing the redecoration charms and not me. Then she decided to do the kitchen, so Mendy hasn't had anywhere to cook. So we've been mostly eating cold leftover soup and porridge -- we had bread for a while, but we ran out...anyway, Mum told her not to make sandwiches."

"Your mum's nuts," Neville said. Andromeda gave him a sharp look. "Well, she is. Go on, tell her why you couldn't have sandwiches."

"Because they're barbaric," Draco recited, then took another enormous bite out of the one in front of him. "And they're a Muggle invention."

"So is underwear," Ted said, winking at Draco, and the boys laughed. "I'd like to see her face if she found that out."

"Well, you're here now," Andromeda said, daintily eating a crisp. "And as you know I'm a terrible influence on the family, so you say what you'd like to eat and we'll fix it. You are, however, required to wear underwear in the house."

This brought on another wave of laughter from the boys, and after Draco had finished his sandwich she sent them off to Neville's room to play. Once they were gone, their voices (and occasional faint thumps and explosions) muffled by the door, she looked at Ted, who looked back

seriously.

"I think perhaps we should talk to Dora about this," she said. "Clearly he's being maltreated, Ted. Aurors have the right to do inspections and take custody of children who're being abused."

"This isn't like Neville, love," Ted answered, sipping his now-cold tea thoughtfully. "Narcissa has a lot of power, whether or not she's gone absolutely round the twist, and she could probably get Dora out of a job if she really tried. Besides, Dora's not -- "

"I have power and influence too. The boy was starving!"

"It'd be hard to prove that. She was feeding him, and she had an excuse. Besides, who's to say taking him away might not be worse? You've seen what they do to children, Andromeda -- look what they did to poor Harry when his parents died, shipped him off to live with Muggles."

"I'm his closest relation -- "

"But you're also a disowned Black."

Andromeda looked at him, shocked.

"Sirius hasn't adopted Harry. If he dies, Draco gets everything that's entailed, as the next male in the line. If you were to try to get custody of him, a lot of people might think it was suspicious. This isn't just child-care, Andromeda, it's politics."

"To hell with politics!"

"You say that now, but I don't want to see Draco put in some Muggle orphanage somewhere. We've got him now," Ted continued, soothingly. "We'll feed him up before school starts and he'll stay here or at school for the winter holidays. Narcissa won't even see him until next June, and by that time I'm sure the remodeling will be over."

Andromeda rested her chin on one hand. "I don't like it, Ted."

"I know, but you can't go around taking in stray puppies when they already have owners," he said with a grin, and rose to kiss her forehead. "I'm going to go down to the market and buy some supplies for dinner. Lamb and new potatoes sound good?"

"And get some eggs, he likes omelettes."

Ted gave her a grin and a salute, and vanished down the stairs. From Neville's room came another explosion and a shriek of laughter; starving or not, he was in good spirits now.

"Harry!"

The shout was the first sign they had that they'd been sighted; Remus, who was a good deal taller than Harry and a bit taller than Sirius, shaded his eyes and then pointed in the direction most of the passengers leaving the train were headed.

"There they are," he said. "Neville's spotted you -- no you don't," he added, catching Harry by the shoulder as the boy began to run in the direction he'd pointed. "Not going to lose you in this crowd, Harry."

Neville broke through the sea of people then, followed closely by Draco and Ted; there were a few minutes of confused greetings before Ted pulled them out of the way of other people disembarking, over to where Andromeda and Dora were standing near a newspaper stand.

"Hello Sirius," Andromeda said, giving him a hug, and Remus a kiss on the cheek. "Welcome back to civilisation. Hi Harry!"

"Hi Aunt Andromeda!" Harry said, looking up from his huddle with his friends. "Hi Dora!"

"Hi Harry," Nymphadora said, with a grin. "Wotcha, Sirius, Remus."

"How's the invalid?" Sirius asked.

"If I wasn't leaning on it, I'd shake my cane at you," she said.

"We told her she could wait at home, but she refused," Ted put in. "Course it means I'll have to carry her back -- " He ducked Dora's well-aimed swat.

"I can walk just fine, thank you," she said. "It's good for me."

"Have you got bags we should be collecting?" Andromeda asked, gently steering the boys towards the exit.

"Moody's sending up our boxes in a few days, so we just brought the essentials," Sirius answered. "We're leaving the furnishings there this time -- going to have to buy some new things for the flat."

"How was your summer?" Ted asked.

"Provincial," Remus murmured wryly.

"Pleasant," Sirius corrected. "Harry got a lot of reading done for school, and Remus paid service to his work ethic by being gainfully employed, and I slept a lot."

"How do you manage such a stressful life," Andromeda asked with a laugh. "I suppose your plans

for the year include sleeping a lot, as well?"

"I thought it might be a part of the schedule," Sirius replied.

They ambled towards Diagon Alley, their pace set by Dora, who was as she'd promised walking fine, albeit slowly. While Neville and Harry compared notes on their respective pets, with Snake curled around Harry's ear and Trevor placidly croaking in Neville's pocket, Draco hung back a little until he was walking just ahead of Sirius.

"Wotcha, Draco," Sirius said, touseling his white-blond hair. "Keeping out of trouble?"

"Yes," Draco answered. "Mostly."

"Only mostly?"

"The boys think it's fun to try and sneak into Knockturn Alley," Ted said, only mildly disapprovingly.

"Well, it is," Sirius agreed. "Trying, anyhow."

"Don't encourage them." Ted rolled his eyes. "Still, I suppose it keeps them occupied. And now they've got Harry to distract them, don't they, Harry?" he called. Harry, who was showing Neville some trick Snake had learned, shot him a grin before returning to the conversation.

"Harry nearly got us in a world of trouble a few weeks ago," Sirius said, gallantly offering Dora his arm when she stumbled a bit. She glared at him and looked disdainful of it, and he shrugged. "We were at a dinner with some of his football friends -- their parents are always throwing dinners -- "

" -- trying to set him up with an appropriate mother for Harry," Remus added, smiling.

" -- thank you, I'll tell the story," Sirius replied. "We were at this dinner and the boys were talking about school -- they all go to the local comprehensive, except one or two -- and one of the boys turned to Harry and asked what was so special about Hogwarts, what they teach there."

"Oh, dear..." Andromeda said, stifling a grin.

"Harry, cool as you like, turned to the boy and said he was learning how to be a wizard. I thought the Ministry was going to swoop down on us then and there," Sirius recounted, shaking his head. "I couldn't believe he just out and said it, he's always so good about being discreet. And of course the parents are laughing, but the boys all seemed to believe him. So another boy piped up and said there wasn't any such thing, and Harry said there was, and the first boy said he ought to prove it."

"He didn't."

"Well, he didn't have his wand, not that it would have worked anyway, and he knows the rules about underage wizardry, so I wasn't too worried, but he got that look in his eye like he's about to pull a fast one -- "

" -- not at all like the look you get when you're about to do that, I'm sure -- "

"And he pointed at the boy in question and said Jiggery pokery mumbletypeg!"

Andromeda and Ted burst out laughing.

"And would you believe it, he was so intent and serious about it that the other boy nearly wet his pants in fright and spent the rest of the evening worrying he was going to be turned into a frog."

"When everyone knows that Jiggery pokery mumbletypeg is the incantation to turn someone into a cat," Remus added, grinning. "Fake or not, it almost gave Sirius and me heart attacks."

"Speaking of which," Sirius said, "We haven't had any details on Dora's accident -- Dumbledore sent us some clippings, but nothing about the injury. What happened?"

"Oh, it's so stupid," Dora sighed.

"Heroic, sweetheart, the word is 'heroic'," Ted said.

"Stupid," Dora replied. "We had a call that someone had got into one of the animal pens at the London Magical Zoo, and so Kingsley and Medder and Callie and I all went down to see what had happened. As it turns out, Dung Fletcher had tried to sneak into the Ashwinder pen and fell into the Grindylow pond instead. Well, you know how those little buggers are -- "

"Language around the children," Ted said quietly.

"Sorry dad -- you know how they are, they get hold of you and won't let go, so Kingsley sent me in because I can change my shape a bit if I get grabbed. We didn't know," she said, aggrieved, "that I'm one of the one-in-twelve who are allergic to Grindylow bites. In I went, and while I was trying to get Dung free, one of them latched onto my leg and wouldn't let go. I kicked it a bit and broke its fingers -- all the zoo people are very upset, seems they think their precious Grindylow is more important than my leg -- and it let go and they all started biting me..."

"The end result of which," Ted supplied, as Dora sighed in frustration, "was that Kingsley had to go in and fetch both of them out since Dung still had a Grindylow hanging tight to his -- er -- "

"His danglers," Dora said, sounding satisfied. "He'd cast an invisibility charm, so he was naked -- "

Remus and Sirius winced in sympathy.

"Anyway," Ted said hastily, "Kingsley and Dora between the two of them managed to get Dung out all right, and then Dora went and passed out from anaphylactic shock. The Healers only just got to her in time."

"It was touch and go for a few days," Andromeda said softly.

"I'm fine," Dora announced to no-one in particular. "It's just taking a while to get back on my feet, that's all. And the Aurors say I ought to take it easy for a few months, so I'm on medical pension and they helped me find something to keep me sharp while I do all the recovery stuff."

"Andromeda mentioned that in her letter, what are you up to?" Remus inquired.

"I'm going to be teaching," she replied. "I'm the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts. I'm really only down for the day, then I've got to get back -- thought I'd see you lot, and pick up my professors' robes."

"You're the new Defence teacher?" Sirius asked.

"Congratulations!" Remus said. "Good, you can keep an eye on Harry, make sure he's not getting into too much trouble."

"I bet Snape about bit his tongue off when he heard," Sirius mused.

"He wasn't too happy," Andromeda admitted. "Of course he's happy for Dora, but -- "

"He'd like to see her dead in a ditch so he can have the post?" Remus asked, with a mischevious grin.

"Something like that," Dora answered, equally mischevious. "I'm sorry if he thinks I took his job, but he wasn't even the one I beat out for the post -- you know Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"The ponce who writes all the adventure and how-to books?" Sirius asked. "Don't tell me Dumbledore was considering him."

"Sirius is just bitter because Lockhart beat him out for Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile award," Remus grinned.

"Well, there aren't a lot of people who'd take the job," Andromeda said. "I don't know why they keep turning down Severus, he's more than qualified, but apart from him, only Lockhart applied, and then they switched him out for our Dora at the last minute. Apparently Dumbledore would rather have her. Can't say I blame him," she added proudly.

"It's not that big a deal," Dora said, but she flushed happily. "It's just for a year, anyhow. I'll take my requalification exams right after the school year ends."

"I'm glad she's taking some time off," Ted said quietly, to Sirius, as Harry turned around to demand if it was true that Dora was going to be a teacher. "It was quite a shock to Andromeda and me. I don't think Dora herself knows quite how close we came to losing her."

"I wish we could have been here," Sirius answered. "She's all right now, though, isn't she?"

"She's getting there. Been a dangerous summer, really. First Severus' heart nearly gave out -- did you hear about that?"

"We knew he was ill," Sirius said noncommittally.

"Well, that was a worry, though apparently he's recovered. And then Dora was attacked, and Neville caught the Kneazlepox...I'll be a bit glad when school starts and Andromeda can let Madam Pomfrey fret about everyone for a while."

"As if Andromeda would trust anyone else with her children," Sirius said with a grin. "Let me know when she's planning on sending a care package, and I'll chip in a few Galleons."

"Here we are then," Andromeda said, as they arrived at the front door of the Leaky Cauldron. "Ted, you take everyone through and down to the shop, I'm just going to have a word with Tom about buying some wine for dinner."

"Right, everyone, this way," Ted said, leading the little band towards the back, and out through the receding brick wall, into Diagon Alley. "There's a roast in the oven and Neville and Draco made a giant pudding -- sugared violets and all -- "

"Home!" Harry cried happily, and Sirius caught Remus grinning even wider than he was, as they emerged back into the wizarding world.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 3

"I am not fond of moving. In fact, you know what? I hate moving."

Sirius grinned and charmed another box into the air, landing it on the kitchen counter so that he wouldn't have to bend over to open it. "Dishes or books?" he asked.

"Two Sickles says crockery," Remus answered, maneuvering the new bookshelves into place along the wall opposite. The delivery wizards had left them in the middle of the living room, and Remus was grumbling good-naturedly about having to rearrange them.

"Ah! You owe me two Sickles, it's toys," Sirius replied.

"That wasn't part of the bet, and what toys? I thought we left most of Harry's in Betwys Beddau."

Sirius grinned and held up a smaller box he'd taken from inside the larger, which read Madam Schaeffer's Architectural Building Blocks. "These're your toys."

"Oh, grand! I was hoping those wouldn't get left behind," Remus said, abandoning the bookshelves for the much more entertaining box of blocks. He opened it at once and began removing little wooden buttresses, columns with changeable capitals, and thin arrow-slit windowframes.

"Going to build a cathedral?" Sirius asked, as he unpacked the rest of the box -- a few tea towels wrapped around some blue-glass ornaments that always sat on their windowsill in Betwys Beddau, and some puzzles from Madam Schaeffer's.

"Just part of one," Remus replied. "Where's the -- there we are," he said, taking out a thin wooden circle with an inset rose-window design. Sirius watched in amusement as the front facade of a church was assembled, Remus' nimble fingers joining the blocks deftly. Finally, he pressed the rose-window into the middle, and set it up on the counter against the wall, murmuring a charm to make the window glow.

"And you accuse me of being nine years old," Sirius said with a grin. Remus matched it, but didn't reply; after a moment he felt Sirius' arm snake around his waist, and the press of his chin on his shoulder.

"I know you missed it. This, the magical world," he continued quietly. "Merlin knows why, since it hasn't been kind to -- "

"It's our home," Remus said swiftly, cutting him off, but he didn't pull away. "Home isn't always easy, but it's always home."

"Mmh. That's true." Sirius nuzzled his neck, and Remus leaned back into the embrace a little, his hands covering Sirius'. "You know, we've been working hard all morning..."

"You just want an excuse not to finish unpacking."

"Well, that doesn't hurt," Sirius agreed. His hands slipped a little lower, and Remus let out a soft breath that wasn't quite a moan. "But I was thinking it's a very old and honourable tradition to christen new furniture -- "

Remus laughed. "I hope you're not meaning the shelves."

"I was thinking of the sofa," Sirius said, pulling him slow backwards towards the living room. It was an awfully nice new sofa; soft upholstery, wide cushions, deep and comfortable. Remus smiled and let himself be moved, turning to face Sirius when their legs bumped against it.

"The boys," he said around a warm, affectionate kiss, the sort Sirius had a naughty habit of turning passionate.

"Gone with Ted," Sirius answered. "Won't be back for hours."

Remus was going to reply, something about locking the door, but Sirius put a hand on his chest and pushed gently, angling him down onto the sofa with his back against the armrest. They were good at this, good at moving together and finding the ways the other fit; good at dancing around and with each other.

It was an informal arrangement, unspoken mostly, but it worked. It had been, once, Remus following Sirius because that was what he'd always done, following Harry because he loved the boy as if he were his own blood, but now it was them, a family -- Remus and Sirius, and their boy Harry, theirs, and it didn't matter for the moment if nobody else knew that.

Sirius had straddled his hips and was kissing his jaw, hands unbuttoning his shirt, pulling it haphazardly out of his trousers; he managed to push Sirius away for long enough to pull off the old t-shirt Sirius wore, fingers working at his belt buckle as Sirius slid warm hands inside Remus' shirt. He had followed Sirius for years, wanting this -- wanting the skate of Sirius' fingers over his ribcage, the spread of his hands over his skin. Sirius loved to touch, and Remus had been starved for it.

He managed to get Sirius' belt undone and shove his trousers down far enough that Sirius hissed with pleasure and fumbled with the zip of Remus' flies, the belt sliding easily over his hips if he sucked in a breath for a minute. He often wondered privately what Sirius thought of him, skinny and scarred and ragtag, but when they were together like this, clothes still half-on, hips arching against each other, breath coming fast against slick skin, hands everywhere at once, stroking, encouraging, exploring --

"Sirius, mum says to -- MERLIN."

Remus gasped and opened his eyes, turning his head to see Dora standing in the doorway, one hand still on the doorknob. Sirius tensed and turned as well, his dark hair brushing Remus' chest tantalisingly even as the horror of the situation washed over them.

Dora was flushed bright red, and staring at them; hopefully the fact that their clothing was mostly still on made the situation better, though Remus had a terrible suspicion it somehow made it much worse.

"Dora," Sirius said faintly. "Give us a minute?"

She was still staring. Remus very slowly lifted the corner of his unbuttoned shirt, and pulled it across the bits of his chest that weren't covered by Sirius' head.

"Dora," Sirius said.

"Yes?" she asked faintly.

"You've come down from Hogwarts for lunch?"

"Yes..."

"Good to see you. Close the door and tell your mum we'll be down in a few minutes."

She nodded, mutely, and closed the door.

"Dora."

"Yes?"

"Go through the door and then close it, okay?"

When she was gone, Remus leaned his head back against the armrest and laughed. Sirius kissed his collarbone, and pushed himself up slightly.

"We should dress," he said regretfully. "They'll be waiting."

Remus could feel heat still against his thigh. "Your cousin doesn't seem to have dampened your enthusiasm much."

"Maybe I'm secretly an exhibitionist," Sirius said with a grin. Remus shifted his weight a little, and Sirius moaned.

"Lunch can wait five minutes," he said, pulling Sirius' head up to kiss him on the mouth. His other hand drifted back down to stroke them both, tantalisingly, and he was pleased to hear Sirius'

breath hitch. "Poor Dora..."

"Poor Dora?" Sirius growled, falling into a quick, even rhythm, and Remus shivered happily. "Just think of the show we gave her -- oh -- "

He gasped and came, and Remus nuzzled against his cheek, bucking his hips as he followed. They lay for a minute or two, catching their breath; eventually Remus stretched and murmured a cleaning spell.

"Well," Sirius said, as he pushed himself up and reached for his t-shirt, pulling it on before tugging his pants and trousers up, "I'm starving. You?"

Remus laughed and let Sirius button his shirt for him. "Ravenous."

The house was empty and quiet with the workmen gone; Narcissa moved through it like a ghost among ghosts. The sheeted furniture lending an eerie surreality to the rooms, as though it was not a place to live so much as a peculiar indoor graveyard.

Her bedroom was untouched, of course; the bedroom she and Lucius had shared, once, the bedroom that didn't change because as much as she hated her husband sometimes, she couldn't bear to part with the shreds of their marriage. For the same reason, as much as she might scream and rave at Draco, she would not send him away without at least a token battle.

Draco was half of her, after all, and she was proud of that, just as she was proud, in a twisted sort of way, that her husband rotted in prison on the Dark Lord's behalf. She had given a husband up to him and did not expect reward for that; she would do better with her son.

She had dreamed of being at the right hand of Lord Voldemort, and if Lucius had abandoned her, Draco would serve here just as well.

She stepped into the library -- Lucius' library; like a good Black woman, when she had married she had gone to her husband's house, and nearly everything in it was a Malfoy possession. These were Lucius' books, would one day be Draco's. Some of them sooner than others.

She took a key from around her neck, the key that opened every door in the house, and used it to unlock the little glass cabinet at the back of the library, next to the cold, empty fireplace. These...these were her things. Her little collection of Dark artefacts, carefully arranged and preserved.

Reaching inside, past chalices made of black stone and stands of velvet with ropes of silver chain on them, she found what she was looking for -- a nondescript black diary, a Muggle thing bought in Vauxhall Road decades ago, to judge from the year stamped on it.

"Narcissa," said a voice behind her, and she pointedly did not start.

"Walden," she replied, removing the book and locking the cupboard again. "So good of you to come."

"For you, always," he answered. "Your elf let me in."

She turned around and clutched the diary tightly, fingers tapping on the cheap cover.

"Is this it?" he asked, eyeing the plain little book carefully.

"Yes," she answered. He stepped closer. Walden Macnair was like the animals he dealt with, dangerous and unpredictable, and while she loved that, she never knew what to expect....

He lifted the book out of her fingers, and placed it carefully in an inner pocket of his leather duster, before shedding the long coat and draping it over a nearby chair. She backed into the cabinet as he came forward, his arms on either side of her shoulders, palms flat against the glass.

"Will it work?" he asked, lips close to hers. He smelled like leather oil and the acrid tang of ground metal; not unpleasant, but always surprising to her.

Macnair was a rangy, weatherbeaten man, with ropy muscles from years of handling and putting-down dangerous animals; surprising too was how firm, how immovable he could be when he pressed against her, how frail she felt in comparison. Everything that Lucius had been -- pale, controlled, calm, vicious -- Walden contrasted. Even his own particular brand of cruelty was animal, predatory but not sadistic.

One of his hands lifted away from the glass -- she'd have to clean it later, she reminded herself -- and gently cupped her breast through the thin straw-coloured robe she wore. She gasped and some of her tension faded away; clearly he was in a good mood tonight.

"I'm not in the habit of failure," she whispered back, as he began to kiss her neck.

"Prognosis?"

Madam Pomfrey folded up the small brass device she had, until a few moments before, been holding over Severus Snape's heart, and crossed her arms.

"You're not to exert yourself," she said.

"Do I ever?" he asked, reaching for his shirt. She slapped his hand away, and he gave her a glare of injured dignity.

"I'm not done yet with you, and I'd like to remind you that if you hadn't exerted yourself, last June, you wouldn't be in this predicament now," she replied. "Whatever Pettigrew did to you, Severus, it's had lasting impact."

The worry in his eyes rose a notch, and she shook her head. "Don't fret too much. You're fine, but in order to ensure that you remain fine, I'd like you to take it easy for a few months still."

"Splendid," he growled. "May I put my shirt on now?"

"No. I want to have a look at your lungs."

"My lungs are perfectly functional," he answered, and reached for his shirt again.

"Oh, don't be a big baby, Severus," she replied, and unfolded another device, this one silver. He rolled his eyes and held still while she pressed it to one side of his chest and then the other, carefully studying the dials that clicked and whirred as she did so. "You were out in the forest yesterday, and the late-summer damp -- "

"For an hour," he protested. "Two at most. That's hardly enough time to catch cold, let alone some kind of lung ailment."

"That's for me to determine. What were you doing out there?"

"I had business with the centaurs."

"Hmm, the mirrors?"

He gave her a sharp look. "What do you know about them?"

"Severus, it's a small school. I know the Mirror of Ynitsed was broken. The centaurs have been sending messages up to the castle all summer, asking after you. I assumed from the way Dumbledore spoke that they weren't particularly friendly notes."

He was silent for a moment, as she adjusted a dial.

"Erised has become unstable," he said, after a while. "It no longer shows the heart's desire -- they allowed me to examine it."

She glanced up at his face, worried by his tone. "What does it show?"

"Base desire, as far as I can tell. Violent urges, animal impulses. The centaurs are...upset." He glanced out the nearby window, where one edge of the forest could just barely be seen. "The magic that forged the mirrors is lost, even to them -- they kept repeating 'destiny is shattered'. As though I could do anything about it."

"Have they asked you to do anything about it?" she inquired.

He looked taken aback, as if she had said something he hadn't considered before. "No...no, they didn't, precisely. Are you finished?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes; you may dress now," she said magnanimously. He pulled the white shirt over his head, lacing it in the front, and then followed it with his usual black, buttoning the line of small loops along the arms first, then up his chest. She smiled in amusement as he pulled his professors' robes over them, and wondered how he didn't overheat in all those layers.

"Pomfrey," he said, as he adjusted the robes on his shoulders, "I'd like to ask...."

"Yes?" she said, tidying away the instruments she'd been using.

"How close was it?"

She glanced at him. "How close was what?"

"The hurt I took from Pettigrew. You didn't tell me everything," he said. "You still haven't."

"Mindreading, are we, Severus?" she asked. "Well, I suppose you're entitled to know, now. I didn't want to worry you."

"Am I often in the habit of worrying?" he inquired. "How close was it? To fatal?"

"It was close," she said.

He nodded, impassively, and fixed the sleeves of the robes. "I'll see you again if I have any troubles. And of course at the welcoming feast."

She gave him a smile, which he returned less enthusiastically before vanishing into the corridor leading away from the hospital wing. As a person he was prickly and rude, as a patient incorrigibly disobedient, but he had a good heart. She had reason to know.

There were many nights, even now when he had the measure of Remus Lupin as he hadn't when they'd only been friends, that Sirius felt he was as much his protector as he was...well, whatever you wanted to call what they were. Lover -- or companion, perhaps. Sirius didn't really care to label it.

Ever since they were thirteen, Sirius had been there -- hundreds of dawns he'd kept vigil over a sleeping, pain-wracked body, too young to suffer the monstrous indignities of the lunar change. Since they were fifteen, there had been whole nights when he was one of Remus' packmates, the most peculiar pack a wolf ever kept. He had employed Remus when he was starving, and Sirius

was proud that he had never once held that over his head -- had never even thought of it. For the past three years he'd been allowed to sleep beside him, to reach out in the night and touch him if he liked.

Or like tonight, to watch Remus as he dreamed, because returning to London meant returning to the odd, unsettling, prescient dreams that were one more disadvantage of lycanthropy. Whether it was a connection to whatever controlled the way events turned in the world, or a knack for Divination, or some peculiar link with another version of their existence (one in which horrors lay -- twelve years of Azkaban for Sirius, continual torment at the hands of the Dursleys for Harry, a decade and more of solitary poverty for Remus) Sirius didn't care. All he knew was that it had saved Harry's life once, and once had driven Remus on an obsessed search for Peter. Too many times to count, it had robbed him of a decent night's sleep.

Remus shifted a little, head turning on the pillow, eyes moving under his eyelids, and Sirius watched. His mouth was open, and a soft cry escaped, but for all Sirius knew he could be dreaming about the afternoon's briefly-interrupted activities. He stretched out a hand and smoothed silver-brown hair back off his forehead, leaning close and whispering soothing nonsense reassurances. Skin cold, almost clammy; perhaps it was no more than a touch of the flu upsetting his sleep.

"Moony," he said softly, "What are you dreaming?"

Remus' eyes opened and it took them a minute to focus; Sirius realised it wasn't just his forehead that was cold -- his whole body was chilled as if he'd come in from a storm. His hands were freezing when Sirius pulled him close, and he tightened the blankets around their shoulders.

"Cold," Remus said.

"It's just a chill -- "

"No -- I was dreaming of cold..."

Sirius gathered as much of the lean, angular body as he could up against him, willing some of his heat into the chill skin.

"Just cold?" he asked, and Remus shook his head. "Just a dream?"

Another headshake. He stayed silent until Remus drew breath, his hands already warmer, his body no longer trembling.

"I was in a classroom," he said softly. "And there was a boy there...not Harry...I couldn't see his face. But I remember feeling so cold. As if just by looking at me, he could freeze me up. And anxious...because I knew who he was, but he didn't know that -- it was -- petrifying..."

"You knew who he was?"

"I knew what he represented," Remus said. "Something horrible -- something poisonous, blood-poison."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, that was a part of it. Fuck, I'm freezing."

Sirius threw his own blankets off and doubled them over the other man, not sure what else to do. He could get up and get heavier blankets, but that would mean leaving him alone in the bed. Instead he leaned back and grasped his wand, which lay haphazardly across the clock on his nightstand. The only warming charm he could remember was one they used to use after Quidditch at school to relax the muscles, but it seemed to work all right; before he could ask if that was better, Remus' body had gone slack against him, and his eyes were closed again.

"All right then, Moony?" he asked, and Remus nuzzled closer, muttering something half-coherently as he dropped off to sleep. After a while, though he had wanted to remain watchful, Sirius slept also.

When he asked, over breakfast the next morning, if Remus remembered waking up in the night, he got a puzzled smile for his pains.

"Why, did I say something stupid in my sleep?" Remus asked, pouring syrup onto his oatmeal.

"No -- just curious if you remembered it," Sirius answered.

"I don't remember, Pads. Maybe you dreamed it."

"Maybe I did."

Just then Harry emerged from his room, yawning and wild-haired, and Sirius was distracted by fixing him breakfast; not that they needed to speak more, he supposed. He was Padfoot, after all, and it was his job to guard Moony; it was what he had done for nearly twenty years. If that meant keeping secrets Moony didn't even know he had, he could live with that. The rewards for being a faithful guardian far outweighed the trouble.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 4

For a week the boys had talked of very little but school -- seeing the dormitories again, sending letters home, watching the Sorting, taking new classes; how hard the new classes would be, and whether they'd have lots of homework. They had written collective letters to Padma, who was coming to buy her school things soon, and Harry had decided (decreed, really) that Sirius and Remus would take them all shopping together, for their books and potions supplies. Andromeda had already fitted them for new robes, all the while talking excitedly with other Hogwarts parents about how much children grew from one year to the next.

The last day in August dawned fine, and everyone was up early, checking their lists of necessary supplies and anxious to get to the top of Diagon Alley, lest they miss the Patils coming through.

"Harry!" Padma shouted, waving at him from the throng of people emerging from the back of the Leaky Cauldron. "Neville, Draco! Over here!"

Soon the Patil twins were surrounded by boys, and Sirius was introducing himself to Padma's parents, Ram and Sarasvati, whom he knew only slightly.

"Of course we've heard about you," Ram said with a grin, as the children exchanged greetings and Sarasvati took Parvati off to see about new robes. "In all the papers, weren't you, when you vanished last June. And when you showed up again just recently."

"Well, you know how it is -- must keep a low profile at times," Sirius answered. "Sure you're all right with us kidnapping Padma for the day?"

"We don't mind, if she doesn't. Mrs Tonks has invited us up for tea later, I assume we'll be meeting you again then? Padma, don't run off without your Galleons," he added, tossing a small leather sack to Padma. She caught it and peered inside, then laughed and passed small chunks of honey-flavoured sweets to the boys. "Try not to spend too much of it on books, love."

"We'll keep an eye on her -- Remus is taking them to Mardjinn Alley after they pick up their school books at Flourish & Blotts," Sirius said.

"We have to tell Parvati not to buy too many clothes; with Padma, it's books," Ram said affectionately. "Of course, if she runs out of money and there's still something she needs -- or especially wants -- we'll repay you for it. Yes, coming, Sara," he called, as Sarasvati summoned him over to the window of Tonks & Tonks. "See you around three, eh?"

"Three it is," Sirius said, turning to find that Remus was already herding the children towards Flourish & Blotts.

They spent a long time in the bookshop, the children piling up their school-books and restocking

their dwindling supplies of quills and ink, parchment, magical ink-erasers, and all the gadgets and pencil-boxes that the shops put on sale every autumn for school.

Remus browsed the section on Dark Arts, looking wildly out of place in his tidy Muggle clothing amongst the hags and warlocks who usually dealt in the volumes kept behind locked cabinet doors; he eventually came up with two new books on lycanthropy, one on the handling of Dark Creatures, and one on Dark magical theory. Sirius made sure Neville didn't knock over the inkpots and kept Harry from climbing the shelves to get at the interesting books even as he approved Padma's purchase of three Wizarding novels and a book about Great Witches In History. Draco managed to slip three comic books and a new deck of Exploding Snap cards past Sirius' watchful but tolerant eye; he only had pocket-money of his own, but Narcissa had an account at nearly every shop in Diagon Alley, and he simply charged it to her.

They left the books packaged in brown paper and waiting to be picked up when they were done shopping, and made their way down the street. They stopped to look at racing brooms and in the joke shops, and buy ice lollies from a cart near the pet shop while Padma went in to see about a bigger jar for Elmo, who had grown a bit over the summer. Harry, meanwhile, stared interestedly at the snake tank in the window.

"Domestic," he finally pronounced to Remus, in a whisper. "Thick as bricks. Not like Snake."

"Glad to hear you've got a smart one," Remus replied with a grin. "Come on, it's not too much further to Mardjinn Alley."

The entrance to the second-hand district of Wizarding London was just past Knockturn Alley, on the right as they approached Gringotts bank. Sirius abandoned Remus to take care of some banking, and eventually caught up with them in a used-cauldron shop where Remus was helping Neville pick out some spares (he always melted a few) so that he wouldn't have to use up all of Professor Snape's.

"They really should put some kind of regulation on cauldron-bottom thickness," Remus was saying, as he showed Neville how to tap them to find the solid ones. "This cheap stuff they sell to the students hardly lasts a year even when you use them properly."

"Remus," Harry called, "Can I have three Sickles for a book about divination?"

"What do you want a book about divination for?" Remus called back. "You won't even be taking it until next year!"

"S'got interesting pictures," Harry said, coming over to show off his find.

"Where's Draco gone?" Sirius asked, ducking around Remus' arm to study the book's woodcuts.

"He and Padma were outside looking at the two-Knut books a minute ago..." Remus turned to glance out the grimy front window of the shop. "Bugger, where have they gone? No, you stay here

with Neville and Harry, I'll go track them down, they can't have gone very far."

Outside, he glanced around, wondering if they were hidden behind a cart; satisfied that they weren't on the street, he made for the used-books shop next door, where they'd probably wandered into. Hopefully they hadn't wandered up Parshee Alley to Horizont, the red light district. If they had, he'd never hear the end of it from Padma's parents.

"Aren't you a clever one."

The voice came from inside the bookshop, and stopped him cold; he paused, listening without moving. He knew that voice...

"Well, one needs all the proper supplies, true."

Chill and precise, no wasted words; it was associated with the smell of unpleasant things. Is there any other vermin to be put down?

Yes, it was coming from the bookshop, and Remus passed into it as silently as he could, listening warily.

When he woke with his leg in bandages they had caught the thing that had chased him down in the fields; Alastor Moody was waiting by his bedside, but before he could ask any questions he smelled gunpowder and blood. Through his half-open bedroom door he saw a dead man on the floor of the clean-scrubbed kitchen, and another man spattered with blood still holding a rifle with a clip of silver-coloured bullets on his belt.

Is there any other vermin to be put down?

No, his father said, as Alastor Moody told eight-year-old Remus Lupin to be quiet, to keep still; no, his father said, it didn't bite anyone.

Because if there's anyone it bit it'd be best if they were put down now, said the man spattered with blood, as Alastor Moody muttered and closed the door, and Remus' heart thumped because he realised the vermin the man was talking about was him.

He was eight and Walden Macnair a fresh-from-school eighteen, freelancing for the Ministry, hunting feral werewolves and vampires in the dark old days just before Voldemort's rise had begun. Macnair hadn't even known the family's name; all he'd known was that there was a werewolf in the woods behind the house, and Rufus, Remus' father, had thought he would catch the poor sod, not shoot him. Moody had been there to make sure Remus wasn't a danger to anyone, and had ended up hiding him from Macnair instead.

Macnair had gone on to become a Death Eater, and they'd tangled once or twice when the Order was active, but when it was all over he had an alibi for every murder, an excuse for every action, and he was employed by the Ministry now to handle dangerous animals. Which was sort of a good

thing, because nowadays the Ministry did more than frown on people who shot werewolves. Nobody liked werewolves much, but at least they --

"Here you are; run along with your girlfriend, then -- oh, excuse me, miss," said the cold voice. Remus saw Draco and Padma step out into the main aisle of the shop, and realised Macnair must have been talking to them.

"I told you two not to wander off," Remus said, frowning sternly at them. Padma looked penitent, but Draco merely clutched what must be a recently-purchased book to his chest, and jutted out his jaw.

"We were bored," he said. "We only went next door."

"The boy has an inquiring mind," said Macnair, emerging behind them. He laid a hand on Draco's shoulder, and Remus stifled the urge to slap it away. "His mother and I are good friends, I've been minding him and the young miss. They've come to no harm."

"Miraculously," Remus said, and Macnair bridled. "Come along, you two. Sirius and the others are waiting."

"Enjoying playing lapdog to a rich boy?" Macnair asked under his breath, as the children passed.

"Enjoying your job as dogcatcher?" Remus answered. "Keep away from the children, Macnair, or -- "

" -- or you'll call the Order down on me?" Macnair sneered. "They couldn't lay a finger on me the day Lucius Malfoy went to Azkaban, and they can't do any more to me now. Run along, manservant, and tell your master I send my regards."

"You could tell yours to go to hell," Remus snarled, "except he's already there."

Macnair growled and lunged forward, one arm drawing back for a punch, but Remus had moved forward too, closing the space too quickly, shoving him back into a shelf which wobbled precariously. The air whooshed out of Macnair's lungs, and one of the books caught him a glancing blow across the temple as it fell.

"Brilliant!" Draco crowed, and Remus turned around.

"Out of the shop," he ordered, following them before Macnair could regain his footing. Neville and Harry were waiting outside with Sirius, who was juggling a handful of parcels.

"Let's get out of here," Remus said. "I'll tell you later."

They collected the books from Flourish & Blott's, and -- weighed down with packages -- were staggering back to Tonks & Tonks when Neville dropped his packet of quills just outside the shopfront, and Padma nearly lost control of her new salamander jar when she tried to help him pick them up. Draco got his foot on most of the quills so that they wouldn't blow away, and nearly unbalanced himself.

"Oof," he said, as Remus caught him one-handed, pushing him upright again. "I wish I'd asked mum to send Dobby along to help carry everything."

"Master Draco!"

Harry blinked as a knobby, pillowcase-clad house-elf raced past them, nearly slamming into Draco.

"I wish I had a house-elf too," Neville said. He looked around expectantly, but when no more elves were forthcoming, he sighed and turned his attention to Draco and Dobby.

"Dobby is so glad to have found Master Draco!" Dobby was saying, bowing and already accepting some of Draco's packages. "Dobby must speak to Master Draco -- " he glanced around at the others, as if only just noticing them. "Dobby is very pleased to see Mister Sirius Black and Mister Remus Lupin and the young misters and mistress," he said politely, then turned back to Draco and said, in a clearly audible whisper, "Dobby must speak to Master Draco in private."

"In private?" Draco asked, as they passed through Tonks & Tonks and made for the stairs that led up to the flats on the upper floors. "Why, is something wrong with mum?"

"No no no, Master Draco, Mistress Malfoy is..." Dobby paused, and his ears wilted a little. "Dobby shall have to iron his hands for thinking ill of Mistress Malfoy," he murmured. Sirius bit down on a laugh.

"I'll give you something else to do," Draco promised absently as they reached the landing, shifting another package to the growing tower of them that Dobby was carrying, so that he could open the door for the others. "Are you sure it has to be private?"

Dobby nodded, and the packages wobbled.

"All right then," Draco said dubiously.

"Use my room, we have to put all our things there anyway," Neville said, as the adults began exchanging greetings and Harry and Remus ran up to stow away Harry's school things in his own room over the Tonks' kitchen.

"Tea, Sirius?" Ted called from the kitchen.

"Yes, thanks," Sirius replied. "Better make Remus' herbal."

"Oh?" Andromeda asked. "Is he...not feeling well?" she asked significantly.

"Had a bit of a scuffle in a bookshop," Sirius answered with a grin. "He hasn't quite told the whole story yet -- "

"He shoved someone into a bookshelf," Padma supplied helpfully. Ram Patil gave Sirius an inquiring glare, the sort that almost asked 'What have you been exposing my child to?' all on its own.

"I'm sure he had reason," Sirius said smoothly. "Sorry, were we interrupting at all?"

"No, I don't think so." Andromeda glanced at the Patils. "We were just discussing the new Muggle Protection Act that Arthur Weasley's been sponsoring."

"Oh yes? Weasley's behind that?" Sirius asked. "I'm afraid I'm still not quite up to speed on politics after a summer in the wilds. I'll have to ask him about it."

"Well, he's done most of the legwork," Ram said. "Or so I hear. I'm not entirely sure I'm for it, really, though of course I'm not the one dealing with charmed desk lamps day in and day out."

"Desk lamps?"

"Apparently there's been a rash of desk lamps bouncing off their tables in Muggle households recently, caused by a batch of charmed prank lamps that were sold...injudiciously," Ted said, as he carried Sirius' teacup over from the kitchen counter. "Weasley says children and cats are often blamed."

"Well, having spent a good deal of time living amongst Muggles," Sirius said, as Remus and Harry descended the stairs again, "I think there's probably no harm in a little protective legislation."

Ram shook his head. "I worry about too much integration between magical folk and Muggles, that's all," he said. "I mean, I wouldn't like to see Muggles hurt, but it's rather like...well, vampires, say, or werewolves."

"Werewolves?" Sirius inquired mildly. Remus shot him a warning look.

"Yes -- I mean we have laws regarding dangerous creatures, and Muggles are just as dangerous, in their own way. Who's passing the Wizarding Protection Act? More of us are hurt every year by their lorries and such than Muggles are hurt by our broomsticks. I wonder if we give them too little credit, that's all."

"Well, it's up to the Wizengamot to decide," Andromeda pronounced. "Ted, did you put tea on for Remus?"

"Oh -- "

"It's all right, I'd rather just have water," Remus said. "I'll get it."

"Sirius tells us you were being a bad example to the children today," Ted said, as Remus found a glass in the kitchen and filled it. He tapped it with his wand, and a thin crust of ice formed across the water's surface, which he broke and stirred into the water, chilling it.

"The children were being quite bad enough on their own," Remus said, with a stern look at Padma. "I caught them sneaking into a bookshop they knew they weren't supposed to, and consorting with people of ill repute."

"Is this true?" Sarasvati asked Padma, who sank a little lower in her chair.

"Yes, mum," she murmured. Parvati looked smug and sipped her tea.

"You ought to give Walden Macnair and his sort a wide berth," Remus continued. "He's a vicious reprobate."

"What's a reprobate?" Padma whispered to Harry.

"I think it's to do with money," Harry whispered back.

"Draco says you shoved Macnair into a bookshelf," Sirius prompted.

"If I hadn't, he would have blacked my eye," Remus answered. "I sent the children out of the shop when I saw him; he made a remark that I happened to take rather personally. I made one back, and he tried to punch me. I'm very sorry you had to see that, Padma," he added.

"What on earth did you say to him?" Andromeda asked.

"Nothing that bears repeating," Remus said, taking a drink of water. "It's not important, Andromeda."

"I don't think I've ever seen you hit someone," Ted said thoughtfully.

"Nor did I then. Just a little shove, enough to keep him from coming back for a second try."

"Wish I'd been there," Neville said enviously.

"Well, I'm sorry our daughter's actions caused you trouble," Ram said, with a significant look at Padma. "If she can't learn to follow directions, perhaps she ought to be given less responsibility."

"It was my fault," said another voice from the doorway, and the Patils looked up in surprise.

Draco was standing there, shifting his weight uneasily. "I said we should go in the other shop. I told her Remus said it was all right."

"Did he?" Sirius asked Padma, who looked indecisive.

"I did say," Draco insisted. "It isn't Padma's fault. She oughtn't to be punished."

"Listen to all this talk of punishment," Andromeda said. "Draco, come and have your tea."

"Where's Dobby gone?" Harry asked.

"Sent him home," Draco replied, accepting a biscuit and a cup of tea. "He was keen to iron his hands. I told him to dust the upper floors instead."

"Must he?" Neville asked. Draco shrugged.

"M'not old enough yet to give him orders that contradict mum's, and she says he's to punish himself."

"Well, at least it's not greivous bodily harm," Andromeda said. "And as for your punishment, Draco, we'll discuss that later. Today was supposed to be fun, you know. I hope you did have some fun before you took up a career in misleading people."

"The joke shop was brilliant," Neville supplied anxiously.

"Yeah, and Padma got a new jar for Elmo," Harry put in. "And I got a brilliant book on Divination."

"We'll have to unwrap everything and pack it up after tea," Sirius said.

"That's right, we're having dinner with Arthur and Molly this evening," Remus said. "It's quite good of them, putting us up for the night, all things considered. Haven't properly seen them in donkey's years."

"Dunno how we'll all fit in the Burrow, but I think the lads are going to camp outside," Sirius added. The boys exchanged excited looks.

"Any particular reason for it?" Ram asked.

"Well, yes -- with three boys plus luggage, we thought it might be convenient to have transportation," Sirius said. "Arthur's told me he has a Muggle automobile -- he's going to take all the luggage in the car, and the rest of us are going to floo to King's Cross."

"Some of the rest of us," Remus murmured. Sirius grinned.

"I'm taking my motorbike," he said. "But I've promised not to fly at all."

"Well, we should probably be off," Sarasvati said, finishing her drink. "Thank you for tea, Andromeda. What do you say to Mr. Black, Padma?"

"Thank you for taking me shopping," Padma said to Sirius, with a proper tilt of her chin. "I had a very good time, especially when Remus shoved that man. He called me Draco's girlfriend."

Parvati went off into giggles as Draco blushed furiously.

"See you tomorrow on the train!" Padma said, as her parents said their goodbyes. "Save me a spot in the compartment if you get there first."

"All right," Andromeda said, closing the door behind Ted, who was leading the Patils back out through the store-rooms and shopfront to Diagon Alley. "We've got a lot to do to get you two ready for this evening, and I'm sure Harry has loads of packing to do."

"You aren't going to write to mum about this afternoon, are you?" Draco asked anxiously.

"Well, that depends. Either I can write to your mum and she can decide your punishment, or you can accept mine without complaint and we'll keep it between ourselves," Andromeda said. Draco pondered for about two seconds before nodding.

"You tell me, then," he said. "At least you'll be logical about it."

"Logical?" Andromeda asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Well, you won't go on and all," Draco explained. "I mean. You'll tell me to do something and I'll do it and that'll be the end of it, won't it."

Andromeda smiled. "Something like that."

"Give him detention," Harry suggested. "With Dora."

"Detention?" Andromeda asked.

"Sure. Tell him he has to do a week's detention with Dora -- "

" -- that's Professor Tonks to you," Sirius said, ruffling Harry's hair.

" -- Professor Tonks, you know, scrubbing desks and all."

"It's not a bad idea," Remus said. "That's about what he'd get at school, really."

"Well, if Remus approves, it must be all right," Andromeda grinned. "I'll just send a letter along

with you for Professor Tonks -- I do like the sound of that -- and you can serve your detention with her. Now you two go pack, and I'll just dig up something to send along for dinner. I think Ted made you some treats -- but you are to think very carefully about what you've done, while you're eating them," she said sternly, to Draco, who grinned and dashed down the hall after Neville.

"Come on, Harry, I've got something for you," he called, over his shoulder. Harry glanced at the adults for permission before following, and was soon rewarded with the box he'd given Draco, complete with invisibility cloak.

"Thanks, it was great this summer," Draco said, as Harry peered inside to make sure the cloak hadn't come to any harm. "Going to miss it like anything. We'll have to learn some concealing charms, won't we?"

Harry grinned, and stroked the slick material of his father's cloak. "Some of us will."

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 5

The sight of a vintage Ford Anglia, driving down the normally pedestrianised cobbles of Diagon Alley, was something Remus Lupin wouldn't have missed for the world.

"Good afternoon!" Arthur Weasley called, easing the bright turquoise car up against the kerb outside of Tonks & Tonks. Everyone in the vicinity stopped to stare.

"Arthur, how are you?" Remus called, from behind a chaotic mess of young boys, trunks, bookbags, and pet-boxes. "Making an entrance, eh?"

"And why not?" Arthur asked, sliding out of the car and opening the boot. "Need help loading everything?"

"Ah, you're help enough just taking us to the station tomorrow," Remus replied, hefting Harry's trunk and easing it into the seemingly endless boot.

"My pleasure -- any excuse to show it off," Arthur answered. Neville's trunk followed Harry's, and the boys began piling their bookbags on top of the trunks as Remus lifted Draco's into place. "Back-seat, lads, and do up your seat-braces."

"Seatbelts, I think," Remus said gently. "As cars go it's not bad, is it?"

"Well, certainly not for the price," Arthur chuckled. "I got it for a Galleon out of a Ministry impound warehouse."

"How'd you get it into Diagon Alley?" Remus asked, climbing into the passenger's seat as Arthur circled again to take the driver's seat.

"I've lost Trevor!" Neville cried. "Don't leave yet!"

"It's all right, we're not going anywhere yet," Arthur said, then turned to Remus. "I drove it in through the old Roman gate, down near Gringotts. Of course in Muggle London it looks like an empty, fenced-off car park -- took me forever to find it."

As he spoke, Neville fumbled with the car door and dashed across the pavement to where Trevor's traveling box was sitting near the entrance to the shop, nearly forgotten.

"He's okay," Neville sighed with relief, passing the box through the window to Draco.

"All present and accounted for, now?" Arthur asked.

"Just waiting for -- speak of the devil," Remus interrupted himself as Sirius wheeled his

motorbike out of a side-street where he normally kept it parked under an anti-theft charm.

"Right, I'm following you," Sirius announced, pulling his helmet on. He was dressed in his riding clothes -- black leather jacket and boots, white t-shirt and charm-reinforced jeans that wouldn't shred even if he crashed. People who had stopped to stare at the car were now staring at Sirius, who was clearly drinking in the attention.

"He looks cool," Draco said, leaning across Neville to stare out the window as Sirius pulled on a pair of black gloves.

"Yes, he does a bit, doesn't he," Remus agreed, voice slightly hoarse. They were very tight jeans.

Arthur turned the ignition, let out the clutch, and eased the car out into the foot traffic once more, Sirius following sedately behind on the motorbike.

They picked up speed as they passed through Diagon Bar, the old Roman gate that led to Muggle London; by the time they were bound for Ottery St. Catchpole, where the Weasleys lived, Sirius had pulled up alongside the car and was grinning fiercely as the motorbike skimmed along the road.

"How are Molly and the children?" Remus asked, ignoring the laughs and good-natured wrestling in the back seat.

"Oh, doing fine -- Bill's out in Egypt, now -- "

"That was his goal, wasn't it?"

"Yes -- he's quite happy there, or seems to be from his letters. Charlie's gone to Romania, still mad about dragons, you know. Percy did terrifically well on his OWLs, he's in a load of advanced classes -- Arithmancy and Potions and all."

"He's always been a bit ahead," Remus remarked.

"In...some things," Arthur allowed. "We worry about him, but the twins are there to keep him from taking himself too seriously. More or less."

"Are they still playing Quidditch?" Harry asked from the back seat.

"That they are, and they've sworn to break your nose with a Bludger sooner or later," Arthur said, grinning at Harry in the rear-view mirror. "Oh, come on, Remus," he added, when Remus gave him a horrified look, "It's not really Quidditch if you don't break any bones, and they're only joking. I'm pretty sure," he said, a trifle uncertainly.

"Be good to see Ron again," Neville mused. "Reckon he's got high hopes for the Cannons this year."

"He always does," Arthur said indulgently. "Poor boy, doomed to a life of disappointment in that regard."

"Is little Ginny starting Hogwarts this year?" Remus asked, having sufficiently recovered from threats of violence against Harry's nose. "She's a year below Ron, isn't she?"

"Oh yes -- she's terribly excited. It was very lonely for her this past year. We spoiled her a bit, I'm afraid, but she's used to having at least a few brothers around."

"Well, it'll be a full enough house tonight," Remus grinned.

"You don't know the half of it -- the twins have invited Lee Jordan over, and Percy has his friend Oliver -- didn't he and Harry used to know each other?"

"Oliver?" Harry asked, eagerly. "He's captain of Gryffindor team, he's brilliant."

"Glad to see such good sportsmanship," Arthur said, pleased. He signaled to Sirius that they were turning off, and Sirius followed behind them, the motorbike kicking up dust as they bumped down the path to the Burrow.

A crowd of redheaded Weasleys poured out of the side door to greet the newcomers, along with the dark, dreadlocked head of Lee Jordan and Oliver Wood's sandy-brown. The twins gravitated immediately to the motorbike, while Percy pompously welcomed the younger boys and Oliver grinned and thumped Harry on the back. Molly, standing on the step, gave her husband a kiss hello and invited them all around to the backyard, where an enormous picnic table was arranged, along with two shabby, faded tents.

"Dinner's almost ready -- oh, thank you Sirius, that's lovely," she said, accepting a basket of food from him: crackers and cheese, wine, and a box of cookies Ted had sent along for dessert. "If you want to put your things up in the rooms -- Sirius, we gave you the twins' room, don't mind the strange smell, it's just...something that exploded..." she sighed. "Remus, Percy said you could have his room, or you're welcome to Ron's room under the attic if you like."

"Oh, well..." Remus gave Sirius an uncertain look. "Percy's is fine, that's across the hall from the twins', isn't it? That'll do nicely."

"Arthur, will you help me with the food?" Molly called, over the shouts of the boys as they called back and forth to one another, exploring the interiors of the tents.

"They've got whole rooms inside!" Draco said, poking his head out. "With bunk beds and everything!"

"And the lingering smell of cabbage. Haven't you ever been camping before?" Fred -- possibly George -- asked.

"Mum doesn't like the outdoors," Draco answered. "Harry hasn't either, have you Harry?"

"Not in wizarding tents," Harry said, impressed. "We just had the regular kind."

"The regular kind?" Oliver asked.

"Muggle tents," Sirius grunted. "Same inside as out."

"Ooh," Lee Jordan said, impressed. "That's like...survivalist, innit?"

"Well, we had a camp stove and instant breakfast and such," Remus said, amused. "It's not as though we were living on berries and leaves."

"Here we are," Arthur announced, reappearing at the back door with an enormous bowl of pasta in his hands and a veritable parade of plates and cutlery following him, along with Molly, who had a likewise gigantic bowl of salad and a platter of garlic bread. Sirius took the garlic bread, while Remus marshalled the boys and Ginny -- who was looking shy and somewhat overwhelmed -- into places around the table. This was not easy, since the younger boys were all jockeying to sit next to an older boy they admired, or a best friend, and kept changing seats. Ginny wanted to sit with Harry, but Harry and Neville and Ron all wanted to sit with Oliver, who naturally wanted to sit with Percy, who'd invited him. Draco and the twins (accompanied by Lee Jordan) were vying for seats near Sirius, who really just wanted to sit with Remus, who was trying desperately to sit somewhere -- anywhere -- that he'd have another adult within hearing range.

Finally settled, there was a collective pause while Molly, beaming as only a pleased hostess can, gestured at the food.

"Go on, eat up then," she said, and that was all the benediction they needed. The adults, who had managed to cluster around the head of the table, helped the younger ones dish out food, and soon everyone was contentedly eating (or flinging breadcrusts, or helping clean up Ginny's knocked-over water glass, or "sharing" their food with an enormous beetle that was trundling peacefully along the table).

"Draco, take some more tomatoes," Sirius said, as Draco, at his elbow, very carefully selected bits of salad. "This is wonderful, Molly."

"Thank you," she said, beaming. "It's my pleasure. We thought since Ginny -- " she gestured at Ginny, who was gleefully sitting between the Boy Who Lived and the incredibly cool Lee Jordan, " -- was leaving and it would be just the two of us after today, we ought to have as many people over as we could the night before."

"And of course it's good to see you lot again -- hardly got a glimpse of you at all after you came back to the Wizarding World last year," Arthur said. "But then Molly had taken on a few extra students in her little home-school, and I was working day and night it seemed like, getting this

bloody bill ready to go to the Wizengamot..."

"Yes, someone mentioned you were behind it," Sirius said with a grin. "Bit of a departure from your usual chasing-after-enchanted-objects, isn't it?"

"I think it's splendid," Remus said, almost defiantly.

"Good! I'm glad you think so. It's nothing terribly revolutionary, but it will help keep people from tormenting the poor Muggles. Vanishing keys, teakettles that never boil -- and I do mean never -- suicidal desk lamps...it's really like kicking puppies when you think about it. They can't help being what they are. At any rate, it's sort of like the...oh...lads, what's that law you've been working all summer trying to get round?"

"The Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery," the twins chorused.

"Boys after my own heart," Sirius laughed.

"It'll detect when someone's put a permanent enchantment on a Muggle artefact, and as soon as that artefact leaves the possession of the enchanter, it'll sound the alarm," Arthur said. "Help with people 'accidentally' picking up enchanted objects, too."

"There's a very careful loophole there," Molly said, a little disapprovingly. Arthur looked guilty. "So long as it's in your possession, of course, you could...say...enchant a car to fly, couldn't you, Arthur?"

"Does that old Anglia fly?" Sirius asked excitedly.

"You got a whole car in the air?" Remus said, the pair of them beginning to resemble schoolboys confronted with the accomplishments of an older and wiser senior student.

"Very wrong of me to do," Arthur said dutifully, "But I thought if ever there was an emergency it's a bit easier to handle than a broomstick -- "

"Imagine my shock and surprise -- " Molly said, " -- George, mind your elbow, you'll put it right in Percy's salad if you're not careful -- imagine my shock and surprise when I -- "

"Neville!" Remus shouted down towards the foot of the table. "No throwing the pasta!"

"He started it," came the faint and impenitent reply.

" -- when I came out to the yard to call Arthur in for lunch last Saturday and found both him and the car completely vanished. A few minutes later I was still wondering what had kidnapped my husband and his latest foolish Muggle toy -- "

" -- they're quite useful, really -- " Arthur put in, plucking Trevor out of the salad.

" -- only to see a blue Ford Anglia come roaring across the open field twenty feet above the ground and land light as you please on my flower bed."

"I didn't mean to," Arthur said. "I did replant them all..."

"How'd you do it?" Sirius asked. "I didn't think cars worked that well in the area of low-level aeronautics."

"Sirius barely got the motorbike up there and it's still not good for more than about six hours at a time," Remus added.

"Most people would be thrilled to last six hours," Sirius said, and Remus choked on a piece of bread.

"Well, it's a very good car, isn't it. I mean, if you wanted to make a car fly, it's a very efficient car to do it with," Arthur pronounced.

"Reckon if you worked in the fuel system..." Sirius said thoughtfully. "When I modified the motorbike, I was just a kid -- I didn't know the first thing about Muggle mechanics..."

"I didn't either, when I started work," Arthur said. "I had the manual though, and that was very useful. I did end up using the fuel system to help power the lifting charm, but of course Muggle petrol's a filthy thing to run a nice car like this with, so I put a perpetual combustion charm on the engine. It activates when you put it in gear."

"An internal charmbustion engine," Remus said, amusedly. Arthur roared with laughter.

"That's it exactly!"

"We should have a race," Sirius said, and Remus noticed the younger boys becoming immensely interested in the conversation. "My motorbike against your car. First one to ten thousand feet wins."

"Absolutely not!" Molly exclaimed. Arthur gave Sirius an apologetic look, and Remus tactfully changed the subject.

When they were finished with the dinner and the washing-up -- and the cleaning the kitchen that was necessary after ten children "helped" with the washing-up -- Sirius lit a campfire outside and they spent the evening sitting in the balmy late-summer air, watching insects buzz against the no-fly charm Molly had cast and talking about school.

When Ginny dropped off to sleep, leaning against one of the picnic benches, Sirius gathered her up and carried her into one of the tents, while Molly beamed approvingly at him.

"He's made a very good father," she said to Remus. "Mind you, I had my doubts."

"So very many doubts," Remus agreed with a grin. "He does all right by Harry."

"You love him, don't you."

Remus' heart jumped into his throat, and he glanced at her nervously.

"That's why you stayed, isn't it?" she continued, blithely. "He is a charming young boy."

"Yes, yes of course," he said, relieved. "Who wouldn't?"

"It must be awfully lonely for the two of you. I've given up on poor Sirius ever settling down, he simply isn't the sort, but you ought to find yourself a nice girl, Remus, and stop hiding in Sirius' shadow all the time."

"Oh, I -- we get along," he said. "I'm not hiding in anyone's shadow, Molly."

She patted his hand, and he was immensely grateful that Sirius returned then, dusting off the seat next to him before sitting down. He was still wearing those impressively tight riding jeans, and Remus felt his face flush again when their thighs brushed.

Hiding in Sirius' shadow was all right, if it meant having Sirius.

The next morning, the boys and Ginny were awake at dawn and had thoroughly destroyed any chance of natural hot water by the time the adults wanted a wash. Sirius yelped under the cold water and cast a quick heating charm on the showerhead, while various crashes and shouts could be heard coming from the general direction of the kitchen. He was so distracted by charming the water the perfect temperature that he didn't notice the click of the door opening and closing until the door to the shower opened and a warm body pressed up against his.

"Morning," Remus murmured, hair sticking out at odd angles, arms wrapping around Sirius' waist from behind.

"Moony -- "

"Don't worry -- I charmed the door shut this time," Remus said against his ear, then nipped the earlobe lightly. Sirius leaned back a little, any annoyance at being interrupted vanishing like the steam from the hot water.

"This is Molly and Arthur's shower," he protested, mainly for the form of the thing.

"I know," answered Remus, nuzzling around the side of his neck.

"We'll never be able to look them in the eye -- "

"Worth it, don't you think?" Remus asked, one hand splayed over Sirius' stomach, the other sliding down his thigh. Sirius leaned his head back a little, trying to get the proper angle for a kiss outside of the stream of water. He was going to lose this argument, not that he particularly wanted to win it; he was already hard, and he could feel Remus' erection pressing insistently against him, feel Remus' breath hitch as it moved against his skin.

"Mm, Moony," he managed, as Remus' hand slid up again to curl around him, stroking gently.

"Mine," Remus said in his ear, softly, but with a sort of frightening urgency that Sirius didn't fully understand. He bit again, too, the sensitive flesh at the base of his neck -- Moony didn't like to bite, because it was dangerous --

"Yes, yours," he gasped, as he felt himself turned and pushed against the cool, damp wall. Remus pressed up against him again, kissing him so hard it was difficult to breathe, hips thrusting roughly. Another light bite on his shoulder, a kiss, hands holding his wrists up against the wall.

Sirius made a sound very close to a whimper as their bodies touched, feeling helpless in the onslaught of feeling and scent and Remus, the murmured word Mine still in his ears. He tried not to moan, but it seemed he had no control over the situation in the slightest, not even --

"Fuck, Remus," he cried, as teeth bruised the side of his neck and Remus came against him, silently and more fiercely than he was used to, even from Remus. A hand slid down before he had even processed what was going on, and he came without even being allowed to inhale first. He went dizzy for a moment, and let Remus catch him before he fell.

"Good thing I cast a silencing charm too," were the first coherent words he heard, and he glanced up to see Remus grinning at him, feral light in his eyes.

"What the bloody hell are you on about?" he asked, as Remus smoothed wet hair out of his face and stroked one cheekbone with his thumb, affectionately.

"Didn't you like it?" Remus asked, faltering slightly.

"Well, yes..." Sirius turned to let the water cool him off a bit -- his heating charm was dying. It stung the marks on his right shoulder and neck, where bruises were already forming. "It was just a bit...I mean to say. There was that one time, but normally you don't hold me down -- "

He turned back, and found Remus staring at the bite-marks, horrified.

"What?" he asked.

"I bit you."

"Yeah -- you don't normally do that, either."

"I'm sorry -- "

"It's all right, nothing a few concealment charms won't fix and if I'd really have objected I could have knocked you cold," Sirius said with a reassuring grin.

"I just...turn the water off, all right?"

Sirius turned the knobs and the water died, as Remus opened the door and stepped out, looking rather stunned.

"I didn't mean to," he said.

"Didn't mean to?" Sirius asked. "You don't accidentally bite someone on the neck while you're shagging them against a wall, Moony."

Remus gave him a quick smile, the sort that said he might be funny but he wasn't out of the woods yet.

"It's just -- I missed you last night, and Molly said these awful things about 'settling down', and I wanted to make sure of things," Remus said. "And I think I made it worse, didn't I?"

"I'm not going to abandon you over a few ruddy bitemarks," Sirius proclaimed, reaching for his wand and drying them both with a quick spell. Remus' pyjamas lay in a corner, and the brown-haired man began gathering them up, pulling them on again.

"I don't like that," Remus said. "It's something wolves do, not people."

"I dunno, I knew this one girl -- "

"You know what I mean."

Sirius ruffled his still-damp hair. "It's all right, Moony. Are you still afraid one of these days I'm going to see a short skirt on someone and chuck three years of putting up with you snoring?"

Remus rubbed his forehead with one hand. "The whole world thinks I'm some servant of yours, and sometimes I just need to...make sure I'm more than that."

Sirius grinned. "If you are, clearly I'm not paying you enough. And very few servants shower with their employers, so if you'll excuse me, I'd better run along before Molly catches us. I really won't be able to look her in the eye," he said, as he opened the bathroom door. Remus gave him another smile, more sincere this time, and he laughed as he closed the door.

They were late arriving at the train station, in a magically-expanded car that held four Weasley children, five young houseguests, one very patient Remus, and Arthur, Sirius following behind on his motorbike. Padma was nearly jumping up and down with impatience as she waited for them near the entrance to the platform. Arthur took his brood ahead, with Oliver and Lee, while Sirius loaded up their trunks onto a couple of trolleys.

"Ready then? I'll go through first," Remus said, ducking into the magic false wall between platforms nine and ten.

"Harry, you're up, looks like we're last," Sirius said, giving Harry a grin and a gentle push. Harry, nervous, almost broke into a run, and by the time he'd reached the barrier --

-- he hit it with enough force for Snake's box -- fortunately without Snake inside it -- to go flying.

"Watch yourself now, young man!" said a station attendant, as he passed, replacing the box atop the trunk. Harry turned to look at Sirius, wide-eyed.

"It's not working!" he said, shoving the trolley against the barrier again.

"Right, I'm sure it's just some kind of a..." Sirius had no idea what it was. "Harry, move aside and let Draco give it a go."

Draco pushed his trolley forward more hesitantly, and when the edge of it met the barrier, it clanked.

"I'm stuck too," he said. Sirius swore under his breath and moved forward to knock on the wall. Solid brick.

"Listen, are you lot coming or not?" Remus demanded, re-emerging from the barrier. "The train's about to leave."

"We can't get through," Harry wailed.

"Can't get through?" Remus reached out to put his hand through the barrier and taught all four children a new swearword when his knuckles cracked unpleasantly against it.

"Something's gone wrong," Sirius said.

"What if we miss the train?" Padma asked Neville, who shook his head in wide-eyed horror.

"You won't miss the train," Sirius reassured her, glancing around and slowly withdrawing his wand from his trouser-pocket. He tapped the bricks with it and muttered a few charms, but the wall wouldn't budge.

"Dobby," Draco said suddenly.

"What?" Remus asked.

"That little -- Mum's house-elf," Draco said. "He was going on and on about me not going back to school. He said he'd stop me if I tried, and I told him I'd like to see him, a little house-elf, stop a Malfoy doing whatever he wanted -- "

"House-elves have powerful magic," Remus said ruminatively, "but they're not allowed to use it without permission -- "

"I don't think Dobby's much of a one for permission," Draco said.

"Either way, this isn't any use," Remus said disgustedly. "It's five past -- the train must have gone."

"We'll miss the feast, too," Padma sulked. "Wish I hadn't waited for you after all."

"It's all right, we'll think of something," Remus reassured her.

"I think I just did," Sirius announced. Remus noticed that he had a distinctly disturbing look in his eye -- the sort he used to get at school right before some unsuspecting Slytherin suffered. "Come on everyone, this way."

"Are we going to floo my parents?" Padma asked.

"We can," Sirius said, as they made for the exit, "But I have a better idea, if you're up for it."

"Is it dangerous?"

Sirius grinned. "It might be."

Padma looked disapproving, but she didn't say anything. Remus was considering possible counterspells in his head; some of them were useful for charmbreaking, but none of them appropriate in the middle of a crowded rail station. Either that or he was going to get them to Hogwarts some other way.

Some other way...

"Arthur's gone and left the keys right in the car," Sirius said. "Shame that. Anyone could nick the thing."

Remus leaned against the car, and glanced at him. After a few seconds, both men smiled widely.

"You drive," Sirius said. "I'm taking the motorbike."

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 6

If any Muggles had been paying particularly close attention -- and if Remus' concealment charms hadn't been so good -- a blue Ford Anglia could have been seen lifting off from the car park near King's Cross station, accompanied by an old but serviceable motorbike. As it was, some very odd noises, rather like the shouts of several excited children, were heard soaring over the heads of pedestrians at around eleven-fifteen that September first.

Once they'd passed the cloud cover, with Sirius pulling his riding leathers up around his face and muttering warming charms to keep from getting frostbite, Remus released the charm and saluted out the window at Sirius.

"That was brilliant," Harry breathed, from the honoured front seat. In the back, Neville and Padma were plastered to the windows, staring out, while Draco, trapped in the middle, looked like he was going to be sick.

"All right back there?" Remus asked, adjusting the rearview mirror so that he could see the backseat, as there was little danger of being tailgated at this altitude, except by attitudinous ducks.

"Are you sure this is all right?" Padma asked. "Move over, Harry, I want to see the view from the front."

"Well, so long as we get you to Hogwarts on time, I don't see that it matters how you get there," Remus replied, though he looked a trifle uneasy. "Don't open your windows, we don't want you falling out if I have to make a sudden turn."

"I'm going to dip down every once in a while," Sirius called, "And track the train, all right?"

"Sounds fine," Remus answered. "Remember your concealment charm."

"Where's the fun in that?" Sirius laughed, and ducked below the clouds. Remus sighed and continued north, by the dashboard compass, until Sirius popped up far away on their left, and beckoned them over.

"Found the tracks!" he shouted. "Hit a goose, I'm afraid, though!"

"Beware of falling poultry," Remus muttered with a grin, dutifully signalling before angling the car towards Sirius.

They caught up to the train around twelve-thirty, and having established that it ran through a small Muggle village on its way to Hogwarts, landed just outside the sleepy little town and drove sedately through until they found a place to stop for lunch. Sirius ran across the road to buy a map

book, and over fish and chips the two men studied it carefully.

"Now I don't expect the railway line to be on here," Sirius said, "but Hogwarts is here," with a stab of finger on paper, "right, or hereabouts?"

"I think it's a bit more north, really," Remus answered.

"Well, anyway, if we head in this direction we're more or less on the right path. So we don't have to follow the train if we don't want to, and this way we'll get there just as everyone's coming up from the station. Grand entrance," Sirius declared. Harry and Neville cheered.

"Do you think that's really wise?" Remus asked.

"We've already stolen a car," Sirius pointed out.

"Borrowed."

"Oooh, I bet Arthur was furious," Sirius mused. "Hope he got home all right."

"Well, without a dozen children and trunks to chaperone, I imagine he could find a nice quiet loo to Apparate from," Remus said, reassuring himself as much as Sirius.

"Well, anyway, we'll fly northwest, yeah? We can cut across where the train takes a bit of a detour, and we'll pick it up near Hogsmeade again. You lads up for another few hours of flying? And lady," Sirius added hastily, glancing at Padma.

"Can't I ride on the motorbike?" Harry asked.

"Two more years," Sirius promised. Harry sighed. "Tell you what, you take the map, and you can navigate."

"All right," Harry said. "But when I turn fourteen you'd better not have sold the motorbike."

"Promise," Sirius said with a grin. "I'll pay up, I think I've still got some Muggle cash on me -- "

"No using Obliviate to cheat the pub out of a meal, Sirius."

"I never would, Prefect," Sirius sing-songed, while Remus began to herd the children back towards the car.

The rest of the trip went more or less smoothly, except for the somewhat expected stir-craziness on the part of the children. Trevor also made a spirited bid for freedom that would have ended the career of the world's first skydiving amphibian with a resounding splatter if Padma hadn't caught him at the last minute. They still hadn't found the train tracks again by early afternoon, and Remus breathed a sigh of relief when Draco spotted the familiar spires of Hogwarts castle, almost

dead ahead.

"Look down," Remus ordered, as they soared over Hogsmeade. "Pretty little place from the air, isn't it?"

"It looks like a toy village," Padma exclaimed, just before they left it behind and began skimming the treetops of the Forbidden Forest.

"Time-check, Harry?"

"Train ought to be just pulling in," Harry replied. "Look -- there it is!"

The Hogwarts Express was standing empty at the platform, and the carriages that took the students from the train to the castle had just disgorged the last of their passengers as the Anglia flew over, low enough for them to see the surprise on the upturned faces watching them. Remus circled the castle once, looking for a decent place to land, before angling low and flat over the grassy hill just past the Quidditch pitch.

"Seat belts, we're about to land," he announced, and the children had just settled in when there was a resounding thump, and the car skidded to a stop on the grass, leaving a muddy track behind it.

"Not the most comfortable landing, but not bad for a first timer," Remus declared, as Sirius brought the motorbike to a perfect two-point landing next to them. "Everyone out, Hogwarts Mini-Express has reached the end of the line."

A swarm of house-elves appeared almost immediately, screeching in shock at the long streaks of uprooted grass Remus had left behind him while landing. Some of the others took control of the trunks, and had soon vanished with them. Denbigh, head of the Kitchen elves and a particular friend of theirs, started to shoo the children towards the door.

"Masters and mistress are so very late!" he squeaked, all but shoving them in the direction of the castle. "The feast has begun! Minerva McGonagall is in a state, sirs and miss!"

"We can't be that late," Remus said. "We saw them going up as we landed."

"Minerva McGonagall is having a letter special express from a Wheezy," Denbigh continued. "About the bloody flying automobile, she is saying. Mistress Padma Patil is being searched high and low for!"

"Bum, we're in for it now," Sirius said, in Remus' ear. "I didn't think about the Patils. Do you suppose we've caused a national wizarding panic?"

"Sounds about your style, yes," Remus answered.

"I didn't drive the car!"

"It was your idea."

They were passing through the front corridor now, towards one of the side-doorways to the Great Hall. Denbigh put a long green finger to what counted, on house-elves, as his lips, and opened the door just enough for them to slip through. They ended up behind a banner at one end of the Ravenclaw table just as McGonagall, a murderous gleam evident in her eye, began wrathfully calling names for the Sorting Hat.

"Well, buck up," Sirius said quietly. "At least if there's hell to pay we'll take the blame. Reckon you can get to your seats without attracting too much attention?"

"Padma can," Harry said, indicating a nearby empty seat. "And Draco and I ought to be able to. Gryffindor's way at the other end though; bad luck," he added to Neville, who gulped. "Look, there's Oliver, you can ask him to move over."

The two adults watched carefully as the children crept into their seats, while the last of the names were being called. Sirius pointed out Tonks, who had keenly noticed Neville sharing half a bench-space with Oliver; if Dumbledore had noticed, and he probably had, he gave no sign.

The Headmaster was just standing to give his usual welcoming speech, when Sirius' focus shifted.

"Hang on, where's McGonagall got to?" he asked, and Remus followed his gaze towards the high table.

"Look, they're missing Snape, too."

"Maybe the bastard finally got himself fired."

"Maybe he's not quite well yet," Remus said, more charitably.

"Maybe he's waiting to find out why four of his students vanished from King's Cross, only to be seen lunching in the company of two disreputable-looking men and a blue Ford Anglia," said a chilly voice behind them.

"Bugger," Sirius said, with emphasis.

"Maybe he's not the only one," came another voice, this time in McGonagall's distinctive brogue. Both men turned to see the two Hogwarts professors, arms crossed, faces masks of annoyance and, in Snape's case, a hint of smug superiority.

"My office," McGonagall snapped. "Now."

"Aren't we a bit old for detention?" Sirius asked. Her mouth tightened into a thin, hard line.

"Right, your office. Just seeing the children safe into the Feast," he added, as they turned to walk down the corridor, towards the stairs.

McGonagall was silent as she led the three men up to her office, and even Snape looked a little nervous about being in a small, enclosed space with an enraged Deputy Headmistress. Once the door was closed, she waved them curtly into chairs, and went to the fireplace, kneeling on it and tossing some floo-powder in. They heard her speak briefly to Sara Patil, who sounded relieved.

"Now that's settled," she said, withdrawing from the fireplace, "I should like to know how two grown men, who give every impression of having finally learned how to behave like responsible members of society, could kidnap four children, steal an automobile, fly willy-nilly across the English countryside, and expect that they'll be able to simply sneak the children into the feast as if nothing had happened?"

Sirius shifted uncomfortably. Remus cleared his throat.

"Well, we didn't exactly fly...willy-nilly," he began. "I mean, we knew where we were -- "

"Not a word to the Patils about where their daughter had gone, not even a note left for Arthur Weasley about that -- that -- "

"Blasted flying car?" Snape suggested, calmly.

"Well, it was the fastest route, and we didn't want the children to be late," Sirius began.

"In that case, Mr. Black, I suggest that next time you get to the platform in a prompt fashion."

"We did try," Remus said, spreading his hands. "The platform portal closed on us. We couldn't very well leave the children there, and flying them seemed the most logical thing to do." He paused. "Now that I come to actually say it...."

"You're supposed to be on my side!" Sirius hissed.

"Do you two actually have any idea how much trouble you've caused? Beyond throwing the Patils into a panic and forcing Arthur Weasley to report his illegal flying car -- "

"He's a very safe driver -- "

"Mr. Black, when I am talking, you are not, is that understood?" McGonagall snapped. Sirius hung his head like any scolded third-year.

"Yes'm," he mumbled.

"We were forced to contact Mr. and Mrs. Tonks, as well, who I may say were less than helpful," McGonagall continued. "Andromeda Tonks in particular didn't seem to think there was anything

to worry about."

"There wasn't," Sirius muttered rebelliously. "Good for her."

"In addition," said Snape, in a somewhat silky, predatory voice, "there is the newspaper to consider."

He tossed a Muggle paper onto the desk in front of them. Remus pulled it towards him.

"UFO sighted over Yorkshire countryside," he read aloud. "Well, at least they don't know what it is."

"Nevertheless, several people had to be...handled by the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office, after reporting that this 'alien spacecraft' appeared to highly resemble an antique motorbike."

"Told you to use better concealment charms," Remus muttered, over Sirius' enraged "Antique! It's called classic, thanks."

"What's this nonsense about not being able to get onto the platform?" McGonagall continued. "If that's what inspired this mad and reckless behaviour, I should like to hear about it, considering I have spent my entire afternoon hearing about how Padma Patil has been kidnapped and what I ought to be doing about it."

"We arrived in plenty of time to catch the train," Remus said, slowly, once it became evident he wouldn't be snapped at for speaking. "I even went through, onto the platform. When Sirius and the children didn't follow, I came back out, and couldn't get in again. We thought it was some kind of prank," he added. "We were concerned that the children would miss the Feast, so we took Arthur's car and flew them here. They were never in the slightest danger; the car has excellent child-safety locks."

McGonagall looked as though she'd like to take issue with what was obviously a flippant finishing statement, but Remus had not been a Prefect for nothing; his delivery was deadpan serious, and it was hard to tell if he'd been joking at all.

"Sorry about the lawns," Remus added. "I'll pay for the grounds repairs. And we'll return the Anglia to Arthur, of course."

"It's being impounded," Snape said smoothly.

"What?" Sirius demanded. "You can't -- "

"It is illegal to enchant a car to fly without a permit. Or a driver's licence," Snape interrupted. "Arthur Weasley has neither. It's out of our hands, I'm afraid."

"You bastard, you didn't have to TELL anyone," Sirius snarled.

"Didn't have to tell anyone that you abducted my students?" Snape asked, pushing himself away from the table he'd been leaning on. "I didn't have to inform authorities that they were being carried without their consent hundreds of miles above the air in an illegal flying vehicle? I'm sure that would have gone over well with the Patils. Yes, Mrs. Patil, we're unaware of your daughter's whereabouts, but we suspect she's in a flying Ford Anglia bound for Hogwarts, and we don't think it's necessary to inform the authorities. Brilliant plan, Black, as usual."

"Are we finished?" Sirius asked McGonagall, doing the one thing that could enrage Snape more than anything else -- ignoring him. "Or am I going to have to scrub Professor Snape's chalkboards?"

"The Headmaster," McGonagall said, choosing each word with care, "has intervened on your behalf, and I understand that, seeing as you did escort the children without harm to their destination, other than the impounding of the automobile no punitive measures will be taken. Unfortunately, in my opinion," she continued, "your motorbike is specially licensed, although you will be required to pay a fine for being seen by Muggles, even if you were taken for an alien spacecraft. What these Muggles imagine they're seeing..." She sighed then, and shook her head. "I believe you should be grateful to the Headmaster for his handling of the situation, and to your cousin Mrs. Tonks for certain strings she has no doubt pulled to keep your motorbike licence from being revoked."

Sirius was opening his mouth to say something, probably something stupid, when there was a high-pitched squeal outside, and McGonagall turned to look out the window.

"Merciful Merlin," she said, as Snape and the other two joined her.

Below, they could see the Anglia's landing-tracks, and in the floodlight from a Lumos Maximus charm, several Aurors in a loose circle around the car. A few of them were pushing themselves up off the ground. All four of the car's doors were open, as well as the trunk and hood, which seemed to be bobbing up and down -- rather like mouths, really. One of the Aurors stepped forward, cautiously, and the car --

The car moved on its own, jerking forward, feinting at the Auror, who backpedaled quickly. There was a revving noise, and the motorbike drove itself into the fray, settling firmly in front of the Anglia's front fender. Sirius swore.

"What on earth...?" Remus asked, as an Auror approached from the back of the car, only to be thrust rudely away. The Anglia's tyres squealed in place, throwing up mud, and its headlamps flashed threateningly.

"It knows what's going on," Sirius said. The Aurors had managed to get some kind of net over its hood that was anchoring it to the ground, but the Anglia wasn't going to give up without a fight.

"It's a car, it doesn't know anything," Remus replied.

"Nobody charmed it to do that," Sirius said, as one of the doors thumped an advancing Auror soundly. "Look, it's the perfect defensive makeup -- it can see you coming from any direction with those mirrors, and if it can't run you over it can thwack you with its doors."

"I'm not interested in the biology of the common Muggle car," Snape growled. "Why don't they just -- "

"Look at it go," Remus said, pointing. The Anglia had shaken off half the net, and was now doing circles almost in place, back tyres anchoring it while the front ones rolled furiously. The Aurors took cover from the sheets of mud and water it was flinging up, and the occasional defensive dodge by the motorbike. When a sufficient swath had been cleared, the motorbike's engine revved, and the Anglia took the hint -- off it went, bumping over the grass and occasionally managing to soar a few inches off the ground before thumping down again. By the time the Aurors had regrouped enough to give chase, it was nothing more than a fading pair of brake lights in the Forbidden Forest.

There was stunned silence for a moment.

"Guess it didn't want to go," Sirius said, solemnly. The motorbike's headlamp flashed a few times, proudly, and then went out as it fell back on its kickstand.

The Flying Car Incident was the talk of the dormitories that night; Draco, painfully shy in the spotlight, hid in the kitchens until lights-out to avoid the attention of his classmates, while the girls who shared a room with Padma all wanted to know how it worked and if she'd been allowed to drive. There was also a significant amount of talk about dashing Mr. Black and his clever valet Mr. Lupin, and how romantic it must be to soar above the clouds in a blue Ford Anglia. Padma ignored it, for the most part, as she arranged Elmo's jar in a little altar next to her bed and made sure he was comfortably stocked with peppers.

Neville was asked to tell the story over and over again, and while Neville was not a gifted storyteller, it didn't really need much embellishment -- especially after Percy Weasley came up to the Gryffindor common room with news that the Anglia had made a daring solo escape into the Forbidden Forest, and the Aurors had given up the chase. Mr. Black was going to have to pay a very large fine, and in addition pay their father back for the car. Ron said it was worth it, and he wished he'd been late too so that he could go with them, and Ginny said wasn't Harry Potter's godfather cool, and the general consensus was that nobody would ever be as cool as Sirius Black, and of course he was a Gryffindor, because that was the sort of brave, cool thing Gryffindors did.

In Slytherin it was a slightly...different story.

Harry Potter had stolen the glory of the new Slytherin first years, had once again consorted openly with other Houses, and -- most importantly -- had gotten to ride in a flying car, which bred

jealousy like nobody's business. The older students envied him and hated themselves for envying him, while the newest students talked unsubtly about how they were going to be the best Slytherin class ever, much better than the last one. Harry finally escaped to the dormitory, where Theo Nott and his hoodlums Crabbe and Goyle cracked their knuckles menacingly while he unpacked his clothes and hid his old soft toy, Frog, in the secret bottom compartment, lest there be talk of Baby Harry and his Stupid Teddy Frog.

The only Slytherin who didn't have some kind of grudge against Harry was, apparently, a small, mousy-haired boy called Creevey, whom all the other Slytherin first-years were pointedly ignoring. Word had gone around that he was Muggle-born, though they didn't use quite so nice a term for it. No-one wanted to associate with a runt who had no family and could not be separated from a camera that was bigger than his head.

The next morning, with the rest of the House sleepy and yawning, was at least a little better; Harry was up before most of them, and was gratified to find Draco and Padma waiting for him in the dining hall for their usual early-morning breakfast. Dora was there too, at the high table, and she winked at Harry over her oatmeal.

"I went past Gryffindor, but Neville said he couldn't find his shoes and I ought to go on without him," Padma said. "Thank you, Denbigh," she added, as the house-elf set a plate of fried bread near her elbow.

"He needs some kind of charm," Draco said thoughtfully.

"Who, Denbigh?"

"No, I mean Neville. Something that just somehow attaches everything he owns to him. There's got to be some kind of 'find-it' spell. How do you lose your shoes?"

"You put them in a very safe place," Neville sighed, hurrying up and sliding onto the bench next to Padma. "Sorry. Is there any sausage -- oh, there it is," he added, helping himself to some of Harry's with a grin. Harry mimed stabbing his hand with a fork.

They were just finishing up their meals as other students began to appear, and they were forced to go their separate ways; Padma took a book out of her bag and began to read at one end of the Ravenclaw table, while Draco joined a group of Hufflepuff second-years who were racing tarantulas. Harry sauntered over to the Slytherin table, sitting near the door so that he could be off once he got his morning owl post and class schedule.

A flashbulb popped just as he sat down, and the world was full of purple splotches for a moment; when his vision cleared he found himself confronted by the Creevey kid from the night before.

"What'd you do that for?" he demanded, reaching out to take the camera from the boy. Creevey jumped back.

"I like taking pictures," he said uncertainly. "And you're Harry Potter, aren't you? I hear you can get them developed so that they move, is that true?"

"Not me in particular," Harry scowled, then grabbed the camera when Creevey raised it to take another picture. "There's no picture-taking in the Great Hall, all right?"

"Really?" Creevey asked, wide-eyed. Harry had no clue whether picture-taking in the Great Hall was allowed or not, but a Slytherin takes his opportunities where he finds them.

"Not at all," he said promptly. "Not in the dormitories either. Might catch someone naked, you know."

"Gosh."

"Or in classrooms," Harry said, handing the camera back. "You take a picture of Professor McGonagall and she'll bite you."

Creevey looked terrified and scuttled away.

"Oi, Potter, didn't you know only fourth-years and up are allowed to terrorise the firsties?" said a voice, and Harry grinned as Oliver passed on the way to the Gryffindor table.

"I thought that rule was about bullying Gryffindors!" he called after Oliver, who offered the two-fingered salute over his shoulder. McGonagall, passing out class schedules by table, caught the older boy by the ear and led him along for a few paces before releasing him.

Owls began to swoop in through the windows, carrying letters, packages, newspapers, magazines, and various other odds and ends for the students. Hedwig landed in front of Harry, looking as though she'd flown all night, and dropped a slim envelope addressed in Remus' handwriting on the table before flapping off to the Owlery. Harry, intrigued, slit it open and shook out a letter and a newspaper article inside.

Dear Harry, the letter read, Good luck on your first day of classes. We're thinking of you. Thought you'd enjoy this article from the early edition. If Sirius ever stops getting into trouble, we'll know he's died. We're home safe -- we took the train -- so write and let us know how you are. Love, Remus.

Harry flattened the folded Prophet article, and began to read.

NEWS OF THE NATION -- HOGSMEADE

WP -- Rumours abound that Sirius Black, the last male heir to the Black family legacy and debonair wizard-about-town, has been charged by Aurors with several criminal acts. Sources

report that Black has been charged with Operating a Magically Altered Muggle Artifact; Detection by Muggles, Grade Three; and Illegal Use of Muggle Airspace. His companion, Remus J. Lupin, has also been charged with a lesser count of Operating a Magically Altered Muggle Artifact in connection with these events.

If convicted, both men face fines totalling nearly a hundred Galleons, and a maximum of thirty days in Azkaban prison. It is unlikely, however, that Sirius Black, a well-connected man highly capable of paying even the most severe fine, will see the inside of Azkaban Prison anytime soon. Mr. Lupin, facing a lesser charge, may have his case dismissed for lack of evidence, the "uttomobile" having been hidden from Auror detection for the moment. Apparently the owner of the Muggle "uttomobile" involved, Mr. A. Weasley, has declined to press charges of theft.

The department of Magical Law Enforcement declined to comment on the likelihood of locating the uttomobile.

"Psst! Harry!" Padma said, leaning back across the aisle. "What're you reading?"

"Nothing," Harry answered, folding up the article and stuffing it into his pocket. "Just a letter from Remus."

"Get your schedule yet?"

"Yeah -- what've you got next?"

"Potions. You?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts. Astronomy with you, night after tomorrow," Harry answered.

"Telescope partners?"

"Sure," Harry grinned. Padma matched it before turning around to copy her schedule onto a notecard for her pocket.

It was good to be back.

Copperbadge
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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 7

Neville caught up with Harry on their way to Defence class, the two boys walking democratically between the Gryffindors, shoving and rough-housing behind them, and the Slytherins, slouching along disdainfully ahead. Theo Nott had decided to lead the rest of the Slytherins, but Harry didn't need to be in front; he could afford to let Theo think he was number one, until he needed to prove otherwise.

"You think it's going to be weird?" Harry asked, over the shouts of the other students.

"What, having Dora as a teacher?"

"Professor Tonks."

"Right, right," Neville looked determined, as though remembering to call his foster-sister Professor was a major hurdle to overcome. Knowing Neville's memory, perhaps it was; Harry saw the Remembrall bracelet on Neville's wrist, mostly hidden under his sleeve, and grinned a little. "I guess it might. She's always bossing me around at home, though, so I don't think it'll be all that different."

Harry laughed. "Think she'll be any good?"

"Sure, why wouldn't she?" Neville asked, defensively.

"No reason, Longbottom, don't get all upset," Harry said, as they ducked into the classroom. He looked away from Neville, eyes scanning the room for Dora -- Professor Tonks -- but she was nowhere to be seen.

Professor Snape was standing at the front of the class, instead, scowling at the Gryffindors as they poured noisily inside. The Slytherins smirked at each other and took seats in the front rows. The Gryffindors barely hid their dismay as they piled into the back rows, and Harry got separated from Neville by Crabbe, who wanted to sit next to Snape's favourite.

"Silence, please," Snape drawled, eyes scanning the classroom. They settled on Harry for a minute, and Harry looked at Neville suddenly; Neville's face was split in a hugely amused grin.

Snape's eyes were the wrong colour.

"If you do not stop fidgeting, Longbottom, I will deduct ten points from Gryffindor," he snapped, and Neville tried his hardest to put on an appropriate poker face. "Professor Tonks, regrettably, cannot attend to her duties today. You find that funny, Mr. Potter?"

"No, sir," Harry replied, promptly wiping the smile from his face as well.

"Good. Now -- "

Snape paused in apparent surprise. The class was staring. One lock of his short black hair had turned bright pink.

There was a slow titter of laughter from the Gryffindors as another, on the other side of his head, popped up vivid purple. The crown of his head suddenly turned blond.

"What on earth -- " Snape stuttered, as his hair became a rainbow of garish bright colours. "LONGBOTTOM!"

Neville had broken down into laughter. He tried to pretend to cringe as the rainbow-haired Snape bore down on him, but it was useless; as Snape ordered him out of his seat, the rest of the Gryffindors and most of the Slytherins were laughing, and Snape's face had turned choleric red.

"LONGBOTTOM, STOP THIS INSTANT!" Snape roared, as his nose began to change. "If you do not CEASE THIS AT ONCE I shall -- "

All of a sudden his voice was softer, much more feminine, and his face had changed dramatically. Nymphadora Tonks stood before Neville, laughing helplessly herself as her hair returned to a sober auburn shade.

"-- be forced to reveal who I really am," she finished, with a grin. "All right, you lot, settle down," she added, as the Slytherins began to grumble and the Gryffindors laughed among themselves. She made her way back to the front of the room, still wearing Snape's usual dour black, though she filled it out a little differently than before.

"Good morning to you all," she said. "As you may have guessed, I am Professor Tonks," she said, as she flicked her wand at the chalkboard. A piece of chalk lifted itself up into the air and began to write her name on the board. Her last name only, Harry noticed. Not that he blamed her.

"I am your new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, and what I have just shown you is actually a little test for your first morning. Oh, come on now," she said, as the students universally groaned. "You're not going to be graded on it." She leaned back on the desk at the front of the classroom, and crossed her arms. "How many of you knew it wasn't Snape right before I changed?"

There was an awkward silence. They stared at her, and she sighed.

"Come on, hands up! How many of you knew? I'm not going to bite," she said sternly. Almost every hand went up, except for Crabbe, who was looking a few minutes behind events.

"All right, how many of you knew it wasn't Snape when I started berating Neville?"

Many of the hands dropped.

"And how many of you knew when my hair first went pink?"

Four hands were still in the air -- Theo's, Harry's, Neville's, and Ron's.

"Now. How many of you knew before that?"

Harry fought the overwhelming urge to drop his hand, but he kept it up. Neville, apparently taking courage from him, did the same. She nodded.

"Neville and Harry, as many of you are probably going to protest, already know me. How did you know, Neville?"

"Snape's eyes are darker," Neville stammered.

"Harry?"

"Same," Harry answered.

"Neville and Harry noticed this because they know I'm a metamorphmagus," Dora said, as the chalk wrote out the complicated term on the board. There was a rustle of paper and quills as people scrambled to begin taking notes, and she looked startled for a minute before continuing. "For those of you who don't know, metamorphmagery is a rare magical condition -- some call it a birth defect -- where a person is able to alter their body, to a certain extent. This is not to say that they are perfectly able to imitate people. As Neville pointed out, I got Professor Snape's eyes wrong. I don't know most of you, so I couldn't pick on you by name, as Professor Snape might have done. Not," she added hastily, eyes sweeping the room, "that Professor Snape picks on people, I'm sure."

Another quiet murmur of amusement.

"The key to detecting an imposter, as with all defence, is observing actions and identifying threats. Constant vigilance, as one of my old teachers at the Auror academy says. What I am going to be teaching you, this year, is a combination of observational skill and magical knowledge, so that when you get out in the real world you're prepared to defend yourself. Merlin forbid you have to."

Harry glanced around. The rest of the class was still watching her, intently, and she looked a little anxious under the sudden focus of twenty-odd sets of eyes.

"Uhm. With that in mind," she continued, "we're going to start the class off with a little discussion of ancient defensive magic, and at the end, if there's time, I'll give you a practical demonstration. Who can tell me what an apotropaic is?"

Hermione Granger's hand shot up. Harry rolled his eyes.

"An ancient defensive amulet like a picture of a dog or a demon's head," she said, when Dora pointed at her.

"Well....yes and no. It is an ancient defensive amulet, but it took many forms. Some of which you'll be discussing when you're much older," Dora said. "Today we're going to be discussing one of the most common, which is the Gorgon. Yes, Miss..."

"Granger, ma'am."

"Miss Granger?"

"Like Medusa, professor?"

"Yes, like Medusa. Take five points for Gryffindor," Tonks said. "Who can tell me who Medusa was? Not you, Miss Granger."

Theo raised his hand. "She had snakes on her head."

"Snakes as hair, all right, what else?"

Theo looked thoughtful. "Turned people to stone?"

"And five for Slytherin."

"And she was really ugly," Theo added.

"Not always, which leads us to the lecture," Tonks said, flicking her wand at the chalkboard. It moved and stretched, as though something was pushing against it, until finally a face popped out in relief, a sad-looking woman with a broad face, rich frowning lips, heavy eyelids and thick curly hair.

"This is also a face of Medusa, from Italy, dating to probably about twenty-five hundred years ago," she began. "The Greeks hung the face of Medusa on temple walls and the gates of their homes, as protection against evil..."

Sept. 2, 1992

Long, Draughnout, Payne & Assc.

President Andrew Wotton, Broosh & Chakle Studios:

The law firm of Long, Draughnout, Payne, & Associates have been retained to make certain

inquiries into the nature of your studio and in particular all charms, spells, hexes, potions, and magical devices used in your patented Dorian Gray portraiture process. Our client, who wishes to remain anonymous, has requested information concerning their possible effects on unusual magical persons.

If you would please forward any and all information concerning the Dorian Gray process and its effects on Animagi, Werewolves, Metamorphmagi, and magical pets such as Kneazles and Salamanders, our client would be much obliged. We will of course sign any confidentiality agreements you require, understanding that you prefer to protect your business interests. We will not disclose any details of the process itself to our client, but rather make a recommendation to said client based upon the information you provide.

You are of course under no obligation to disclose any of the information requested. However, our client has authorized payment of your usual per diem consulting fee, to compensate for your expenditure of time in this matter. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via Owl or Floo, or to arrange a meeting in person.

Yrs,
Llewellyn Payne, Esq.

It had been a long day for Dora Tonks. Between her first day of teaching, the many layers of the costume she'd been wearing, and the frequent body-shifts, she was nearly exhausted. It had, however, also been worth it, she felt. She'd captivated the OWLs-level classes with advanced hexes for them to gnaw on, and gotten on the good side of most of the lower years with her Snape impression. If she could just get the NEWTs students in the special Friday class to accept her...

"Good afternoon, Professor Tonks," Minerva McGonagall said, as she walked into the staff room. Dora, from where she lay sprawled in one of the squashy easy chairs near the windows, grinned and waved in greeting.

"Professor McGonagall," she said, in a carefully respectful voice with just a hint of good humour. McGonagall smiled back, which had been enough of a rarity during her school years that she was still getting used to it as a professor.

"Did you have a good first day?" the older woman asked, pouring herself a cup of tea and stirring it with her wand to warm it.

"Brilliant," Dora answered, enthusiastically. "Now if I could just get up the energy to move..."

McGonagall settled into a chair nearby, and sipped her tea. "It is a little wearing at first. You'll get used to it in time. I heard about your opening lectures from many of my students -- quite a brilliant stroke, a good practical lesson."

"Good," Dora said, "because I'm going to be impersonating you in all of tomorrow's lessons."

McGonagall chuckled into her tea. "I shall have to lend you a hat appropriate to the occasion. I hope you didn't do anything unseemly in the guise of Professor Snape."

"Nothing worse than berating Neville, which I hear he does enough of," she answered. "And I've signed an agreement with Dumbledore not to change while I'm here, except in the cause of education."

"Well, I can't say I blame him. A less scrupulous person might go about collecting gossip and making trouble in the guise of other people. You were always a very honest young woman, however, and I'm certain -- "

She was interrupted by the door to the staff room banging against the wall as someone threw it open rudely. Severus Snape, normally sallow face pale with rage, loomed in the entryway.

"Oh, do come in, Severus," McGonagall said. "Young Dora and I were just -- "

"I beg your pardon, Deputy Headmistress, but would it be possible for Professor Tonks and myself to have a word in private?" he asked, voice tightly controlled. McGonagall gave Tonks a "better you than me" look as she stood.

"I'm not certain I ought, Severus," she answered. "You look rather -- "

"We aren't children, and we don't require a babysitter," he snapped. His gaze fell on Dora. "One of us isn't, anyway."

"Now, Professor Snape -- "

"Professor McGonagall, with all due respect, this is not your concern."

McGonagall set her tea down and put her hands on her hips. "I'm not sure you're quite old enough yet to tell me what is and is not my concern, Severus. It's clear -- "

"It's all right," Dora said, finally finding her voice in the face of Snape's towering wrath. She'd lived through seven years of it when he was her professor, and now that she had a certain right to talk back to him, as a colleague, she found she was itching for the chance. "Professor Snape and I can discuss things like civilised human beings, I'm sure."

McGonagall looked slightly surprised, but she picked up her tea, nodded at Dora, gave Snape a warning look, and brushed past him, closing the door behind her as she left. There was a moment of painful silence.

"How dare you?" he demanded finally. "I had my reservations about your appointment to this position long before you arrived, and now I see them fully justified. Impersonating a professor -- "

"I am a professor," she answered, not rising from her chair.

"Impersonating another person for the purposes of amusing your classes is an outrage to the dignity of this institution!" he roared.

"It wasn't a comedy routine -- "

"Oh? It wasn't? The entire school discussing me with ridiculous -- pink -- hair!" He could barely get the words out, his dignity was so affronted. "I suppose that wasn't intended to be amusing at all?"

"It was intended to prove a point, and if you haven't even bothered to ask why I did it, you shouldn't go poking your nose in -- "

"Outrageous child!" he shouted. "How dare you impersonate me without asking permission?"

"I wasn't aware I had to have my lessons plans checked by -- "

"A person whose face you're wearing? Are you really so incredibly idiotic?" His voice dropped. "No. Of course you aren't. You knew precisely what the effect on those children would be, and you didn't ask me because you knew I would say no."

"I didn't think you'd care!" she blurted. "Professor McGonagall thought it was clever!"

"So I am now the laughingstock of the staff as well as the children?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "Well done. You've succeeded where a generation of schoolchildren have failed. This isn't Twelve Grimmauld Place," he continued, before she could get a word in edgewise. "This is Hogwarts, and while we are here I am not your parents' friend. I am a professor, senior to yourself by many, many years, and I deserve the respect of that position. I do not deserve to be mocked behind my back!"

"I wasn't mocking you! I was making a point!" she retorted.

"Yes, and a fine point you've made," he growled. "Stay out of my way, and if you so much as colour your hair black, I will ensure that you are removed from your position for irresponsible negligence."

"Professor -- "

He was gone too quickly for her to explain or even apologise. She realised she was shaking, and cursed herself; she'd taken on warlocks a lot tougher than Severus Snape, but they hadn't been her professor or the quiet, sardonic man her parents had over to dinner every few weeks. She'd thought he might be amused; she was used to his dour demeanor, but he did smile once in a while,

and she hadn't hoped for anything more emotional than a tight-lipped smile and a nod of acknowledgement over dinner.

There was a soft click as McGonagall let herself back into the staff room. She resumed her seat across from Dora, and waited patiently for the younger woman to gather her wits about her.

"I could have stayed," the older woman said, finally.

"No, then he would have just shouted at me with witnesses," Dora answered. "I didn't think he'd be so angry."

"To be frank, neither did I, and I know him much better than you do," McGonagall replied. "As much as he confides in anyone, I suppose, he confides in me. It's his pride, you know. I think he's terribly afraid the children will realise someday that he's not omnipotent, and when they do, he won't be able to control them." She smiled. "I remember when he started teaching his greatest fear was that he'd be like old Metterley -- Metterley taught Defence Against the Dark Arts, you know, when Severus was a student. He wasn't good at keeping his classes under control -- he wasn't a very bright man, really, and Severus, unfortunately, was. He ran circles around most of his professors."

"Not you, I bet," Dora said with a small smile.

"Certainly not me," McGonagall agreed.

"So I guess I should stick to impersonating famous people, and keep away from professors?"

"I certainly don't mind. I've always wondered what I'd look like with purple hair," McGonagall said, and Dora couldn't help grinning.

"Come by my class tomorrow after breakfast and find out," she replied.

At least if she had to get shouted at on her first day of teaching, it hadn't been Professor McGonagall.

Sept 4, 1992
Broosh & Chakle Studios

Dear Mr. Payne,

I have been appointed by President Wotton to address the inquiries your client has made through your offices and forward all information you have requested. I am inclosing a standard confidentiality agreement signed by all clients before they undergo the process. However, I can provide some preliminary information to you at the moment.

The process has not been known to work on magical creatures at all, to discount the second part of your inquiry; usually, if the client requires that their beloved Fluffy be included, it is added in regular magical paint after the portrait is completed. It will show all the signs of a normal magical painting, but will not age nor will it preserve the magical pet in question.

To the best of my knowledge, as a portraitist with the Studio for a number of years, we have never attempted a portrait with an Animagus; as I'm sure you know, they are quite rare. In 1962 we did successfully handle a Metamorphmagus, although they were required not to shift their features or bodies at all for the duration of the sittings, which your client may be aware takes several weeks. An inconvenience, perhaps, but not impossible. I would imagine the same restriction would apply to an Animagus, as the conditions are remarkably similar according to my research.

Having confirmed these two items with the studio's records, I can also report that we have never knowingly dealt with a Werewolf in this particular process. Werewolves being more common than either Animagi or Metamorphmagi, it is possible that we have done so unknowingly; however, as they have distinctive differences in their transformative qualities, I can name three or four issues with completing the portrait right off the bat. None are insurmountable, especially with the assistance of the Werewolf in question.

I must admit that I would be terribly excited to work with any of the abovementioned Magical Persons, and if required could handle the portrait myself, without disclosing their particular unusual status in the Studio's recordkeeping; we pride ourselves on the discretion we employ. Especially if your client is a werewolf, I would like to arrange an interview with him or her. To that end, I have included a mutual nondisclosure clause in the document, ensuring that I, as the artist, will not betray your client's magical status. All the usual punitive damages and magical punishments apply.

If you require more information on the process itself, I have been authorised to answer any and all questions you may have, by owl or in person, upon receiving the return of the signed confidentiality form.

Sincerely,

Helena Broosh
Senior Journeyman Portraitist
Broosh & Chakle Studios

Sirius was never comfortable in his solicitor's office; Llewellyn Payne was a kind, elderly man, an incongruous choice for his parents, but beneath that twinkling eye and wispy-hair lurked the mind of a criminal genius and a chess master rolled into one. Still, he was the soul of discretion and tact with his clients, and Sirius wouldn't have had a clue how to go about finding a new solicitor anyway.

"Ah, Mr Black," Payne said, taking a large black portfolio out of his bottom desk drawer. "I imagine you'll be wanting to see your quarterly investment numbers? I've had your accountants --"

"Uh, no, actually," Sirius said, hesitantly. "I made the appointment for another reason entirely."

"Oh? I hope you've not landed yourself into some new legal trouble. My clerks have had quite the time dealing with your little automotive mishap," Payne chuckled.

"No, I...ah...well, I didn't actually make this appointment under my own name," Sirius admitted.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Black?"

"I, um, made it under another name. I'm the one, Mr. Canis, I owled you anonymously with the inquiry about Broosh & Chakle studios."

Payne stared at him for a while, blinking, before composing himself.

"I see," he said. "Are you perhaps planning on a gift for your young cousin? Miss Tonks, I believe, the Metamorphmagus?"

"Well...listen, I know all about legal confidentiality," Sirius said, leaning close. "And there's privileged information, and then there's Privileged information. I've seen a lot of people slip things out without seeming to."

Payne smiled at him. "Mr Black, not to be crude, but there is a reason lawyers are often compared to a certain class of working woman. It has always been my policy that I am paid to be intelligent, tactful, and silent. My loyalty to those who do not pay me is bought with friendship, but my loyalty to those who keep me on retainer is absolute. If you are a werewolf, Mr Black, the one person in the world you may be sure will never betray your confidence is sitting before you."

"Oh -- Merlin -- no," Sirius stammered. "I mean, I am asking about werewolves, but I'm not one personally."

"I see."

"I'm...are you sure you can't tell anyone if I've committed a crime?"

"I dearly hope you haven't murdered anyone, Mr Black, but even if you have -- "

"I'm an unregistered Animagus," Sirius blurted. Payne raised a white eyebrow. "I've never been authorised to even conduct the ritual required for the transformation."

Payne pursed his lips. "Yes, I believe that breaks -- "

"Eight separate Ministry laws, I looked it up once."

"Nine, if you count the law passed last year against impersonating animals in public. Presuming you have," Payne said thoughtfully. "Ranging in penalties from small fines through imprisonment in Azkaban, if I'm not mistaken. Is this a recent development?"

"Er...no. It happened when I was fifteen."

For the first time in all the years he'd known Payne, the solicitor looked astonished. Sirius stared down at the desk, as if he'd been chided. Closing his mouth with an audible click, Payne shuffled papers on his desk while he gathered his thoughts.

"Well, certainly -- you've read the letter, I forwarded it on to the address that you, er, Mr Canis gave me -- certainly you could approach Broosh & Chakle without revealing your unique status. Although you would not be allowed to become...a...?"

"Dog," Sirius muttered.

"A dog, good heavens, I expected a panther or something," Payne said. Sirius suspected he was being teased.

"There's, um, more."

"Mr Black, are you attempting to give me a heart attack?"

Sirius grinned at him. "Um, my friend, Remus Lupin -- "

"Oh, yes, I believe we've met once or twice. Tall, brown-haired man?"

"That's him. Listen, if I tell you something about him, is that confidential too?"

"I shall be silent as the grave," Payne assured him.

"He's a werewolf."

"Ah. That does muddy the waters," Payne said, after a contemplative moment. "Would he be willing to meet with the studio representative to discuss options?"

"I haven't actually told him I've made the inquiry yet."

"And you'd like my advice?"

"I...I guess, yes."

Payne steepled his fingers, thoughtfully. "Clearly you're contemplating a portrait for Mr Lupin as well as yourself."

"I thought one together, perhaps."

Payne lifted one eyebrow. Sirius flushed.

"You're rather full of secrets, Mr Black. It must be a relief to get a few of them off your chest."

Sirius was silent.

"In that case," Payne continued, "I would certainly advise you to speak with Mr Lupin before taking further steps. Under the confidentiality contract, he would be protected, and Ms Broosh certainly seems to be of a tolerant disposition, but ultimately the decision to admit to someone -- anyone -- that he is a werewolf rests with Mr Lupin. I would not," he added, "inform him that you have shared that information with me."

"No, you're right," Sirius murmured. "Thank you for your time."

"You pay for it," Payne pointed out, with a smile. "If I may, Mr Black -- as I recall your current will entitles Mr Lupin, as executor, to the vast majority of your estate, with significant portions also going to Ms Tonks and her family. May I suggest a specific clause stating that your young ward, Master Potter, is to be placed in his custody in the event of your untimely death? With a subclause stating that no infirmity, condition, or legal infraction shall prevent the letter of the will from being carried out? Otherwise, of course, young Master Potter becomes a ward of the Tonkses, which may in some ways be preferable."

Sirius nodded eagerly. "I, ah, oh yes -- I'll have to get his permission -- I'm sure he'll agree."

Payne smiled and began shuffling paper again as Sirius let himself out, barely looking where he was going until he was back on the street again.

Well, he'd told Payne and hadn't died. Perhaps, if this artist Payne was in contact with could keep a secret...

Copperbadge
FanficAuthors.net

Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 8

This is where they keep the magic.

There's always the chance, after all, that someone might be innocent, and plenty of people serve their time in Azkaban and survive it, even if they're never the same afterwards. They don't snap the wands of prisoners, whether or not they're serving life-sentences. They bring them here.

Only when someone dies is the wand disposed of, in a careful manner, by a trained expert. The current Ollivander, of the generations who have owned Ollivander's, has both provided and destroyed the wands for many of Azkaban's residents.

Among those he'd supplied, and those he had every expectation of disposing of, was the wand of Lucius Malfoy. Ten inches, Yew with a core of unicorn hair. Ollivander found this whimsical, as the boy himself looked vaguely like a unicorn: a pale-haired, inquisitive, and calm child, so very calm that Ollivander had peered into the boy's eyes to make sure he wasn't...damaged, somehow. There had been a keen intelligence there, but also an upsetting coolness of emotion. There was no hint of mercy in those eyes, even when he was eleven. That he should be a murderer had not shocked Ollivander.

This is the room where they keep the wands of the condemned, row upon row of cubicles lined in velvet, a name and the Azkaban serial number etched on the glass front of each small case. Some are empty; not nearly all are full, but enough are occupied that a wizard, on entering, would feel a chill down his spine. A wand is a part of one; seeing this room is like seeing a roomful of extracted teeth, carefully labeled and preserved. It is deep in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic, accessed by an unassuming little door labeled "storeroom."

(Real storerooms are never actually labeled that.)

And several floors up, a rat has crept into the Ministry and is beginning what he knows will be a long series of tests against the magical wards placed around the room of wands.

Remus finally made the appointment for his examination at St Mungo's in mid-September. It was the Ministry's not-terribly-subtle way of keeping tabs on werewolves, and though Sirius offered to come along, he didn't want Sirius there, hovering and making a fuss. He'd rather just quietly get it over with. Sirius was bound to raise hell if he had to actually see what werewolves underwent on the medical end, and he couldn't come into the private evaluation anyway. It was easiest for all concerned if he simply had the row ahead of time and convinced Sirius to meet him for lunch afterwards.

Not that he was ever very hungry. The whole process was humiliating, and even looking forward

to the friendly, scatter-brained company of his official evaluator, Rubin, didn't do much to assuage that.

The medical examination passed without incident; blood, hair, and saliva samples, a detailed history of the last three years' worth of Changes, physical appearance documentation including scars (plenty of those), and the tolerance tests. Remus hated that part more than anything, even stripping down for the physical appearance photographs. Technically the tolerance tests were supposed to measure how close he was to "feral" by exposing him to increasing doses of silver; a nasty side effect was that it also tested his tolerance for pain.

Finally, tired and nursing three bandaged burns on the back of his hand, he walked down the corridor to the evaluation office with something approaching relief. Seth Rubin was a friend of Moody's and had known Remus since he was a child; he'd treated him not only through the incident at school with Severus, but through the scheduled Ministry-required checkups and a brief but memorable flip-out when he was nineteen. He knew everything -- the lycanthropy, obviously, but also about the weird, sometimes prescient dreams, and his feelings for Sirius back before, long before, Sirius himself had known about them.

"Come in!" the Healer called when Remus knocked, and he let himself into the unchanging office full of files, some of them charmed to float in the air for lack of desk space. "Eleven o'clock...must be Remus Lupin."

"Hello, Seth," Remus called, pushing a floating pile of files to one side. A small, tidy-looking man beamed up at him from where he was scrawling notes on a Muggle yellow legal pad.

"Have a seat. I've been waiting rather impatiently for this meeting," the man said with a grin. "You had such exciting things to tell me, three years ago, and then you up and disappeared until last year..."

Remus nodded. "I'm sure you heard about Harry."

"One can hardly avoid it," the Healer said with a smile, passing a sheet of parchment across the desk. "That's your official certification of continuing stability. I thought we might as well get the formalities out of the way."

"Er..." Remus scanned down the questionnaire that Rubins was supposed to administer. "It's filled out."

"Stupid, pointless things," Seth said agreeably, leaning forward. "Only someone who has never had contact with a werewolf would ask if you had come to terms with the fact that you turn into a hairy slavering beast once a month."

"Oh." Remus gave him a slightly confused look. "You never did this before."

"You rarely had anything you needed to discuss, before," Seth replied. "Other than what's on that

questionnaire."

"And I do now?"

The Healer leaned back in his chair. "Well, you've been raising a child, and the last time we spoke there was the issue of a relationship..."

"Oh...Sirius. Yes." Remus coughed. "Er...yes. Raising Harry. That's going well."

Seth grinned. "In your own time, Lupin. If you don't want to talk, I won't make you. Tell you what, play you two games of Exploding Snap while you tell me all about Harry, and you ought to be right on schedule for discharge."

Forty minutes later, Sirius sniffed the air as Remus emerged from the hospital, pulling on his coat.

"It smells like sulfur," he said. "What do they DO to you in there?"

"Relaxation technique," Remus answered with a grin, as Sirius straightened the collar of his coat. They were careful, in public; more careful than either of them wanted to be, but there was a lot at stake. The Wizarding World took as well to two men kissing as it did to publicly-acknowledged werewolves. Sirius had begun fussing with his clothing as a sort of substitute affectionate gesture, and Remus rather enjoyed it. "Where are we going for lunch?"

"Actually, we're meeting someone," Sirius said. "My solicitor."

"Ah yes, the Payne," Remus said with a grin. "Business lunch?"

"Yeah, there are one or two things I need to talk to you about before we meet. Er, I'm making you Harry's legal guardian if I die."

Remus frowned. "Can we do that? Does Payne know about...me? I mean, if you're doing it without his knowledge, it'd never stand up in court."

Sirius gave him a guilty look. "I did sort of mention the situation. But -- " he added anxiously, " -- but he knows about me, too, about the animagery, I mean, and about us."

"Us?" Remus asked with a grin.

"He's really very confidential."

"Should be, for what you pay him," Remus sighed. "He knows a way around the laws?"

"He seems to."

"I'm not so sure I'm happy with you telling him about me, but we can have a shouting match about it later."

"I sort of had to, for the other thing."

Remus raised his eyebrows. "There's another thing?"

"Yeah. You remember the Dorian Gray portrait thing?"

"The letter you got?"

"I was thinking about doing it."

Remus grinned. "Vanity, thy name is Sirius. This year is a good look for you, I think."

"I want you to have it done with me."

At that point, Remus blinked in shock and, distracted, walked into a lamppost.

The first few days of school went quietly enough, and they were well into the third week by the time Snape stopped Harry as he was leaving Potions class and asked if he could have a word with him that evening. Harry, who had been expecting this, went back to his rooms after dinner and fetched the Quidditch playbook he'd been working on all summer, when he wasn't out with his friends or socialising with the snakes at the bottom of the garden. He assumed Snape had probably been giving him time to finish it at school, without wanting to seem like he had. Harry was keen on Quidditch, though, and if he couldn't play it, making up new plays was the next best thing.

"You've anticipated my request, I see," Snape said, looking up from his desk as Harry entered with the playbook folder under one arm. "Settling into your second year?"

"Yes, sir."

"Gryffindor has already begun practice."

"Yes, sir, Oliver Wood has had to train some new players."

"A good excuse."

Harry smiled a little at the sour expression on Snape's face. "I thought it might be better if you told Captain Flint that he was lagging, Professor. I don't think he wants to hear it from me."

Snape gave him a sharp look. "I'd like you to present your new plays, please."

Harry opened the playbook and turned it around so that Snape could peruse them. "I didn't know what you wanted specifically, so I wrote three plays for Seekers and two formations for coordinated offence," he explained.

"Offence?" Snape asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, when I was playing last year, it looked like nobody changed much," Harry explained. "I mean, the Seekers fly low and high a lot, but mostly the rest of the players stay on a level with the hoops, even midfield. Nobody's really making use of the full space. If a player...here, I drew pictures, but it doesn't help much..." Harry flipped to the first play, and Snape looked down at the page, dismayed. It was covered in notes and scribbles. Harry had copied it out four times, but it was frustrating to discuss a three-dimensional game in two dimensions.

"I did the best I could," Harry said. Snape continued to examine the page, fingers drifting here and there over the notes, until finally he rose and went to the bookshelf behind his desk. He took down a thick book with "Quidditch Practical Guide" in gold on the black calfskin binding, and opened it flat on his desk.

To Harry's delight, it wasn't a book at all -- it was a platform from which six golden hoops sprung, a Quidditch pitch in miniature. Fourteen little figures rose up, half black and half white, along with four dots of light -- two blue, one green, and one gold.

"Show me," Snape said. "Use your wand to guide the players."

Harry, fascinated, prodded one of the little black figures with his wand, and it stuck to the player's robe so that he could move it about. He placed the Keepers at either end, the Seekers, Beaters, Bludgers, and Snitch out of the way, and the six Chasers closely clustered at one goal.

"If a player gets the Quaffle," he said, attaching the little green point of light to one of the black players, near the black goal, "He generally either shoots straight through the crowd, or he passes. Sometimes he'll rise up a little -- " he stuck the player to the end of his wand and drew it along, over the heads of the other figures, " -- but that's considered sort of arrogant, right?"

"Generally," Snape said, reservedly. "It looks like trick-playing. Flying circles around the other team."

"But the problem is, nine times out of ten, if you get the Quaffle, you're going to lose it within ten seconds."

"The Chaser's Median. You've been researching."

"Yes, sir." Harry leaned forward, dragging the player back where he'd been. "But if you can break away from the crowd, in any direction, you've got a good chance of keeping hold of the Quaffle long enough to get in scoring range."

Snape was silent, waiting for him to continue. Harry, carefully, tipped the player's broomstick up in a flyover feint, and then dropped player and broomstick straight down, executing a backwards move in a vertical plane.

One black eyebrow lifted.

"If I may," Snape said, and Harry sat back. Snape took out his own wand and re-set the figures, then flicked his wand over the entire arrangement. The players burst into motion, and he watched for several seconds. Finally, the tip of his wand, hovering over the playing area, dipped. The player Harry had demonstrated with executed the move flawlessly, and sped towards the goal while half the players shot upwards and the other half collided with each other in confusion.

"Seems to work," Harry said, a little proudly.

"Indeed. Did you have much assistance with it?"

"Assistance?" Harry asked, confused.

"From your godfather."

"Well...we talked about it..." Harry said. "I didn't cheat!"

"I'm not implying you did. This is...very reminiscent of his playing style, that's all," Snape said.

"Is it all right?"

Snape closed the Quidditch Practical, and steepled his fingers over it, resting his hawklike nose against his knuckles.

"I'd like to examine the other plays, if I may -- I'm fairly sure I can re-create them from your notes, with the help of the Practical. If they are acceptable, I'll pass them on to Mr. Flint."

Realisation dawned on Harry. "You're not going to tell the team I wrote them, are you."

"Not unless you want to be ostracised by your team for the rest of the year. If you present them to the team, you will be ignored. If I force them upon the team in your name...I think you can see where this is going, Harry."

Harry sighed and sat back. He knew it was no good; Snape was right, of course. But he said it anyway. It had to be said. "That's not fair."

"Life rarely is, especially for those who represent the bottom of the age scale in any given group," Snape said, almost absently.

"On the other hand..." Harry said thoughtfully, "We'll still win if we use them."

Snape nodded, gravely.

"When do we start practice?" Harry asked.

"Sunday," Snape replied. "I'd be ready for an early wake-up. You're dismissed."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, standing. "Sir..."

"Yes?"

"Could I try the Practical sometime?"

Snape frowned. "It's a complicated magical mechanism. Perhaps next year."

Harry nodded and left the office, wandering down the labyrinthine maze of corridors that led to the Slytherin common room. It was disappointing, knowing that he wouldn't get credit for plays that Sirius and Remus had both said were brilliant, but Snape was right; at least this way the plays would get used --

Come...come to me...

Harry stopped, just outside the common room, startled.

Snake? he asked, reaching into his pocket. Snake, now almost too big to be carried around with him, complained sleepily.

What is it? Snake demanded. *I was napping.*

Harry shook his head. He must have been hearing things.

Let me...

He hadn't imagined that.

Let me...

Rip you, tear you, kill you...

In his pocket, Snake had pulled himself into a tiny ball, and was actually shaking with tension.

What is it? Harry asked. There was silence, and Harry bolted through the portrait-hole, closing it quickly behind him. Only when he was alone in the dormitory, with the door closed on the noise of the common room, did Snake stop shivering. He took Snake out of his pocket and set him on

the pillow of his bed, watching as the muscular, sinuous body quivered with alertness.

What was that? Harry asked again. Snake curled in on himself and slithered under a corner of the blanket.

Big, came the muffled reply.

Sirius had gone to bed late, having stayed up reading, and he was barely asleep when he was bothered by the noise of the bedsprings and the shift in weight on the bed. He opened his eyes to slits, just enough to see Remus sitting on the edge of the bed, the hollows and ridges of his spine sharply outlined by the moonlight spilling in through the windows. His head was bowed, and his hands were running through his hair, smoothing and then disordering it, as though he were thinking deeply.

"Moony?" Sirius asked, propping himself up on one elbow. "All right then, mate?"

"Didn't mean to wake you," came the reply, slightly muffled. "Sorry."

"Not to worry, I can sleep through the day. Something bothering you? Dreams again?"

"No, just...uneasy sleep. It's all right, Pads, honestly, you can go back to sleep. Sometimes I think better at night, that's all."

"Care and feeding of the urban werewolf, Lupinus bibliophilim," Sirius said, placing one hand on Remus' spine. The skin was cold and taut under his fingers.

"You're warm."

"Come find out just how warm," he invited, grinning. Remus leaned back into his hand a little, but that was all.

"I keep thinking about the portrait," he said. "I'm sorry I haven't made up my mind yet. I know you're waiting."

"Hell, I don't think that much about it. Take your time. I'm still uncertain myself."

"It's not just that. It's...telling another person what I am. Explaining that I'm...sick. Knowing how people think of it."

"She said in the letter she'd be all right with it."

"They always do say."

"I was all right with it."

"Yeah, after a week or two. Don't think I didn't notice. Not that I blame you, mind." Remus was silent for a little while. "Does it strike you, Sirius, that I'm a little high-strung?"

"Not particularly. You worry too much, that's all." Sirius slid his hand down Remus' spine, inching forward to wrap one arm around his waist and pull him gently backwards. Remus shrugged and went, laughing a little.

"That," he said, "is because you don't do this often enough."

"Throw you down on the bed and ravish you? I do it all the time."

"I know," Remus said happily.

"What are you worrying about at two in the morning?"

"Stupid things people worry about at two in the morning. Harry. You. Whether or not I remembered to send off the owl-post orders at the shop yesterday. The portrait."

Sirius snuffled the small, soft hairs on his neck. "The portrait."

"We haven't talked about it in a while."

"I figured you needed to think about it."

"I did. But I haven't been, really. It's just...how do you tell someone that? Hello, I'm a werewolf. This is Sirius, he turns into a dog once in a while, and occasionally we have mindblowing sex."

"Occasionally?" Sirius asked, scornfully.

"All right, well, I'm not going to go into the details of my sex life with anyone, portraitist or not, but if your solicitor guessed, they will." Remus sighed. "It's such a huge...you hide this thing all your life, and then you're expected to just blurt it out to a stranger. You know what I mean. It's like telling people you're an Animagus. It's personal."

"But you do tell secrets sometimes. I mean, you never seemed very careful about people knowing you fancy blokes."

"Not in Muggle society. It's not really okay, there, but it's...more okay than in our world. And it's one thing to talk about that, it's another thing to...to have a bloke, and tell people about that."

Sirius was silent for a while. Finally, he took a breath.

"Want to have sex?" he asked. Remus burst out laughing. Sirius scowled. "It's not funny!"

"Sex is not the answer to every existential dilemma, Sirius."

"I don't see why not. It's a good distraction, and most existential dilemmas are caused by not having enough to do," Sirius said persuasively.

"I'm all right."

"Good, because I'm knackered." Sirius said, eyes drooping shut again. "Remind me at breakfast."

"Remind you?"

"Mmm, 'bout the portrait. We'll talk."

"All right," Remus said, softly.

"Sleep now."

"Yes, Sirius."

The next day was Saturday, which meant there was no reason for an early-morning breakfast; Harry and his friends could sleep late until the Great Hall was almost empty and still meet up at the Slytherin table for a breakfast together. Draco and Neville were already in the Great Hall, standing together under the Gryffindor banner and talking, when Padma met Harry as she came down the stairs and he came up.

Harry had lain awake the night before, huddled completely under his blankets with Snake wrapped tightly around his right wrist, wondering if he should share what he'd heard. None of the others knew he was a Parselmouth, although he'd once spoken to Snake in front of Neville, and he wanted to keep it that way. When he was eight or nine, he'd hated all the secrets he'd had to keep - - Remus' condition, his own identity, who his parents were...

Now though, back in this world, the Wizarding world -- back in a place where his scar marked him and everyone knew his history -- Harry clung to his secrets with a perverse determination. And perhaps it had merely been a big snake passing through the area, anyway. It could have been talking to the rats on the grounds, for all Harry knew.

Snake, having migrated upwards and wrapped around his neck like a living choker, still trembled from time to time, and he kept reaching up to adjust the little creature's chokehold on his throat. He used a quick warming charm on a plateful of bacon and scrambled eggs, sharing scraps of the egg with Snake.

"What about you, Harry?"

He glanced up from his plate, blinking. Draco was looking at him intently.

"Sorry, what?" he asked. Neville snickered.

"I have extra Transfigurations, Padma wants to re-write her Astronomy paper, and Neville needs books," Draco said. "But then we're all going on an adventure this afternoon. Game?"

Harry shrugged. "I have to be in bed early -- Quidditch practice starts tomorrow."

"It won't take long," Padma replied. "It's just up near the Ravenclaw tower."

"This isn't going to be the three-headed-dog all over again, is it?" Draco asked.

"Whose fault was that?" Padma retorted pointedly. "It's fine, it's not even dangerous. It looks like it might be a music classroom."

"They used to teach music at Hogwarts," Harry said.

"I hear they still do, at Beauxbatons," Draco put in.

"Beauxbatons?"

"It's a wizarding school on the continent. Mum almost sent me there, except they said they weren't taking any foreign students," Draco answered. "Just as well. Wretched school uniforms, all blue satin and bows."

"Aww, but wouldn't oo wook adorable in ickle bows?" Harry teased.

"Suck it, Potter."

"Don't you wish, Malfoy," Harry replied amiably. "Anyway, they used to teach all kinds of things in the olden days. Music, elocution, dancing -- "

"Ew," Padma said, wrinkling her nose.

"Girls had to take domestic arts," Harry added.

"Did boys have to take a class in being Kneazles' arses?" Padma demanded. "Wait, no, you don't need extra lessons in that..."

"You could go play with Mandy Brocklehurst and Hermione Granger if you want," Neville offered.

"I don't see what's so great about some music classroom, anyway," Draco said.

"You will when you see it," Padma promised. "But first, we have to visit the library so that Harry can help you with your Transfiguration."

"Why, what're you going to do?"

"Neville and I are going to find his books," Padma said, as they rose to leave. They all nodded, including Neville himself. It wasn't that he wasn't good at finding books, it was just that he was easily distracted and tended to wander off in search of interesting books as opposed to relevant ones.

"I have extra Transfiguration, you know, it's not that I haven't done any," Draco complained to Harry, shouldering his book-bag. "I can do it without your help."

"Suits me," Harry shrugged. "I can work on my Quidditch plays, and see if Goyle wants to play a few rounds of Gobstones."

"Goyle's a moron. I don't know how he got into Slytherin."

"Me either, but that's why I play with him," Harry answered. He'd learned that you could take away a lot from playing chess against someone smarter than you, but all you got from a Gobstones opponent with a high IQ was a faceful of noxious Gobstones scent.

Padma and Neville betook themselves to the Catalogue Room, a small cubicle filled with little card catalogue shelves and the only place where students were permitted to speak above a whisper. Harry could hear, distantly, Neville request "books about herbology" and Padma add "magical spices"; after a second, the sound of paper shuffling could be heard as the catalogue reorganised itself, index cards flying madly around the room until the requested information settled into a neat stack in one open drawer. After two years of the little village library, where it was easier to ask the librarian than to check the card catalogue, Harry had spent hours in the catalogue room, watching in fascination as the cards whirled and dipped around his head.

He didn't join them this time, however; instead he sat down at one of the study tables, tucked into an alcove just back from the doorway, and folded his arms on the table, resting his chin on the backs of his hands. He watched Draco unpack his bag, including an enormous book on basic transfigurative spells.

"Catching up from last year?" he asked.

Draco sighed. "Professor McGonagall says if I don't master the basics I'll never get anywhere," he said. "It's just so much easier to do it my way."

"Your way?"

"Yeah. But when she asks me to tell her how I'm doing it, I can't. I'm just as good as any of you,

you know," Draco said. "It's like you and flying. You could fly even without having to do all the stupid basic stuff, but they made you do it anyway. Are you going to work on Quidditch? It makes a person nervous when you stare at him."

Harry made a face. "Can I borrow some parchment and a quill?"

Draco nodded his head at the pile of writing supplies, and Harry picked out a short sheet of parchment and one of Draco's quills.

"Where'd you get this nib?" he asked, examining the metal tip of the quill.

"Mum gave me a set," Draco replied. "They're real silver. They write awfully smooth."

Harry tested it out on the parchment. "Guess we know you're not a werewolf," he joked.

"Brrr, don't even think it." Draco shuddered expressively. "Can you imagine?"

"Imagine what, being a werewolf?"

"I think I'd rather die. Ugh."

"It's not like it matters that much," Harry protested. "When you think about it, I mean."

Draco sniffed, and opened his book, beginning to copy notes from a page marked with a brass book-dart. Harry, dipping the silver-nibbed quill in the ink, felt almost like a traitor to Remus for using it.

Instead of doing the usual pitch-overview sketch that he always saw in playbooks, Harry tried drawing a picture of the Quidditch Practical that Snape had shown him, the way Sirius did when he'd doodled on the margins of Harry's drawings when Harry was younger. Harry had learned a lot from watching Sirius, and while he was better at drawing things without straight lines -- snakes and grass, the river, the trees -- he didn't do too badly imitating Sirius' style, which tended more towards odd assemblages of line and angles. He'd just finished sketching out the hoops, which were the hard part, and was beginning to draw in a new play when Padma and Neville returned triumphant from their expedition.

Padma was a discerning sort of scholar, but she was also of what Draco called the Grab and Run school of library research; she and Neville each had an armload of books, and she began sorting them as they were deposited on the table. Harry knew from experience that she would take her time helping Neville go through each book, and most of them would be left on the returns cart when they were done. He set himself to copying his original drawing, fixing the scratched-out bits in the new draft.

"Ready?" Padma asked finally, as Neville carried his final handful of selections to the desk to be stamped and signed out. Harry rolled up the parchment and stuffed it in his back pocket.

"Let's go see this sad little music room, then," Draco said with a grin, and Padma rolled her eyes. They followed her dutifully out of the library and up the stairs, pausing every so often for the stairs to readjust themselves, as they sometimes did. Padma led them further down a corridor, past the portrait-entrance to the Ravenclaw dormitory and around a series of corners, until none of them knew precisely where they were. Finally she stopped, in the darkest part of the castle they'd ever encountered, and stood in front of a large portrait.

"Lumos," she said, and held up her wand, illuminating the figure in the portrait.

It was a blond man, seated at a piano in what looked like a library; behind him a fire crackled soundlessly, and between shelves of books there was a second portrait-within-a-portrait of a striking woman with wildly curly hair. The man looked up at them and adjusted a monocle in one eye, thoughtfully.

"Password?" he asked, fingers picking out a complicated arpeggio of notes on the piano.

"Polyphonic," Padma replied. Harry expected the portrait to swing open, but startlingly, the woman in the portrait-within-a-portrait turned to them, too, and asked, in a deep voice, "Password?"

"JS Bach," Padma said confidently. With a creak, the portrait swung aside.

"How'd you figure out the passwords?" Harry asked, as they filed through.

Padma shrugged. "It wasn't that hard."

The portrait swung shut again behind them as she spoke, and Harry wondered suddenly who had turned off the sound.

"What happened?" Neville asked, in a strangely muted voice.

The room was almost perfectly round, and as Harry looked out the curving, thick windows set in the far wall, he realised where they were -- somewhere inside the curved facade set into the front of the school. Six or seven floors below them, steps led up to the front entrance; above them, a small spire rose out of the dome.

Padma, meanwhile, was pushing Draco to the centre of the room, where a series of triangles set in the floor all met in a sort of bizarre blue sunburst mosaic. She stepped back, and said, in the same muted tones, "Say something."

Draco, as with most people when requested to speak suddenly, stared owlishly at her for a minute, speechless. Finally, he took a deep breath, and even on the breath, Harry knew something important was about to happen.

Know this, the ancient words are not forgot --
Vesuvius the phoenix bodies show,
Their bones unbleach'ed by the waning sun
Which our full faces and strong fingers know.

Draco's young voice echoed off the walls with the clear tones of a precisely tuned bell, each small breath and movement of his lips perfectly audible. Neville was staring, round-eyed, while Padma beamed approvingly.

Unblest by knowledge we these later times
Have sought and to our ruin unwise seen,
Pompeii and Herculaneum sleep fast
While wasteland where a city once had been
O'ergrows once more in tempered steel and glass --
Far better to have died these centuries past.

Draco licked his lip as he finished, blinking at Padma.

"That's a strange poem," Neville said. "Who wrote it?"

"A Wizarding writer in the forties," Draco answered, giving him a sidelong look, as if to ask whether Neville knew anything. "Ellis Graveworthy. It's amazing," he added, turning to Padma, voice still perfect and clear. "It's like I'm not even the one speaking. I can hear myself."

"It's acoustically perfect," Padma said. "And it's blocked somehow -- look."

She went to the windows and unlatched two of them with audible clicks; when she threw them wide, however, there was no change -- the room was still silent except for the sound of Draco breathing.

"You can't hear anything," Neville said. "No birds, no people talking."

"Brilliant place to drop water balloons from," Harry added, leaning out one of the windows. As soon as his head passed the barrier of the walls, he was assaulted with noise -- people splashing in the lake in the distance and gossiping on the lawns, the thump of a football being kicked around by some of the Muggleborn students, and the distant noises of animals and birds in the Forbidden Forest. He pulled his head back inside, and the noise abruptly ceased.

"How did you find it?" Neville asked, as Draco stepped off the centre sunburst.

"Dunno, I was just exploring," Padma answered. "It's brilliant, isn't it?"

"I can see why it was a music classroom," Draco replied, gazing around the room at the wall-paintings of violins, pianos, flutes and harps, as well as chalkboards with permanent musical-notation lines ruled on them in white. Neville sang a note, uncertainly and not at all proficiently,

and a small white dot appeared on one chalkboard. Harry laughed.

"Sing something!"

Neville laughed too. "What should I sing -- no, wait, I know." He took a deep breath. "Fight Gryffindor Fight, For we're glorious and might-y! Win Gryffindor Win, Cos we're House Champions!"

"Merlin, what an awful fight song," Padma murmured, even as the musical notes to the old Quidditch cheering song were appearing on the blackboard, together with the lyrics.

"Do you think the professors know about it?" Harry asked, brushing the thickly-coated dust off a bookshelf.

"Wouldn't they use it? Imagine teaching a class in here," Padma said. "I mean, talk about having everyone's undivided attention."

"There must be all kinds of secret rooms and stuff at Hogwarts," Neville mused. "I bet there's loads of places the professors don't know about."

"Yeah, that's what we thought about the room with the three-headed-dog in it," Draco replied.

"Oh, stop complaining about the dog already," Harry said. "Come on, let's go talk Denbigh into giving us some sandwiches and have a picnic. It's too sunny to spend the whole day inside."

The other three agreed, and the man in the monocle gave them a friendly wave goodbye as they left to the faint strains of the portrait's piano being played softly.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 9

That Sunday morning Harry woke early so as to be ready for practice. Flint, however, didn't come down to the common room until Harry was already washed, dressed in his gear, and fidgeting impatiently to be off. The rest of the team followed, yawning and complaining.

"Pipsqueak's ready to go," one of them observed, and Harry scowled. "You're making us look bad, Potter."

"You're making you look bad," Harry retorted. "Let's go, I want to play already."

Disagreeably, they made their way down to the pitch, where Professor Snape stood waiting for them, wind whipping his loose robes around his ankles and ruffling his short hair. Flint, the trunk following behind him with a floating charm, gave him barely a nod; Snape ascended to one of the spectator towers as the others crowded around their Captain.

One of the few things Harry liked about his captain -- who was a proud, lazy, cheating hack for the most part -- was that he never gave them diagrams. Flint didn't like charts and maps, so he didn't use them. They ran new plays as they learned them, then adjusted for problems mid-flight. It meant they drilled over and over again, while they were learning, but they were more adaptable once they did, and Harry could always plead lack of memory when he refused to cheat the way Flint wanted him to. Cheating, as he'd once told Snape, was a mug's game; you couldn't cheat in real life because the basic rules weren't breakable, so you might as well learn to play within them and use them to your advantage.

While Flint was dividing them up for a scrimmage, in which Harry had little interest since Flint was drilling the team on plays Harry had invented, he noticed a second figure in the spectators' tower. Dora -- Professor Tonks -- had climbed the ladder and was now making her way down the aisle, occasionally tripping on her robe and grabbing onto the benches for support. She was graceful, Harry decided, when she wasn't falling down.

The Snitch whizzed past his ear and he went after it, chasing it down until he had to duck through a mess around the Quaffle to get to it, and it vanished. When he looked back, she was leaning on the rails, watching through a pair of shiny brass omnioculars. Snape did not look happy about it.

"Hey Potter, stop ogling the Dark Arts professor!" Flint shouted, and Harry returned to the game, chastised. The feint maneuver he'd worked out and demonstrated for Snape seemed to be effective, but the players weren't making the most of the idea of level-change; all it had done was brought them much closer to the ground as they battled for the Quaffle.

When Ravenclaw sees this, he thought to himself, they're going to catch on and they're going to do it right, and then all of us are going to be --

"Watch where you're flying!" shouted Bole, one of the Beaters. Montague, a Chaser in his final year and clearly still bitter about not being Captain, had nipped between Flint and Pucey to steal the Quaffle, and in so doing had narrowly missed colliding with Bole, who was riding wing on Flint and keeping a determined Bludger away from him. Montague skimmed past Bole barely an inch from his elbow, and the Beater spun wildly away, clinging for dear life to his broom and trying to bat away a Bludger at the same time. He finally lost control of his broom and fell in seeming slow-motion to the pitch, where he landed in undignified fashion on his tailbone, while Flint went after his flyaway broom.

"Learn to keep on your broomstick and you can yell at me all you like!" Montague called, sneering. The others laughed.

"I should have figured you wouldn't give a damn for proper play, you filthy mudblood!" Bole screamed.

The laughter stopped abruptly. Harry had only heard the word once or twice before, but it sent a chill down his spine; Bole continued to swear, and Montague had gone white-faced.

"You take that back," he said, dropping altitude abruptly and hovering nose to nose with Bole. "I'm not a mudblood."

"Your gran's a Muggle and you've three squib aunts, mudblood, and I bet your father was a Muggle too," Bole snarled back. Two of the others went for Montague to hold him back, but someone else was faster; Dora had run for the ladder when Bole first shouted, and she was between the two before either of them could make a move for the other.

"Hold him," she said over her shoulder, to the boys who were already grasping Montague's sleeves. She whipped around to face Bole furiously.

"Fifty points from Slytherin for conduct unbecoming a student and use of profanity in front of a professor," she snapped. Harry actually saw her grow a few inches, though he didn't think anyone else was in a state of mind to notice. "If I ever hear that word out of your mouth again, Bole, you will never see your NEWTs, let alone graduate."

"Did you see what he -- "

"Two weeks' detention. I don't care what he did. That word," she spat, "is unacceptable on the grounds of this school. Or anywhere."

"Professor -- "

"Would you care to make it a hundred points and three weeks, plus team suspension? That can be arranged."

Bole sensibly shut his mouth and stared at her with wide eyes. A hand touched her shoulder,

lightly.

"That will be sufficient, Professor Tonks," Snape said, darkly. "I believe I am best situated to handle this particular disciplinary issue from here."

Harry saw distaste and anger in Snape's face, and realised suddenly that Dora had severely overstepped her bounds. After all, Professor Snape was senior, and he was the head of their House; if anyone was going to threaten team suspension, it ought to be him.

Not to mention her getting there first made him look rather awful, really.

"If I hear that word again from any Slytherin on this team -- " she started, but he cut her off.

"That will do, Professor Tonks. Thank you," Snape said icily. She gave Bole one last furious look before turning and stalking away across the pitch, although the effect was somewhat ruined when, about halfway to the castle, she stumbled briefly on a sudden dip in the grassy landscape.

The silence on the pitch was deafening. Everyone had landed their brooms, and Harry absently caught the Snitch when it made another run past his ear, stuffing it in his pocket.

"It is unwise to use that particular word," Snape said slowly, arms crossed over his chest as he stared down at Bole. "Aside from its unpleasant connotations of intolerance, it is a word which is not found in the polite society a Slytherin aspires to belong to, and it certainly is impolitic to speak it in front of a Professor whose own father is a Muggle-born wizard. As you can see, they tend to take it rather amiss."

Bole's eyes, if it were possible, grew rounder.

"I believe, as I do not wish to take another fifty points from my own House, or suspend an adequate player from the House team, we will make it fifty points and three weeks' detention," Snape continued, "served with Filch and Hagrid. Carry on practice," he added. "Flint, my office after breakfast, please."

He turned and followed in Dora's general direction, moving more easily and confidently across the grounds towards the castle. When he was out of earshot, Pucey let out a low whistle.

"I didn't know Professor Tonks was half-Muggle," Flint said.

"She isn't," Harry said. "Her father's a wizard same as you or I."

"Yeah, but Muggleborn, right?" Pucey put in.

"What's that matter? He's brilliant at everything," Harry retorted.

"Yeah, but blood will out, and all," Pucey said vaguely.

"Don't make me punch you," Montague snarled. Pucey still had him by one arm, and he let go quickly. Bole was looking a little as if he'd been hit in the head by something heavy. "We're not done either, Bole."

"My mum was Muggleborn," Harry said menacingly, to Pucey. "Going to say something about her, too?"

"Nobody's saying anything about anyone's mum or calling anyone a mudblood, all right?" Flint announced loudly. "Harry, if you try to punch someone two feet taller than you are he'll knock you flat, so you might as well not bother. We can all fly a broomstick so let's get back to doing that, all right?"

"Most of us can," Bole muttered resentfully, glaring at Montague, but fortunately the other boy didn't hear him -- or if he did, was more sensible than to make an issue out of it.

Harry reflected, as he shook the Snitch out of his pocket and let it go again, that at least they weren't at each others' throats over whether or not to use his plays. Professor Snape was smarter than most people, Sirius included, would give him credit for.

If only Dora hadn't gone quite so far...

Life on the upper floors of Twelve Grimmauld Place (also known as TONKS & TONKS, purveyors of fine wizarding dress) was, outwardly, much more peaceful than it appeared to be at Hogwarts that week. At the civilised hour of nine am on Tuesday, Remus was sipping tea while Sirius made french toast. Downstairs, the shop was opening and various patrons were coming and going, cheerfully met and catered to by Andromeda while Ted dug in and worked on the perpetually-behind book-keeping.

Remus had the paper open and was reading the rather badly-edited Literature section of the Prophet. The pretentiousness of the reviews and occasionally the books themselves were strangely soothing to his nerves. Sirius compensated for nerves by frying things; hence the french toast, not to mention the giant plate of bacon on a heat-charmed plate, already on the table.

"We don't have to go if you really don't want to, you know," he said, as he transferred the last of the food to a plate and carried it to the table. Remus folded the newspaper and set it aside.

"That's a coward's game," he said, transferring a single slice to his own plate and drizzling a little honey on it. "We both know it."

"If it's going to make you anxious -- "

"Not the painting," Remus sighed. "Just the meeting."

"She'll be hexed to secrecy, this Helena person. She's the great-granddaughter of the founders of the company, she seems all right," Sirius said. "I mean, well-educated and that. And she doesn't seem anti-werewolf at all."

"She's a stranger, that's all," Remus said, cutting up his toast. "You never know about strangers."

"Maybe it's more trouble than it's worth," Sirius mused.

"No, but...I want you to have this and I like the idea too," Remus protested. "Honestly, it's no good living like this anyway. If I really wasn't a coward I'd say what I was and have done with it to all and sundry, but it makes life so unnecessarily difficult, and it wouldn't be fair to you, either. And I don't want to," he added defiantly.

Sirius watched him across the table, expression unreadable, until finally he smiled reassuringly.

"If we were to say damn the world, we could say a lot of things. Any time you want to, I'm game if you are. It won't be the first time," he added. Remus smiled.

"There's no need," he replied. "This belongs to us, not to anyone else."

They finished in comfortable if slightly nervous silence and went out into the mild bustle of a mid-morning high street, hands in pockets, strolling down towards Gringotts and the turnoff for Fansif Alley, the arts-and-theatre district. Sirius gave him a sidelong look as he put his hand on the brightly painted green-and-gilt door of Broosh & Chakle Studios, but when Remus gazed back evenly, he shrugged and pushed it open.

The inside room was a cheerful pale ochre, and several portraits grinned and waved at them from the walls, interspersed with the occasional plaster or stone statue.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said a young, formally-robed man, bearing down on them and, Sirius noticed, mentally rubbing his hands. "Do you require any assistance?"

"Is this Helena Broosh's work?" Remus asked, examining a painting of a basket of puppies. One of them kept tumbling out of the basket and clambering back in. Another one yawned humourously.

"Ah yes, Miss Broosh's work is quite popular with the town and country set," the young man said, adjusting his glasses. Sirius saw him eyeing Remus, and wondered whether it was measuring him up for a purchase or measuring him up for personal pleasure.

"We're here to see her, as it happens," Sirius said abruptly.

"I see. Do we have an appointment?" the young man asked, crossing to a desk and opening a leatherbound ledger there.

"Sirius Black? I contacted the office yesterday by owl."

"Ah yes, Mr Black, here we are. This way, please."

"I liked those dogs," Remus said, as they followed him back through a curtain in the rear of the shop. "She's a decent artist."

The back of the shop was wildly different from the front gallery; most of the walls had been knocked out to create a series of open, well-lit stalls in which sculptors and painters were working on various creations, or gathering to sip tea and wait for their next sitting. Some areas were walled off by thick black curtains. In the last stall but one, a woman around their age, in paint-spattered robes, was sizing a canvas on a frame.

"Your ten-fifteen, Miss Broosh," the man said, leaving them only after he'd leered a little more at Remus.

"Mr Black?" she asked, holding out a hand. "Don't worry, all the paint on it's dry," she added. Sirius grinned and took her hand, shaking it firmly.

"Miss Broosh," he said. "Ah, this is my friend Remus Lupin..."

"Yes, I've seen you both in the papers. I am," she said, "very much hoping you're here to commission portraits. You have an extremely good skull for painting, Mr Black, and Mr Lupin's face is an interesting study in itself."

Remus touched the small scar on his jaw, self-consciously, and she laughed.

"No, it's all in the nose and chin," she replied reassuringly. "I read the society pages," she added, by way of explanation.

"Is there somewhere we could speak in private?" Sirius asked. She grinned and pulled a pair of black velvet curtains across the open entrance to the small room, tying them together with a small silk cord.

"There's a silencing charm as well," she added. "We sometimes do nudes, and of course we respect client confidentiality."

"That's much appreciated," Sirius said frankly. "I...am not here for a nude," he added with a grin. She matched it.

"Spoil my dreams, Mr Black," she said.

"Yes, well," he said, as Remus coughed, "I understand you've been in communication with Llewelyn Payne regarding some inquiries into the painting of Animagi."

"Are you Mr Canis, sir? The name did sound rather contrived."

Sirius glanced at Remus. "She's quick."

Remus nodded, watching her intently.

"I had hoped you would come to speak to me in person. It really is a unique challenge, and of course I would be happy to enter into any confidentiality agreement you require -- which of you gentlemen is the Animagus?" she asked, eagerly.

"Miss Broosh, we'd like to..." Sirius paused. "There are other issues at stake, as well. We'd like to ensure that the confidentiality agreement also covers things of a more personal and dangerous nature."

"Well, unless you want to pose with a freshly killed body or something, I think I can keep quiet," she said. "I can provide references from other clients I've worked with discreetly. Men and their mistresses, erotic nudes -- all tastefully done, of course -- even people who would like to be painted in the costume of a historical figure without a fuss being made over it, though that seems pretty minor, in comparison." She glanced at Remus. "Does he talk?"

"I'm sorry, I'm being rude," Remus said, giving her an apologetic smile. "This is somewhat nervewracking." He gave Sirius an anxious look. "I've never voluntarily told anyone this before."

"Perhaps if you would feel more comfortable after any paperwork had been signed -- "

"No, it's all right -- I like you," Remus said. "I...that is, Mr Black and I were hoping to commission a portrait together..."

She nodded, looking not at all surprised and picking up a rag, twining it between her fingers. "I have also protected the confidentiality of men and women like yourselves, whose personal relationships are not the business of the public -- "

"Well, there is that," Sirius said hastily.

"He's the Animagus, you see," Remus said. "And I'm a werewolf."

She dropped the rag in surprise. After a moment of speechless staring, she spoke.

"Oh -- I did hope that you would -- that is to say, of course, I'm sure you'd rather not be treated any differently," she said eagerly, "but it would be such an interesting challenge. And an Animagus -- those are very rare. I hope I'm not overstepping myself," she added, checking herself suddenly. "Am I right in assuming, sir, that you are an unregistered Animagus?"

"You may be," Sirius said with a smile. Remus was looking less nervous, now that the first

reaction was over with and her mind seemed wholly concerned with the challenge of painting a werewolf rather than the minimal danger of sharing breathing space with one.

"Of course if you'd prefer to consider it a little more, Mr Black, Mr Lupin, I'd be happy to wait, but I have all the papers drawn up and the charms in place in case you want to sign them -- I have had for a few weeks, only I hadn't heard anything more and I thought you must have decided against it."

Sirius glanced at Remus, who looked back expectantly.

"There are some rather invasive techniques used," she said hesitantly, into the silence. "Nothing physical, but we do like to talk to the sitters while we're painting, and we ask questions that some might consider rather impertinent, especially if the sitters are romantically involved."

"We're getting obvious in our old age," Sirius said quietly. "I suppose that might show in the portrait, too?"

"It might," she said thoughtfully, "but I've been doing lots of animal studies lately -- "

"Yes, we saw the puppies," Remus said.

"Oh, do you like them? Troublesome little curs," she said affectionately. "I think I could actually paint a portrait that made use of both the human and animal form of the Animagus -- in public, that is to say to a stranger's eye, the painting would appear to be of you, Mr Lupin, posing with Mr Black's animal form. It would be a really very interesting experiment," she said persuasively. "With the names changed I could even write it up for a few journals if you were agreeable."

"Up to you, Pads," Remus said gently. "I'm game if you are."

Sirius grinned back at him. "Was that a dare?"

Remus gave him his best poker face. Sirius turned to Broosh, who was smiling slightly. "You'd better get out those papers so that we can look them over," he said. "If you do all right, I might have my godson come sit for a normal portrait sometime."

"I'm sure it would be my pleasure to paint Mr Potter," she said, and left to get the papers. When she was gone, Remus exhaled slowly, and leaned back against the wall.

"All right, Moony?" Sirius asked.

"Yes -- that went well," Remus replied, smiling at him. "It did. I thought she'd -- I didn't think she'd react like that. I like her," he added.

"Me too. She's a little nuts," Sirius said. "Like us, really."

"I suppose she's paid to be open-minded, but..." Remus grinned at him. "Well, treating a pureblood Animagus and his werewolf boyfriend like a new painting technique is above and beyond the call of lucre, I think."

While all seemed more or less peaceful on Fansif Alley that Tuesday morning, at Hogwarts the tempest in the Slytherin teapot had grown entirely out of control.

It might have died down if Montague and Bole weren't Transfiguration partners. If they'd been able to avoid each other, the bickering could have come to a slow and tedious halt, but it just kept up in a steady stream every time they encountered each other. Finally it broke out in violence in the hallway outside the Transfigurations classroom on Monday afternoon. A couple of Gryffindors charged in to pull them apart, but before they were both settled down by the arrival of Percy Weasley with Professor McGonagall, Oliver Wood had a really fantastic black eye and Bole had shouted that Montague couldn't always be running to that halfbreed Tonks for help, even if like did attract like.

None of the professors or prefects heard the halfbreed remark, but plenty of the students did, and by lights-out half the school knew that Professor Tonks' father was a Muggleborn, while the other half had been treated to various mutations of the story including, but not limited to, Professor Tonks being a Muggleborn, Professor Tonks' father eating Muggleborns, and Professor Tonks having some form of illicit relations with Montague, which was quashed by a horrified Montague himself.

Harry and his friends were eating their usual early breakfast on Tuesday, discussing the fight and weighing the advantages of having an honourably received black-eye versus not having a painful and ugly swollen face, when it happened. It was perhaps fortunate that it happened so early, considering everything, but unfortunate that they should be inadvertent witnesses to it. They were seated at one end of the Slytherin table, blocked from view by one of the hangings, just able to see Professor Snape eating a solitary bowl of oatmeal, when Dora -- Professor Tonks, Neville still had to be reminded -- entered from one of the side-hallways.

"Can I have a word with you, Professor Snape?" she asked. The sound echoed in the empty hall, fully loud enough for them to hear, whether they wanted to or not, and all four fell silent immediately.

"Professor Tonks," Snape said, impassively. He set his spoon down and turned slightly in his seat.

"Whether or not I chose to discipline your students, which I was within my rights to do as a professor at this school, you had no business discussing my parentage or my personal life with a pair of Quidditch hooligans who don't know better than to get into fistfights in public hallways," she said. There was an odd formal tone to her voice, as if she'd been rehearsing the speech. Neville glanced at Harry, who was watching in wide-eyed awe.

"I'm sure I'm unaware of what you mean," he replied, blandly. A hint of smirk played around his lips.

"Bole called me a halfbreed in front of a hallway full of students. Since then he's been telling vicious stories about my father's parentage. I know where he got that information from."

"I merely explained that it was unwise, given your father's status, for them to use certain expressions to which you overreacted on the Quidditch pitch on Sunday morning."

"Bastard," Padma breathed.

"Shut up," Harry hissed.

"Well, he is."

"Over-reacted? Did you hear the filth coming out of Bole's mouth?" Tonks demanded.

"He's a child, he hardly knows what the word means."

"He's fifteen, he knows exactly what it means and how to use it. That's not the point. No matter how well or badly I handled the situation, there was no call to bring my father into it. And you have the audacity to lecture me on leaving your friendship with my parents out of our professional relationship!"

"I don't see how -- "

"You don't see how?" she asked, and to his credit, Snape didn't flinch. "You don't think your personal knowledge of my father's ancestry is inappropriately applied in disciplining children? Do you think he wants the whole school talking about his parents? My mother and father are the best friends you have in this world, if they're not the only ones you have, and -- "

"That will be quite enough," he said suddenly, standing so quickly his chair fell over. "May I remind you I am a senior professor -- "

"Then act like one!" she snarled. Neville was so startled by the vicious tone of voice coming from his normally placid foster-sister that he dropped his fork.

The clatter of metal on stone was like the roar of a train passing through the hall. Both professors turned to see four students, clustered around one end of one table, looking sheepish and frightened.

"Ah, Severus, Tonks, good morning," said a voice from the doorway. Their savior had appeared; Albus Dumbledore was entering, and immediately both professors moved away from each other, Snape righting his chair, Tonks taking the furthest possible seat from him. Dumbledore sat between them beatifically, and requested an enormous breakfast from Denbigh when the head of

the Kitchen Elves appeared, eager to serve.

Students and other professors began to trickle into the Great Hall, then, and the four went their separate ways. The walking wounded put in the briefest, most sullen appearances -- all but Oliver, who was enjoying talking with Lee Jordan while pretending not to notice that he was the centre of attention at the Gryffindor table.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 10

To her credit, Dora was not one to go crying to her parents. Ted Tonks never heard a word about the incident in the hallway, which was probably for the best, since he was genuinely fond, in his own quiet way, of Severus. As September turned to October, he and his wife may have noticed that Dora was never available to visit at the same time Severus was, but, after all, professors did keep different schedules -- and as the most junior of the lot, she was expected to chaperone a good many of the Hogsmeade trips. She seemed to her parents to be enjoying herself, and aside from the icy and tenuous cease-fire between herself and Snape, she honestly was.

While Harry and his friends went about their classes, attended Quidditch practice, and got detentions for being out after-hours when coming back from writing naughty but melodious limericks in the music room, Sirius and Remus had been just as busy. Remus, who had an eccentric love of selling people things, was hired on for extra shifts at Madam Schaeffer's Scholars' Emporium; Sirius had sold one toy design to them already, and been commissioned to work on a new toy for older children which could be on shop shelves in time for Christmas. His idea for sexual-education dolls had been shot down on the grounds that it would only attract perverts, though Madam Schaeffer herself had been uproariously amused by the prototype. Captain Kneazle, the action-figure feline which came with a variety of heroic costumes, was impractical for this year but had definite potential; toy testers were still recovering from wounds inflicted by the self-retrieving frisbee. Still, he persevered. Madam Schaeffer, having met Sirius, had every faith in his ability to think like a fourteen-year-old.

"I'm thinking about Quidditch," Sirius said, leaning against Remus' leg.

"Oh god," Remus answered.

"Please, just a minute more," said Helena Broosh.

They obediently sat still while she finished her charcoal work, dusted her fingers off, and held up the pad of paper at arm's length, comparing her drawing with the real thing.

"All right, that's good," she said. "It's enough for a first study, anyway, and I can experiment with the charms on it."

"Can we see it?" Sirius asked, from the floor. Remus gave him a hand up, and they both came forward to study the result of their first sitting for the portrait. In sketchy charcoal, smudged and fingerprinted here and there, two men smiled back at them: Sirius, seated on the floor with one arm draped over his knee, leaned back against one corner of the chair on which Remus sat, hands folded quietly in his lap.

"It's not very...dynamic," Remus said, slowly. "Composition-wise, I mean. I'm sort of sitting there like a lump."

"Well, you'll have a book and maybe your legs crossed," Helena said. "And see, when Mr Black is in dog form, he'll be here," she said, drawing in the rough outline of a large dog lying in front of Remus.

"I like that," Sirius said with a grin, winking across the page at Remus, who blushed slightly. "Favoured pet at adored master's feet."

"We could put you both on the floor, if you prefer," Helena said, matching Sirius' grin. "I like the levels, though; I think it captures your personalities. That's half the difficulty, of course -- we've got to get the portrait moving and talking and acting like you, and then over that we have to layer the Dorian Gray charms. When we actually start on the sittings you'll be encouraged to talk to me and to each other; I just wanted something to play with for a few days."

"Don't we all," Remus said gravely. Sirius affected amazement.

"Was that a joke, Mr Lupin?" he asked.

"It may have been, Mr Black," Remus replied. Helena looked amused.

"I'd like to consult with one or two other colleagues throughout the process, but none of the confidentiality clauses in the contract will be broken," she said. "Can I schedule you for a second sitting sometime next week? I'd like to fit in two more between now and the end of November, though I realise you have busy schedules and I'm somewhat booked myself this time of year -- lots of holiday work. Speak with Crane on the way out, he'll schedule you. He's the young one with the spectacles."

"And the lecherous ways," Sirius muttered. Remus gave him a look, but preened just a little when he noticed Sirius possessively place himself between Remus and Crane while they were discussing scheduling.

October was unseasonably warm that year, and Hallowe'en was impending, making all the students restless. It even infected Padma, who usually preferred intellectual pursuits and had a tendency to roll her eyes at the three boys whose company she kept. In fact, though Harry usually planned their evening mischief, and Draco -- whose sense of direction was best -- usually led the way, Padma was the one who suggested they go wandering in the first place, and always found the best places to explore in. It was harmless fun, though there was the odd detention for being caught, and Andromeda would have threatened Neville with strangling if she'd known that he was the one who led them down the narrow tiles of the roof-peak, the one time they managed to get out onto it.

If it hadn't been Percy Weasley who told on them and Dora whom he told to, things might have gone so differently.

Most of the boys above fifth-year or so nursed a harmlessly mild crush on Professor Tonks, as young men will do when they are prisoner to their hormones and confronted with a young, good-looking instructor who could in addition take any one of them in a fight. Oddly enough, Percy wasn't one of them; she didn't keep enough order in her classroom to please him, but then it was doubtful that any classroom which actually had living beings in it was orderly enough for Percy, as his brother Ron was quick to point out. Instead Percy sensibly and boringly took up with the Ravenclaw prefect and was secretly adored by Hermione Granger, who shared his passion for rules and regulations.

They had been down to a not-often-visited area of the dungeons, to see Completely Headless Nick in his first official Head Polo tournament since joining the Headless Hunt. Nick's side lost, but it was a near thing, and after centuries of having to look on, Nick couldn't care less who won or lost so long as he got to play.

Harry wasn't far from the dormitory, of course, and he could slip back without much fear of being caught, especially since Professor Snape's unusually keen eyes tended to fail when a Slytherin was the guilty party slinking along the hallways. He hadn't even bothered to bring his cloak, or he would have thought to lend it to the other three, especially Padma, who had the furthest to go.

They left Draco presumably safe at the bottom of the stairs, barely a minute's walk from the Hufflepuff cellars and under the eye of the Fat Friar, who had been one of the spectators in the Head Polo game. The ghosts especially liked Draco, for reasons that the others could only guess at; perhaps it was that Draco, the child of two ancient, breeding-obsessed houses, valued history and tended to know the names and stories of people long dead. When you can't leave the castle, eat, or indulge in other various pleasures of the flesh, having someone pay a bit of attention is always gratifying.

"Oh bugger," Neville said, as he and Padma made their way down the corridor towards Gryffindor's portrait-entrance and, beyond, Ravenclaw's tower. "I think I've forgotten the password again."

"Got your remembrall on?" she asked, but Neville held up his bare arm. "Neville, remembralls only work if you remember them."

"I know that!" Neville said irritably.

"Well, don't shout at me," Padma sighed. "I don't know the password. Can you knock?"

"Password," the Fat Lady prompted sleepily.

"Hold onto your stockings," Padma replied. "Come on, Neville, it only changes once a month -- "

She stopped, because Neville was looking over her shoulder in terror, and turned.

It would be Percy Weasley, the most officious, rulebound Prefect to ever forget to remove the broomstick from his arse. He was wearing a bathrobe with his Prefect's badge pinned onto it, and his hair was damp; he'd probably come from his bath.

"Longbottom," he said darkly. "Patil."

"Prefect," they chorused.

"You're out after hours."

"Padma was just bringing me some homework," Neville blurted. The fact that he had no parchments or books with him was not lost on Percy.

"Come on, Percy," Padma said. "It's not much after hours, and my dormitory's only five minutes from here -- "

"And you're only twelve!" Percy said, apparently attempting to shame them into something, though a glance at Neville told Padma that he was as oblivious to what that might be as she was.

"I'm almost thirteen," Padma ventured. Percy's eyes darkened.

"Oh, are we having a party?" said a new voice. Percy whirled. Professor Tonks was leaning against the wall, grinning. "I like your bathrobe, Weasley. Hi, Neville."

Percy flushed. "I was coming back from a bath -- "

"Clearly. Personal hygiene, very important," Tonks agreed.

"And I found Longbottom and Patil -- "

"Padma, right?" Tonks asked. "You're the Ravenclaw twin. This isn't your dormitory."

"No, Professor," Padma said, ducking her head. She hated getting in trouble, not really because of the punishment but because getting in trouble was mortifying and shameful. She didn't even like it when Parvati got in trouble, and Parvati got in trouble a lot more often than Padma did.

"Having a midnight tryst?" Tonks inquired. Percy looked a little triumphant. "Or rather, a ten-thirty tryst. Neville treating you like a gentleman should?"

"Awww, Dora..." Neville moaned.

"That's Professor Tonks to you, Neville," she said with a slight grin.

"It wasn't like that, Professor," Padma said.

"Quite right. Well, I think ten points from Gryffindor and ten points from Ravenclaw ought to --" she paused, and peered down the corridor. "Well, this is a party."

Snape loomed terrifyingly out of the shadows.

"I hardly think that's an appropriate sobriquet for this situation, do you?" he asked. "Weasley, get inside and out of that ridiculous bathrobe."

Percy nearly hopped to obey, crying "Felinus Est!" at the portrait, which obediently allowed him inside.

"Felinus est?" Padma demanded. "That's your Gryffindor idea of a password? 'It's a cat'?"

"I didn't come up with it," Neville retorted.

"I can handle this...pair," Snape said, lip curling slightly.

"You could," Tonks agreed, coldly. One of Snape's hands fell on Neville's shoulder. Neville and Padma exchanged despairing looks. "If I were inclined to use students as pawns in grown-up games."

Snape stared at her.

"Run inside, Neville, and remind Percy to change the password," Tonks said, and Neville darted out from under Snape's grasp and through the Gryffindor portrait. "Padma, off you go."

Padma glanced up at Snape, and then ran off.

"If they were out, you can be sure Mr Malfoy was as well," Snape said. "No doubt he's returned by now."

"No doubt," she replied. "And Harry too, I'm sure."

He was silent at that.

"Shall we take ten points from Hufflepuff and Slytherin as well?" she asked. "On the basis of speculation?"

"What would be the point of taking anything, if all four Houses lost an equal amount?"

"Well, it has a nice symmetry to it," she sighed. "There's little enough balance around here right now."

"I don't believe I know what you mean."

She leaned back against the wall again. "Are we going to spend the whole year sniping at each other? We used to get along, you know. I distinctly remember."

"We tolerated each other."

"Oh, come on, Professor -- "

"Need we be on good terms?" he asked. "You will be here another eight months, at most, and I see no reason for our paths to cross more often than at daily meals."

"Are you still angry about me impersonating you? I said I was sorry."

"Professor Tonks," he said, drawing himself up fully, his face fearsome in the flickering torchlight, "you have managed not only to steal the position which by right of ability and experience should be mine, but you then added insult to injury by stealing my face as well. Kindly keep your own as far away from me as possible, if it's not too much to ask."

Before she could formulate a reply, there was a shriek from the other side of the portrait, and Neville and Percy emerged, Percy gripping Neville's collar.

"Eavesdropp -- " Percy began, but Snape cut him off.

"Longbottom! Detention!" he snapped, and turned to stalk away, leaving Dora there to gently shove Percy and Neville back into Gryffindor's common room and shut the portrait behind them.

"Now what?" she asked the empty, chilly corridor air.

"Well, at least we're all annoying together," said Harry the next morning, when they found that not only had Gryffindor and Ravenclaw lost points, but Slytherin and Hufflepuff as well. Not very much, ten points, but still irksome, especially as it wasn't the first time. They were well on their way, those four, to the uneasy status of Fred and George Weasley, who had both their own share and, clearly, Percy's share of mischeviousness as well. They were respected and popular, but nobody was ever very happy with them.

"Cept me," Neville said sulkily. "I'm annoying and I have detention."

"Serves you right for eavesdropping," Padma said, unconcernedly buttering her toast. "You know better."

"You know better than to get caught, anyway," Draco said.

"I don't like the way he speaks to Dora," Neville said persistently. "He never used to speak to her that way."

"Who knows why Professor Snape does anything he does?" Draco asked. "I say we get Percy Weasley back for being a miserable tell-tale."

"A prank?" Harry's ears almost literally pricked up.

"A Hallowe'en prank," Draco said, leaning in closer. He and Harry both glanced at Padma, waiting for the usual objections and reasons, but she gave them a not-altogether-reassuring grin, and leaned in also. Only Neville wasn't yet part of the little crowd of heads.

"Up to you," Harry said, glancing at him. Neville fidgeted with his remembrall-bracelet.

"Nothing too mean," he said. "It's not like we weren't out after-hours."

"If it were me -- " Draco began, but Harry gave him a quelling look, then coughed to interrupt Padma, who had been about to say something about the Weasley family's reputation.

"You know Fred and George are all right, and Ron and Ginny," Harry said severely. "It's just Percy, and he can't help being the way he is. And none of them," he added significantly, "can help that their family's poor."

"Fine," Padma said. "So what do we do?"

"Dye in his bathwater?" Draco suggested.

"We've done that already," Harry pointed out.

"When did we dye anyone?"

"Well, we painted the Gryffindors who bullied Neville," Harry said.

"Maybe that's our signature," Neville observed.

"Maybe that's a good way to get caught and expelled," Padma said.

"What annoys Percy most?" Draco asked.

"Mess," Neville said promptly. The others looked at him. "He hates anything to get out of order. Ron says he irons his socks. Or uses an ironing spell, anyway. And nobody ever nicks ties or robes off him, because he knows and he makes a stink about it."

"Sounds like your mum," Harry said to Draco, who was looking thoughtful. "Any ideas?"

"I have one," Draco said. "How're your sticking charms, Padma?"

The Hallowe'en Feast that year was splendid; the house-elves outdid the previous year's culinary delights, with surprise exploding peas, orange mashed potatoes, roasts that howled when you carved them, and chocolate-filled pumpkin pies. The ghosts, who had all been invited to Completely Headless Nick's deathday party, were all at their brightest, and even Peeves the Poltergeist, a notable troublemaker, was spending too much time herding bats around the ceiling to spell out naughty phrases and dodging Filch's attempts to stop him to do any real harm. A troupe of dancing skeletons entertained them all with acrobatics, jaw-juggling, and the ever-popular Bone Explosion, which littered the Great Hall with clicking white bones that slowly reassembled themselves bit by bit.

Even after all of that, however, Harry had to admit that the handiwork before him put all else to shame. It was a thing of beauty.

Hallowe'en was a traditional time for pranks, of course, but tonight they had taken the art to a new level, and he felt a ridiculous amount of pride in it. Padma held up her camera and snapped another photograph. Draco, standing next to her with his arms crossed, gazed up at their night's work like an artist looking at a finished canvas.

"It's wonderful," said Fred Weasley, behind him.

"Don't you feel a bit of a traitor?" Draco asked Fred. "I mean, I don't care, but out of curiosity, you're all right doing this to your own brother?"

"Percy's not stupid," Fred replied. "He'll get it down, no problem. I just hope he isn't alone when he comes up to find it."

"But he's family," Draco continued. "You stick with family."

"He's certainly going to be in a sticky situation after this," Fred assured Draco.

"Even if he is alone when he comes up, he's bound to shout," Harry said. "Go on, Fred, stand under the bed."

Fred moved to stand under the four-poster bed that was now thoroughly stuck, upside-down, to the ceiling.

Sticking the knickknacks to the top of the dresser had been child's play, and even sticking the trunk and the dresser to the ceiling of Percy's dormitory room had been very little trouble, given Padma's inherent talent for it. It was hardly the work of a moment to turn the posters over the bed upside-down as well. The tricky bit had been getting the bed curtains to hang the right way and the linens to stick, but that was why they'd enlisted Fred's help. Padma snapped another picture of the three boys under the bed.

Through the open doorway they could hear George distracting the rest of the sixth-years whose dorm this was; they were feeding fireworks to Padma's salamander, Elmo, who had apparently developed a taste for them after getting loose and eating half the stash of Guy Fawkes pyrotechnics a Muggle-born Ravenclaw had smuggled into Hogwarts. A sharp whistle rose to their ears, and the pranksters hustled out, Fred bolting for his own dorm while Harry, Padma, and Draco slipped down a flight and pulled on Harry's invisibility cloak. The whistle, coming from a Shrieker firework, was to be fed to Elmo as a signal that Percy had returned from his distraction.

The distraction itself happened to be Neville, leading Percy on a wild chase through the school after Completely Headless Nick, who was "having difficulty" locating his head -- I'd lose my head if it weren't attached took on a whole new meaning amongst ghosts. Nick was happy to do it; they all knew he owed his gleefully headless state to the four of them.

They didn't dare stay to hear Percy's reaction, though Neville was planning on witnessing it; having been with Percy the entire time, he had the perfect alibi. They were going to meet Neville afterwards by the stairs to make sure everything had gone according to plan; it was just past the nook in which Nick's head had been hidden.

"You'll be Head Boy if you keep up the way you've begun," Nick had told Neville when he was hiding it (which didn't amuse anyone).

"It was brilliant," Harry said, throwing off his cloak. Padma was busy checking her camera to make sure it hadn't been damaged in their rush for the stairs. "I'm glad we got Fred and George to go along with it."

"I hope Elmo's all right," Padma answered.

"He looked like he was enjoying himself," Draco reassured her. "Neville should be -- "

"Oh Merlin's toes!" Neville said, puffing a little as he arrived to meet them, Elmo's large glass jar tucked carefully under one arm. He was red-faced, not from exertion, but from laughter. "You should have left the camera with me, Harry. I've never seen anyone so horrified. He tried to open one of his -- " he burst into a fresh fit of laughter, and had to lean against a wall for support. "He tried to -- "

"For heaven's sake, Neville!" Padma said, and Harry noticed that she really did look worried as she snatched the jar back from him and busied herself inspecting Elmo to make sure the fireworks hadn't done him any harm.

"He opened one of the drawers and all his socks and pants fell out all over his head," Neville blurted. "I've never laughed so hard in all my life! Fred and George were just standing there, poker-faced..."

Draco chuckled, Harry's cloak still hanging over his arm, and peered at Elmo, who was snorting the occasional puff of smoke.

"So what are we going to do now?" he asked.

"Now?" Neville inquired.

"Well, it's Hallowe'en, there must be loads of stuff we can do," Harry said, nodding at Draco. "We could -- "

...rip...tear...kill...

"Harry?" Padma asked, as Harry turned sharply to the left, the direction the noise had come from. There it was again, and Snake was back in the dormitory --

...come to me and let me kill you...

"Harry!" Neville cried, as Harry stumbled against the wall, almost overpowered by the deep, commanding snake-voice. He'd known all sorts of snakes, small and large, smart and stupid, but nothing like this primal, dark voice.

"Shut up," he said to the others, urgently, and they fell silent. Padma put a concerned hand on his arm.

So hungry, and alone so long...come to me...free me...

"He's sick," Draco whispered to Neville. "We need to take him to the infirmary -- "

"I'm not sick," Harry said. He stumbled forward a few paces, then a few more.

Someone screamed.

The four of them took off running in the direction of the sound, the direction Harry had been stumbling in the first place. Down a flight of stairs, then another; a second scream led them on until they stumbled to a stop, near the bottom of the stairs.

Little Ginny Weasley, the youngest of the Weasley family, was standing on the landing of the central staircase, where it split and went off in two separate directions one storey up from the Great Hall. Pale under the freckles, she glanced at them and pointed at the wall, where large red letters had been painted.

"The Chamber will be opened -- the Heir has come," Neville read. "Urk, is that -- "

"Don't touch it!" Padma said, looking ashen. Draco clung to Harry's arm.

"Ginny, come away," Harry said. Ginny was still staring. "Neville -- "

Neville put his hands on her shoulders; she gasped, startled, but allowed herself to be guided back to where the others stood, burying her face in Neville's shoulder.

People began to arrive then, running up or down the stairs or gathering on the floor below. Snape arrived first, barefoot; McGonagall came shortly after in a crowd of students, a housecoat thrown on over her clothes instead of her Teachers' robes and tartan slippers on her feet.

Someone in the back of the crowd shouted "Mudbloods had better look out!"

Snape whirled on the crowd, eyes blazing, and several of the children at the front drew back.

"Prefects," McGonagall called, putting a hand on Snape's arm to calm him.

"Here, Professor!" Penelope Clearwater replied. She and Percy were standing together, looking stunned; Ginny bolted from Neville to Percy, nearly knocking the wiry Prefect over.

"What's all the -- Merlin," Tonks breathed, coming down the stairs. Dumbledore was fast on her heels. "What happened?"

Dumbledore looked at the wall, and a shadow passed over his face. "Mr Weasley, please escort the Gryffindors to their dormitory," he ordered. "Ms Clearwater will take the Ravenclaws. Hufflepuffs -- "

"Our Prefect's in the loo!" someone shouted. There was a nervous giggle.

"Tonks?" McGonagall asked, and she immediately pushed through the crowd.

"Hufflepuffs this way!" she called, her hair turning to yellow-and-black stripes.

"Professor, would you take the Slytherins, please?" Snape asked, in a low voice. McGonagall lifted an eyebrow. "I'd like to speak with a few students," he added, catching Ginny by the elbow as she moved to follow Percy to the dormitories. Harry wasn't about to go anywhere, and the others stayed with him, huddled in a little group as the rest of the students reluctantly began to leave. Dumbledore joined them.

"What's this, Severus?" he asked. "No student did this -- "

"They were here when I arrived, before the other students," Snape replied.

"Ginevra appears distraught," Dumbledore said. "Did you discover this monstrosity, my dear?" he asked.

"She was here when we got here. She saw it first...sort of..." Draco said, glancing at Harry.

"Sort of? This is not the time for engima, Mr Malfoy," Snape said sharply.

"Ginny saw it first, sir," Padma said. "We heard her scream -- "

"Where were you?"

"At the top of the stairs, outside Gryffindor," Neville said.

"Given the situation, I shan't ask why," Dumbledore assured them. "You saw no one else, Ginevra?"

Ginny gulped and shook her head.

"There were no footsteps, no voices?"

"I wasn't looking, sir," she whispered. "I was just getting my gloves -- I left them in the Great Hall -- "

"And you came down the stairs to discover this?"

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore nodded. "Professor Snape, if you would accompany Ms Weasley, Mr Longbottom, and Ms Patil back to their dormitories, I will ensure that Mr Malfoy and Mr Potter are delivered safely."

Snape gave him a curt nod and began shepherding the others up the stairs. Dumbledore's hand, gentle but firm, clamped on Harry's shoulder as he shot a sidelong look at Draco. They walked towards the Hufflepuff dormitory in silence, until Dumbledore spoke again.

"Give Harry back his invisibility cloak, please, Draco," he said. Draco flushed crimson and passed it over.

"Is there anything you don't find out about, sir?" he asked, daringly.

"Oh, quite a lot of things, I should think," Dumbledore answered. "In this case, however, I confess to advance knowledge of that particular cloak."

Harry looked up at him, sharply. The cloak had been delivered by Snape, last Christmas, and signed only "From a Friend"; he'd never discovered who'd given it to him, only that it was his father's. But of course Dumbledore would have known his father...

"Perhaps it was a trifle premature to give it to you so soon," Dumbledore continued, "But I suspect you've made good use of it. And here we are," he added, as they descended into the cellar. Tonks was waiting in the open portrait-doorway.

"I thought we'd left one behind," she said. "In you go, Draco. All right, Harry?"

"All right, Professor," Harry answered automatically. Dumbledore steered him back up the steps, and down the long corridor, Tonks following behind until she broke off at the stairs to go up for another look at the horrible wall.

"Thank you," Harry said, as they walked towards the stairs down to the dungeons.

"Your father would have wanted you to have it," Dumbledore answered, almost absently.

"Headmaster..." Harry began, then faltered.

"Yes?"

"Who's the Heir? What Chamber's going to be opened?"

Dumbledore was silent as they descended and began working their way through the labyrinth of underground corridors that led to Slytherin's dormitory.

"The Heir is a silly tale to frighten children with," he said, finally. "And the Chamber is little more than a legend."

"But what -- "

"Here we are," Dumbledore said, and indeed they were -- the Slytherin's entrance-portrait was just ahead. Harry gave the password and crept through, but by the time he'd glanced back over his shoulder, as the portrait-door was closing, Dumbledore was already gone.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 11

Only after Dumbledore had left him at the entrance to the dormitory did Harry remember the voice he'd heard, the snake-voice demanding to be free and interrupted by Ginny's scream. He ran to his room, where the other boys, and a few of the girls, were sitting on Theo Nott's bed, deep in discussion. He scooped up a trembling, loudly complaining Snake into his breast pocket even as he dropped his cloak into the trunk at the foot of his bed.

"Potter might know," said Blaise Zabini, who moved over to make room for him between himself and Crabbe.

"Know what?" Harry asked, glad enough to be in the company of other people.

"Who the Heir is."

Harry shook his head. "I just asked Dumbledore. He wouldn't tell me anything."

"Bet you it was just Bole, doing it to scare Montague," Theo said contemptuously. "Bet you anything tomorrow Bole's going to be strutting around saying he's the Heir."

"What Heir, anyway?" Harry asked, realising suddenly that they knew more than he did.

"You don't know?" Blaise asked.

"Didn't I just say I didn't?"

"All right, you don't need to jump on me about it," Blaise said. "The Heir of Slytherin. The hundred-times great grandson -- "

"-- or daughter -- " put in Pansy Parkinson.

"Or daughter," Blaise rolled his eyes, "of Salazar Slytherin."

"My mum says there aren't any," Crabbe said.

"How does your mum know that?" Theo asked, contemptuous.

"She says." Crabbe stuck stubbornly to his story.

"Well, I heard about there was a Headmaster at Hogwarts who was a Slytherin and a Parselmouth and he was the last Heir of Slytherin," Blaise ventured.

"What's being a Parselmouth got to do with it?" Harry asked, very conscious of Snake in his

pocket.

"Who put you in such a snit? Didn't you know Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth? It's hereditary," Theo answered.

Harry opened his mouth to say that it wasn't, since he was one and neither of his parents were, but his first thought was that he didn't know his parents weren't Parselmouths, and his second thought was that he'd almost given himself away.

"Which headmaster?" he asked, instead.

"Don't recall," Blaise said, furrowing his brow. "Philip or something."

"Phineas?"

"Might've been."

"Who's he, then?" Theo demanded.

"Phineas Nigellus. He's in Hogwarts, A History," Harry replied. "It doesn't say anything about him being an Heir of Anyone or a Parselmouth. He just wasn't very popular. And he can't have been the last, because I think he had children."

"He's related to the Blacks, isn't he?" Pansy asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied, remembering the Black family tree he'd seen once, with Sirius and Andromeda burnt off of it and names stretching back almost to the Founders.

"They're famous for being Slytherins, the Blacks," Blaise said. "All but your godfather and Professor Tonks' mum. Malfoy's mum was, though, and her other sister -- "

"Bellatrix," Harry said, the hatred in his own voice surprising him. Blaise and Pansy, who caught on a little quicker than the others, raised their eyebrows.

"My aunt used to be friends with Mrs Malfoy," said Goyle. "She says they were all ashamed of your godfather, being a Gryffindor."

"If you say one word against my godfather I'll knock you flat," Harry said warningly, and Goyle subsided. "Anyway, I don't think there is any such thing. I bet it was Bole," he said, trying to reassure himself. If the Heir of Slytherin was a Parselmouth, then that might have been what he'd heard...

After all, Harry himself couldn't be the Heir. He didn't know anything about painting things in blood on walls, and he'd already been at Hogwarts a year, anyway.

"I hope so," Blaise answered. "If the Heir of Slytherin really is at the school..."

"Then what?" Harry prompted.

"Well, he might actually open the Chamber like he said he would, mightn't he?"

"What Chamber, anyhow?"

"What, isn't that in Hogwarts, A History?" Pansy asked snidely.

"The Chamber of Secrets," Blaise replied. They all leaned in closer, as if they were telling ghost stories around a campfire. "Before Salazar Slytherin left Hogwarts, he built an underground lair and hid a monster there. He left it all behind when he went away. Anyone who could find and open the doors to the lair could send the monster out into the school to eat all the Muggle-born students."

"That's why they were shouting about mudbloods," Harry said, understanding dawning. Every eye was on him, and he realised of all the students in the room, he was the only one with a Muggleborn parent -- with a Muggle of any kind in the family, closer than three or four generations back. Little Creevey in first year was Muggleborn, but he was one of only two with Muggle parents. Of the rest of the Slytherin students, barely a handful had any significant amount of Muggle blood.

"We should be back in the girls' dormitory," Pansy said. The girls slid off Theo's bed and talked quietly as they left; the boys, one by one, went to their own beds to put on their pyjamas. Soon the candles were doused and Harry was curled up under the blankets, whispering soothing reassurances to Snake on his pillow, wondering if even now the primal snake-voice that had demanded its freedom could hear him.

Snape returned from delivering the students to their rooms to find Dora Tonks on the landing, arms crossed, staring at the red words painted on the wall.

"Disturbing," he said, finally. She glanced up, as if just noticing him, and stepped aside a little, to allow him to join her.

"How's Ginny?" she asked.

"Hysterical child. One of the Gryffindor Prefects is seeing to her," he said shortly.

"No going easy on account of age," she murmured.

"It wasn't her blood," Snape replied. There was another pause. "Have you tried -- "

"Everything from Scourgify to dissolving spells," she said. "I think we'll have to strip a layer of stone to get it off."

Snape tilted his head slightly, as if a new perspective on the wall might give him new ideas. "Have you tried transfiguring the blood into something which -- "

"No, but the blood's been absorbed into the wall. The stone's porous. I'm not good enough to separate the two out," she said. It was a dare, but he didn't rise to the bait.

"Few would be," he agreed, instead.

"Speaking objectively, as an Auror, it's a good place to put something like that. Hundreds of children go up and down these stairs every day. Any physical evidence is all tangled up in..." she sighed. "Drooble's Best Blowing Gum wrappers and crumpled parchment."

Snape looked around, and realised she was right; as good as the house-elves were at keeping the place clean, the main staircase always ended up slightly dingy at the close of the school day. He tended to forget that Tonks was an Auror, with skills and ways of thinking that he didn't have. It caught him by surprise.

"What I wonder now," she continued, in that oddly detached voice, "is where all this blood came from. It would have had to be very fresh to be painted on so easily."

Snape knew from horrifying personal experience how quickly blood clotted. It was one of the primal elements of magic; working with blood was tricky, and there were few charms that affected it. Only the Muggles had ways to keep blood from clotting, by adding other things to it. He supposed those could be detected, but he had little experience with the Muggle alchemy known as chemistry.

As if she, and not he, were the master of Legilimency, she said, "Our alchemists have ways of detecting what sort of blood's been used, but I don't think Dumbledore wants this handled by outside help. You're Potions Master; could you find out?"

"Are you asking me for help?" he inquired, haughtily.

"As you're so fond of pointing out, we're supposed to be professionals. I'm furious with you, but you're useful. You don't like me, but you don't like obscenity scrawled in blood on the walls of our school, either." She shrugged. "If you can't do it -- "

"I can," he said.

"I thought as much."

He took a small folding knife from his pocket, a gift from Minerva after he'd made her nervous by summoning a knife from the kitchen once too often. He found an empty glass vial in another

pocket; he always had a few, and they seemed to multiply when he wasn't looking, like clothes-hangers in a wardrobe. She watched as he knelt and tested the blood at the bottom of the wall. When he found it not entirely dried yet, he slipped the blade into the blood and lifted it up, scraping the half-dried residue off on the lip of the vial.

"I doubt it's human," he said.

"Chicken is traditional, in the thriller novels," she replied. She was about to say something else, when Dumbledore appeared, carrying a small jar of powder.

"I see I am anticipated," he said, eyes falling on the vial Snape held. "Shall we, then?"

"Now?" Tonks asked.

"Can you think of a better time?" he inquired. "Severus, I had thought that perhaps you would be short of powdered unicorn dung," he said, shaking the jar slightly. Greyish dust swirled inside it.

"I have sufficient amounts for this," Snape replied, and led the way down into the dungeons, past the Potions classroom and into his private office. He cleared a stack of half-marked papers away, neatly, and took down a glass tray. He emptied the blood onto the tray, where it made a small, ragged-edged puddle, and put both bloody knife and vial into an empty porcelain wash-basin to be cleaned later. His hands found the ingredients he was looking for almost automatically in the supplies case, and Dumbledore and Tonks watched in silence, Dumbledore seating himself on the chair normally reserved for troublesome students, on the opposite side of the desk.

He mixed aconite -- the base of so many potions and the reason Remus Lupin had always had sneezing fits in class -- with a bat's heart for protein, adding a pinch of centaur's hair when the mixture formed a smooth paste. With a muttered incantation, he sprinkled the powdered unicorn dung over the coagulating blood, and spread the paste smoothly across it. He looked at Dumbledore as he picked up a hollow black tube, about the size of a pencil.

"Would you prefer...?" he asked, but Dumbledore shook his head. He didn't bother offering it to Tonks, but instead pressed the tube to his right ring finger, and jerked it slightly. The thin needle inside the tube drew blood, and he dripped three dots onto the mixture on the glass tray.

A puff of smoke spiraled upwards, and Snape seemed to cup it into his hands as if it were clay. In the bowl of his palms, it began to take shape, forming an elongated ball. Legs began to drift out from it, a head and tail; the small creature turned its head, and Dumbledore and Tonks both looked mildly surprised.

"Cow's blood?" Dumbledore inquired.

"The nearest cattle herd has to be miles from here. There's a butcher's shop in Hogsmeade, but they'd notice that much blood being bought," Tonks said. "I can look into it."

"I'm not sure there's need," Dumbledore said softly. "We have our own coldhouse and butchery in the kitchens; I would suggest, Professors, that you begin your search there."

"That means it's a professor, or a student," Tonks said, looking alarmed.

"Or," Dumbledore replied, "a house-elf."

The next day was Saturday, and by almost silent agreement, Tonks and Snape met on the steps to the kitchens at eight; they tried bickering about who ought to do the questions-asking, but it was half-hearted in the face of the bigger crime. They got no further than Tonks declaring herself a trained investigator and Snape demanding to know who had spent seven years training her, and who was the senior professor, before they reached the kitchen doors.

Questioning the house-elves proved to be fruitless, however. Since they were indentured to the school, and not any single individual in it, they could not be compelled to answer any question which would mean injuring any student or professor at Hogwarts. When asked if a house-elf could have done it, they merely dithered at the idea. They offered to iron their fingers, apologetically, but Dumbledore had a strict policy against such things, and in the end the questioning resulted in nothing more than the admission that the blood had come from the Hogwarts butchery, a lot of miserable house-elves, and two frustrated professors.

Denbigh, the head of the kitchen-elves, shared this information with Harry when he stopped by the kitchen to get some breakfast after oversleeping.

"But it wasn't a house-elf, was it?" Harry asked, worriedly. Denbigh's ears drooped.

"All the house-elves are busy with the washing up after the feast -- " Denbigh said anxiously.

"Oh, well, don't get too upset about it," Harry said hurriedly. "Can I have another apple?"

"Is Harry Potter seeing Mister Malfoy and Miss Padma Patil and Mister Neville Longbottom?" Denbigh asked. "Is he seeing them in the library, Harry Potter?"

Harry grinned. "We're falling into a rut, is that what you're saying?"

"No sir! Denbigh does not wish to -- "

"It's okay, Denbigh. Yes, I'm going to study group. Then I have practice this afternoon."

"Dobby the house-elf has insisted that we say to Mister Malfoy that he should come home, sir! The Heir, Harry Potter, the Heir!"

The rest of the house-elves took up the cry in their high, squeaky voices, and Denbigh shouted to

be heard over the din.

"Mister Harry Potter should go too! He is in danger!"

"Quiet!" Harry shouted desperately. They all fell eerily silent, immediately. "Now listen, nobody's going home. It's probably just a dumb prank."

Denbigh stared at him, enormous eyes unblinking, until finally Harry sighed.

"We'll be all right. If every person with a Muggle relative went home, the school would be almost empty, anyway," he said. "Now listen, I have a game against Gryffindor next Saturday at eleven. Will you make some popcorn for the others to take to the game?"

"Of course, Harry Potter. One sweet, one salted, one sweet with extra butter," Denbigh said, recounting the way the other three liked their popcorn. "And Harry Potter will come to see us afterwards?"

"Sure, Denbigh. We'll have a late lunch in the kitchen." Harry accepted the small sack of food that the house-elves pressed into his hands, put it in his bag, and was just turning to leave when something occurred to him.

"Denbigh," he asked, turning around. "When was Dobby here?"

Denbigh looked frightened. "Dobby and Mendy are coming to help us do the washing up after the feast," he said, in a very quiet voice. "Harry Potter will not tell Mistress Malfoy? She is un -- unkind -- " He hesitated, elf-fashion, unwilling to speak ill even of those humans who didn't employ him.

"Unkind to them, I know. It's all right; I won't even tell Draco."

Denbigh sighed with relief, and soon the rest of the kitchen was filled once more with clattering and clanking as the lunch preparations began. Harry shouldered his bag and headed for the library. By the time he reached it, most of the students who had studying to do were there; it was too cold to enjoy being outside, but not quite cold enough to snow, and students in the library were very rarely harassed so long as they kept quiet. Harry waved at Padma, who had staked out and viciously defended a table for their use, and stopped to drop off two books he'd taken out a week before.

"Harry!" someone whispered urgently, and Harry looked up from the returns box to see a cadre of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs gathered at a table near one of the magical fireplaces that heated the library without actually being on fire. A curly-haired boy in Hufflepuff yellow was gesturing madly for him to come over.

"What is it, Justin?" Harry whispered, wondering if he had something in his hair, or if his bag flap was unlatched.

"Is it true you know who the Heir is?" Justin Finch-Fletchley asked. The rest of the table was watching eagerly. "Blaise Zabini said all the Slytherins knew, but nobody's willing to tell us except Colin Creevey, and nobody tells him anything anyway."

Justin glanced to his left, and Harry followed his gaze; Colin was sitting wretchedly at a table with a handful of other Slytherin first-years, and being completely ignored by his fellows.

"He's supposed to be the great-great-whatever-great grandson of Salazar Slytherin, and he can talk to snakes, and if he gets into the Chamber of Secrets which nobody knows where it is, he'll let a monster out and it'll eat all the Muggle-born students."

Justin turned pale.

"But it's just a story, I'm sure it's a prank," Harry said hurriedly.

"I'm Muggleborn," Justin said, then winced when he realised he'd announced it to the world.

"If I were you, I wouldn't tell the monster that -- I'm kidding, Finch," Harry said, when Justin blanched. "Look, it's just a story. Pass it on if you want to, but don't forget to tell people that, all right?"

Padma was waving for Harry to come over, but he held up a finger and walked over to the table where the Slytherin first-years were studiously ignoring Creevey.

"Hey, Cricket," Harry said. Colin didn't look up. "Creevey. Cricket. I'm talking to you."

Colin met his eyes slowly. He looked like he was about to wet himself. Harry wondered if the second-years, or even the other first-years, had been bullying him.

Harry had never himself been a bully beyond the usual cuffing and wrestling between village boys in Betwys Beddau. He supposed if he had to, he could, but he found it distasteful; and besides, if you had to bully, you ought to have a point to it, and you jolly well ought to bully someone your own size.

"Come on, Cricket," he said. The first-years were pointedly not looking at him; they were exchanging anxious glances. This was Harry Potter. What did Harry Potter want with a little Mudblood?

"Um?" Colin asked.

"Come on, Cricket, you'll never get anywhere studying all alone like that. Padma's brilliant at Charms; come study with us," Harry said. Colin glanced at the others, as if asking if this was some kind of joke. When Harry looked impatient, he scrambled to gather up his books, and followed the taller boy back to where Padma was sitting.

"Neville and Draco are in the stacks. Neville's booby-trapping books with some of George Weasley's exploding bookmarks," Padma said. "Who's he?"

"Exploding bookmarks?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, he found out how Exploding Snap works and reversed the polarities so now it goes bang when you open the book," Padma replied. "Who're you?" she asked Colin directly this time.

"Colin Creevey," he said, shyly.

"This is Cricket," Harry said. "He gets a nickname, because it makes the other students jealous, and they all hate him already. Sit," he said to Colin, who obeyed.

"Oh, you're the Muggleborn who got in with the Slytherins," Padma said. "The one with the camera always around his neck."

"Yeah," Colin said glumly, as Neville and Draco emerged from the stacks and sat down with absolutely straight faces.

"This is Cricket, he's studying with us today," Harry said. Neville and Draco nodded and opened their bookbags. There was an explosion from the stacks. Draco fought down a grin, bravely. "He's going to keep his mouth shut about what we're talking about, too, aren't you, Cricket?"

Colin nodded. Padma was reading his book, half-over his shoulder.

"The Slytherins know who the Heir is," Harry said, and the others listened as he recounted the previous night's conversation. "Professor Snape and Dor -- Professor Tonks talked to the house-elves this morning, but they didn't say anything. They're all really upset about it. They said to tell you Dobby says you should go home," he said to Draco, who grinned a little.

"Ginny says she didn't see anyone," Neville said helpfully. "And Dora's not exactly likely to tell me much. I mean, she might if I could get her to, but I'm not that sneaky."

"So if the students and the professors don't know anything and the house-elves don't know anything -- or if they do they aren't telling..."

"Do you think there really is an Heir?" Neville asked. They were all silent.

"I think there's something," Harry said quietly. "I don't know if it's the Heir. It might be the monster."

"We're scaring Cricket," Padma said softly.

"I'm not scared," Colin said hastily. "I just thought..." he paused. "I mean...could you ask the ghosts?"

"The ghosts?" Draco asked.

"They're...always floating around. You can't go to the bathroom but there's a ghost putting his head in to say hello," Colin said. "It takes a bit of getting used to...the others made fun because I...I don't...really like ghosts..."

Draco and Harry exchanged a look. "We could ask Nick to ask around," Draco said. "He isn't much fond of the Baron, but -- "

"I'll deal with the Baron," Harry said. Colin stared at him admiringly. "Let's finish studying and we can go find Nick. Padma, do you want to help Cricket out?"

"I have to finish, too," Padma said, slightly crossly. She shoved a few books into her bag, and took out a roll of parchment. "You keep reading and if you have questions you can ask your benefactor there," she said, to Colin.

"I do all right," Colin said in a small voice.

Harry, unrolling his half-finished Potions essay, glanced at Padma; it was unusual for her to even have any work to do on a Saturday, especially by this late in the morning. She was always done first. She looked tired, though; maybe she'd been doing extra work, and their prank had taken up quite a bit of time in the planning and execution.

They studied in silence, punctuated only by the occasional exploding bookmark in the stacks; Neville and Draco were working together, their heads bent over a Herbology exercise, and Padma was taking notes for the same essay Harry was working on, which was an enormous help as he could glance over at her book and see what she was writing. It wasn't cheating; it was just...getting hints.

When noon tolled, most of the other students rose to get lunch; Harry passed Padma the bag of snacks that the house-elves had given him, and gestured for Colin to pack up his things.

"You should go eat," he said, standing and steering Colin towards the door. "Listen, they don't like you, and they're going to like you even less because I like you. You understand?"

Colin nodded.

"So ignore them. I'll make sure the Gryffindor first-years are nice to you, and if anyone tries to pick on you..." he paused for thought. "Well, let 'em, and tell me after, okay?"

"Why are you doing this?" Colin asked.

Harry had to stop, in the doorway of the library, and think about this.

"Because it's stupid to think someone's not worth knowing just because their parents couldn't do magic," he said finally. "You ought to dislike a person because that person is horrible. How'd you get into Slytherin, anyway?"

Colin mumbled.

"What?"

"I asked," he said.

"To be put in Slytherin?"

"I think Slytherin is brilliant," Colin said. "It's historical, and wizards who're in Slytherin really become something. That's what I heard on the Hogwarts Express."

Harry thought about Bellatrix Lestrange and Phineas Nigellus. And Severus Snape.

"Sometimes, we do," he said thoughtfully, and sent Colin out into the hallway with a gentle shove.

Sirius was reading in the kitchen when Remus came in, shrugging out of his coat. The walk from Madam Schaeffer's wasn't far, but it was chilly, and he went immediately to the stove, where hot water was waiting in the kettle.

"Do you ever look at Harry," Sirius said, by way of greeting, "And think just how much he's James' son?"

Remus put a strainer on top of a large white mug and added a spoonful of tea. "Not really."

"No?" Sirius asked. "How was work?"

"Fine. It's bloody cold out. Tea?"

"Just had some. You don't ever look at Harry and see James?"

"No," Remus said, pouring the hot water over the strainer. "I look at him and see Lily."

Sirius glanced up from the letter. Remus smiled faintly. "It's the eyes," he said.

"Yes, well, the disposition is James all over," Sirius replied. He passed the letter to Remus, who removed the strainer and added honey while he read. The corners of his mouth twitched.

"Caught outside after hours, having stuck a dormitory bed to the ceiling as a prank...sounds more like you, if you ask me," he said, handing it back to Sirius. "Dumbledore's not going to punish

him for the prank?"

"They can't prove he did anything," Sirius said. "He wants me to have a word with the boy."

"Can't think why, all you're likely to tell him is how not to get caught," Remus said, grinning over his tea. "And you can bet that if he was there, his cohort was too."

"I could send him a Howler," Sirius said. "I used to get those on a regular basis. Went over very well with the girls."

Remus scowled.

"Yes, you never were impressed, I recall," Sirius grinned. "Don't you think it might be fun? I've never sent a Howler. I wouldn't even know where to go to get one."

"Post office down near Gringotts, I think."

"You never got Howlers at school."

"Lupins are genetically disinclined towards shouting," Remus said. "If you could invent a piece of paper that glared like my mum glared, then I'd have had lots."

He sat down at the table, while Sirius folded the letter up and set it aside.

"Do you think Howlers are a good idea?" Sirius asked. "In all honesty."

"No. I never did. It's barbarous to publicly embarrass your children in front of their friends."

"I was never embarrassed."

"Yes you were. You were more embarrassed than most. You smiled and strutted whenever you got one to hide how mortified you were," Remus said. "Even James only looked embarrassed and sat it out, but you made a production out of it. I don't blame you. Your dad had a set of lungs on him."

Sirius was staring down at the table. Remus put a hand on the back of his neck, fingers twining up through his short black hair.

"You," he said, "made trouble to annoy your parents. Harry makes trouble because he has troublemaking in his soul, like James did. He's always going to make trouble."

"I used to wonder how my father reacted to letters like this," Sirius said. "I used to take gleeful delight in wondering, in fact."

"And now?"

"Well, I hope he got more upset than I am. If I went through years of Howlers and detentions and all he got was....was amused, I have failed deeply."

"I think the Howlers themselves are proof of success," Remus said, shaking him gently and letting him go.

"He really shouldn't be wandering around the castle at night." Sirius worried his lip with his teeth, thinking. "He's not an ordinary child. It's dangerous."

"Tell him that and see if you can stop him," Remus said.

"I know, he's young still. It's just...do you ever wonder where Peter is?"

Remus nodded, gravely. "All the time. Where he is, why he hasn't come back to try to kill the lot of us...I trust Severus, though."

"Trust him to do what?"

"To look after Harry. To be...aware enough that if Peter is near, he'll know. He's tied to Peter, somehow. He knows. And he loves Harry, Sirius. I trust Severus to give his own life for Harry, just like you or I would." Remus grinned. "And I know that gets under your skin in a way very little else does."

Sirius opened his mouth to reply, but Remus had leaned forward and kissed him before he could say anything.

"I'm still cold," Remus complained. "Want to try warming me up?"

Sirius smiled back. "You're good at changing the subject."

"If I weren't, you'd worry everything to death like a dog with a rag doll."

Sirius laughed, and let himself be pulled up out of his chair, towards the bedroom and a certain amount of pleasant oblivion.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 12

It was one o'clock before they finished with their schoolwork, owing mainly to the fact that Neville and Draco kept taking time off from their assignments to write notes to each other, flick wads of paper at Padma, and good-naturedly tease Snake with the feather-tips of their quills. Snakes were supposed to hibernate for most of the winter and Snake had always done so in the past, but he was anxious lately, and awake far more often than was usual. It helped Harry's nerves to have Snake distracted.

"I told Denbigh we'd get lunch in the kitchens, then we can go and look for Nick. Where do you suppose he is?" Harry asked, as they put their parchment away and sealed up their inkpots. Draco carefully slipped his silver-nibbed quills into the shallow wooden case he kept in his bag, shrugging.

"He's normally somewhere around the Great Hall. We can find him after lunch," Padma said. She stroked Snake's head with a fingertip, then allowed him to wrap himself around her wrist, loosely. Draco was still wary of holding Snake, but the other two kept equally cold-blooded pets and didn't mind carting him about once in a while.

They made their way towards the staircase that would lead them down past the next two floors and the landing with the bloody scrawl on it that no amount of scrubbing had been able to remove. Despite the previous night's events, they were in high spirits; while most Hogwarts students would spend the entire weekend feeling vaguely guilty about not completing their homework until Sunday night, they were finished and had a whole day and a half of freedom to look forward to, full of the prospect of playing Detective and talking to the ghosts, which was always an interesting experience.

Draco was saying something about Monday's classes, to which nobody was paying much attention, when Padma stopped on the stairs so suddenly that Neville had to dart to one side to avoid plowing into her, and only Harry's quick grab at the back of Neville's shirt kept him from tumbling down the stairs.

"What is it?" Harry asked, as Neville grunted his thanks.

"I bet Moaning Myrtle saw something. She's always here -- the other ghosts don't like her."

"Wow," Draco said. "I mean, hard enough being a ghost without being an unpopular ghost."

"She must have at least heard Ginny scream, and probably what happened before that."

"Can we ask her?" Neville asked.

"I don't see why not," Padma said, striding forward. The boys followed until she pushed open a

door across the corridor, at which point they all paused uncertainly. The door swung shut behind her and, after a second, swung open again.

"Are you coming?" Padma asked, peevishly.

"That's the girls' toilet," Neville said.

"And?"

"And we're boys!" Harry replied.

"Nobody ever uses it," Padma said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, the toilets don't bite."

They hesitated on the threshold, but Padma forged ahead and it was cross or be hit by the door.

Entering the sanctum of a Girls' Loo was more than just going where you weren't supposed to go; it was a trespass into sacred space. Even Harry, who would normally go anywhere and do anything, felt a curious mix of anthropological interest and guilty discomfort.

He wasn't sure what he would have expected to find, but the reality was commonplace and eerie at the same time. It looked like most normal Hogwarts bathrooms. There was a long, spotty mirror on one wall, over a row of white porcelain sinks. There were half a dozen stalls with wooden doors, facing the mirror, and one of them housed leaky plumbing. The floor was damp, reflecting the light of Padma's illumination spell on the tip of her wand, and a handful of stubby, low-burning candles.

What was unsettling was the dust that was thick everywhere; it piled in the corners and scuttled in dustbunnies along the drier edges where wall met floor. Neville daringly ran his finger along the mirror and came away with dry brown powder on his hand. It was clear that the house-elves came here only to change out the candles and fled as soon as they could; cobwebs abounded, but even Draco, who was jumpy around things with more than four legs, couldn't spot a single spider.

"Myrtle?" Padma called softly, and the room amplified her voice. "Are you here, Myrtle?"

She was just pushing the door of the last stall open when there was an enormous splash and water slopped out over Padma's shoes, flooding the floor with a stale, rusty wet film. The boys all took a few steps back; Draco, who'd gone past Padma, was trapped against the wall.

Moaning Myrtle floated in the doorway, having apparently just emerged from the u-bend of the toilet. She was a short, lank-haired ghost who looked as if she were -- or rather, as if she'd been when she'd died -- about fifteen. She had pearly, thick-lensed spectacles on, far too big for her face, and she was incongruously chewing gum.

"This," she said snottily, "Is the girls' bathroom."

"I told you -- " Neville started to say to Padma, but she interrupted.

"It's all right, Myrtle, there's no one else here -- "

"Oh, that's just fine," Myrtle snapped. "I suppose I don't count. I suppose from now on, I'm to be a display item to show to boys -- "

"It isn't like that at all," Padma said hastily. Draco, behind the door, was mouthing something at Harry, who was terrible at reading lips. Myrtle saw Harry give Draco a bewildered look, and put her head right through the half-open door so that her body floated on one side near Padma, and her head stuck out of the other, a foot or so from Draco's rather startled face.

"What were you saying about me?" she asked.

"N-nothing," Draco stammered.

"Everyone's always talking about me behind my back!" Myrtle wailed. "Ghosts have feelings too, you know!"

"Oh, don't be such a baby," Neville said crossly. Everyone, including Neville, looked shocked at this. Myrtle gave a little choking sob, and Neville pushed onward. "We never heard of you before today so it's not likely we're telling tales about you, is it?"

"The fact is," Harry added hastily, stepping between Myrtle and Neville before she tried to drown him in a toilet or something equally dire, "you're a very important witness, Myrtle."

She opened her mouth to wail again, but seemed to change her mind just beforehand.

"I know you," she said instead. "You're Harry Potter."

"That's right," Harry said, playing on his celebrity for one of few times in his life. "I'm the Boy Who Lived."

"You're more than that," Myrtle said, and Harry watched in horror as she floated towards him, coyly.

"Yes, well," Harry continued. "The thing is, Myrtle, last night someone vandalised the school, and your bathroom's not at all far away, so we thought, knowing that you're so -- " he swallowed and took a step back; Myrtle was floating disconcertingly close, " -- so observant, we were wondering if you'd seen anything. Or heard anything. Or knew anything. So, anything really," he finished with a gulp.

"Last night?" Myrtle asked. "That was Hallowe'en."

"Yes..."

"Peeves made fun of my costume," Myrtle sulked.

"Oh? Er, what did you go as?"

"You know very well what I went as!" she shrieked. "Ghosts can't dress up as anything BUT ghosts, you know!"

Harry heard Draco whisper "Sod this for a game of soldiers" somewhere beyond Myrtle. He pushed his glasses up on his nose anxiously.

"Yes, but, but, I mean, what's Peeves? He hasn't even got a proper place to haunt. He's just a drifter, really," he said quickly. "Please, did you hear anything at all?"

Myrtle wrinkled her nose. "I don't like people coming in my bathroom," she said. "Coming in and making fun of me -- "

"Nobody's making fun, Myrtle! Honest!" Padma said helpfully.

"Stupid little house-elves," Myrtle snivelled. "He didn't have to clean his filthy old bucket in here."

"A house-elf was here?" Draco asked. Myrtle turned to him.

"Didn't I just say that?" she asked snidely. Harry wondered if he should bolt; the door was barely three feet behind him, but that would leave the other three with Myrtle between them and the door, and that was no good.

"Do you know which one?" Padma asked eagerly.

"House-elves don't talk to me," Myrtle sniffed. "He had big eyes and floppy ears."

"So every house-elf ever, then," Neville muttered.

"I heard that!" Myrtle shrieked, whirling on Neville, who flinched. "It's not my fault! They're all horrible little bug-eyed snobs! They come here just to make fun of me, you know! Replacing the candles as if anyone's ever going to want to come here again!" she howled.

And that was when Harry heard the voice again, the deep, primal snake-voice that terrified Snake and gave Harry bad dreams. Even as Myrtle continued to howl and dive into another toilet, splashing water all over the floor once more, he heard it as though it were rising through the stone floor.

Bite and kill....so close...

Free me....master....free me to feed in the air once more...

Snake had unwound himself from Padma's wrist and dropped, and now he left a pale trail on the damp floor as he slithered frantically towards Harry, who ran forward and scooped him up into his pocket before bolting --

Straight through the door and into Argus Filch.

The door was swinging behind him, and he heard Padma's surprised squeak when she caught sight of the door caretaker. Hoping that at least the other three would be able to hide out in a stall, he pushed again, almost sending Filch sprawling and maneuvering him away from the door.

"What have we 'ere?" Filch asked, with the air of a wine connoisseur enjoying a fine vintage. "Harry Potter, trespassing in the girls' bathroom."

A thick wash of water spilled out through the crack at the bottom of the doorway.

"Vandalising the girls' bathroom," Filch announced. "I've nicked you, my young prankster. Come on," he added, grasping Harry's sleeve in his dirt-stained hand and pulling him along.

At least the other three were safe, so long as Myrtle didn't howl and ruin everything. In his pocket, Snake was agitated, writhing and complaining incoherently. He put his hand in to soothe the small creature and felt the sinewy body wrap tightly around his fingers, Snake's head burrowing into the fold of his palm.

He was being taken to Filch's office, he realised, a miserable windowless cubbyhole that most students preferred not to investigate. Filch nearly threw him into a chair and ordered him not to move. Harry took the opportunity to look around. There were -- were those manacles? -- hanging on the walls like grisly Christmas garlands, and a small stove with a teakettle and a few dirty plates on it. Most of the space was taken up with filing cabinets, which apparently contained details of every pupil ever punished by the caretakers of Hogwarts.

When Harry noticed that the Weasleys had an entire drawer to themselves, he grinned a little, despite Filch's admonitions to shut up and contemplate his doom. Filch, as he locked several of the file cabinets, muttered about fetching Dumbledore to expel the Vandal. Harry came to realise, with horror, that Filch meant to blame the vandalism in the hallway on him. He considered opening his mouth to protest, but that would probably only make Filch angrier; he decided to wait and appeal his punishment with Dumbledore, who would surely at least want to look into any student blamed for the macabre graffiti.

Finally, Filch's head snapped up and the caretaker fixed him with an icy glare.

"Fetchin' the Headmaster now," he grunted. "Stay there and don't touch anything. I'm locking you in."

Harry carefully did not point out that there was a large bowl of floo powder on the mantel over the fireplace, if should he really want to make his escape.

The door slammed, keys snicked in the lock, and Harry was alone in Filch's office. He investigated the file cabinets first, but couldn't get them open; shame, really, as he was sure there were things in the Weasleys' drawer that they'd like to have back. The desk, considering the bedlam the rest of the room was in, was oddly tidy; the only thing on it, aside from an inkbottle and a handful of quills in a stand, was a large glossy purple folder, lettered silver across the front. Harry picked it up idly, hoping Filch hadn't managed to stumble across the other three as he went to the Headmaster's office.

It seemed to be some kind of correspondence course, the sort he dimly remembered being advertised on television when he lived with the Dursleys in the dark time before Sirius and Remus took him away. Aunt Petunia had ordered a course on gourmet cooking, he thought, and for a few weeks their dinners were either composed of food too disgusting to eat or dishes that had gone subtly wrong in the cooking process.

Kwikspell, A Correspondence Course in Beginners' Magic!
Feel out of step in the world of modern magic?
Find yourself making excuses not to perform simple spells?
Ever been taunted for your woeful wandwork?
THERE IS AN ANSWER!

Odd, Harry thought. Filch worked at a school for magic; why would he need a correspondence course? Surely he could get some sort of tutoring if he was having trouble in any particular area.

He opened the folder and sifted through the paperwork inside. A particular page caught his eye.

ONE SQUIB'S STORY

How one man conquered Squibhood and amazed his friends and family

Was Filch a squib?

It explained a lot, but it was still difficult to believe. He had just started to read the letter to Kwikspell from the grateful squib when the door opened and Filch loomed in it, menacingly. Harry narrowed his eyes at the caretaker, tilted down the folder just long enough for Filch to see what he was reading, then closed and set it on the desk. Filch gaped at him.

"You!" he sputtered. "My! What!"

"Headmaster Dumbledore," Harry said, as he moved back to stand before the desk. Dumbledore was attempting to look around Filch to see what the fuss was. Filch had no choice but to stumble into the room, glaring in anger and horror at Harry.

"Good afternoon, Harry," Dumbledore said, gravely. "Mr. Filch has brought me here for a very

serious reason."

"Yes, sir. I was caught in the girls' loo," Harry replied. "Well, coming out of it, really, sir."

"He's the vandal!" Filch almost shrieked.

"Harry, Mr. Filch appears to be convinced that you painted the obscenity in the stairwell landing yesterday," Dumbledore continued. He looked so serious that Harry really began to believe he might be blamed, but there was a slight tilt to his lips that Harry hopefully interpreted as amusement. "I must say, it doesn't look good for you, skulking around a girls' bathroom. Especially as I found this while investigating his claim." He held out his hand. There was a red smear on one finger. "Blood on one of the sinks."

The house-elf washing out the bucket....

"I didn't do it, sir," Harry said. "You can ask Neville or Padma or Draco, I was with them when it happened!"

"He's tricky!" Filch shouted furiously. "His friends will lie for him!"

"Undoubtedly; sometimes that's the sign of a true friend," Dumbledore agreed. "Harry, we need to know what you were doing in that bathroom."

Harry bit his lip. "I was talking to Myrtle," he said truthfully, and then realised he might have a good thing, in that excuse. "Nobody ever goes in there, sir, and she's very lonely."

"You were keeping a morose ghost company in the middle of a Saturday afternoon?" Dumbledore asked. There was a definite twitch of a smile around his lips now.

"She's a very interesting person to talk to," Harry answered.

"You know what the ghosts are saying about him," Filch hissed. "You know he's -- "

"That's quite enough, Argus," Dumbledore said gently. "I happen to have spoken with several students, including a handful of Gryffindors, who can say irrevocably that Harry was...otherwise occupied at the time in question. I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere for your vandal."

Filch's eyes nearly bulged out of his head.

"By all means, however, it is not right for boys to be in the girls' bathrooms, no matter what the pretext," Dumbledore said. "I think an evening's detention is in order, Harry."

Harry nodded. He was watching Filch now, hoping the man would blurt out something more about precisely what the ghosts were saying about him. He'd said he was the Boy Who Lived and Myrtle had said you're more than that....

"I leave this in your capable hands," Dumbledore finished, and tipped a wink at Harry as he left. Harry, feeling slightly bereft, was startled when Filch grabbed his arm and stared into his eyes, furiously.

"You read my private -- " Filch stuttered. "Not that it's mine -- for a friend -- "

"It was very interesting reading," Harry managed.

"If you say one word -- "

" -- it would make you the laughingstock of the school," Harry finished for him. Filch regarded him warily.

"I won't be blackmailed by some snotty twelve-year-old," he said finally.

"Fine. You don't tell anyone where I was when you caught me and I'll forget about that folder," Harry answered. Filch snarled. "It's not as though I've any proof."

"Detention," the caretaker growled. "Monday night, in the old scullery."

"But I don't know where that -- "

"OUT!" Filch roared, unable to take it any longer. Harry wisely did as he was told, and put as much distance between himself and the unpleasant, fishy-smelling office as he could.

The four of them didn't get a chance to meet or discuss what they'd discovered until late on Sunday, as it turned out, and by then, they had bigger problems to worry about.

At dinner on Saturday, thinking it would probably be unwise to be seen with the other three in case they were implicated by association, Harry sat with Cricket Creevey on one side of him (the name had caught on amongst the first years with almost alarming speed) and most of the Quidditch team ranged out along the table on the other side. If the others raised their eyebrows at Harry's protege, they didn't say anything. Most players, sooner or later, did take on someone to shine their gloves and carry their broom, and if Potter wanted a Muggleborn to do it, they weren't going to stop him.

Tomorrow was the first game of the Quidditch season, against Gryffindor, and the rowdy insults between Houses flew thick and fast at dinner. Wood and Flint both ordered their teams away early after dinner and Flint sequestered them in one corner of the snug, dimly-lit Slytherin common room, where they shared around chocolate frogs and talked informally about Gryffindor's plays. Harry knew that at that moment Oliver Wood was going over those plays as well, in a much more organised fashion than Flint. He wondered if, after this year, Slytherin might finally get a decent

captain.

Bole and Montague were talking to each other again, grudgingly, because while fistfighting was all well and good on the ground, Quidditch was Quidditch, and team loyalty came before anything else, even for Slytherins.

Sunday dawned muggy, threatening to storm, and as usual before a game, Harry had very little appetite. He picked at his toast while Padma and Neville both ordered him to eat, and when the four dispersed to their respective tables as breakfast properly started he cut up his sausage into very small pieces. He fed most of it to Snake, who was sleepily bored with Quidditch, and the rest to Hedwig, who had delivered a letter from Remus and Sirius which was charmed to make little triumphant trumpeting sounds whenever it was opened.

Harry knew that it cost Sirius a great deal of effort to root for Slytherin, and the sentiments were appreciated. Remus, happily moderate when it came to House loyalties of any kind, actually owned a green-and-silver jumper and wore it on game days, much to Sirius' disgust.

To calm his nerves, he started mentally composing a letter back to them after he left Snake with Neville for safekeeping and followed Flint and the others down to the Quidditch pitch. Dear Sirius and Remus, he thought, I hope you both listened in to the match on the Floo Broadcast this morning. Lee Jordan is still announcing, and I overheard Ron Weasley say that he heard his brother Fred say that Lee wants to be a professional sports announcer after he leaves school. That'd be an interesting job, don't you think? Anyway, lots of people must hear him whenever there's a school match.

The Gryffindors have been training much harder than we have, which should come as no surprise, but we're cleverer, I think, and we're going to try some of my new plays today, so I hope you were listening especially close because I think that feint I was working on during the summer might --

He stopped then, surprised at what he saw; the little building that housed the showers and lockers for all four teams was in sight, and the door to the Slytherin section was open. Colin Creevey stood there with his camera around his neck and Harry's Quidditch gloves, nearly as big as Colin's entire arm, in his hands.

"One of the bigger boys told me I should look after your gear, Harry," he said breathlessly. The other Slytherins looked at each other and exchanged amused grins. "Did I do it all right?"

Harry accepted one of the gloves, turning it over in his hands. A loose tag of fabric that he'd been meaning to mend had been stitched back into the leather, and every inch of the glove shone.

"It's all right, Cricket," he said. "But you shouldn't be here. From now on make sure you do it before game day, all right?"

"All right!" Creevey said rapturously. Montague sniggered.

"Shut it," Harry said, turning to glare at Montague. "Go on, Cricket."

Creevey held up the camera, the flashbulb popped, the entire team roared in blinded outrage, and by the time Harry rubbed the spots from his eyes, the first-year was gone.

"If he does that again, Potter, I'll break that camera over his head, and I don't care how nicely he oils your glove," Flint growled. Montague sniggered again, but Harry was almost positive that couldn't have been as dirty as Montague thought it was.

"Break some fingerbones when you shake hands," Bole said to Flint as they were suiting up. "And hey, Potter!"

"What?"

"You're the wunderkind. Try and play like it, Scarhead."

"Sod off, Bole."

"And the Quaffle is up! The first game of the Hogwarts Quidditch season opens with a snatch by Slytherin captain Flint, playing in his final year..."

"Hey, do we have to listen to that?" asked Sara, the newest (and youngest) clerk at Madam Schaeffer's Scholars' Emporium and Educational Toy Shoppe.

"Yes," came a chorus of voices from Ellers, Lupin, Blake, Madam Schaeffer herself, and three patrons, all of whom were sitting at a table playing with Sirius Black's newest invention, gravity-defying building blocks which could be used to build skyscrapers from the top down.

"Don't you like Quidditch?" Ellers asked.

"Not really," Sara replied.

"Heretic," Blake said.

"Honestly, it's not even a real game, it's just a school game," Sara said, rolling her eyes.

"Mind your tongue," Madam Schaeffer said sternly. "That's our Lupin's boy playing Seeker for Slytherin."

Lupin, who was wearing a green jumper with silver cuffs and ringing up a purchase, smiled with pride.

"He's the youngest Seeker in a hundred years," he said. Most of the rest of the staff chimed in on

the last few words. "He's going to take Slytherin to the cup this year again, you wait and see."

Over the Floo Broadcast, crackling out of the hearth in the corner, there was a ragged cheer.

"Who scored?" Lupin demanded. "Curse you, Sara, if you don't like it take the day off, I'll pay your wage."

"Gryffindor, I think," Ellers said, as she tossed another log on the fire. The volume increased.

"Gryffindor is playing with razor-sharp precision today but Slytherin seems to be breaking up their formations left and right. Oh, foul!" called a voice. "Harry Potter fouls the Gryffindor Beater -- "

"He never did!" Lupin said hotly.

"Hooch fails to call -- play continues -- "

"You're bloody right," Lupin muttered.

"Where's the proud godfather today?" Ellers asked, during a lull in the action.

"He's at home -- Andromeda's having a bit of a do."

"I could have given you the day off, you know," Madam Schaeffer scolded.

"And miss listening here and bragging to everyone who comes through? I'll make it for the end of the game. And the party afterwards when Slytherin wins," Lupin added. Sara rolled her eyes.

"So he can fly a broomstick, big deal," she muttered.

"He's the best flyer in Hogwarts," Lupin retorted.

"Slytherin scores!" called the announcer. The listeners cheered. "No sign of the Snitch yet as it begins to rain...they appear to be grappling for the ball near Slytherin goal and -- "

They heard the crowd gasp.

"What happened?" Lupin demanded.

"Slytherin has somehow...how did they do that?" the boy announcing the game sounded stunned. "Either that was a complete failure of a broom or a brand-new move in the Slytherin playbook -- Slytherin scores," he added glumly.

"Bet you two Galleons that was Harry's new move," Lupin said to Madam Schaeffer.

"I know better than to bet with you, you shark," she replied with a laugh.

"The Snitch has apparently been spotted but it's tough going through the rain -- both Seekers now in pursuit as Gryffindor scores -- quick steal by Slytherin but there seems to be a problem with one of the Slytherin Beaters, some sort of scrum between players -- Harry, look out -- "

All the colour drained from Lupin's face.

"Potter -- yes -- Potter has the Snitch and the game is over and it's Slytherin the winners, but Madam Pomfrey is already on the field and Potter appears to have fainted -- bad blow from the Bludger he took -- "

They all turned to look at Lupin, who was gripping the counter tightly.

"I'm sure he's fine," he said, sounding as if he was anything but sure. "If he had time to catch the Snitch it can't be that bad -- "

"Go, Lupin," Madam Schaeffer said, taking down a jar of floo powder and offering it to him. "Sara will cover your shift."

He looked indecisive for only a moment, then took up a pinch of powder and tossed it into the fire, calling "Three Broomsticks, Hogsmeade" as he stepped inside.

He actually ran into Sirius' back as he emerged.

"It's Harry," Sirius said. "Did you hear?"

"Come on," Remus replied. "We can cut through the forest."

Harry woke to the sound of Montague and Bole being furiously shouted at by at least three separate voices, which was a great comfort.

He remembered seeing Montague skim past Bole as he'd done during practice, and Bole had reached out and grabbed him, and then Pucey had sailed in to keep them apart --

And nobody had been free to get rid of the Bludger which had hit him across the left shoulder, knocking him sideways just as his fingers curled around the Snitch. Rapid descent and blackness...

"Harry?" said a voice, quietly, and Harry opened his eyes. Sirius' face filled his vision, worried and pale. In the background, the voices resolved themselves into Professors McGonagall and Snape, and he could hear Remus trying to quiet everyone down. His shoulder was burning.

"Hey, how are you?" Sirius asked, stroking his hair. Harry smiled reassuringly at him.

"M'ok," he said, wanting to sit up but not sure his shoulder would support him. "Why're you here?"

"We heard about you getting hit on the Floo Broadcast," Sirius said.

"Lee's a good announcer, isn't he?"

"Yeah, Harry," Sirius said reassuringly. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Bole and Montague were being arses," Harry said. Sirius laughed, looking relieved. "I thought I'd get in just under the Bludger."

"Hard to judge in the rain, huh," Sirius said, leaning back. Harry scabbled a little with his right hand, pushing himself up, and felt Sirius' broad hand under his back, helping him.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm fine."

"Your shoulder was dislocated," Sirius said. "It's not all right."

"It's Quidditch, Sirius."

"Yes, and your teammates should have been looking out for you. I'll have a few choice words for your Beaters."

"People get hurt all the time."

"This was preventable, Harry. Even professionals don't dislocate their shoulders."

"Do shut up, Lupin," came Snape's voice, drifting down from where a three-way argument was still going on. Sirius' head whipped around, furiously.

"I think that's quite enough from all concerned," said Dumbledore, loudly. "*Omnimutus!*"

Snape opened his mouth to snarl something, and no noise came out. The silence was a blessed relief, at least to Harry. Dumbledore smiled pleasantly and gestured for Remus to join Sirius, at the same time as he clearly and calmly placed Montague and Bole in Snape's custody. The furious professor snapped his fingers at the two of them and pointed to the doorway, following them out. Harry was almost positive he saw Snape knock their heads together as they left.

Sirius stood to confront Dumbledore about the muting charm, annoyed, and Remus took his place in the chair near Harry's bed. He folded his arms on the bedrail and rested his chin on them, tilting his head slightly and smiling at Harry. Dumbledore, behind him, flicked his wand again, and suddenly the sounds of breathing, of Remus inhaling to talk, were highly audible.

"Feeling heroic?" Remus asked. "They've been pouring muscle regeneratives down your throat for an hour or two. Madam Pomfrey says you'll have to stay the night."

"That's all right," Harry said uncertainly.

"It was a brilliant win," Remus continued. "Andromeda and Ted send their love, I spoke to them by floo. Though they are rather bitter Gryffindor lost."

"Not for lack of trying," Harry said. "Did you hear about when we tried my new play?"

"Yes, I told Madam Schaeffer that was your idea."

Sirius had begun to drift down towards the other end of the room, as Professor Tonks came in to speak to Dumbledore. Their voices were low, but he heard a few words -- blood and dogs and what sounded like chicken, though that made no sense.

"Harry?" Remus asked, and Harry glanced back at him, ignoring the others. "Are you sure you feel all right?"

"Yeah. It just hurts."

"I can imagine."

"Not as bad as when I broke my leg, though."

"Well, that's some consolation," Remus said with a smile. "Madam Pomfrey says you can have the day off classes tomorrow, if you want, and I think your friends got permission to bring you dinner. I hear the house-elves are making you something really special, they must have taken quite a shine to you."

"And who wouldn't?" Sirius asked, returning. "Madam Pomfrey says we have to leave you, Harry, but we'll be back after dinner."

"M'kay," Harry said, feeling secretly relieved. The attention was nice, but he was still tired. He eased himself back down under the covers as they left, with many concerned backwards glances, and closed his eyes. He could still hear Dora and Headmaster Dumbledore talking, more clearly now that Remus wasn't there.

"Do you think it could have been some kind of purposeful distraction?" Dumbledore was asking. "It would not be unprecedented."

"I don't think so. Montague and Bole wouldn't throw a game, however stupid they are. I think someone saw their chance while everyone was distracted."

"Not dogs, then."

"No. Their throats were cut with a knife."

"How unutterably brutal," Dumbledore said. Harry wondered what they were talking about. It couldn't be good. "The entire flock?"

"The house-elves are plucking and cooking them now. It seems...cold-hearted somehow."

"No use in letting good food go to waste, alas," Dumbledore replied. "I suppose I shall have to resign myself to chicken for dinner for a good many days."

"Sir..."

"Yes, Professor Tonks?"

"There does come a point where the Aurors are going to have to be called. Someone at Hogwarts is distinctly unbalanced, and if it continues, a student is going to be hurt."

"And what will the Aurors do, pray?" Dumbledore inquired. There was a pause.

"If a child is hurt, it will be my duty as an Auror to open an investigation," Dora said.

"Understood, Professor," Dumbledore replied, as impassive as before. Harry barely had time to wonder what the big fuss was about before he was drifting off again, into dreams of the rain-slick, slippery Snitch flicking through the air.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 13

When Harry woke again it was to the smell of fried chicken and chips, and his stomach growled before he could even speak.

A chorus of giggles answered it and he opened his eyes on Padma, Draco, and Neville, bearing an enormous platter of health-giving fried food.

"Told you he'd wake up for that," Neville said, as Draco shoved another pillow behind Harry's back and helped him sit up. Neville reached under the tray and unfolded four little legs, placing it over Harry's lap. Padma poured pumpkin juice.

"How do you feel?" she asked, passing it to him.

"Like a Bludger knocked me flat," Harry said sleepily.

"Vinegar?" Draco asked.

"A little on the chips?"

Draco shook vinegar over the chips, and Neville began cheerfully eating them, avoiding Padma's warning smack deftly.

"Some game," he said, around a mouthful of potato. "I don't think I've ever seen Dora shout that loudly."

"Did she shout too?" Harry asked.

"Well, not at the team."

"Tell me what happened," Harry commanded, picking up a chicken wing. It was hard to eat it, holding it with only one hand, and Draco helpfully reached out and held the tip of the wing.

"I guess Montague and Bole got into it again, and Pucey decided to come down on both of them, which distracted Flint, and pretty soon nobody was paying attention, which was right about when you grabbed the Snitch," Draco said. "And since all the Beaters were trying to pry them apart, nobody was looking at where the Bludgers were going. Bad form," he added censoriously.

"There is no 'Look Out Harry' in 'Team'," Harry muttered. "Someone might have told me, you know."

"Lee Jordan said it...and that dive you did was pretty great," Neville said.

"What dive?"

"Well, it looked like a dive from where we were. Anyhow, by that time about half the players were on the field, since while everyone was fighting they were also sinking down," Neville continued. "Professor McGonagall said your shoulder was dislocated, and then she and Professor Snape got you onto that floating stretcher they keep around and took you up to the hospital wing while Dora and Madam Hooch got the teams calmed down. Course, then Remus and Sirius showed up and started yelling all over again."

"They said hi earlier," Harry said.

"They had dinner with the Professors in the Great Hall," Draco said, a little awed. "But Remus and Professor Tonks had to sit between Sirius and Professor Snape. I wouldn't like to be a part of that dinner party."

"Was it really that bad?" Harry asked Padma, who tended to have a better sense of proportion than the other two.

"Dinner?" she asked.

"No, the fight on the Pitch."

"Oh," she said vaguely. "I suppose so. It was pretty awful."

"What's going to happen to them? Montague and Bole, I mean."

"I suppose Bole might get expelled from the team," Neville said. "He hit Cricket pretty hard."

"He hit Cricket?" Padma asked, alarmed.

"Sure, didn't you see it? It was hard to miss when he hit the ground."

"What on earth -- oh, no," Harry moaned. "He was taking pictures, wasn't he?"

"Trying to," Draco said. "Before Bole broke his camera. Still, Cricket's not in the hospital wing, and you are."

"Poor little twit," said Neville. "Anyhow, the Headmaster said he's going to punish them personally, whatever that means. He's coming down hard on fighting, is Dumbledore."

"Parents might start to complain. I'm pretty sure Sirius did," Harry said. "I mean, about this and the blood on the wall."

"And the chickens," Draco added. Harry looked down at his half-finished meal. "Did anyone tell you about that?"

"I overheard," Harry said, reaching for the pumpkin juice to wash the suddenly bitter taste out of his mouth. "I heard Dora say she's going to call the Aurors if anything else happens."

"Really?" Padma and Draco chorused.

"Dumbledore didn't seem to think they'd help any, but Aurors are awfully clever. I bet they'd find out what the problem is in no time," Harry said.

"Dora hasn't," Neville pointed out. "Course, she hasn't got all her proper Auroring tools and things."

"Why would someone want to kill all the chickens?" Padma asked, in a hushed voice.

"Maybe it was just wild dogs," Draco said, which was not as soothing as it could have been, apparently.

"Maybe," Harry said, thinking of the conversation he'd overheard. *Not dogs, then? No. Their throats were cut with a knife .*

He was about to tell them about it when Sirius and Remus appeared in the doorway again, waiting patiently for Harry to finish with his friends. He said goodnight to the others, allowing Neville to deposit Snake (who'd slept through the whole wretched episode in Neville's pocket) on his blanket and take the tray away before Remus and Sirius walked down the long row of beds.

"Now then," Sirius said, seating himself and placing a large bowl of chocolate and shortbread trifle before Harry, who grinned, "I want to hear about this bed-sticking charm you lot did..."

Tonks might as well have kept silent, all things considered, since as November wound into December the school settled into the snowy deep-winter months peacefully and without incident. The school was supplied with chickens from a flock in Hogsmeade; every morning the chicken farmer strolled up the hill with a string of magic-stunned chickens following obediently behind him. The kitchen itself was presided over by Fang, the enormous boarhound that Hagrid the Groundskeeper owned, and no more bloody paintings appeared on the walls. As Brecon informed Harry, Fang was a terrible coward, but he did look the part of a terrifying hound.

Even Bole and Montague, who had emerged from Dumbledore's office white-faced and shaking after the match, agreed to peacefully ignore each others' existence. This was made easier by the fact that Bole was thrown off the Quidditch team, and Flint replaced him with a fourth-year named Towler who had apparently played cricket at his exclusive primary school. He explained to Harry that the Dunworth Academy prided itself on teaching its "exceptional students both Magical and Muggle Life Skills" and Harry certainly had never seen anyone hit a Bludger so far one-handedly.

And if Harry sometimes woke at night thinking he heard voices -- thinking he heard that voice, louder than ever-- he chalked it up to the lingering effects of the Quidditch accident, though his shoulder had healed with hardly a twinge.

By the time Professor McGonagall came around to the common room to sign up those who were staying at Hogwarts over the holiday, most students had forgotten the bloody scrawl or chalked it up to a school prank. Bole was sullen and given to spending his evenings alone in a corner of the common room, but he didn't cause any trouble, and the rumours about Montague and Professor Tonks had faded mercifully away.

Dora herself was staying at the school over the holidays to catch up on her reading, though she promised to come home to London for Christmas and New Year's, and even agreed, for the sake of family peace, to drag Severus along with her. Neville was going to spend the first week of the holidays at the Patils', then rejoin the extended family at Twelve Grimmauld Place in time to go caroling and Christmas shopping and such.

Draco was being taken along to Spain with Narcissa, who had decided he was now old enough to travel without complaining and fend for himself if she chose to spend an afternoon in Madrid's exclusive Wizarding Fashion district. He was looking forward to it, in a vague sort of way; Narcissa probably wouldn't bother with him too much, and he'd have the whole complement of the Malfoy house-elves to entertain him. Besides, he had loads of homework to do.

Harry glanced at Neville as Draco delivered this little monologue in the train compartment on the way to London. Neville raised his eyebrows as if to ask what Harry expected him to do about it.

"Will you send us postcards from Spain?" Padma asked, slightly enviously.

"I guess," Draco replied. "Mum says Mendy and Dobby can take me shopping for Christmas things."

"Wish I was going to Spain," Harry said.

"Sure," Draco answered, and twiddled the edge of his coat between his fingers before changing the subject to the truly outrageous Potions essay they'd been assigned. Professor Snape, announcing that the entire second year was falling behind, had given them two feet of parchment each to devote to a new potion of their choice, not covered by class yet, which they would be expected to research during the holiday and brew when they returned to school for the edification of their classmates.

Harry, worries about Draco aside, could not have been happier as they left the train station. He had Remus and Sirius and Andromeda and Ted all to himself for a week, after which he'd have Neville around too, after which there would be Christmas.

With Sirius' hand reassuringly on one shoulder and Remus asking him about classes and the books

he'd brought home and whether he'd like to visit Madam Schaeffer's tomorrow, not to mention Ted slipping him sweets while Andromeda said he'd need to have his robes let down a few inches, Harry walked blissfully down the main street of Diagon Alley as if he owned the world.

There had been a time, years ago, when they'd tried to keep things from Harry, but it had turned out to be supremely pointless. It had taken him less than a year to puzzle out that Remus was a werewolf, and it hadn't been all that much longer before he'd pointed out that the Birds-and-Bees talk which Sirius was giving him didn't seem to be covering Harry's Two Dads.

So Sirius had stopped worrying, fairly quickly, about Harry wandering into the bedroom to wake them up in the mornings and finding one or both of them without clothes on. They had blankets on the bed, after all, and Harry usually gave them the privacy in which to throw on pyjamas and dressing-gowns and wander out into the kitchen for breakfast.

It was just that Harry woke them up at seven in the bloody morning.

"I'm going to kill your godson," Remus moaned, as Harry cheerfully fled the bedroom, still shouting about breakfast.

"My godson? He's your blood-relation," Sirius replied, rolling out of bed. "I smell sausages."

"SAUSAGES!" Harry shouted, from the kitchen.

"He's going to kill us both in a house fire before I get to him," Remus continued, making no effort at all to get out of bed. Sirius tossed him his dressing gown as he located relatively clean clothing.

"I have it on good authority there are probably pancakes too."

"Harry doesn't know how to make pancakes," Remus said, now truly alarmed, pushing himself up onto his elbows. Sirius leaned over and kissed him, then nearly overbalanced and caught himself with one hand on the other side of Remus' chest.

The early morning, the smell of slowly burning sausages, and the fact that his hair was sticking out every-which-way were suddenly irrelevant, enveloped in the warmth of kissing Remus, his scent, his mouth. He didn't even consciously think as he leaned further over in preparation to crawl back into the nice warm bed --

"SAUSAGES AND EGGS!" Harry shouted. Sirius winced.

"Later," he said, in a hushed whisper.

"Too late," Remus answered. "They'll keep warm -- "

"Close your eyes and think about Cornelius Fudge naked."

"Oooh," Remus said, dropping back onto the pillows. "That worked. Yuck."

Sirius chuckled as he wandered into the kitchen, reaching around Harry for a glass of orange juice.

"Is it really necessary to be awake this early?" he asked, conversationally, as Harry transferred the sausages into a magically heated dish and cracked four eggs into the grease.

"Today?" Harry asked.

"Ever."

"Yes," he said decidedly.

"This is what comes of raising children to have a work ethic," Sirius said, as Remus wandered out, doing up the dressing gown over a pair of pyjama trousers. "I blame you."

"You kidnapped him first," Remus muttered, locating the tea on instinct and heating the kettle with a tap of his wand.

"Are we going to Mardjinn Alley today?" Harry asked. Remus chuckled.

"Now I see," he said. "Bribery! I am not to be bought with sausages."

"That's not what I hear," Sirius said into his orange juice.

"Are we?" Harry repeated.

"Yes, and then to Fansif Alley, and maybe for ice cream," Remus recited. "Sirius wants to sell you off to the art world as a living sculpture."

"I just want him to meet Helena. I want a portrait," Sirius said stubbornly.

"Can't you just take a picture?" Harry asked.

"His breeding is showing," Remus said, patting Harry on the shoulder. "Wealthy pureblood wizards don't stoop to things like photographs."

"I have boxes and boxes of photographs," Sirius protested. "I just think it would be nice to have a painting."

By the time they had eaten and washed and dressed for the chilly London weather, Harry was almost dancing with impatience. They met other witches and wizards they knew, walking down

Diagon towards Gringott's, and even a few of Harry's classmates. Oliver Wood waved through the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies where he'd gotten a holiday job; a couple of Ravenclaws came dashing out of Madam Schaeffer's, crying a quick hello as they went. Madam Schaeffer herself greeted them, her arms full of silk cloth and bright ribbons to make soft toys with as they passed. Blaise Zabini and his parents were coming out of Gringott's, and Mr. Zabini stopped to discuss some investment that he and Sirius had both gone in on and how it was maturing. Remus dawdled down towards the big arching gate that was the boundary line between Diagon and Mardjinn, while Harry and Blaise had a snowball fight.

Mardjinn Alley itself was a mess of sales stalls, second-hand bookstores, thrift shops, odd little places full of strange devices, and eateries with peculiar foreign Wizarding food. Most children (Blaise included) thought it was shabby and second-rate, but to Harry it was the strangest place in a world that, as a child, had already been strange and wonderful to him. He dimly sensed, too, that Remus liked it the way he did; he knew Remus had been poor when he was a boy and had bought all his school things there. Mardjinn Alley made Remus and Harry happy, and that meant Sirius was happy.

They visited the bookshops first, where everyone knew Remus and most people knew Sirius; they still talked there, in hushed tones, about the night Sandust Books had burned down. Sirius found a few novels he wanted and Harry found a history of Quidditch which Remus said was wildly inaccurate but which did have brilliant woodcuts. The trinket stores were their next victim, and Harry found a set of engraved brass orbs that had no apparent purpose but which he was sure Padma would love for Christmas.

There were the musty old clothes shops, too, which were mainly filled with shabby robes and clothing of various sorts, but which occasionally yielded a treasure or two. Harry always shivered a little when he saw the shop that sold leather goods, since it had a dusty decades-old display of snakeskin boots and belts in the window, but it was still a dark, sharp-scented and mysterious place with a back room which children weren't allowed into. Remus said they sold mainly dog-training supplies, which Sirius seemed to find extremely amusing.

Finally, loaded with books, Padma's Christmas present and a huge sack of Green Dragon Toffee for Draco, they made their way back up towards Diagon and the second gate that led to Fansif Alley, where Broosh & Chakle Studios stood. It was just past Flourish & Blotts, and as they approached they saw an enormous crowd of people near the doors.

"Has there been a robbery?" Sirius asked a witch he knew slightly. She shook her head.

"It's Gilderoy Lockhart!" she squealed excitedly.

"Gilderoy Lockhart?" Remus asked. His lip curled slightly.

"He's here! And he's doing a reading AND a signing!" she continued.

"Is he laying-on hands, too?" Remus inquired. She gave him a confused look.

"Laying hands on what?" she said over her shoulder, as she joined the crush to get inside.

"Moony," Sirius murmured.

"What's wrong with Gilderoy Lockhart?" Harry asked. "Who is he?"

"A fraud, that's all," Remus replied, clearly tense. Harry had rarely seen him this way; Remus didn't often get angry, except when someone said something about Sirius, or about Harry. Or about werewolves.

Remus had taken Harry's arm and was starting to pull him past the crowd, but it was hard going, and they found themselves shoved inside the bookshop before they knew what was happening. Sirius was a few feet back, elbowing his way through the press and shouting for them to meet him by the Arithmancy section, which was always empty, when another strident voice cut across the crowds.

"Is that Sirius Black?" asked a tall blond man in violently blue robes that matched his eyes. "Make way! I'm sure if Mr. Black has come to hear my reading he must have brought his young charge -- "

The sea of people parted before the blond man, leaving a path straight to Harry, who was afraid for a moment that he was going to be attacked.

"Master Harry Potter, here to attend my reading. Well, this is an honour," the blond man said.

"Who is he?" Harry asked Remus. The blond man laughed, heartily.

"Oh! Such a joker. Surely you recognise me, Harry? Gilderoy Lockhart. Such a pleasure to meet you. And this must be your tutor, Mr. Lupin -- "

"You've been upgraded from valet," Harry heard Sirius say in Remus' ear, as he finally arrived at their side.

"...and Mr. Black," Lockhart finished. "It's good to see you taking such an interest in your godson's education."

Something complicated was going on between the adults, and Harry decided not to announce that they had come into the shop by mistake. He could feel the tension radiating off Remus in waves, and Sirius was trying to be some kind of buffer, which was hard, because he was behind Remus.

"Now, you come right down to the front here near the table and we'll get you all set with an autographed copy of the new book I'm sure you're here to pick up -- Talking Transformations, a limited edition of all my absolute best stories, culled carefully from my vast body of work. A very educational book for a young man like yourself -- " Lockhart plucked a book off the stack

and signed it. Harry saw an enormous photo of the man, which took up almost the entire back cover, winking and smiling at him.

"Free of charge," Lockhart said, handing Harry the book. Harry opened it, meaning to read the inscription, but the page fell open to the table of contents instead. Several of the chapter headings were from a book called Wanderings With Werewolves. Remus' anger began to make more sense.

"Thank you," Harry said, rather coldly. "But I think we must be going."

"So soon?" Lockhart asked. "Surely you can stay for at least a few minutes. I do extremely good dramatic readings, though I say it myself."

Remus and Sirius were already trying to push back the way they'd come, but the crowd had closed tightly around them.

"Surely you, Mr. Lupin, would like to stay? Your reputation in Dark Studies precedes you," Lockhart said. "As one expert to another -- "

"Where's the other one then?" Remus asked sharply.

"Don't be so modest! I happen to know that you've applied several of the precepts from my earlier book in your travels before settling down as Master Potter's tutor. Why, I imagine you have the entire library of my works. Isn't it funny, us meeting like this?" Lockhart leaned in, suddenly, and turned his head enough for a small man with a large camera to snap a photo of the four of them.

Harry glanced up at Remus. A terrible, predatory smile was spreading across his face. Harry began to edge closer to Sirius.

"Yes, I've been meaning to question you on several aspects of your writing," he said.

"Splendid! Perhaps over lunch? I'm sure Mr. Black and his godson will want some time alone, and I must say," Lockhart lowered his voice and said something almost in Remus' ear that Harry couldn't catch. A faint tinge of red crossed Remus' cheeks, and suddenly Sirius was tense too.

"Why not now?" Remus asked politely. "I'm sure your audience would be pleased to hear an impromptu discussion of, perhaps, your studies in werewolf biology."

Lockhart beamed as a spate of applause rippled through the audience.

"I was wondering about your methods of detecting lycanthropes, especially in an urban setting. I'm given to understand that in the wilderness you've tracked them by spoor?"

"Yes, though also by the fur they shed -- "

"Ah, yes," Remus cut him off. Lockhart looked annoyed. "You were on the Steppes, I believe."

"That's correct -- "

"In January? No, that can't be right," Remus said thoughtfully. "Werewolves don't shed in the winter months. Too little hair as it is. Oh, I suppose you could recognise one that way?"

"What way?" Lockhart asked.

"Well, a werewolf's coat -- so I've heard -- isn't quite so thick as a true wolf's. Doesn't help much the other twenty-seven days, though. How do you find so many of them in the big cities?"

"The -- werewolves are drawn to big cities."

"Really? Have you read Sanzecki's study of the bioethical urge?"

Lockhart didn't just look annoyed -- he looked lost. "Well, there are differing opinions on the subject -- "

"Of course. But you wouldn't say that werewolves actually instinctively avoid situations where they will come into contact with humans?"

"My dear Mr. Lupin, it's a well-known fact that werewolves hunt humans."

"Have you asked any werewolves?"

Harry felt Sirius' hand tighten on his shoulder.

"They're hardly in a position to say."

"Not in your stories," Remus said drily. A few people laughed. "Generally you pounce rather quickly, eh? Hex first, ask questions later?"

"I am doing a public service -- "

"For whom? It seems to me that most people who attack an individual unprovoked in a -- shall we say a telephone box? -- are arrested for assault. Of course, I suppose most people don't have a notable reputation as a werewolf hunter," Remus added, with sardonic graciousness. "I'd also be most interested in your etymology."

"Mr. Lupin! Not in front of the children!" Lockhart joked. Very few people laughed. Some of them were looking extremely thoughtful.

"I believe..." Remus said, as he took the book from Harry's unresisting fingers, "That you mention it in *The Episode Of The Wagga Wagga Werewolf*. Let's see..." He flipped deftly through the pages, then glanced up at Lockhart. "Would you like to read, Mr. Lockhart, or shall I? Just there,

second paragraph."

Lockhart cleared his throat, stepped backwards, threw back his shoulders, held the book at arm's length, coughed for good measure, and declaimed, "As he howled, I pounced on him from the window and slammed him to the dusty stone floor of the castle ruins. The moon drifted through the skeletal trees above us as I pinned him neatly with one hand. He scratched and snarled, but I was relentless; bruised, bleeding, and exhausted, I pressed on."

Horror crept over Harry as he listened. Sirius was gripping his shoulder so tightly it hurt.

"With my free hand I fumbled for my wand and pressed it into his belly, then screwed up my remaining strength for a final thrust and performed the immensely complicated Homorphus Charm. He moaned, piteously, but within a few seconds the claws, the teeth and hair had begun to recede -- and I found myself pinning an unconscious man to the cold stone floor. Simple but effective, and another village will remember me forever as the hero who delivered them from the monthly terror of werewolf attacks."

This did merit some applause; it was true that Lockhart wasn't a bad performer. Harry, however, was watching Remus.

"Homorphus, did you say?" Remus asked.

"Yes," Lockhart replied, having regained some of his imperturbability. "Homo, hominis, man; morphus, change or transformation."

"From the Latin?"

"Yes."

Harry heard someone draw a sharp breath in the crowd.

"What about the Greek?" Remus asked.

"What about it?" Lockhart replied.

"Morphus isn't Latin."

"Of course it is, man."

"Morphus is a Greek root. As is Homo," Remus replied. Two small spots of colour rose in Lockhart's cheeks. The crowd began to murmur quietly. "From the root Morphe, a noun concerning external appearance, and Homos, meaning similar. You know the modern usage of homos, I'm sure. Homogenous," Remus said. "Or homosexual?"

Lockhart began to sputter when Remus said homosexual.

"I'm sure your spell was just as complex, but I highly doubt it was homorphus," Remus said. "Unless, of course, you made the werewolf look just like you?"

"That," Sirius said, as they sat in a quiet booth in the Leaky Cauldron and Remus drank a very large whiskey to calm his nerves, "was brilliant, Moony."

"It was highly stupid is what it was," Remus replied. "Werewolves! Why did I pick werewolves?"

"Brilliant," Sirius insisted.

"I think it was brilliant too," Harry added, around a mouthful of crisps.

"Did I actually say homosexual in a crowded store full of people?" Remus demanded.

"It's not a filthy word, you know."

"Yes but I -- " Remus leaned forward, urgently. "I happen to be one, and there's no need to call attention to the fact!"

"You're also a -- "

"Don't say it!"

"Well, you said that too."

"Yes, because I am stupid. I let my anger get in the way of my common sense. Let this be a lesson to you, Harry," Remus added. "The only thing that happens when you crush stupid people with your intellect is you do stupid things yourself."

"That's not true," Harry declared. "Professor Snape does it all the time and he never looks stupid. And you didn't either," he added.

"Severus Snape making a habit of it is not the best recommendation, Harry," Remus said gently.

"What did Lockhart say to you when he asked you to lunch, anyhow?" Sirius asked.

"I'm not repeating it," Remus answered.

"He fancies you," Harry said.

"You are an odd child."

"Your fault," Harry replied placidly.

Remus finished his whiskey in a swallow, and glanced at Sirius. "We could still stop by Broosh & Chackle if you like."

"Let's go home," Sirius said. "We can get rid of the packages and put Draco's sweets in the mail to him. I'll send Helena flowers in apology. "

They left Harry downstairs with Ted, who was more than happy to help Harry package up and mail parcels to Padma and Draco, whom he wouldn't see before they returned to school. Remus carried the rest of the parcels upstairs while Sirius had a word with Ted, and he was leafing through a battered, leatherbound book when he heard the door open and close.

"The day wasn't a complete write-off, anyway," he said, closing the book and setting it on the table. "I found -- "

He was abruptly cut off by Sirius' mouth as the other man kissed him roughly, pushing him back against the kitchen wall.

"Merlin, Sirius -- " he said, as Sirius' body pressed up against his. "The books aren't that good."

"But you are," Sirius replied, kissing the sensitive spot just behind his jaw. "Ted's watching Harry."

"Door's locked?" Remus managed, around a moan, giving up on any attempt to control him for the moment. Sirius' hands were creeping up under his shirt, sliding around his waist to pull him away from the wall. He felt the hard pressure of Sirius' erection against his thigh, through their clothes.

"Locked and hexed shut."

"Been planning this long?" Remus asked. Sirius had hiked his shirt up as far as it would go without pulling it off, which would mean separating for a moment. He drifted his hands down Sirius' back, untucking his shirttails. Sirius laughed against his collarbone, then sucked gently on the skin just over his pulse. Remus tilted his head back, moaning.

"Since the bookstore," Sirius said hoarsely, stepping back to help him off with his shirt.

"Bedroom," Remus managed. They stumbled around the kitchen table, shedding clothing as they went, and tumbled mostly-naked onto the bed in a friendly, groping heap. "Really?"

"Mm," Sirius said, scrambling on top with a laugh and shifting his hips so that Remus could slide one leg up along his thigh, anchoring him in place. "Yeah."

"Why?" Remus asked, arching up. "Oh -- "

"Too many questions," Sirius said, thrusting down against him delightfully. Remus caught his breath and forgot the next question he was going to ask in the feel of Sirius' body on top of his, skin on skin, Sirius' agile mouth and skilled hands.

"Moony," Sirius moaned. "Yes, there -- "

It was messy and fast and too rough, but god it was good to be touched and to hear Sirius swear and say his name. Too soon he felt that blissful high that meant Sirius only needed to thrust and cry out and oh...

When he caught his breath, Sirius was still on top of him, nuzzling his shoulder affectionately and looking only mildly ashamed of himself.

"Good?" he asked quietly. Remus laughed, and nodded, and let his head fall back on the pillow.

"Good, Padfoot," he said, smoothing Sirius' hair with his fingers.

"Good."

"Clearly we owe Ted something really great for Christmas."

Sirius laughed into his skin. "Sorry about molesting you in our kitchen."

"I like it when you molest me."

"It was just..." Sirius was quiet for a while. Remus tweaked his ear. "Ow!"

"Tell your secrets, Sirius Black!"

Sirius laughed again. "It's just that watching you demolish that pompous ass was really..."

"Sad? He's a sad small man and I shouldn't have been cruel to him."

"Arousing."

Remus shook his head.

"Yes, Moony. You were brilliant. I wanted to snog you right up against the table of Lockhart's books."

"That certainly would have been an interesting capper to the show."

"You're brilliant."

"Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of Greek -- "

"Moony."

Remus fell silent. Sirius drew a breath and continued.

"Plenty of people know Greek. I know Greek. It takes real brains to use it to teach bastards like Lockhart a lesson." Sirius snickered. "Brains and courage. Not to mention being hung like a -- "

"Sirius!"

"Mmm. Say it again."

Remus smiled and spread his hand possessively across Sirius' cheek, more than satisfied with the day's events.

"Sirius," he said quietly.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 14

Christmas came and went with the usual fuss and mess that year; Dora and Neville came home about the same time, and they enjoyed a week's worth of wintry outings, including the now-traditional carol-singing for cash in Diagon Alley. Dora and Severus even managed to be civil to each other at Christmas dinner, although Andromeda began to suspect something was amiss from the stiffness of their casual interactions. They weren't at each others' throats anymore, time being the balm if not the solution to all wounds, but there was still a certain frostiness when he asked her for the butter dish or she requested the mashed potatoes.

Padma owled at least once a day and it was evident from her letters that she missed the boys terribly, though Dora teased Neville that Padma fancied him. Padma's writing did betray a certain unhappiness which seemed unusual; Andromeda said it was probably growing pains, and that Harry and Neville would want to spend the hols away from their families soon enough. Neither boy protested too loudly at the time, but that night Neville crept out of his own bedroom and up to the flat above the Tonks', where Harry got out the old squashy bedroll Sirius had given him years before and spread it on the floor for him.

"Harry," Neville said, the edge of the bedroll drawn up around his chin and one of Harry's pillows under his head, "do you ever wish you didn't live with Remus and Sirius?"

"No," Harry answered immediately.

"Me either. About Ted and Andromeda, I mean. Do you think they'd adopt me if I asked?"

"Dunno."

"You ever think about asking Sirius to adopt you?"

"Once in a while." Harry wrapped the blanket closer around his shoulders. "I don't think they get it."

"Get what?"

"Sirius still gets scared I'm going to forget my dad." Harry hesitated. "You didn't like your gran much, did you."

Neville scowled. "She was my gran, Harry."

"Yeah, but you didn't like her. I mean. You have to love your family and all, but I heard Andromeda saying she was awful to you."

Neville was silent for so long Harry thought he'd fallen asleep. "I didn't wish she'd die."

"I didn't say that."

"Well, I didn't. But I'm glad for Andromeda taking me in. I never want to live anywhere but Twelve Grimmauld Place."

"You'll get married and move out and such."

"Not forever yet, though. I mean, not for ages. I like it here."

"Me too."

"What were your family like? The ones you lived with, I mean."

Harry shrugged under his blankets. "I don't remember them much, not anymore. My cousin Dudley was rotten. He broke all his toys and threw fits all the time. My uncle and aunt weren't very nice to me."

"Did you love them?"

Harry thought back to the tiny bed and the single bare lightbulb, the locking door on the closet they'd kept him in.

"No," he said. "I don't reckon I did."

"I don't see why Padma's so unhappy, anyway," Neville decided. "She has two parents and she's always had them. And they're not insane like Draco's mum."

"Sirius says Draco's mum is evil, and she went mad on account of Draco's dad being in Azkaban."

"When my mum and dad went mad they locked them up," Neville said quietly. "Andromeda takes me to see them sometimes."

"I know," Harry replied. Neville sometimes went "away" for an hour or two, and came back tired and shaking, and Sirius told Harry never to bother him when he was like that.

"You want to come sleep in my room tomorrow night?" Neville asked, sleepily.

"Sure," Harry said. "We can have cocoa and read your comics."

Neville mumbled a reply as he drifted off, and Harry slid down into sleep shortly afterwards, wondering if Neville might be the only person in the world who really understood how lucky they were to have Ted and Andromeda, Remus and Sirius.

The various branches of the Tonks-Black family were up at dawn on the day the children were to return to Hogwarts in order to prevent a repeat of the last time they'd tried to catch the Hogwarts Express. The Patils still hadn't really forgiven Sirius for that, and they politely informed Andromeda that they themselves would be escorting Padma and Parvati onto the train.

Draco was supposed to be portkeying back to England the night before, but his last postcard had said that he probably wouldn't be able to see anyone until they were on the train. While the rest of them made it onto the platform with the minimum amount of trouble that one can expect from two children, a toad, a snake, and an owl (Ted's Christmas present to Neville), Padma was not to be found, and Draco didn't show until the last possible minute, when he had to run to catch the train.

Padma turned up, shortly after the train left the station, with the explanation that her parents had told her not to leave the compartment until they were well underway. Draco, pink-cheeked from his mad dash, flopped down next to her, sprawling.

"I have never wanted to kick a house-elf in my life until now," he announced. Harry tossed him a packet of chocolate frogs.

"What happened?" Padma asked.

"What didn't happen? First Mendy locked herself out of the kitchen where all our luggage was, and then Dobby lost the portkey, twice, and it turned out he'd gotten the wrong one so Mum had to apparate into town to get another one, and *then* they lost my trunk, so we had to portkey back to find it. So finally we're all in England and all our luggage is in England and then we realise we left Mendy and Brisky behind."

"In Spain?"

"*Si*. But by that time Mum said bugger all house elves ever, and she had one of the bellhops at our hotel in London take me to the train station. I hope he got my trunk on board," he added, worriedly.

"What about Mendy and Brisky?" Neville asked. "Your mum is terrible about names, by the way."

"*Draco Black Pur Malfoy*," Draco said. "I'm aware of this, *Longbottom*."

"No need to get snippy at me, she's the one who named you," Neville said complacently. "I can't help my surname."

"She's going back to Spain to fetch them, I think. I don't envy them when she does. What a ruddy mess!" Draco declared. "Have you done your Potions project yet?"

"Yeah, Neville did Shrinking Solutions and I did Growth Emulsions," Harry answered.

"Emulsions! That's fourth-year work!" Draco said.

"Well, Remus helped. But only a little!"

"How about you, Padma?" Neville asked.

"I found out who the Heir of Slytherin is," Padma blurted. "And did the basic components of pepper-up potion," she added as an afterthought.

"Who is it?" Harry and Draco demanded in unison.

"Well, all right, I don't have *names*," Padma said irritably. She looked tired; flyaway wisps were escaping where her hair was tied back in a ponytail, and there were dark smudges under her eyes. "But I did some research and I'm almost positive it's someone in Slytherin. There's eight families who claim to be descended from Salazar Slytherin -- I guess he had a lot of kids," she said skeptically. "Anyway, six of them were confirmed to have died out by the seventeenth century, but the other two didn't die out until 1890 -- "

"That's it then though, isn't it?" Neville said. "If all eight families are dead..."

"Sort of," Padma said. "There's something to do with....well, with the Blacks," she said, glancing at Harry.

"What about them?" Harry asked.

"Well, there were two sons of the Black family and two sons of the last remaining Slytherin descendants, the Altairs," Padma began, digging around in her bag. She took out a big book which was flagged all over, looking sort of like a hedgehog made of post-it notes. She paged through it and eventually flattened it on her knee so that they could all look. It was a family tree written in crabbed script, labeled "The Antique House of Altair, Now Deceased", and it made no sense at all to Harry.

"But there was a rumour that the Black family and the Altair family may have swapped," Padma said. "Because, see, the old houses used to do that -- it's called fostering. It helps spread the bloodlines between the great houses. They think that Altair Black might actually have been an Altair, which would mean that..."

She frowned apologetically at Harry, and turned the page. A photograph of Sirius, very young, looked up at him from a book. Oddly, seeing Sirius' photograph in a big scholarly wizarding book was more surreal than almost anything that had ever happened to Harry. The Sirius in the photograph stared stonily out at them, hardly moving, dark eyes burning with sullen anger. Harry recalled that Sirius had not got on very well with his family.

"Altair Black was Sirius' great-grandfather," Padma said. "So...well..."

"I might be an heir of Slytherin," Draco said, hoarsely.

"Yeah. Or, well, Sirius might. Or Dora -- "

"What happened to the rest of the Altair family?" Harry asked, to cover for Draco's shocked silence.

"They both died in duels -- Marvolo Altair wasn't...wasn't a very nice boy, and he got in a duel when he was twenty six, and then his brother Dux -- "

"Ducks?" Neville laughed.

"Dux, it's *Latin* ," Padma scolded. "Dux Altair, who may have been Dux Black, challenged his killer to a duel and died too. Um. The man who killed him went on to become the Dark Wizard Grindelwald."

"Nothing good at all about that story," Harry sighed.

"I'm not the Heir!" Draco said loudly.

"Nobody thinks you are, Draco," Padma said reassuringly. "But you might be *an* heir. And if...well, if Altair Black had any...illegitimate children, or any of his children did...it's likely it's someone in Slytherin, if so. Blood sort of...tells true. It...it might be Dora, for all we know."

"At least we know it's not Harry," Neville said. "Ted said all his dad's family were Gryffindor and his mum's family are all Muggle."

Harry looked at him.

"What?" Neville asked, nervously.

"When did he tell you about my mum and dad?" Harry demanded.

"Well, he didn't," Neville replied, looking slightly embarrassed. "I overheard it."

"They were talking about me?"

"Well, last year..." Neville shifted uncomfortably. "There was a row about you going into Slytherin, at Christmas."

"With Sirius?"

"No..." Neville sighed. "They were doing the dishes and I was in the dining room and Ted said you didn't strike him as the Slytherin sort. He said some not very nice things about Slytherins....he doesn't mean them, though," he added hastily. "Andromeda got *really mad* about it and said if he ever talked about Slytherins like that again she was going to do all sorts of dreadful things to him."

"Was she a Slytherin?" Padma asked.

"No -- but you know..." Neville lowered his voice. "All the Blacks were Slytherin, up until Andromeda, so if Altair Black was really an Altair, that might be why. Anyway, Andromeda said there was no call to say such horrible things about children who were only being their own selves, and Ted said, well, then wasn't it strange that your mum's whole family are Muggle and your Dad's whole family are Gryffindor and even Remus and Sirius are Gryffindors and look where you ended up. And then she got so mad she threw a plate in the sink and left the kitchen and didn't even notice me in the dining room. I've never seen them fight like that," Neville said.

"Blood's tricky," Harry decided. "Besides, it doesn't help at all. We know Draco's not the Heir and Dora certainly isn't and the rest of us aren't actually related to the Blacks. So unless we do everyone's family history back three generations, we'd never know. And besides, everyone says it was just a prank pulled by Bole to frighten Montague."

"What about the chickens?" Neville asked. They all fell silent.

"It wasn't me," Draco said defiantly.

"Of course not. You don't even like trimming hangnails," Padma retorted.

"It might make an interesting report for History of Magic, anyway," Harry said, settling the book on his knee and flipping back to the page with Sirius' photograph. Neville leaned over his shoulder. "He doesn't look very happy, does he?"

"There's a family portrait on the next page," Padma said helpfully. Harry turned the page. In this photograph, Sirius was standing, one hand stiffly posed on the shoulder of an older man with a leonine mane of black hair and the angular Black jaw, the familial resemblance more than obvious. Seated next to the older man (Jupiter Black, d. 1982) was his wife; she wore a frilly white dress, and standing just behind her was another young boy. He had the same dark hair, but his face more closely resembled his mother's -- and his expression was much more cheerful than Sirius', which was just this side of scowling.

"Look at his *clothes* ," Neville said gleefully, pointing to the vaguely Victorian-looking suit Sirius was wearing, with a high collar and unflattering knickerbocker trousers terminating in lacy ruffs below the knee. Harry wasn't looking at Sirius, however; he was studying the other boy, Regulus.

"Sirius never talks about his brother," he said. As he spoke, Regulus -- perhaps eleven years old? -- turned his head slightly to smile down at his mother, and she reached up to place her hand on top

of his, affectionately. Sirius and his father, on the other hand, gazed at the camera with identical closed-off expressions. It was unsettling to see his joyful, loud, affectionate godfather so young and so angry. In every photograph Harry had of Sirius at that age, he was at school, grinning and clowning with Remus and James, or making faces in the background, or strutting for the camera.

Harry closed the book, handing it back to Padma. As he did so he glanced up at Draco, and was suddenly struck at the resemblance between Draco and Sirius -- aside from the pale blonde hair and a longer, more narrow nose, Draco's jaw was beginning to sharpen and his face had the slightly foxlike, narrow shape that Sirius and Jupiter Black both had. Harry had never really connected Sirius' kinship to Narcissa because the two never spoke, but for a second he was suddenly and furiously jealous of Draco, who was closer by blood to Sirius than Harry himself. Draco wasn't paying attention, however; he had taken the book from Padma and was looking in the index.

"Thought so," he said morosely. "My dad's not in here."

"Well, neither is mine," Neville replied.

"Your dad wasn't the last heir of the Malfoys," Draco replied. "He's not in any of the books he ought to be in -- books about the old bloodlines and all."

"Well..." Harry looked uncomfortable.

"Yeah, I know," Draco said, without looking up. "I wouldn't put him in a book either, it's not as though he's exactly a credit to wizardkind. The only books he gets into are the ones about You Know Who. He's a nutter, and if he wasn't before he went to Azkaban he is now. And Mum's a nutter because of him. I come from a long, proud line of nutters."

Padma touched Draco's elbow, and he glanced up at her, closing the book.

"It doesn't matter," he said shortly. "It's not like I ever knew him, anyway."

Neville, looking anxious, changed the subject back to their Potions assignments, and after a few minutes Draco seemed to have given up on being bitter over his genetics. They spent the rest of the train ride speculating about classes and Quidditch, until the train pulled up to the Hogsmeade station just past sunset. Hagrid, the enormous groundskeeper, was waiting for them there, and he guided them towards a series of old-fashioned carriages, waiting in the gloom near the road back to the school.

For a moment, Harry thought the stamping, snorting creatures were horses, but as they drew closer, the indistinct shadows resolved themselves into spiny, skeletal creatures with sharp cloven hooves.

"What *are* they?" he asked, stopping a safe distance away to stare in amazement.

"What are what?" Padma asked, even as Parvati and Lavender were grabbing her arms to haul her towards one of the front carriages. Last year the roads had been out and they'd taken the boats across the lake to Hogwarts, as they had when they arrived during first-year; it was the first time Harry had seen carriages like this, and certainly the first time he'd seen the animals pulling them.

"They're all spiky," Neville said. He looked unhealthily pale.

"Where?" Draco asked, clambering up into the nearest carriage. Ron and Ginny Weasley were already sitting in it, bickering.

"See 'em, do yer?" Hagrid inquired sympathetically. "Not ev'ryone does. Those're the Thestrals. Go on; they won't bite."

"What's he going on about? I swear he's not all there," Draco said, as Harry and Neville warily climbed into the carriage after him.

"I've heard of Thestrals," Ron Weasley said. "They're big horselike things."

"They're pulling this carriage, is what!" Neville blurted. "They're horrible!"

"Our dad says you can only see them if you've seen someone die," Ginny piped up.

"I've seen someone dead, and I don't see them," Draco retorted. Ginny scooted closer to her brother; she was only a first-year, and tended to be shy.

"Who've you seen, then?" Ron asked Neville, in the spirit of casual inquiry.

"None of your business," Neville answered, which effectively killed the conversation. They rode through the Forest in silence, and Neville was out of the carriage like a shot when it stopped, skittering anxiously away from the Thestrals. Draco, on the other hand, walked right up to one, clearly unable to see it, and waved a hand in the air about a foot from its nose. The Thestral snorted. Draco leapt backwards, eyes wide, as a puff of hot air hit his palm.

"Creepy," he muttered, and turned to follow the others into the school. Harry decided that it was not, perhaps, the best way to start the new spring term.

Harry's brooding forecast was only confirmed by the screams.

It was the day after they'd returned and Harry was sitting at lunch, working on a Charms assignment he'd forgotten to finish over the holiday and absently eating a sandwich (he later got ten points off his assignment for a mustard spatter on the corner of his parchment) when they started. Along with every other student in the Great Hall, he looked up and towards the main entrance; it was a girl's voice, and not the playful shouts of someone rough-housing in the hallway

but a real scream of terror, continuous and solid, pausing only for the next breath to be drawn. The Prefects were already swarming towards the door, but the rest of the students stayed rooted in their spots. Harry only realised he had frozen up when McGonagall rushed past him, followed closely by Snape and Dumbledore. He leapt to his feet and ran after, and as if this had broken the floodgates, the rest of the students began to follow.

Hermione Granger was standing on the big central staircase, about halfway between the ground floor and the landing, facing the Great Hall's entryway. She was pointing at something hanging in midair and having a really tremendous hysterical fit.

"Close the doors," Dumbledore said sharply, even as Harry passed through them. Ignoring Harry, Snape and McGonagall slammed the doors shut, locking the rest of the students in; Harry sidled over towards the little cluster of Prefects who were standing against the wall, staring up in horror. One of them clapped a hand over his mouth and began to retch; another pulled him away down the hall, and the rest followed hastily, leaving Harry in the shadows, staring upwards.

Hanging in the air just below the ceiling, on eye level with anyone coming down the stairs, was a cat. It dangled from a hook pierced through its tail, and it was...dripping. A little red puddle had formed on the broad flagstones below. Hermione had abruptly stopped screaming, but Harry didn't look to see if it was Dumbledore or McGonagall who had silenced her. He was staring at the cat. It dangled limply, like a bit of fur coat that had been dipped in red paint.

"My cat," said a hushed voice. This time Harry did look; Filch was standing in the corridor, Dora behind him. He was staring in horror at the cat. "Mrs. Norris," he said numbly.

"Get him out of here," Snape snarled.

"My *cat*," Filch wailed, and Harry felt a momentary jolt of pity for him; he might be a horrible man, and Mrs. Norris was an awful, smelly, ill-tempered beast, but neither of them deserved *this*.

"Dora, get him *out of here*," Snape repeated, shocked into slipping back into the old familiarity. She grabbed Filch's arm but he pulled away furiously, nearly throwing her to the ground. She was up again in an instant, and Harry saw her poised to leap after him, to subdue him in a less professorial style (and that was the first time he'd really realised she was an Auror, someone who wrestled people to the ground for a living) but before she could, a noise stopped them all.

At first Harry thought that the animal was still alive; it was a piteous mewl, the sound, not a happy-cat sound at all. Filch swallowed convulsively. There was silence for a moment, and then another mewling noise, and the sound of paw-pads on stone, dull thuds, and another cat came streaking furiously out of the shadows near the entryway. Harry barely registered it before the animal rocketed into Filch's arms, clawed its way up his shoulders, and settled itself tremblingly inside his robes, a quivering lump under one of his armpits.

Bewildered silence reigned.

Snape slowly lifted both his hands and made a small, gentle swinging motion with the wand held lightly in his left. Chain clanked, and the dead cat descended slowly towards the floor. Really, it did look like --

"It's just fur," Snape said, crouching to study it where it now floated, a few inches above the puddle on the stones.

"What?" Dora asked. Dumbledore was bent over it now as well.

"It's a bit of fur," Snape repeated. "Fur coat. Pinned together to look like a cat."

"Oh my *god* ," Dora said.

"Real blood," Snape murmured, touching the drenched fur. As he prodded it, something white fluttered to the ground.

"Bet you it's cow's blood," Dora said. Filch had moved to the stairs and nearly collapsed there, clucking and cooing to the certainly very alive Mrs. Norris, who looked as if she'd had the fright of all her nine lives.

"The Chamber will be opened ," Snape read. *"You will be next. "*

Filch sobbed, clutching Mrs. Norris so tightly that she let out a breathless, complaining yowl.

Harry was watching Dumbledore now; he was looking thoughtfully at the bundle of fur and cow's blood.

"It cannot be Hagrid," he said. "Not this time."

"He hasn't the imagination for something like this," Snape agreed, disdainfully.

"He never meant to make trouble then, and he would never take such joy in brutality now," Dumbledore remonstrated. "No, this is...far more serious. I think that this time, it is truly the Chamber. Someone either wishes to open the Chamber, or wishes us to believe they are capable of it."

"There is no Heir of Slytherin," said Snape, angrily. "I've been through the records a dozen times. The last possible heirs were Dux and Marvolo Altair."

"Or Altair Black," Dora said softly.

"There is no proof -- "

"But you're thinking it."

"Did I not *just say* that there is no Heir?"

"For all you know, it could be me."

Snape made a disgusted noise. "There is no Heir. It's a legend. If there is a Chamber and if someone has found it when eight hundred years of careful searching has not, and if they are miraculously the last illegitimate heir of Salazar Slytherin, and if they intend mischief, why go about spattering cow's blood on walls? Why not unleash the cursed thing and have done with it?"

"Such a person might feed on fear," Dumbledore murmured.

"Ridiculous," Snape said bluntly. "I think we should know if there was such a madman in our midst."

"It could be Peter Pettigrew," Dora said. Harry felt something cold and terrifying begin to fill his insides. "I know we've put up wards and that there's no basis for it, but it's possible. He's able to conceal himself, and it would be just like him to pretend to kill a cat."

Dumbledore was looking at her gravely.

"I understand that you must do what you promised," he said, soberly. "Call the Aurors if you feel you must, but I will not close the school."

"I'm not asking you to. I'll call Alastor Moody; I know he knows you." Dora grabbed Filch by the arm, lifting him to his feet and leading him away down the corridor.

"I'll see to it that the house-elves clean up this mess," Snape said.

"I'll speak to the children," Dumbledore agreed. Harry, who had hatched an idea in the back of his head several minutes ago, waited impatiently until they were gone, and then dashed across the corridor, flying up the stairs.

He reached Myrtle's bathroom with a stitch in his side and out of breath; ignoring the possibility that she would screech at him, he burst inside, the door slamming open, and skidded to a halt.

Myrtle was sobbing quietly in a stall, the floor near the far end was flooded, and a house-elf looked up at him from where he was bent over a bucket, scrubbing out the inside. Red dripped from the brush.

"*Dobby?*" Harry asked, stunned.

Harry and Draco ended up getting out of classes for the entire afternoon. So did Hermione, but only because she was recovering, under the influence of a calming draught, in the infirmary.

Harry knew, from spending time with the house-elves in the kitchens, that they could vanish and reappear at will; he also knew that if you got hold of them, actual physical hold, then that particular magic stopped working. The first thing he had done, while both he and Dobby were still in shock, was grab hold of one of the enormous drooping ears. Dobby had shrieked the castle down, with some help from Myrtle, but Harry held on like grim death. In the end, all the shrieking did was summon McGonagall, who was returning from delivering Hermione into the capable hands of Madam Pomfrey.

She had found them and promptly realised that something was dreadfully wrong; she didn't understand Harry over Myrtle's shrill shrieks, but she understood the bloody bucket perfectly well, not to mention the pile of fur scraps in the corner. She'd plucked up the bucket and, summoning Harry along behind her, led the way to the Headmaster's office.

Now Harry sat, Dobby's ear still clenched tightly in one hand, waiting for Dumbledore to appear. Fawkes, the phoenix who had delighted and fascinated Harry when he was a child, was in full flare, and the room was uncomfortably warm.

"Please, please, Harry Potter, friend of Master Malfoy, please let Dobby go. Dobby will stop, Dobby promises to stop, but Dobby will have to bake his head -- "

"You're not going anywhere, you little monster," Harry replied furiously. "Hanging dead cat dummies in the halls! Painting blood on walls! Draco's right, you ought to be kicked soundly!"

"Dobby will let Harry Potter kick him if he lets him go, only please -- " Dobby broke off and began shrieking again in despair as Dumbledore entered.

"That will be quite enough of that," Dumbledore said calmly. Dobby fell silent, gulping. "You may release him, Harry. He cannot escape from this office; the walls are particularly well-warded."

Harry slowly let go of Dobby, who at once grasped his mauled ear and began to stroke it, smoothing out the wrinkles Harry's hand had made.

"Now then, let me see. Do you know this house-elf, Harry?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied. "I told Professor McGonagall, sir. That's Dobby, he's a Malfoy house-elf."

"Indeed. One of young Draco's family elves?"

At Draco's name, Dobby's lower lip quivered.

"Yes, sir."

The door opened, then, and Draco entered, followed by McGonagall, with her hand on his shoulder. Harry caught Dobby by his spindly arm before he could make a break for the door.

"Ah, here we are. Mister Malfoy, I wonder if you might help us."

Draco looked bewildered. "What's Dobby doing here?"

"That's what we would very much like to find out. I understand some authority over the family elves has been ceded to you?"

"I can tell them what to do, as long as it doesn't disagree with anything my mum says," Draco said warily.

"Excellent. Have you given any orders to Dobby recently?"

"Not since Christmas, sir."

"You have not ordered him to come here? Or smuggled him into the castle with you?"

"He sometimes comes to have a bit of a chat with the kitchen elves..."

Dobby wailed. "Dobby is a good house-elf, he is only doing what is best for -- "

"Dobby, be quiet!" Draco said sharply. Harry looked at him, startled. "This is the Headmaster's office! Behave yourself!"

"Yes, Master Malfoy," Dobby murmured, nervously.

"I'm sorry, sir. Has he done something wrong?"

"Are you aware of what happened during lunch?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well, the Prefects are saying..."

"Ah yes. Rumour, that most efficient of machines. We suspect your house-elf may have had a hand in it."

"I found him in Myrtle's bathroom, washing the blood out of a bucket of water," Harry said. Draco looked green.

"Dobby," he said, in the most authoritative voice Harry had ever heard the mild, highly-strung Draco use, "Did you hang a cat in the hallway?"

"No," Dobby replied.

"Well, that's sort of true," Harry said, glancing at Dumbledore. "It was a dummy. A fake."

Draco crossed his arms, angrily.

"Dobby, did you paint words on the walls last term?" he demanded. "Did you kill a flock of chickens? Did you hang *a fake dead cat in the hallway?* "

Dobby quivered.

"Master Malfoy must not be angry with Dobby, Master Malfoy loves Dobby," Dobby said. "Dobby loves Master Malfoy and only -- "

"Dobby!" Draco's voice was like a whipcrack. Harry was stunned.

"It was for Master Malfoy's own good! Master Malfoy must NOT be at school! No student must be at school! It is dangerous!" Dobby said desperately. He hopped from one foot to the other. It would have been funny if there weren't still traces of blood on Dobby's hands.

"Dangerous how?"

Dobby's dance sped up. "Dobby cannot tell," he moaned. "Dobby cannot tell secrets!"

"Stop that at once."

Dobby froze.

"Dobby, who told you to do these things?" Draco asked.

"Dobby was not told -- "

"Did you paint that blood on the wall last term? Yes or no, Dobby."

"Yes," Dobby whispered. Only the force of Draco's orders was apparently keeping him from finding the nearest hard surface to bang his head on.

"Did you hang a dead cat dummy in the hall this afternoon?"

"Dobby -- "

"Yes or no," Draco snapped.

"Yes."

"Did you kill the chickens?"

"No."

"Dobby, don't lie to me."

"Dobby did not kill any chickens!" Dobby shrieked. "Dobby would not kill chickens! That is why Master Malfoy must leave! Master Malfoy is not safe!"

Draco looked bewilderedly at Dumbledore. "I didn't tell him to do it, sir. I don't see why mum would."

"Ask him, please."

Draco turned back to Dobby. "Did mum tell you to do these things, Dobby?"

"No," Dobby answered. "Master Malfoy must -- "

"Be quiet, Dobby."

Harry, nearly forgotten, watched Dobby's ears droop. He knew all house-elves had some quirk which made them adore Draco -- they were like puppies eager to show him new tricks. He'd never known why; he wondered if it was this...peculiar, inherent voice of command. The Malfoys were old-money purebloods like the Blacks; perhaps it was something in the blood, from generations of ordering house-elves around.

"Did anyone in the family tell you to do these things?" Draco asked.

"No," Dobby whispered.

"Why did you do them?"

"Master Malfoy must not stay at school."

"Why?"

Dobby began to dance again.

"Fine, fine," Draco said disgustedly. He glanced at Dumbledore again, hapless, as Dobby began to mutter about having angered Master Malfoy and slamming his head in a door.

"I think you had best send him away for a little while," Dumbledore said gently. "Somewhere we can find him later."

"Dobby," Draco said. "You are not to go slamming your head in any doors. Your punishment is to go to the kitchen and tell Brecon to chain you to the main table. You mustn't leave on any account."

"But Master -- "

"You are, in addition, to spend the entire afternoon chopping onions," Draco said sternly. Harry suppressed a nervous laugh. Dobby bowed his head and walked through the door when Draco opened it, vanishing once he was in the stairwell.

Draco flopped down on a chair, sighing with relief.

"That is a peculiar punishment," Dumbledore said. "There's something very soothing about chopping onions, I've always thought."

"If I don't give them a punishment, they hurt themselves," Draco answered.

"Indeed? And when did you begin this?"

"When I was five or six. You can't stop them punishing themselves, but you can tell them to do things that aren't so awful."

Dumbledore mulled this over, thoughtfully. "I can see why they are fond of you, Mister Malfoy. Now, I think Mister Potter has some explaining to do."

With Draco's help and Dumbledore's gentle encouragement, Harry told the whole story -- how they'd gone to talk to Myrtle, the story she'd told them; how he'd overheard about the chickens being slaughtered, and how he'd watched Dumbledore and Snape and Dora discuss the cat. How he'd come up with the idea of trying to catch Dobby in the act and run up several flights of stairs to accomplish it. Dumbledore sat silent and serene, though once or twice McGonagall looked furious at their antics.

"What's going to happen to Dobby, sir?" Draco asked, into the ruminative silence that followed the end of the story.

"There must be further interrogation, I think," Dumbledore said. "He has committed fairly serious acts of vandalism, Mister Malfoy."

"Yeah, but...do we have to tell my mum right now? Can't we wait?"

"You take an interest in Dobby's welfare?"

"Well, if mum finds out, she might actually kill him," Draco said plaintively. "And if she doesn't do that, she's sure to make him do something awful to himself. He's not a bad house-elf. He's never done anything like it before."

"For the moment she need not be informed. The Aurors will, no doubt, wish to speak with him. It is ultimately their decision."

"Yes, sir."

They might have gone back to classes after that, except that Dora arrived shortly, escorting three other Aurors. Harry vaguely recalled Alastor Moody, the peg-legged, rolling-eyed old man who used to visit Sirius and Remus back before they moved to Betwys Beddau. The other two were unfamiliar; a tall, bald-headed black man introduced as Kingsley Shacklebolt and a woman with white-blond hair and keen eyes named Anne Delphine. So they had to tell the story over again, answering a hundred questions put to them by the three Aurors, while Dora and McGonagall went back to their classes. By the time they were through the rest of the school had gone to dinner, and both Harry and Draco were exhausted; the Aurors agreed to stay the night in guest lodgings near Hufflepuff's dormitory, and have Draco help them re-interrogate Dobby in the morning.

Harry ate in silence, feeling overwhelmed by the afternoon's discovery and just a little bit as though someone ought to have told him what a splendid, clever lad he was instead of implying that he was far too young to be apprehending house-elves in the girls' loo. Cricket, who had saved him a seat, chattered on regardless, so Harry wasn't required to spend too much time thinking about how to reply.

At least the pranks were done with; that was something. Even if Dobby's refusal to admit to killing the chickens was bizarre, no doubt there was an explanation for it.

When they found Completely Headless Nick Petrified and dangling mid-hallway the next morning, Harry got a sinking sensation in his stomach not unakin to that of falling off a broomstick from thirty feet in the air.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 15

None of the children actually saw Completely Headless Nick before the professors managed to cast a charm that swept him up to the infirmary. Once there, Madam Pomfrey spent a few perplexed minutes wondering what to do with him before hanging a sheet over him and depositing him safely in a corner. They heard about it through the ghosts; even the placid Fat Friar, the Hufflepuff ghost, went about with a hunted look on his face and tended to poke his head through walls before going around corners, just to make sure nothing nasty was lurking on the other side.

"It can't have been Dobby," Draco said, catching up to Harry as they walked down the corridor towards the Great Hall for lunch. "He was chained up all evening and the Aurors took him away for questioning."

"What's going to happen to him?" Harry asked.

"Dunno," Draco said glumly. "Mum might give him the sock."

"You mean the sack?"

"No -- that's how you fire a house-elf. You give them clothing and then they're freed from service," Draco explained. "That's why all the house-elves wear tea-towels and pillowcases and things."

"What does a freed house-elf do, do you think?"

Draco shrugged as they entered the Great Hall. "Anyway, Dobby didn't do it. Besides, house-elves don't have that kind of power."

"I wonder who did."

"Don't know. I'll ask the Fat Friar if he's heard anything," Draco said, heading for the Hufflepuff table. Harry picked his way along the Slytherin table, heading for the Quidditch team, who were clustered at one end and waving for him to join them.

"Sit," Marcus Flint instructed, and Harry rolled his eyes before dropping onto the bench next to Towler. "We're playing Ravenclaw in two weeks. The good news is, they're just as out of practice as we are."

"The bad news is, they've seen all our moves," Harry said. Marcus nodded.

"Well, we need new moves then," Towler said. "Where'd you get the other ones from, Flint?"

"Professor Snape passed 'em on. He's got mates in professional Quidditch, I guess," Marcus said.

Harry glowed with the quiet pride of the virtuously anonymous. "So that won't help. If he had new plays, he'd have given them to me."

Harry almost drew breath to suggest something, then thought better of it. Discretion was what Professor Snape had taught him by giving Flint the plays without his name attached; he would show Snape that he knew how to be discreet as well. Harry had kept a good number of secrets in his life, more than his fair share if truth be told, and while admittedly knowing when to open your mouth was different from knowing when you shouldn't....

Well, this was good practice. So he stayed silent while the others mulled over their options, hoping one of them would come up with the same solution he had. When none of them did, he sighed and finished his lunch before heading off to class again.

In class that afternoon he found it difficult to pay attention. The idea he'd had at lunch niggled at the back of his mind and he tried to look as though he were industriously taking notes while he was, in fact, devising new plays. He had two near-misses when he forgot himself and became so absorbed that he ignored the teacher coming closer, but at the end of the day he'd avoided detention and he had several strategies for coping with the Ravenclaws. Really it was a matter of knowing that they would *expect* the new plays, and working with their predictable reactions.

Now the problem was how to give the plays to Flint without him realising it. And Harry had one or two ideas about that, too.

They had practice only a scant few days later; because of Nick's "accident", all students were under constant supervision and Quidditch was no exception. Professor Snape met them at the stands as the Gryffindors were departing under the watchful eye of Minerva McGonagall.

Harry had been watching Flint the last few days when he felt he could do so safely, trying to figure out how his mind worked. This was made difficult by the fact that Marcus Flint was not a terribly bright boy and didn't actually seem to use his mind very much. Harry wasn't sure he'd even have to be very subtle, but of course it was a fine balance between being so subtle he went unnoticed and being so blatant the rest of the team caught on.

Three of the moves he'd given Snape were Seekers' moves, which helped; he didn't have to teach the new adaptations to Flint. He could just do them, and pretend they were accidents. It was the two offensive formations that he was going to have to demonstrate with subtlety.

It wasn't until he was actually aloft, the wind ruffling his hair and the familiar thrill of gameplay washing over him, that he discovered the easiest way of demonstrating -- flying it himself. He'd been ridiculous not to think of it before. It just went to show that you had to think *differently* about Quidditch to be any good at it.

He watched Flint and Pucey run the Slytherin Feint, and in the middle of it he zipped over Pucey's broomstick, barely inches away, chasing after a Snitch that wasn't there. Pucey, shocked, fell backwards instead of reversing intentionally, and the others nearly had to catch him before he

tumbled off his broomstick.

"Sorry!" Harry called, drifting back. "I didn't think you'd get up that high before you dropped."

"Bloody hell, Pipsqueak!" Pucey shouted. "You nearly did for me that time!"

"I said I was sorry!" Harry insisted. "I thought I could get more clearance. I knew you were going to drop..."

"And what if I hadn't?" Pucey demanded. This was going even better than Harry could have dreamed. "What if I'd just have kept going?"

There was a brief silence, followed by a noise of surprise from Marcus Flint.

"That's it," he exclaimed.

"What's what?" Pucey demanded.

"That's how we're going to cream the Ravenclaws," Flint said excitedly. "They're going to expect these moves."

"Well, yeah..." Harry said, encouragingly.

"But what happens when you feint, everyone drops expectantly, and you keep going up?" Marcus asked.

The Chasers all looked at one another, thoughtfully.

Harry grinned.

Scheduling sittings for the portrait shouldn't have been so difficult.

Sirius was unemployed, after all. Remus only worked when it pleased him. Helena was a painter who worked at all hours and had nearly total control over her own schedule. It should have been easy to find a time at which all three could come together for a two-hour sitting.

Still, they discovered that they were surprisingly busy people. Sirius was invited to all sorts of events as a representative of one of the old Wizarding families, and he liked to go to readings and book-signings at Flourish & Blotts. Remus had bad days around the full moon, and of course during the holidays Helena had been snowed under with people who wanted portraits done as gifts. Their first sitting since December had to be rescheduled three times: once because of a meeting with Llewellyn Payne about Sirius' amended will, once because Harry had a Quidditch match (they creamed Ravenclaw handily -- apparently they had more mastery of tactics and basic

psychology) and once because Remus had to take an emergency shift at Madam Schaeffer's when the entire staff caught a magical strain of the flu from one of their younger patrons.

"The entire staff?" Helena asked when they finally met again, after she'd arranged them in their pose. The bare little stall she painted in had been decorated with a bookshelf, a fake window, some curtains, and a large shaggy rug. The wooden posing stool had been exchanged for a comfortable wing-chair in which Remus sat, a prop book open on his knee. Sirius, one arm over Remus' crossed legs, glanced up at Remus and grinned before returning to his prescribed pose.

"Sticky little children," Remus replied, with a sigh. "The child couldn't have been more than two, and he sneezed in everyone's faces as they were passing him around admiring him. Fortunately," he added, a trifle smugly, "werewolves are generally immune."

"Do you know, I think I've learned more about werewolves from two sittings with you than the entire unit we did on them at school," Helena observed. "More accurate information, certainly."

"It's nice to talk about it with someone," Remus replied. "I don't often get the chance, except with Sirius, and he knows just about everything there is to know."

"Oh yes?"

"When I found out, I did a lot of reading on the subject," Sirius said.

"It must have put a strain on your relationship."

Remus chuckled. "It would have, except he found out -- what, fifteen years before?"

"Well, we were thirteen -- so, fifteen or sixteen years before anything happened between us," Sirius said with a nod.

"Thirteen?" Helena raised her eyebrows. "How old were you when it happened?"

"Eight," Remus said softly. Sirius glanced up at him.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to intrude -- it's just we've been trained to ask personal questions," Helena said, looking only mildly apologetic. She had, after all, warned them. "You must have been at school, then? When Mr. Black found out, I mean."

"Yes," Remus replied. "Sirius, and two of my other friends."

"One friend," Sirius replied. "One filthy traitor."

"He was our friend then," Remus said gently.

"Yes, I've retroactively disqualified him."

Remus smiled indulgently.

"How did you find out?" Helena asked Sirius.

"Well, the monthly excuses for his absences were wearing a little thin," Sirius said. "Finally we started keeping round-the-clock watch on him."

"Sirius harboured youthful dreams of being a spy," Remus sighed.

"We saw him leave the school and followed." Sirius shrugged, fingers tightening possessively on Remus' leg for a moment. "Nearly lost James, that time."

"James Potter? Your godson's father?"

"Yes, of course. He was almost *James Potter, my friend's midnight snack*."

Remus was silent; Sirius bent his head and brushed his cheek against the other man's leg, affectionately. Helena, sensing they were on dangerous terrain even for someone trained to ask impertinent questions, changed the subject.

"Then you haven't been together that long, have you?" she asked. "You've been friends a long time, but -- "

"No," Remus said, relief evident in his voice. "Just four years together. He kissed me while we were doing the washing-up."

Helena grinned, brush still moving over the canvas. "Romantic."

"I was going for the element of surprise," Sirius sulked.

"I did wonder, after that article in the Prophet came out," she said.

"Which one?" Sirius asked resignedly.

"The Skeeter piece, back last summer -- the one about Mr. Lupin."

Sirius' brow furrowed. Helena tutted, and he resumed his pose. "I don't think I saw that."

"Oh, it was stupid -- it speculated that Mr. Lupin was somehow blackmailing you."

"Ha! *Black* mail!" Sirius said, before realising what was being inferred. "Oh -- people don't think that, do they?"

"I doubt it," Remus said. "I rarely draw enough attention for people to think anything. Besides, the

article was pure speculation because they couldn't dig up anything real on me."

"You knew about it?" Sirius asked. Remus worried his lip with his teeth. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"We had other things to worry about."

"When did you find out?"

"It came in the clippings Severus sent us. I didn't think you'd care, Pads," Remus said. "It wasn't anything, really. Just a stupid little piece on a back page somewhere."

When Sirius looked up at him angrily, Remus glanced at Helena, a not-terribly-subtle signal that they could postpone this fight for when they were in private. She cleared her throat, anxiously.

"I was hoping you'd tell me a little bit about your godson, Mr. Black," she said. "You seem very fond of him."

Sirius, with a last glare at Remus, turned his attention to Helena, giving her a brief history of Harry's life with them, and Remus relaxed by degrees.

They walked home in a somewhat stony silence, however, and by the time they'd reached their flat again Remus was strung tightly, waiting for the explosion he was sure would come. Sirius remained quiet, hanging his coat with particular care and deliberately folding the jumper he'd been wearing, setting it on the arm of the sofa when he was done. Remus almost burst into hysterical laughter at this; Sirius always threw his clothing on the sofa, even if he folded it first.

"You might as well shout, then," he said finally, heart thudding fast at his own audacity. He knew Sirius wouldn't hurt him, but he hated rows and they hadn't had a really serious, important one in years.

"What would be the use? You'd just sit there until I was finished and then change the subject," Sirius said tightly.

"That's not fair, Sirius."

"Not fair? That's rich."

"It's just a newspaper article -- "

"It's more than that, and you know it," Sirius replied. "I realise I'm not the easiest person to live with, you know, but I don't want to be *handled!* "

"I'm not handling you, Pads!" Remus protested. "I honestly didn't think you'd care."

"Then why didn't you let me see it?"

"I was angry. I burned it before I thought about it."

"You think about *everything*," Sirius retorted. It was true, and Remus watched him silently. "You are handling me and you know I care what they say about you. If you don't you're a fool."

"It's not your business. It's mine," Remus said. "My life and my reputation."

"It's your stupid damned pride is what it is!" Sirius insisted. "Your life is a part of my life. This is our life together, that's why they *call* it a life *together*, you shouldn't be hiding things from me!"

Remus had hidden things from Sirius before they stole Harry, and they both knew it; some things more important than others, but never maliciously. Since the first time they'd kissed he'd hidden nothing, as difficult as it was for the naturally private man to believe that Sirius wanted to know, wanted to hear. The implication angered him, irrationally.

"All right, would you like to know the truth?" he asked, aware that such a phrase was usually the opening of a truly ugly row. "Would you? I hate it when you get angry at the Prophet for running those stupid articles. I hate hearing you rant about them and *I don't want you defending me*," he said, keeping himself from shouting only through long practice. "I know you've never begrudged a moment you've spent taking care of me and I won't deny that sometimes I've needed help, but I don't want to be taken care of in times and places where I don't need to be. I'm not Harry, I'm old enough to fight my own battles or to choose not to fight them if they're not worth fighting. And some stupid editorial in the Prophet isn't worth it. It *isn't*, Sirius. But you get so upset over every stupid thing. And it's fine when it's you or Harry, but not me. Because it's exhausting and it frightens me."

Sirius was staring at him in shock. Remus bowed his head and waited. Whatever was said next, he wouldn't speak until Sirius did.

"Frightens you?" Sirius said finally. "Why? You know I don't mean anything I say -- you know I'd never -- it frightens you?"

"Yes," Remus confessed. "Because I'm afraid one day you're going to realise I'm not worth it."

He hadn't raised his head; he wasn't sure he wanted to see what Sirius was thinking, and Sirius always wore his emotions on his face, nakedly.

"You stupid, stupid git," Sirius said softly, and then he did look up. "Remus, the reason I shout is that you're worth shouting over. Don't you see? You're so frightened you're going to lose me that I start to wonder if you're going to leave first so that it doesn't happen, and I don't know how to tie you down. The portrait is permanent, that's why I'm doing it. This is the only -- I'm not good at this, you know, the only things I know about love are shouting when someone I love is hurt and taking care of them and giving them things. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"

He looked so confused and unhappy that Remus covered his face with one hand, ashamed.

"I said you can have everything you want if you ask for it," Sirius continued. "But you have to ask, so that I know. What do you want? Anything. Anything you ask for. It's yours."

"Just you," Remus replied, brokenly. "You and Harry, that's all I ever wanted. I don't care about things or the Prophet or any of it. Just you and Harry."

"Well I can't give you that, dolt, you already have that," Sirius said, so gravely that Remus laughed. Sirius took a hesitant step forward and Remus pulled him close, burying his face in Sirius' short black hair.

"I would never have left you," he said. "I wouldn't have the courage."

"You don't need to," Sirius insisted.

"All right then."

"All right."

They were quiet for a few minutes, Sirius breathing slowly to calm Remus' frightened, quick breaths. Finally Remus stepped back, rubbing his forehead.

"That's a hell of a way to end a row," he said. "I thought there were supposed to be doors slamming and flung crockery and the rest."

"I could slam some doors if you want," Sirius said uncertainly.

"No -- no," Remus said, laughing a little. "That's all right. Let's...let's go out and have dinner somewhere. Somewhere very expensive and posh. We can pretend I'm blackmailing you into it."

Remus kissed him, gently but firmly, and Sirius smiled into it. He'd always been the more open one, almost embarrassingly so, but something in their fight had snapped the last barrier he always sensed in Remus, the one that wasn't natural reserve but fear of some kind.

They went to Sosi Alley for dinner, to the exclusive but glass-fronted Pisces Bistro, which Ted Tonks said always reminded him of eating in a fish-tank. And Sirius did not shout about the society reporter who took their picture, even the next morning when the piece on Sirius Black dining at Pisces included mention of his dinner companion Remus Looping.

The week after Nick's petrification was especially difficult for Professor Tonks, all things considered. Her students normally paid the lazy attention of children who, because the weather is

terrible, have nothing better to do; when word got around school that there was something wandering the halls which could freeze a ghost, they either focused so tightly on her lectures that she found it unnerving, or they distracted her with questions about ghosts, freezing spells, petrification, and charms against the Dark Arts. It was no good her explaining to them that an amulet was worthless if you weren't paying attention to your surroundings.

"I don't know what to do," she complained to McGonagall one afternoon in the Professors' common room. Flitwick looked sympathetic over his digestive biscuit. Sinistra, who was marking sixth-year star charts near the windows where Madam Hooch sat, nodded and frowned.

"It makes them nervous. I've never seen students so reluctant to leave a lesson, but none of them want to be wandering the halls at midnight," Sinistra said. "I have to escort the younger children myself. To be sure, it sometimes makes *my* skin crawl. Whatever do you suppose could have done it?"

"He's free of hexes and curses, and there aren't many that work on a ghost at any rate," Tonks replied. "Madam Pomfrey's still working on unfreezing him. It must have been something that went *through* him. Which....which might mean whatever happened was aimed at someone else."

"And you're certain it's not the house-elf?" McGonagall inquired.

"Couldn't have been. He was in custody at the time. Not that I don't think he's capable of it, and certainly now he'd have reason to want revenge -- especially on Harry."

"Oh?" McGonagall raised her eyebrows.

"He's been fired," Tonks said, sadly. "The Aurors couldn't really hold him on anything more than mischief making, and Narcissa Malfoy went down to the Ministry when they released him. She gave him two socks on the spot. And it's Harry's fault, you know, he's the one who caught him and took him to Dumbledore's office."

"Where is the little blighter now?" Madam Hooch inquired, from the window-seat where she was birdwatching with a pair of omnioculars.

"Gone off somewhere to look for work, I suppose. Aunt Narcissa left immediately, of course, and the poor little thing burst into tears on the front steps of the Ministry. My friend Anne -- she's been in on the case since Dobby was caught -- tried to calm him down, but he ran off."

"No more than what he deserves," drawled Snape from his armchair near the fire, where he was reading a literary-looking wizarding novel. "He faked the death of a cat and painted graffiti in blood on the walls, wasting our time and resources."

"He's clearly unbalanced," Tonks said uncertainly. "I think he deserves pity more than anything. He obviously thought there was a very good reason to do what he did, even if he won't say what it is."

"On one point, we agree -- he oughtn't to be running about loose," Snape said. "Unemployed house-elves are a menace and nothing good can come of it. Narcissa Malfoy may be a bigger menace and entirely unfit to command house-elves, but -- "

"She *is* my aunt, you know," Tonks said, feeling that if anyone was going to call her aunt horrible names, she ought to have first chance. Snape raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, your mother would appear to have got the lion's share of sanity in her generation," he replied. "But of course, your family is a topic upon which *I* have been *forbidden* to speak."

McGonagall, sensing the tension in the room -- not that it didn't rather bludgeon one over the head -- cleared her throat.

"The question is, I suppose, what we're to do about your students," she said to Tonks.

"It's not really a problem except that I don't know how to remind them that if they're not paying attention to their surroundings and prepared to cope with whatever comes their way, all the protective charms in the world won't do them an ounce of good. They want practical lessons, but it's hard to decide what I ought to do. It's not as though I can leap out at them in the halls and hex their noses off while they're busy adjusting their lucky amulets."

"Not much chance of an expedition into the Forbidden Forest at this time of year, either," Sinistra said, laying down her quill. "The centaurs have been hostile lately, and you know they hate anyone mucking about down there until the first spring thaw. They hardly even come down to the border to talk to me anymore, and I thought Ronan was rather fond of me," she added sadly. "He did say once that I wasn't entirely incompetent as an astronomer, which is very high praise from a centaur."

"What about some sort of extracurricular activity?" Hooch asked. "You could take them out to the old Shrieking Shack and give them a good scare."

"It's so unpredictable, though," Tonks sighed. "It never seems to perform on command."

"If I may," Snape said, surprising everyone, "perhaps some sort of...competitive activity would be more to your students' liking."

"What, like Quidditch with hexes?" Sinistra inquired.

"I don't think we could be having with that," McGonagall answered, somewhat severely.

"I'm afraid I couldn't approve hexes and broomsticks. It only ends in nasty splatters," Hooch added.

"I suggest something slightly more direct," Snape continued, marking his place and closing the

book he'd been holding. "An activity which teaches alertness and defence at once -- perhaps along the lines of dueling lessons."

"By Jove, a dueling club!" Flitwick said, excitedly. "We had one of those when I was at school -- oh, the happy hours spent making people grow garlic out their noses and dance jigs while they tried to cast a gibberish hex....splendid times, wonderful times." He sighed, nostalgically.

"Yes -- I remember some of the senior students had something of the sort, when I was a first-year," McGonagall said thoughtfully. "If I recall, it was put to an end two years later when one of the young women involved became a little overzealous and hexed her partner's wand into oblivion."

"That doesn't sound too terrible," Tonks said.

"It wasn't the wand you're thinking of," McGonagall replied. Tonks looked horrified. Madam Hooch and Professor Sinistra both chuckled. Snape looked extremely uncomfortable. "Fortunately it was not irreparable, but it caused him some definite discomfort for several months, of both the physical and social variety. He was not a very nice boy, so I can't say that I blame his tormentors over-much."

"It's not a bad idea though, as long as we make sure there's no...no hitting below the belt," Tonks said, with a snigger. Madam Hooch abandoned all pretence of birdwatching and burst out laughing, coming to sit next to McGonagall on the sofa, near the small round table with the tea-service on it. McGonagall poured her a cup as Tonks continued. "If it were properly supervised and we made certain that the older students were aware of punishments for using any of the really dangerous hexes and jinxes, it ought to be all right, don't you think?"

"With two professors supervising it? I don't see why not," McGonagall said with a smile. "And I'm certain Professor Snape can put the fear of several of the more ancient and bloodthirsty gods into them."

"I beg your pardon?" Snape said, craning his neck around the wing of the armchair.

"Well, naturally you and Professor Tonks, having formulated the idea, would want to work together on it," McGonagall said innocently.

"Nonsense, I haven't -- "

"Surely the children could benefit from your experiences in Defence?" McGonagall asked. Snape's mouth closed abruptly. "Of course, Professor Tonks may prefer to ask Headmaster Dumbledore -- "

"There is no need to bother the Headmaster," Snape said quickly.

"Grand," McGonagall declared. "Then you'll supervise Professor Tonks?"

Dora didn't care for the idea of being supervised by Professor Snape, considering she'd had seven years of that already, but certainly he was well-informed about the Dark Arts and she'd heard Andromeda say once that he was not inexperienced as a duelist. Aside from that...well, if he seemed to be sizing her up as an opponent, she was already wondering what it would take to beat him. After all, she was a fully qualified Auror now, not a terrified sixteen-year-old.

"I will," Snape replied impassively, "if she wishes to teach an extracurricular course in dueling."

McGonagall, had she been a cat at the moment, would have groomed her whiskers as if she'd just eaten a very large canary, Tonks was certain of it.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 16

This is where they live, the dark crevices, the corners, the spaces between. They avoid the wide open and the low places where there are threats, but venture out far enough to catch their prey without being prey in return.

Of course, some are foolish or careless, and they deserve nothing more than the death they receive -- being less than a credit to their noble species, why should they survive long enough to breed?

It was almost dawn when Snake returned to Harry's dormitory from a nocturnal feeding expedition, one twitching spider's leg still dangling from his mouth. Mostly he hibernated in the cold times, which were less interesting than the warm times when Harry took him to a place where there was green as far as the eye could see and it was just him and his Harry and the two Big Ones. Still, a snake had to eat, and Snake had woken with a hunger for some crunchy creatures. As much as he liked the eggs and bacon Harry fed him, sometimes he itched to hunt, and spiders were delicate and tasty.

He'd found a single isolated web in a corner of the room Harry slept in and devoured the four spiders living in and around it, but his animal instinct told him something was off. Spiders didn't share webs and there ought to be more of them in an underground burrow like this. He was a snake, and it wasn't his place to care about such things, but it made him uneasy.

As he slithered past the wall of the dormitory beneath the high windows that never let in enough proper basking sunlight, even in the warm times, he found his way blocked.

It was as if a human had somehow come across a parade of ice cream cones which had sprouted legs and were all scurrying past. He watched in predatory fascination as a steady stream, a river of spiders made their way towards the windows, across the floor and up the wall. Little baby spiders crawled under and around others which were bigger than Snake's head; brown, black, grey, long-legged, short-legged, creeping and jumping, all moving methodically towards the nearest way out of this burrow. It was like a feast on eight legs.

Harry , he called delightedly, come see what I've found.

Harry was unsure why he woke in the middle of the night and for a moment the skewed perspective of not-quite-focused eyes, combined with the Parseltongue voice in his ears, made him wonder if the vaulted ceiling of the dormitory room wasn't the belly of an enormous coiled snake come to devour him. He bolted upright and nearly fell out of the bed, but the movement

corrected his depth-perception, and the voice he heard wasn't the horrible predatory voice of last term, but Snake's mischevious tones.

Harry, come see!

Harry grumbled but obediently found his glasses and followed the voice to a corner near the outer castle wall, below the moonlit windows.

What is it? he asked sulkily, crouching next to Snake. Something scuttled over his foot and he flinched backwards; when he'd recovered from the tumble, he crawled forward again, carefully.

Spiders were scuttling across the floor in the moonlight, hurrying with terrifying purpose towards the wall. Hanging down from each window was a multitude of silvery threads to help them along, and one of the windows had actually been pushed open slightly by an enormous tarantula -- it might even have been Lee Jordan's -- who was sitting nearby with front legs upraised, as if summoning the rest with a gesture. Harry had never seen anything like it and, as he watched, he realised that he never wanted to again. Snake, having coiled himself around Harry's ankle, was a soothing weight, but there were hundreds of spiders making for the windows and Harry reasoned that if an entire species was trying to get out of somewhere, there was probably a good reason.

Why are they leaving? he asked Snake. *And where are they going?*

I don't talk to my food, Snake replied scornfully.

Harry sat on the floor until the sun rose, watching the spiders leave the castle. Just before the other boys woke up their numbers started to drop off, and by the time Blaise sat up and rubbed his eyes and yawned, the last of the spiders had gone; Harry was already dressing and Snake was drowsing in his box on Harry's nightstand.

He was the first into the Great Hall for their usual early breakfast, and Brecon the house-elf brought up a plate of warm buttered crumpets with jam for Harry to start on while he waited. He was expecting Padma, who was an early riser and generally beat all three boys to the Great Hall. It wasn't unusual to find her already buried in a book or working on an essay, but this morning she was nowhere to be seen until long after Neville came down, and Neville was invariably last.

"Wish I'd known," Neville said, around a mouthful of egg. "I'd have run up to the eyrie and fetched her down. It's not like her."

Harry, who was bursting with the news of the spiders' exodus, was almost dancing with impatience by the time Padma did arrive, looking as if she hadn't slept well. Her normally tidy braid was wispy and uneven and she gave no explanation for her lateness. Harry didn't inquire too closely; he had his own story to tell, and once he'd recounted it, her interest (not to mention Draco and Neville's) was renewed.

"Do you suppose it's some kind of migration?" Draco asked.

"I've never heard of any spider that migrates like that," Padma answered. "And Harry said it was all kinds."

"Well, I say the fewer spiders in the castle, the better," Neville said. "Suppose we could get the rats and everyone above fifth year to evacuate themselves too?"

"Brecon begs Master Draco's pardon," said the reedy voice of a house-elf, interrupting Padma's retort to Neville, "but...but..."

Draco glanced down at the bug-eyed, bat-eared elf. "Well, say it then, Brecon. What is it?"

"If Master Draco would be so good -- Denbigh requests -- oh!" Brecon wrung his hands. "In the kitchen there is *goings-on!* "

Draco gave the other three a wry grin. "Goings-on. Sounds serious. What do you want me to do about it, Brecon?"

Brecon squeaked and wrung his hands.

"I'd better see what's wrong," Draco said. "Though why they'd ask me and not Headmaster Dumbledore, I'm sure I don't know. Coming?"

"Never been to the kitchens," Neville said thoughtfully. "I think I might."

"Come on then, Padma," Harry said, and they slipped out the side door and down into the cellars just as the rest of the school was trickling into the Great Hall.

The kitchen was in chaos, even more so than usual -- great platters of eggs, bacon, sausage, pastries, kippers, pitchers of juices and milk were all being prepared at an alarming rate by the kitchen house-elves who hopped and ran, ducked, shouted, called to each other and wielded knives and frying pans with terrifying speed and accuracy. Neville and Padma, who hadn't accompanied Harry and Draco on kitchen runs in the past, stared at the orderly mess in awe.

Near a great fireplace at one end there was an empty space, and they naturally gravitated towards it as a safe haven, but when they arrived they found a tiny stool and a shivering, miserable-looking creature wrapped in the remains of a jumper with Hufflepuff colours striping the collar and sleeves. Only a pair of bulbous eyes peeped out morosely at the world.

"Dobby?" Draco asked, stopping so suddenly that Neville ran into him. "Dobby, is that you?"

The jumper shivered. The eyes blinked.

"What's he doing here?" Harry asked.

"Well, now we know why they didn't tell Dumbledore. He'd have had Dobby thrown off the grounds," Neville observed.

"He wouldn't," Harry answered. "He knows Dobby had his reasons, whatever they were."

Neville muttered something about house-elves having no reason at all, but Draco was sitting on the hearthrug, peering at the elf.

"It's one of my old jumpers from last year, I thought it had gone for dusters," Draco said, lifting one of the sleeves. "This isn't the clothing mum gave you, is it?"

One trembling foot slipped out from below the jumper, clad in a grimy, tattered sock.

Fifteen extremely trying minutes followed while Draco tried to coax anything more than trembles and whimpers from Dobby, but finally they managed to discover that he'd made his way to Hogwarts from London and collapsed outside the old scullery, where Denbigh had tripped over him while going outside for firewood for the morning fires.

"I think we should talk," Draco said finally, standing and dusting off the seat of his trousers. "The four of us and Dobby. Mum's put an awful fear of punishment in him if he talks, even if he knows she can't get to him anymore. Maybe she can. I don't like it."

"The music room?" Padma suggested.

"There isn't time before class -- Denbigh, can you have someone bring up Dobby and some lunch?" Draco asked, catching the head elf as he went past. "The portrait of the man at the piano, you know the one?"

Denbigh nodded and hurried off, and they all realised they had better do likewise if they didn't want to lose house points for lateness. None of them paid much attention to their lessons, though Padma seemed more tired than distracted, and she snapped at Neville in class, then ran off to her next one with a toss of her braid.

"Do you suppose the spiders have anything to do with Dobby?" Draco asked as he and Harry loitered outside the painting while they waited for the other two to arrive. The man in the portrait was playing the piano softly, and the woman in the portrait-within-a-portrait was reading a novel.

"I don't see how. They've never run away from house-elves before, and even Dobby wouldn't be batty enough to cast an extermination spell or something."

"Not to mention he's not powerful enough."

"Wotcha!" Neville called, trotting down the corridor with Padma in tow. "No sign of lunch yet?"

"Tell everyone in the castle, why don't you," Padma said.

"Nobody can hear us up here," Neville replied sullenly.

"My, we are missish today," said the man in the painting. "Password?"

"You know full well who we -- oh, fine, polyphonic," Padma said. "And it's JS Bach, before *you* can start," she added, jabbing a finger at the woman behind him.

Harry and Neville raised their eyebrows at each other behind Padma as she stalked into the room, while Draco looked as though he preferred the hallway. Dobby was already inside, cowering behind a small table laden with sandwiches and drinks; Draco crossed to him and began speaking quietly, apparently glad to have something to do. Padma took a sandwich and went to sit by one of the windows, staring out.

"Did you know he'd been socked?" Neville asked Draco. Dobby squeaked.

"I thought he might have been," Draco replied. "Dobby, you can't go around in that jumper forever. At least let me shrink it."

"Make Padma do it, Draco, you're likely to flatten it," Harry suggested helpfully. Draco scowled at him and flicked his wand at Dobby. The elf tried to wriggle out of the jumper, but it was shrinking too quickly; soon his pencil-thin nose had popped out, followed by his fingers, and before long he looked like a rather spindly plush Hufflepuff mascot doll.

"What are we going to do with him?" Neville asked, tearing the crusts off of a turkey sandwich as he ate it. He offered the crusts to Dobby, who took one hesitantly and nibbled on it.

"I don't see why *we* have to do anything with him," Padma replied. "He's a free elf."

"He's not used to the outside world," Draco said. "He'll starve."

"He has ears, you know," Harry said, sitting down on the floor next to Dobby, who looked up at him with bulbous, wary eyes. "Why did you come to Hogwarts, Dobby?"

Dobby swallowed the crust he'd been eating all in a lump and hacked reedily a few times before speaking.

"Dobby did not know where else to go. All the big houses turn Dobby away. *Troublesome house-elf, nobody wants you here*," he said morosely.

"Someone's got to look after him," Draco said.

"Well, I wouldn't tell the Headmaster," Neville answered. "Merlin alone knows what he'd do."

Dobby had been slowly inching closer to Harry's knee and was now hiding behind it, only his nose

and eyes visible over the top. Snake, sleeping in Harry's pocket, poked his head out to see what the fuss was about.

"He's had his punishment already," Harry said. "Dobby, what would you like to do?"

It was apparently the wrong question. The house-elf burst into wailing tears and began to bang his head on the floor. The others, growing bored with his histrionics, exchanged annoyed looks.

"Stop it this instant, you little green bag of skin!" Padma said, startling the other three. Even Dobby was sufficiently surprised that he stopped his furious self-punishment and looked up at her. "We'll have no more wailing or crying or trembling or any of that silly nonsense from you. Stand up and stop sniffing."

A crisp white handkerchief landed on the floor next to Dobby, who picked it up and wrapped it around himself like a cape, using one end to stop his rather runny nose. Apparently, Draco was not the only one who could summon a voice of command when necessary.

"Nobody's going to give you a job and you can't very well stay here, so you had better put some thought into how you're going to feed yourself, because we certainly aren't going to give up our lunch time to smuggle food to you every day," Padma continued.

"He could get a job gathering herbs and things in the Forest!" Neville suggested brightly. Padma gave him a narrow look. "Well, he's low to the ground, he might see things other people miss..."

"Why couldn't he stay here?" Draco asked suddenly.

"Because Dumbledore won't hire him and he oughtn't freeload off the kitchen elves," Padma said firmly.

"No, but what if someone else did?" Draco said excitedly. "If someone hired him to be their...their valet or something. Then he could pay for his food and have a place to stay -- "

"I don't think that's allowed," Neville said dubiously. "It must be in the rules somewhere, you know. No personal servants to accompany students to school. Otherwise everyone in Slytherin would have one. Sorry Harry," he added, belatedly.

"Nobody has to know, except the kitchen house-elves, and they won't mind," Draco said. "I have some pocket-money from mum saved up, I could hire him to make my bed for me and stuff."

"Why hire him? Can't you....re...capture him or something?" Neville asked.

"No," Draco said.

"Course you can, I've read about it," Padma said.

"No, I can't," Draco insisted.

"Oh, Master Draco could!" Dobby cried suddenly. "Dobby would be pleased to serve Master Draco, Dobby would never do anything wrong ever again -- "

"Yes you can," Padma said, over the racket. "You just steal their clothes and -- "

"No, *you* can," Draco said. "I can't. I think it's barbarous."

"Dobby does not want to be *employed!* " Dobby began to wail, but a glare from Padma shut him up again.

"Fine, fine, hire him then, but it'll only get you in trouble," she said.

"Why don't you want to be employed?" Neville asked. "Then you could quit whenever you like, Dobby."

"Dobby does not quit! Dobby is a good house-elf!"

"Oh, for pity's sake, give him a sickle and tell him he's hired, I have class soon," Harry said crossly. Draco jutted out his chin in defiance.

"All right, Dobby, you're hired. No, I'm not going to take your clothes," he said, as Dobby whimpered. "You'll have three knuts a week. You will make my bed, carry books for me in the library, and uh..."

He glanced at Neville, who shrugged.

"He could refill your ink bottles," Harry suggested.

"Sure. Make my bed, carry my books, refill my ink bottles," Draco said. Dobby seemed comforted by his voice. "Go on now. You can sleep in my trunk if you want, there's more than enough room, only don't smash my collars."

Dobby ran up to Draco and threw his spindly arms around his leg, then scurried off through the music-room portrait-door.

"Ew, house-elf snot," Draco said, examining his trouser leg.

"They're odd creatures, aren't they?" Neville asked.

"Bats if you ask me," Harry said. "Imagine *wanting* to be a slave."

"I don't think they do want to, really," Draco said. "I don't think any living thing wants to be a slave. It's not natural."

"Not natural for us," Harry said, gathering up his book bag. "Maybe it's an instinct to them."

"Or maybe it's like religion," Padma said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" Neville asked.

"Well...sort of like monks."

"What's a monk?" Draco said. Padma sighed and shouldered her bag. Draco pushed the portrait-door open for her, then nearly let it slam on her when he ran back to stuff another sandwich in his pocket.

"Someone who promises to serve a god and joins a club to do it," Neville said vaguely. "Dora had to study them for her Muggle Studies unit at the Academy."

"Maybe..." Padma waited until they were all out of the room before continuing. "Maybe they think that by serving humans, they're actually serving whatever gods they have. Or that if they serve in this life they'll be rewarded after they die."

Draco looked troubled. "You don't mean our house-elves think I'm some kind of god, do you?"

"No -- not exactly. But maybe servitude and obedience to humans is what they think is asked of them." Padma shrugged. "I don't know. Do house-elves even have a god?"

"I never asked," Draco replied.

"But then why wouldn't they want to be freed?" Harry persisted. "Don't you think they'd see it as a reward for good behaviour?"

"Well, not really. I mean, when you're free it's a lot harder to be humble and serve others, isn't it?" Padma said. "It'd be like someone who can't have sugar living above a sweets shop. The temptation to do what you want rather than what you ought would be awful. And..."

"What?" Draco asked.

"Well...we sort of take it for granted that freedom is a good thing. I mean, we all think freedom is a basic right, don't we?"

"I like it," Harry put in.

"Yeah, but what if they don't think that way? I mean, if you tell someone who doesn't think freedom is all that great that you want to free all the house-elves, aren't you imposing on them just as much as if they imposed on you?"

"Depends on whether they're the ones being slaves or doing the enslaving," Harry said darkly.

"But that's just it! The house-elves *are* the ones being enslaved, aren't they?"

Harry looked doubtful. "Isn't that what the Muggles said in America about the slaves? That they wanted to be slaves?"

"Maybe," Padma shrugged as they began to descend the stairs. In the distance, the end-of-lunch bell was tolling. "But look at it this way. If house-elves think it's a religious duty to be enslaved to humans as a sort of...service test, then getting freed isn't a reward. Being free and serving humans is something that you can only do if you're really strong and brave and devoted, because otherwise when push comes to shove you're going to start thinking of yourself instead of others. And there's pride in it, you know, like those old Muggle serving families who've been butlers to the same rich family for five generations."

"That's true," Draco said. "There's a whole hallway lined with house-elf heads at home. They all want to have their heads hung up too, when they die."

"Eurgh," Neville said. "There was a hallway like that at home before they knocked down most of the walls. Andromeda took all the heads down and gave them a decent burial." He paused. "Well, you know. As decent as you can get, burying them in the garden. The rosebushes Ted planted there grow like *anything* -- "

"That's disgusting, Neville," Padma said.

"What? They do."

"You needn't bring it up!"

"Well, no, but -- " Neville stopped haplessly as Padma ran off to join the rest of the Ravenclaws, who were heading for class. "She always has to have the last word," he said sulkily.

"What's wrong with Padma, anyway? I thought she was going to punch Dobby in the head," Harry said.

"Dunno," Draco shrugged. "My mum's that way all the time, maybe it's something girls just get as they get older."

"Dora isn't," Neville said. "Except -- ooh. Maybe she has Girl Problems."

"Girl Problems?" Harry asked. "What, like, lost her hair curlers?"

"No, sometimes Andromeda and Dora get cranky and angry and Ted says it's Girl Problems. I think it has to do with vitamins or something," Neville said vaguely.

"Do you suppose if I gave mum some vitamins she'd be more sane?" Draco asked, a trace of hope in his voice.

"Sirius says with your mum it's inherited insanity," Harry put in.

"Bother," Draco sighed.

"There's Dora, we could ask her," Neville said, pointing to where Professor Tonks was hanging a large sheet of parchment on the wall outside the main entrance to the Great Hall.

"I'm not asking her, if it IS inherited," Draco muttered.

"What's she hanging up, anyway?" Harry asked, pushing through the crowds. "It looks like a sign-up sheet for something."

"Dueling club!" Neville read, catching up to him. "Learn the techniques and skills required to engage in a wizard's duel. All years and houses welcome to attend."

"Oooer," Draco said. "That sounds brilliant. Even if you only watch, someone's sure to get their nose hexed off."

"There won't be any of that," Professor Tonks said, without turning around. "Professor Snape and I are supervising it."

"Are you going to duel him?" Neville asked excitedly.

"Only in demonstration," Professor Tonks answered. "You'll be late to class if you keep asking silly questions, Neville."

"Sign us up, Harry!" Neville said, Harry being closest. He shouldered his way past a few fourth-years and managed to scrawl their names down before someone else shoved him out of the way to sign up as well.

Dueling was all anyone talked about for the rest of the day, much to the dismay of Professor Snape in particular, who had only gone along with this stunt because it was easier than backing out in front of Professor McGonagall.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 17

Draco was late to dinner, having had to dash back to the dormitory to make sure Dobby was reasonably well-hidden; he found the house-elf more-or-less cheerfully redecorating the inside of his trunk, piling all the clothing (shirts carefully on top) on one side so as to make a cozy little hut, lined with handkerchiefs and worn socks, in which to sleep. He had even dug up a photograph of Draco from somewhere and hung it on the inside of the trunk in a place of honour. In addition, he had refilled every inkpot in the entire dormitory.

"I don't see how you're going to pull it off, you'll have to keep him a secret," Neville said, as they sat in the library, homework abandoned in front of them.

"Well, I think it's going to be great fun having a valet. He can..." Draco reached deep into the recesses of his memory to dig out a book he'd once read with a valet in it. "...he can brush down my clothing and help me dress, and shave me."

"You don't shave," Harry pointed out.

"Yet!"

"Catch me letting a house-elf near me with a razor," Neville said. "Is it time yet?"

Harry checked the big clock at the front of the library. "Nearly. We can go down, anyway."

"Down to where?" Padma asked, not looking up from the book she was taking notes in.

"The Dueling Club!" Neville said. "Didn't Harry tell you?"

"I thought Draco would, he has class with her," Harry said. "I signed you up, so that's all right."

"Signed me up?" Padma said irritably.

"Dora and Professor Snape are going to teach us about dueling," Neville said. "We're all going, come on."

"Fine." Padma closed her book and stuffed it into her bag. Draco mouthed "Girl Problems" at Harry.

They reached the Great Hall just ahead of a large crowd of Gryffindors. Inside, the tables had been transfigured into a long, elevated stage with soft padding on the floor on either side of it. Snape was pacing back and forth on the stage; Dora sat on the edge, talking quietly with a few seventh-years.

"All right, everyone quiet down," she said finally, pulling her feet up onto the stage and standing in a single, swift motion which would have been graceful if her toes hadn't gotten tangled in her robe. She staggered a little before Snape grabbed her elbow to pull her back into balance. A few students laughed. "Yeah, laugh it up now," she warned with a grin. "You'll feel differently when you're up here at the business end of my wand!"

"She's a good teacher," Draco said.

"She's the best teacher," Neville replied proudly.

"Welcome to the Dueling Club!" Tonks was saying, her voice echoing a little off the enchanted ceiling, which at the moment was illuminating the Great Hall with a combination of floating candles and a meteor shower. "I am Professor Tonks, for those of you who are failing my class, and this is my assistant, Professor Snape," she added with a grin.

Snape looked furious at being called anyone's assistant, but far too dignified to retort.

"Before we begin instruction, we're going to give you a little demonstration. Those of you who are unfamiliar with wizards' duels should probably pay special attention. Miss Brott, will you give us the count?"

Anastasia Brott, a sixth-year Gryffindor, nodded with proud solemnity. Harry was very close to the slightly rounded center of the stage where Snape and Tonks now met; otherwise he never would have heard what they said.

"Don't play nice just because I'm a girl," Dora said under her breath.

"Do I ever?" Snape answered, equally quietly.

They turned their backs on each other and paced the length of the stage, turning when they reached the painted full moons at either end. There was a perfunctory bow, more graceful on Snape's part, and then they raised their wands like swords in front of them.

"One -- two -- three -- " Anastasia counted.

They moved almost in unison, swinging their wands over their heads and pointing them directly at each other; Snape cried "*Expelliarmus!*" at the same time Dora shouted "*Referio Erubescete!*" and there was an explosion of light about five feet in front of her. Harry felt Padma pull him back just as a ball of pink light flicked past, striking Snape in the chest and knocking him flat.

When he sat up, the room burst into uproar. Cricket Creevey's flashbulb popped.

Snape's short-cropped black hair, as much a hallmark to his current students as the three long scars on the side of his face, was now bright pink.

Dora was moving towards him cautiously, looking like she was trying very hard not to smile. Snape aimed his wand at his own head and muttered a charm that seemed to wash the pink out of his hair. She offered him a hand to help him up, and Harry could see her lips form the words "Told you not to play nice."

He ignored the hand and swung to his feet with startling grace; she didn't back down, and for a moment they stood toe-to-toe, faces only a few inches apart, though Snape's head was inclined slightly to stare down his considerable nose at her.

"What have we learned, children," he said, loudly, without moving, "about the strategy of dueling?"

"Don't play nice," Neville called. Snape's head snapped down and he glared at the boy, but Dora was backing off and so he began to pace again, up and down the left half of the stage.

"Anticipate what is to come," he said clearly. "There was no time for Professor Tonks to hear what I was saying before she had to reply or be defeated. She therefore chose a rather dangerous but effective anticipatory gamble. Betting that I would attempt an *expelliarmus*, she used a countercharm instead of a hex, one which is only effective against some forms of attack. Had I, for example, hurled an *incendite* at her -- " he flicked his wand, apparently by accident, and sent a screaming jet of flames in her direction, which she quickly ducked, " -- her countercharm would have been ineffective, and you would now be minus one Dark Arts professor."

"Instead, I deflected the hex he did throw and added a small spell that made use of the expended energy to...redecorate Professor Snape a little," Dora added with a smile. "So you see, even in dueling, you must be willing not only to defend yourself against what is coming, but to anticipate it. Now, who'd like to try something a little more basic? Let's see -- Patil, why don't you give it a go?"

Padma looked around, searching for her sister, until she realised Professor Tonks was pointing at her. Almost reluctantly, she clambered up on stage.

"Professor Snape, would you like to pick a champion?" Tonks asked politely. Snape smiled.

"Potter," he drawled. Harry, who had seen this coming, used Neville's shoulder to hoist himself up next to Padma.

"Don't go easy on me just because I'm a boy," he said with a grin. Padma smiled back, miraculously.

"Face and pace," Tonks ordered, slipping off the stage. Snape jumped down lightly on the other side. Harry and Padma faced each other, turned around, and walked down the stage in opposite directions.

"Turn and bow," Snape ordered. Harry turned, bowing stiffly, and saw Padma flick her braid back

over her shoulder when she was done.

"One -- two -- three -- " Dora said, and Harry -- who had anticipated that Padma would probably try Dora's trick -- decided on a little dirty pool.

"*Serpensoria!* " he shouted, just as Padma let loose an entirely ineffective "*Referio boletus!* " which would have turned Harry's ears into mushrooms if it had worked. Instead, Harry was unharmed, while a large black snake was crawling towards Padma. It was bigger than he'd intended. There were shrieks from the onlookers, many of whom were backing away hurriedly.

"It's only a snake," Harry heard Goyle say, from the audience. "Here, I can fix it -- "

"Goyle, don't you dare," Dora began, but it was too late; he'd pointed his wand at the snake and bellowed "*Aterte!* " just as Padma tried an *expelliarmus* on it. The combined force of her hex and Goyle's garbled attempt to kill the thing sent it flying through the air even as poisonous fangs began to grow from its mouth.

It landed in front of Cricket, who couldn't resist taking a picture. The flash only seemed to make the snake angrier.

"Don't move, Creevey," Dora said. She was running forward even before Snape cleared the stage, but she tripped on the hem of her robe again and crashed down amidst a cluster of fifth-year Ravenclaws.

The snake, undeterred, raised itself up -- as tall as Colin was -- and hissed. Harry knew the posture; it was going to strike if someone didn't do something.

Without thinking, he shouted.

Don't you dare!

The snake paused, confused.

Leave him alone! Shame on you! Bad Snake!

The hissing ceased, and the snake turned its head to regard Harry with two beady, stupid black eyes. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape flick his wand at the enormous black snake, and it dissolved gently into smoke.

Ow , it said, as it went.

Through the haze of black smoke, Harry saw Cricket staring up at him confusedly. Others were staring as well, including Padma, still standing at the far end of the stage.

"I think that's enough for today," Dora said, clapping her hands for attention. Harry swallowed,

wondering if by some miracle nobody had noticed him. "We'll meet again next week -- off you go, now..."

The crowds slowly dissipated, breaking up into small, muttering groups. Harry heard one boy say "Parselmouth" under his breath as they passed by.

No such luck, then.

He barely saw Snape's dismayed look as the professor helped him down from the stage. Instead what he saw were Neville and Draco standing together, eyes round as saucers, watching him.

"What did you do to that snake?" Draco asked in a hushed whisper.

"Saved Creevey's life, much thanks I get," Harry replied. Cricket had fled the room as soon as the snake had vanished.

"That's...not what it looked like," Neville answered hesitantly. "You sort of hissed at it..."

"What, you think I told it to attack him?" Harry demanded.

"We don't know what you said," Draco answered.

"How long have you been a Parselmouth?" Padma asked, from behind him. The other two winced.

"How long have you been a nosey-parker?" Harry said sharply. "All my life, not that it's your business or anyone's."

"Hardly difficult to make it our business when you start speaking in tongues in front of the whole ruddy school!" Neville blurted.

"I'm not the one who turned it poisonous, I'm not the one who threw it across the room so that it landed practically on top of Cricket," Harry protested.

"But you made it," Padma said. "And then you talked to it. Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because it doesn't matter! It's like...having double-joined thumbs or an extra toe or something, it's just always there and you don't think to go around handing out cards reading *by the way, I talk to snakes*," Harry said angrily.

The Great Hall was echoingly silent, except for the sound of Harry's own breath.

"Wish I could," Neville said finally.

"Could what?"

"Talk to snakes, idiot," Neville replied. "Are they very interesting?"

Draco looked at Neville incredulously. "They're snakes! They bite things!"

"So do you."

"Not living things!"

"Snake eats bacon, I've seen him do it," Neville said calmly.

Harry had almost forgotten about Padma, as silent as she was, until she cleared her throat.

"It would have been nice to know," she said, scoldingly. "But there's nothing to be done about it now. Everyone's going to be talking about it so you might as well get used to being asked awkward questions. I'm tired; I'm going to bed."

She walked out of the Great Hall, and Draco gave Harry a regretful look.

"I'll...make sure she's okay," he said, following quickly. "See you at breakfast!" he added over his shoulder, as if to reassure Harry that there were no hard feelings.

"I always wondered how you got your snake to do tricks," Neville said. Harry sat on the edge of the stage, brooding. "Dora knew, didn't she? She didn't seem surprised at all."

"Probably. All the grownups know -- Remus and Sirius and Andromeda and Ted, I mean, and Professor Snape and Headmaster Dumbledore. It's not like it was any big secret, it was just...something that was mine." Harry sighed. "Besides, a lot of Dark wizards have been Parselmouths. I'm already in Slytherin, it's not as though that's a glowing recommendation of moral character."

"I don't mind," Neville said. "And Draco doesn't. Padma'll come round if she does. Girl Problems," he added, so gravely that Harry laughed.

"Sure. Like me. I've got snake problems," he answered, grinning. "Want to go raid the kitchen?"

"That was a bloody big snake," Neville said, following him out the door and down the stairs. "Did you really tell it to stop?"

"They're all big softies if you talk sternly enough," Harry replied, tickling the pear in the still-life.

News got around the school quickly, as it always did; Harry found himself the target of unpleasant stares and even more unpleasant whispers in the halls the next day, and someone put a handful of rubber snakes in his cauldron during Potions that Friday. He'd thought it was just

stupid rumour and that it would pass, but an encounter on Saturday made him aware that there were deeper undercurrents to the sudden hostility of some of the students.

The old rumours about the Chamber of Secrets had started up again, that much he knew, but surely nobody really believed them. It was all Dobby's doing. He hadn't given it a second thought.

Now, however...

He'd been looking for a book on magical creatures for Potions -- more specifically, what bits of which magical creatures were used in some of the size-changing potions they'd been making -- when he heard giggles and whispers from the next row over. Curious, he'd leaned forward and peered through a gap in the shelf, wondering if it was some of the sixth years breaking the library's decency rules again.

Instead it was a group of second and third years. Ravenclaws, mostly, with a few Hufflepuffs around the edges. The shortest of them, a Ravenclaw named Morag MacDougall, had a book open in her hands, and the others were leaning over it.

"What makes you think it's a snake?" one of them asked. "Stop shoving," she added, over her shoulder.

"But I want to see!"

Morag hushed them. "Because it makes sense," she said. "If Salazar Slytherin put a monster in the Chamber of Secrets it's bound to be a snake of some kind, isn't it?"

"How do you know what Salazar Slytherin would do?"

"It stands to reason, that's all," Morag replied irritably.

"I think that's faulty logic," said a Ravenclaw boy. "You just want it to be a snake because Potter talks to snakes."

"It's not faulty logic if the sequence works both ways," Morag said. "Slytherin liked snakes so he put one in the Chamber. Snakes like eggs; the thing that killed the chickens might have been a snake. Potter talks to snakes; Potter set a snake on Cricket Creevey; clearly he has practice with snakes, of which the beast in the Chamber is one. Potter is the Heir of Slytherin."

"Or there is no Chamber of Secrets, no beast, no monstrous snake, a dog got at the chickens, and Potter played a tasteless joke," the boy retorted.

"Are you going to bet your life on it? The last time there were rumours about the Chamber being opened, a student died. He's already gone after the Slytherin Muggle-borns. You think he'll stop with his own House? Even the ghosts are afraid of him. Look what happened to Completely Headless Nick."

"But he's always been friends with Nick," protested a Hufflepuff.

"So? I hear when a wizard goes bad he'd turn on his own family."

"Oh, that's rubbish, he's twelve years old, he hasn't gone bad."

Harry, who had been listening in a stunned sort of silence, quietly crept away as they began to bicker about what age was appropriate for a wizard to go bad, citing old rumours about teenage Death Eaters and even managing to bring up the age statute on first communions in church. It was all academic to the Ravenclaws but as he sat at the study table, completely ignoring Padma, Draco, and Neville, he watched the group emerge from the stacks, each student going their separate ways. He watched them join other groups, heads bent low in quiet discussion, and occasionally those groups would break up and spread out again.

There was no doubt he was a Slytherin and a Parselmouth, but he would know if he were opening the Chamber, wouldn't he?

The voice in his head, the deep, primal hunting voice that begged to be freed to kill, had not been silent, though it had haunted him mostly in his dreams. Was that the snake Salazar Slytherin had left behind him when he abandoned Hogwarts? Was it drawn out because Harry was a Parselmouth?

Sirius was the blood-descendant of Salazar Slytherin, and he wasn't Harry's blood relation at all, but...well, magic did funny things to family trees. Sirius was his father in all but name and Harry was his Heir in name as well as wardhood. His parents hadn't been parseltongues as far as he knew, but then neither was Sirius.

He couldn't recall a time he hadn't been able to talk to snakes, but he wasn't sure if he'd ever tried before coming to live with Sirius. He'd never tried to recall his life with the Dursleys and the memories had faded into merciful oblivion for the most part.

Harry knew enough about genetics to wonder if Sirius hadn't passed on some recessive gene, somehow, magically. People often said they looked enough alike to be father and son, though Harry knew that his resemblance to James Potter, his father, was much stronger.

"Harry?"

Harry glanced up at Neville, who looked more worried than usual.

"What?"

"I said, do you want to go down to the kitchen and get cocoa?"

"Oh...yeah, okay," Harry said. He felt the eyes of other students on him as he gathered his books

and followed the others out of the library.

"Hey Potter!" Fred Weasley called from the other end of the hallway, as they were going out and the Weasley twins were going in. "I hear you're the Heir of Slytherin! You need henchmen, you know who to call!"

It was going to be a long few months until summer.

Only the oldest and most adventurous of the Hogwarts students knew that on the far side of the lake, east of the route the first-years took across it in the enchanted boats, was a series of hot sulfur vents cut off from the main body of the lake by a narrow inlet. The Giant Squid often spend his nights there and flocks of late-migrating birds sometimes roosted there for the winter, building nests in the branches overhanging the steaming springs. The only way to the hot springs by land was through the Forbidden Forest without a map; the easiest way was by water, either in a boat or by swimming across the lake.

In a way, it was ideal; one dove into the cold water of the lake from an overhanging rock, and the cold shock became unpleasantly pervasive just as a fast swimmer would reach the warmer water.

Contrary to what his students might write on their desks when they thought he wasn't looking, Severus Snape bathed daily -- just not always in a bathtub. He found it invigorating to be up at dawn for a sulfurous soak and return from the lake in time for a hot bowl of porridge for breakfast. He was hygenic about it, of course; his bathing costume would have put most Victorians to shame, but he rather liked it. It was black, of course, and it reached his knees and elbows -- suitably modest, to his mind. He was aware that as it grew warmer dozens of students would go swimming in the lake clad in little more than a pair of specially-designed boxers, but the young had no shame.

He was just beginning to really feel the icy chill of the freezing water in his fingers and toes as he reached the inlet, and he plunged gratefully into the warmer water without a break in his stroke, dodging around the high chimneys of stone which jutted up from the sulfurous lake floor.

There was one broad, flat rock which was particularly good to stop at; it had a natural seat built into the side, and was long enough to stretch out on if he liked. He made for that, barely lifting his head from the water, and was therefore much surprised to find himself grasping not the edge of the stone, but something soft and rather more yielding.

"Bloody Merlin!" someone yelped, and Snape drew back, shaking his head and wiping water out of his eyes. Someone clubbed him upside the head and he nearly went under; he did go under in order to duck a second wild flail, and opened his eyes on quite a lot more of Nymphadora Tonks than either he or her mother would be at all happy with.

"Desist!" he gurgled, surfacing. "Stop clubbing me, you little fool!"

"Severus?" she gasped. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Writing a novel, what does it bloody look like I'm doing?" he demanded. "I think the question of what you are doing here in the quite altogether is a *much* more important one!"

"It's not even dawn yet and there's nobody around for miles! I came down for a soak!" she answered. "Why shouldn't I be in the altogether? And I'll thank you not to go staring at my altogether!"

"I wouldn't have if you hadn't hit me in the head!" he snapped.

"You grabbed my thigh!"

"I was trying to grab the rock!"

"Well you missed, didn't you?"

"Are you insinuating that I go about in the early morning looking for naked bathers to grope?" he demanded.

She stared at him for a moment, open-mouthed, and then burst out laughing.

"Oh Merlin, the look on your face..." she gasped. She was treading water a little ways from the rock-seat now, still quite naked, and he concentrated on continuing not to look down. The water was very warm, and it was also very clear. "You're blushing!"

"I most certainly am not! It's *hot* here."

"You're blushing because you have a puritan streak in you a mile wide. Your bathing suit has *sleeves* ."

"All proper wizarding bathing suits have sleeves."

"Mine doesn't."

"Clearly," he drawled.

"If you're wearing that for your morning soak, you're missing half the fun," she said, and gave him a look that would put an imp to shame. He barely had time to register it, however, because she had hoisted herself out of the water completely and was standing on top of the rock. He stared at the rock because there was nowhere else that was safe to look; he could see the pink of her bare heels and about six inches of ankle, which was six inches more of Dora Tonks' ankle than he ever wished to see in these circumstances.

"I guess I'm not the only one the Headmaster told about the hot springs," she said, as bright purple fabric swirled around her ankles. "You can look now, my altogether is decently hidden."

"Not from this angle," he said, pulling himself up alongside her. She tightened the belt on the robe she was wearing and sniffed deprecatingly at him.

"There's no need to be insulting."

"You hit me in the head!"

"Haven't we had this part of the argument already?" she asked. "Don't sulk, I promise I won't come here again if you'll tell me when you're going to be here."

"Why? I think I've already had as much of an eyeful as it's possible to get," he sulked.

"I'm trying to be giving, here."

"Don't bother, no-one else does," he said bitterly, before he'd caught himself. She half-sat, half-slipped down next to him. "I don't mean that," he added reluctantly.

"Shouldn't see why not. You're not exactly the popular one, are you?"

"By no stretch of the imagination, but self-pity is a disgusting habit. Besides, it's untrue. Your parents -- "

" -- yes, my parents," she said with a grin. "Stray cat number five, I think you are."

He glanced at her, inquisitively.

"That's mum for you. There were two actual cats, and before that there was my father, who really is quite lost without her, and Neville of course, and you," she said. "Well, dad's debateable. She's pretty lost when he goes off for the weekend, too. But the good news is she only takes in the strays she really likes."

"So I'm a *beloved* boot-faced cat. How nice."

"Yes," Dora said seriously. "You are."

He wasn't really sure how to reply to that, so he sulked some more.

"I really won't come back in the mornings if that's when you come here," she said. "I could just as easily come in the evenings, only there are more bugs out at night."

"If you weren't sitting indecently in my spot -- "

"Indecently!"

"If you managed to wear something -- something you wouldn't be ashamed to be seen wearing in the Great Hall," he added, when she opened her mouth, " -- I feel the springs are big enough that we could enjoy them while barely even seeing each other."

"Well, in that case how will you know I'm not being indecent?"

"Cheek!"

He knew, somewhere in the back of his head, that if he hadn't reacted to her nudity she wouldn't have made such a point of it. Still, one really couldn't bathe naked in the lake, hidden in the hot springs or otherwise, without some kind of comment needing to be made.

"I don't see what the fuss is. It's much more fun when you're not wearing yards of wet swimsuit," she said. "You can look away if you like, but all my clothes are on the shore at the other end of the lake, so I'm going to have to swim out there and get them."

"What if a student saw you?" he demanded. "Do you think about these things at all?"

"There's a big high hedge near the spot I dress in, and they can't have reacted any more indecently than you did."

"I beg your pardon."

"Close your eyes or be offended," she warned, and he looked away long enough to hear her splash back into the water and swim for the inlet.

When he was sure she was quite out of view, he settled down into the underwater seat and leaned back, closing his eyes.

Certainly one could encounter worse things in the lake than a naked Nymphadora Tonks, of course. In fact there were very few things which were less unpleasant. But the fact remained that this was his place, and she had invaded it with her purple robe and really quite stunning breasts and taunts about puritan streaks.

The thought slipped by him without his even taking notice; it wasn't until he was back in the Great Hall, eating his porridge down the table from a dry and decently clothed Dora Tonks, that the surreality of the situation hit him fully.

He was unusually stern and unforgiving with his students for the rest of the day.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 18

Not long after Dobby entered the employ of Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter became the number one suspect for the Petrification of Nick, the children were given something entirely new to fret about.

In third year, two or three more hours were going to be added to their day in the form of new elective classes, depending on achievement. Sooner or later some of these classes would become important pillars of their OWL and NEWT examinations, and all of them seemed either interesting or necessary. Once in a while they were even both.

Draco, now long indoctrinated in the Way of the Flashcard, made little cards which outlined the benefits and failings of each course as passed on to him by older, wiser Hufflepuffs. He spent a great deal of time rearranging them to see which ones would fit together properly and adding little gold stars to the ones his mum was insisting on, to see if he couldn't possibly take the classes he liked and still please his mother. Harry spent just as much time taking the gold stars off and lecturing Draco on letting Narcissa Malfoy run his life. Dobby happily obeyed both of them, adding and removing stars at their behest until he ran out of stickers.

Neville got advice from Dora and long letters from Andromeda, Ted, and surprisingly his great-uncle Algernon, who had never shown any interest in him since he'd come to live with the Tonkses. All the other Gryffindors were trying to get into classes as a group, which didn't help matters any, especially since a good portion of them were also trying to get into the easiest classes as well. Neville knew he wasn't the brightest student ever to attend Hogwarts, but a year and a half of Padma and Harry's high standards had inspired a certain academic ethic in him.

Padma herself had not, apparently, made index cards -- or if she had, she was keeping them private. When Draco asked her what she was taking, she shrugged and said she hadn't decided yet; she seemed uninterested in discussing the problem of Arithmancy versus Divination, Muggle Studies against Ancient Runes against Care of Magical Creatures.

Harry had letters from Remus and Sirius, of course. In addition, he had the entire Wizarding World to contend with; there were no less than three articles in the Prophet about his academic choices and a contest to "Pick Potter's Picks!" in Witch Weekly. Sirius was all for betting on the one with the longest odds and then telling Harry to choose that one, but Remus was more levelheaded about it.

"Oh, that's very good," Helena Broosh said approvingly. "You're both being perfect gentlemen this week. What reason this docility? You didn't have a pint beforehand, did you?"

"It's ten in the morning!" Sirius protested. "Even unemployed layabouts must have *some*

standards."

He was leaning over Remus' leg, almost draped over it, in fact. In the last ten minutes, Remus' hand had strayed from its posed place on the book he was holding and begun stroking his head, absently smoothing down his hair. The effect had not been lost on Sirius, who was bonelessly relaxed and satisfied with the world. Even Helena hadn't found it in her heart to order his hand back onto the book. Instead, she asked pleasantly, "Good book, Mr. Lupin?"

"Blank book," he replied, tilting it slightly so that she could see the handwritten page tucked inside it. "Harry sent me a letter this morning, I'm reading that."

"He's in the middle of choosing classes," Sirius added. "Far too grown up to take his godfather's advice, of course."

"His godfather's advice is what we call *corrupting a minor*," Remus said calmly. "He'd do much better to listen to me and diversify his classes. He has the academic standing to take three new courses -- "

"On top of Quidditch?"

"Why not? If he finds he can't handle the workload, he can cut back next year. It'll keep him out of mischief."

"That's not true, that never worked on me," Sirius pointed out.

"You skipped class half the time and copied my notes," Remus replied. His fingers tightened playfully in Sirius' hair before releasing it and returning to holding his book. Sirius gave Helena a *see what you've done* look.

"How much longer before we get to inspect the masterpiece?" he asked.

"It's almost finished; I think perhaps next time we may start putting the movement charms on it. I'll need to schedule a few sessions with you alone, Mr. Black -- Mr. Lupin is welcome to attend, but we'll need to concentrate on you in order to get the canine half of your personality sorted out quite right."

"If you're lucky she'll play fetch with you," Remus murmured.

"If you're lucky I'll forget you said that," Sirius answered cheerfully.

"You'd sit up and beg if I dangled a treat in front of you -- "

"Mr. Lupin!" Helena said, feigning scandal. Remus laughed. "Mr. Black, what have you done to my polite, obedient sitter?"

"Don't answer that," Remus advised.

"No fear," Sirius said.

"Do tell me more about Harry's classes. What do you think he ought to take, Mr. Black?"

Sirius shrugged without falling out of pose. "Divs is an easy slide and I think he'd enjoy Care of Magical Creatures, but if he wants to spend all his time swotting for Ancient Runes and Arithmancy he's quite welcome to do so. I never tell Harry what to do anymore unless he asks; if I haven't taught him to make smart decisions by now, I doubt he'll ever know."

"That's a very mature attitude for a parent."

"Well, I never had to change diapers. We met Harry when he was already quite well-developed enough to decide things for himself; I just made sure he knew which decisions were going to be good ones."

"Which Divs is *not* ," Remus replied.

"You don't approve of Divination?" Helena asked, paintbrush flicking across the canvas.

"I don't."

"Remus is the only student in the history of Hogwarts School to fail Divination," Sirius said sourly.

"I'm sure that's not true," Remus answered. "And anyway, I didn't fail. I conscientiously refused to take the exam."

"It was an OWL!"

"I didn't need it."

"You refused to take an OWL?" Helena inquired.

"I got tired of faking prophecies and disagreeing with the professor," Remus said. Helena grinned. There was a spark of defiance in his eyes even after twenty years. "I thought it was a pile of bunk, teaching students who didn't have a natural gift and expecting them to actually produce something. Class was structured entirely wrong -- we should have learned Divs theory as a unit of some other course. The professor told me off for being a swot, which I daresay I was, and I told him precisely what I thought of Divination. He sent me to the Headmaster and I told *him* , too."

"What did the Headmaster say?"

"He said it was nice to see me rebelling a little and then offered me a butterscotch dragonfly, "

Remus sighed. "Apparently I was an unnaturally obedient child."

"You were, you know," Sirius said.

"But I'd taken it, thanks to this idiot's suggestion -- "

"Hey!"

"And they wouldn't simply let me drop out, so I refused to attend class and didn't take the OWL." Remus grinned. "Needless to say, I will not be advising Harry to take it. I think Ancient Runes wouldn't present too much of a challenge, he's rather good with languages, and Care of Magical Creatures is fun. He doesn't really need Muggle Studies, but Arithmancy could be very useful."

"What's he going to need a lot of runic tosh for?" Sirius asked.

"He might be a historian."

Sirius snorted. "You don't have very high career standards."

"He's never going to need a career," Remus said firmly, "so he can do whatever he jolly well likes. He ought to be developing his academic mind so that he'll at least put it to some use for the good of wizardkind."

"You'll have to take it back," Helena said to Sirius, laughing. "He wants young Harry to be the saviour of wizardkind!"

Remus flushed and fell silent, but he was still smiling slightly.

"Anyway, it's just a relief he's not an idiot. I can do something with a plucky, bright boy," Sirius said.

Helena smiled and tried to capture, in the brief moment it appeared, the proud smile on Sirius Black's face.

Harry was not, however, feeling either plucky or particularly bright that morning.

It was a Monday, and much to his regret he'd been up late the night before, hiding out behind the Quidditch supplies shed with the others. Dobby had been cleaning the common room (as he often had to be commanded *not* to do twice a day) and found a hidden packet of Lucky Stripe cigarettes, clearly secreted away by one of the older students. He had dutifully presented them to Draco, who had put them before the group for consideration.

Padma had been the one to suggest they try them, as children of a certain age generally do, and

while Draco and Neville refused, in fear of their respective mums, Harry hadn't been able to resist Padma's dare. He'd matched her through two cigarettes while all four of them laughed at the colours their eyes changed as they smoked. Afterwards he'd been really splendidly sick, as had Padma, and he'd spent all night with a rotten taste in his mouth that no amount of toothscrubbing charms would get rid of -- and the Voice had lurked on the edge of his hearing all night.

Neville and Draco had gloated indecently over breakfast. His head still hurt.

The screeching chirps of the Cornish Pixies in the cage at the front of class weren't helping. Dora -- Professor Tonks -- had brought in a cageful of them as a practical demonstration. She was showing the rest of the students how they reacted to various stimuli: freezing charms, bright lights, sudden noises. Needless to say, Harry was suffering the consequences of his actions.

Class couldn't end too soon. Even as Dora was dismissing them his headache seemed to be getting better, but then...

It Happened.

"Don't forget to read chapters nine and ten and come up with three questions the chapters didn't cover," Dora said as they were packing up. She leaned on the table on which the Pixie cage rested, crossing her arms. "And no cribbing, I shall know if you do -- "

She raised her hand to shake an admonitory finger at them in jest, but the wide sleeve of her robe caught on the cover she'd just put over the cage, which in turn snagged on the cage and the whole thing, including the now-unbalanced table, went over backwards in a really tremendous crash.

"Not to worry!" Dora called from the floor, as everyone crowded around. "Just got to untangle -- "

There was a scream of joy from the Pixies as their slightly smashed cage door popped open. There was a matching scream, not quite as joyous, from the class.

"Shut the door! Keep your heads!" Dora called, still floorbound by her sleeve. "Remember your lesson! OW!" she added, as one of the Pixies grabbed her nose and tugged at it.

Most of the students took cover as the Pixies began to zoom around the room, knocking over books, flinging papers everywhere, shaking the fixtures and overturning the desks. Harry tried to grab one and nearly lost a finger to needle-sharp teeth. Hexes were flying everywhere but only a few Pixies didn't manage to dodge. The crashing grew louder; a fortunately-unlit chandelier fell, and Dora shrugged bodily out of her still-tangled robes, raising her wand just as the door burst open and thus missing the bulk of the Pixies out of sheer surprise.

"Professor Tonks, my classroom is, as you know, below yours and I cannot -- "

Snape stopped in mid-tirade. A Pixie grabbed him by the ear and he batted it off so hard it hit the wall with a loud thud. He slammed the door shut behind him.

Harry watched, impressed, as he stalked down what had been the central aisle of the classroom, hexing into petrification anything that got in his way. But the Pixies were regrouping and there was another ceiling-suspended candelabra --

"Look out!" Dora shouted, pointing over his shoulder. He turned, ducked, leapt, and knocked her off her feet, successfully if painfully protecting them both from the swing of the second chandelier. Harry saw him rise up on his knees again, twist, and shout a freezing charm that managed to petrify all but one remaining Pixie, which hooted and fled for the safety of the cage.

Snape seemed to take a moment to contemplate his handiwork, then twisted back around to look down at Dora, whose waist he was more or less straddling.

"All right?" he asked.

"All right," she replied. "You?"

He stood and stepped around her, offering his hand. She was already pushing herself up, however, and didn't notice his offer of help as she dusted off the trousers and plain Muggle t-shirt she had been wearing under her robes.

"Class is dismissed," she called. There was a mad rush for the door. Harry, whose books had been scattered, began to gather them together again after the dust had settled.

"You ought to ward the cage doors," Snape said, examining the bent and twisted Pixie cage.

"I didn't intend the whole table to go over," she answered, rather tensely Harry thought. "Thank you for helping."

Snape, with a gracelessness that was rather typical of him, shrugged. "I have a class still in session. If you will excuse me."

"Of course."

He left quickly, shoving hovering Pixies out of his way as he went. After the door shut behind him, Dora slumped down on one of the desks.

"Damn," she said quietly.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked hesitantly, finally standing. She started and glanced at him.

"Oh, yes Harry -- thanks," she said with a smile. "One just feels a fool being a professor of Dark Arts and letting loose a cageful of Pixies."

"Oh," Harry said. He wasn't sure it was quite proper for a student to comfort a teacher.

"Especially in front of Professor Snape. He does still make me think I'm an idiot, a lot of the time."

Harry shifted his weight from foot to foot. "He does that to everyone," he ventured.

"Yes, I know." She shook her head. "I'm fine, Harry. You'd better run along to your next class."

Harry hesitated, then shouldered his bag and left. He could hear her begin to slowly sweep up the debris and re-cage the Pixies as he left.

He was startled to see Professor Snape leaning against the wall outside, eyes closed, breathing deeply. He suspected now was not a good time to disturb him, and crept away in the other direction as quietly as he could.

Harry had very little time that week to puzzle out just what was going on between Professor Snape and Professor Tonks, however. The Quidditch season was speeding towards the final championship game, and practices were becoming more intense.

Slytherin, having pretty much wrecked the Quidditch rulebook that year, were well ahead of the rest of the school in terms of game wins. They were slated to play Hufflepuff, who were surprisingly their biggest contender this year, while Ravenclaw would be playing Gryffindor just for a chance to stay in the running. If Slytherin won, as they were expected to, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor would probably be competing for the other spot in the championship.

Harry, adjusting a strap on his glove as they walked out to the field, listened to the usual good-natured bickering between teammates and again wondered how he'd ended up in this position. True, it felt terribly grown-up to walk out onto the Pitch in his Quidditch leathers, but the fact that he was so small that his leathers had to be specially shrunken for him last year sort of balanced that out. Being watched by the entire school was not exactly low-pressure, but then they were all watching him anyway, these days. Watching and saying things under their breath.

Parselmouth. Slytherin. *Heir*.

Harry watched Flint shake hands with the Hufflepuff captain and prepared to mount; it all fell away when he was in the air, anyway. Then it was tactics, true, but it was straightforward and there were limits to the movements you could execute on a broomstick. And it was flying which mattered, anyway. Nothing could touch him when he flew.

By the time he reached scanning altitude, the Quaffle was already up and the game was well in hand. Hufflepuff weren't strategists, and they relied on good defence and a very solid set of Beaters to carry them through whatever convoluted tricks Slytherin was likely to play. They had one real star player, their Seeker Diggory, who had been mainly responsible for their very decent

season and was even now circling Harry's position. He tossed Harry a wink as he dove past him, but Harry didn't follow and the feint proved fruitless.

He could see the glint of Draco's omnioculars from the Hufflepuff stands where he was sharing them with Neville, who had defected to the Hufflepuff side out of sympathy. In the Slytherin stands, Professor Snape was a black blot at the end of one bench. Across the aisle, in the Gryffindor half, Dora was a wild mess of Hufflepuff colours, as were most of the Gryffindors. Harry never thought of Dora as a Gryffindor -- he never thought of her as anything, really, since unlike Snape and McGonagall, she didn't seem to be tied up in House affiliations. He supposed she *would* support the underdog; she always did.

He didn't see Cricket, which didn't seem to matter much at the time.

He dipped down into the level of regular game play and dodged around the Hufflepuff Chasers, keeping one eye out for the Snitch while generally making a nuisance of himself to the Hufflepuff team. Diggory was still circling above, but he looked like he was about to dive...

Yes....let me kill...rip...feed --

The Voice brought him up short and he nearly collided with Towler, who shoved him away quickly. He shook his head to clear it and climbed for altitude.

Feed...so hungry...NO!

Harry had no time to be startled by the sudden cry of the Voice; beyond the Pitch, in the Forbidden Forest, an enormous flock of birds took flight. Not simply a flock, in fact, but a multitude, an exodus -- birds of every shape and size and colour, birds of every breed the Forest housed, rising at the treeline and spreading across the canopy. As if some large predator was wending its way through the trees...

Yes....

Prey....

Harry dropped like a stone, catching the Quaffle in mid-toss as he did so and ignoring the furious shouts of the players.

"Stop the game!" he shouted to Madam Hooch, who stared at him. "Stop the game!"

The Hufflepuffs were chasing after the Quaffle, and Lee Jordan was shouting that Potter had just executed an illegal move subject to forfeit, but Harry wasn't giving up the ball.

"Stop the game!" Harry repeated.

"He's right!" Cedric yelled. "Something's happened -- look at the *birds* ."

Hooch turned to see the mass migration; in another minute the birds would be over the stands. She blew her whistle, shrilly, and the players slowly skewed into halts and hovers.

A thick black shadow poured over the stands as the birds, whirring frantically through the air, rushed past. There were nasty crunches as some of them whacked into goalposts in their panic. Diggory, still descending, had to duck low against his broomstick to avoid getting bowled over by a large, ornate bird that looked vaguely like the vicious ancestor of a peacock.

"What's going on?" the Hufflepuff Keeper asked. The other players were drawing into little knots, watching the flight.

"Something's in the forest," Madam Hooch said. Her voice chilled Harry's blood more thoroughly than even the Voice had. He was aware that the Quaffle had slipped his grasp and landed on the Pitch with a soft thud, and that the Bludgers were having a field day with the birds; the Snitch was probably lost somewhere in the avian melee.

There was a shrill, inhuman scream from the forest; Harry dimly recognised it as the furious hiss of a she-snake defending a burrow, multiplied a thousandfold.

The thing that owned the Voice was in the Forest.

He drifted away as the birds continued to flock overhead. The students in the stands were staring upwards, stunned. Professor Snape was watching the treeline from the top of the stands, looking like nothing so much as a large black crow himself. Dora was nowhere to be seen.

"What is it, Harry?" Draco whispered, as Harry drifted over the Hufflepuff stand.

"It's a snake," Harry answered. "A *big* one."

"How big?" Neville asked.

"I'm going to find out," Harry said.

"Harry -- "

"I'm going to," Harry said defiantly, glaring at Neville. "I can carry one of you, but I haven't got much time before my cover's gone."

"You'd better take Neville," Draco said. "I've been in enough trouble."

"Coming or not?" Harry challenged. Neville looked scared, but he hooked his leg around Harry's broomstick and took the offered hand, hauling himself up. The Nimbus bucked a little under the sudden weight shift, but Harry got control and dropped down between stands. The flock was thinning out.

With a burst of speed, the Nimbus darted out and upwards, almost into the flock itself; Harry slid them around the edge of the flock and up above it, where they couldn't be seen. He made for the place the last few stragglers were fleeing from, Neville clutching tightly to his ribcage.

"Why are we doing this?" Neville shouted into the wind.

"I want to know what this thing is!" Harry shouted back. There was another scream. "Whatever it is, it's angry..."

He scanned the canopy, looking for breaks in the leaves. Out here the forest grew thick and dense, but it was uncultivated and there were a lot of dead branches. He caught a glimpse of a herd of horses -- no, of unicorns, wheeling hard away from the source of the disturbance. He thought he saw centaurs riding the edge of the herd. Looking over his shoulder, he could see deer and some kind of small antelope stampeding in the opposite direction, out towards Hogsmeade. He pulled up sharp and turned west.

Down below there was a flicker of sunlight on something that looked suspiciously like scales.

He hovered, becoming aware that even as he stared at what must be a snake, a snake as thick around as the trees it was moving past, he was also hearing not the Voice but a roar composed of loud clicks and clacks, like rattles banging together.

"Oh Merlin," Neville said, pointing. A head rose out of a clearing in the forest, an enormous serpentine head. It was about a hundred yards away and it was facing the other direction; even as they watched, it ducked back down in a striking motion.

"It's fighting something," Harry said. He dropped slowly down to the canopy-level, then just underneath it. Up here in the highest branches it was cold and wet; he inched forward slowly, then dropped again when the branches thinned a little.

They could see the thing more clearly now, an enormous serpent with a spiky crown jutting out from the back of its head like a dinosaur -- triceratops, his nine year old self reminded him. Up came the old rhyme from a book Remus had found for him which he had treasured for years -- *triceratops was dangerous, impervious and strong; the predators that challenged it did not last very long.*

From here they could almost see what it was attacking; Harry lifted a broad leaf slightly, and he and Neville both sucked in their breath. Down below they could see the high, vaulted opening of a stone-paved tunnel, clearly man-made and vaguely resembling the pictures Harry had seen of Roman viaducts in some of Remus' books. He could even make out the legend over the cave mouth, but that wasn't what stunned him.

In front of the cave was an enormous spider, easily ten feet tall, with fangs upraised and red eyes glistening. Other spiders were clustered around it -- smaller, but still much larger than a man.

They were darting forward towards the enormous serpent, trying to bite through its scaly hide and not making much headway. The biggest one was repelling every attempt the snake made to get back into the cave, assisted by a blur of blue and silver --

"The Anglia!" Neville cried.

Arthur Weasley's flying Ford Anglia was indeed joining the fray; its windscreen and rearview mirrors were gone and its bumper and hood were heavily dented, but there could be no doubt that the automobile was alive and thriving in the Forest.

But even as they watched, the spiders were losing ground and the Anglia with them. The serpent had coiled itself through the trees and now, with a flick of its tail, sent the spiders tumbling; the Anglia's horn blew, and the rest of the spiders began to retreat, the smallest leaping onto the Anglia's body. It sped away through the forest, bumping and bouncing, and the way was clear. The serpent, pausing at the entryway, flicked its tongue into the tunnel; satisfied there was no further danger, it vanished inside with lightning speed.

It was only then that Harry realised there were more spiders, and they were climbing up the tree he and Neville were sheltering in. He wheeled the broomstick just as a sticky spiderweb caught him on the ankle; kicking off his left shinguard, he urged the Nimbus on faster while Neville shouted and cursed behind him. Harry didn't know Neville knew words like that.

Branches slapped at their faces and leaves tangled in their hair as they flew, avoiding the leaping, spitting, clicking spiders in fast pursuit. They burst out through the treeline trailing spiderwebs and a split branch of an oak tree, somewhere west of the Pitch. The spiders came as far as the edge, no further, but Harry was not paying the slightest attention. He made for the Pitch like a bat out of hell, which at that point he rather resembled.

Most of the school seemed to be milling around on the grass. Harry dropped down between the stands again and landed, shaking the oak-branch loose and tearing spiderweb tendrils off his clothing. Neville was slapping at leaves, pulling them out of his hair and spitting bark out of his mouth.

"What's going on?" Neville asked, as Harry leaned around the edge of the stands. Two people were carrying what looked like a very small mannequin on a stretcher towards the school. Too small, and with upraised hands...

"Something got Cricket," Harry said, horrified.

"What?"

"Cricket's hurt -- looks like he's been frozen, like Nick was..."

"Harry, this is really serious, we have to tell -- " Neville broke off as a shadow loomed over them.

"Harry," said Headmaster Dumbledore, quietly. "Once more, I think perhaps you have some explaining to do."

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 19

Fawkes was smouldering in Dumbledore's office, adding a slightly acrid tang to the air; Harry and Neville, who were growing uncomfortably familiar with this particular situation, lingered near the doorway hesitantly.

"Come in, please, and sit down," Dumbledore said gravely. "I trust you understand that the Quidditch game has been forfeited?"

"Not cancelled?" Harry asked, picking up on the subtle difference between the two.

"You executed an illegal move, Harry. Seekers are not to intercept the Quaffle in a pass between members of the opposing team."

"I was trying to stop the game!"

"Nevertheless, especially as a Slytherin, the rules of the game must be adhered to. I shouldn't worry; if Gryffindor gets less than two hundred points against Ravenclaw, whoever wins, Slytherin may still compete in the championship. I say this to lay your mind at rest, because I am afraid I will require your complete concentration for the next short interval."

"What about Cricket?"

"We will come to that soon, I promise you. If, of course, you are entirely honest with me."

Harry, glancing anxiously at Neville, nodded slowly. Neville nodded back. Message understood; obfuscation had its time and place, but now was the time for complete honesty.

"Where did you go when the game was halted?" Dumbledore asked.

"The Forest, sir," Harry replied. "Well, sort of...over the forest."

"With Mr. Longbottom?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

Harry swallowed. "I...heard something."

"And what did you hear?"

"There's this...Voice," Harry said. "I've heard it a few times. It's...I thought it was a snake."

"And is it?"

"Sort of, sir. It's...awfully big. I think it's some kind of magical snake."

"How long have you been hearing this Voice?" Dumbledore asked carefully.

"Uh..."

"Approximately."

"A while after school started this year. It didn't used to be so loud, but I know it's what scared the birds. I wanted to see what it was."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair slightly, adjusting his half-moon glasses thoughtfully.

"And did you?" he asked. Neville whimpered slightly. Harry swallowed.

"I think so, sir."

Dumbledore gestured for him to continue and Harry told the story as well as he could, with occasional help from Neville. The Headmaster seemed particularly interested in the tunnel they'd seen and prompted Harry for the words across the top, but Harry couldn't recall; none of it had been very clear, and they had both been focused on the giant spider and equally enormous snake.

Eventually they were interrupted by a house-elf, who entered carrying a tray of sandwiches. Dumbledore sighed and allowed the elf to serve them, apparently giving up the question for now.

"Sir," Neville said, balancing his plate on his knees, "what happened to Cricket?"

"Ah yes -- young Mister Creevey," Dumbledore said. "He is, regrettably, a victim of circumstance, I suspect. He was found at the bottom of the stands, Petrified. It is a temporary condition, but regrettably may not be cured for some time. I have my suspicions that the creature you encountered was, in fact, a basilisk; they are known for a murderous stare. They are a form of snake, hatched from a chicken egg incubated by a toad during the rise of Sirius -- the dog star, of course," he added, smiling at Harry. "Quite an undertaking, and not an easy accomplishment, for toads are not by and large very good mothers -- but you were asking about young Creevey. It is believed that he encountered the basilisk..."

"But you said basilisks have a...a *murderous* stare? "

"We are not...certain why he did not die," Dumbledore admitted. "For now, all you need know is that he will recover, given time. And now perhaps a distraction from such serious matters?"

While they ate, Dumbledore gently but firmly guided the subject away from anything having to

do with Cricket or the game, asking them what classes they were thinking of taking next year and very carefully not offering any advice.

"Now that you have eaten, I believe you may be dismissed, Mr. Longbottom," Dumbledore said. "I will require Harry's help with a little matter, but it need not concern the both of you."

Neville glanced at Harry and gave him an apologetic look before bolting with more haste than politeness would have warranted. Harry swallowed the last bite of his lunch and eyed Dumbledore warily. The Headmaster rose from his desk and went to a cupboard near Fawkes' cage, whistling at the phoenix as he went. Fawkes warbled back, cheerily.

"I am going to ask you, Harry," Dumbledore said, "To undergo something not wholly pleasant. In return, I would like to offer you information which may be of help to you."

"To me, sir?"

Dumbledore grunted, slightly, as he lifted a strapped-up wooden case out of the cupboard.

"It is clear that, serpent or basilisk, you are much better-prepared to detect it than any of us," Dumbledore said. The wooden case thumped down on his desk. "And much more...drawn to it."

"If I had known -- "

Dumbledore shook his head, and Harry stopped talking.

"Harry, I will need to see what you saw in the forest. In return, I would like to show you what happened the last time there were rumours of the Chamber opening. I suspect it will either cure you of your inquisitive tendencies..."

Harry watched as the pensieve was unveiled.

"...or it will help you to survive your curiosity. Do you know what this is?"

Harry nodded. Sirius had used one, once, when he was very young; he hadn't seen him use it, but he'd seen the case before.

"Do you understand how the pensieve works?"

"No, sir."

Dumbledore sat down again, the pensieve before him like an overlarge soup bowl. He took out his wand and touched it to his temple, calmly. When he removed his wand, something stuck to it -- at first Harry thought it was a grey hair, but then he saw that it was more like a silvery strand, an almost elastic cord that finally snapped. Dumbledore let it fall into the pensieve, and then did it again.

"These are memories, Harry," he said. "Memories I would like you to witness. One of them is, unfortunately, of the death of a young woman."

Harry nodded again. He was warned.

"Lean forward until you can touch it," Dumbledore said, placing the pensieve squarely between them. "I will follow you in."

Harry hesitated, but at Dumbledore's encouraging look he leaned forward, craning on his tiptoes to fit his face over the edge of the basin. The strands had filled up more room inside the bowl than he thought; as soon as his nose cleared the rim he saw the silvery mess and was suddenly tumbling through the air, falling...

...and landing.

His shoes touched stone and he staggered a little, feeling someone catch him from behind. Dumbledore, face serene, helped him steady himself.

"This is the girls' loo!" Harry said in a hushed voice. There was the row of sinks, there were the stalls -- this was Myrtle's bathroom.

And yet it wasn't; it was cleaner, and somehow seemed younger. The mirror shone and the candles were tall in their brackets. There was no leaking water anywhere on the floor. But he could hear Myrtle sobbing somewhere...

He noticed, with a start, that a young woman in scarlet robes was standing with her back to them, one hand apparently covering her mouth. Behind him someone drew a sharp breath; he turned and saw what could only be another Dumbledore, considerably younger than the one still holding onto his elbow.

"Minerva?" the auburn-haired, side-whiskered Dumbledore asked. "Is that...?"

Harry, still reeling, turned back to the young woman in the scarlet robes, who was staring at --

"Myrtle," Harry breathed. The body of Myrtle, at any rate, crumpled in a corner of the bathroom like a marionette with its strings cut.

"Yes," the older Dumbledore said. "Did you never wonder why she was such a young ghost, Harry?"

"I heard a scream," someone said, arriving out of breath. Harry saw a dark-haired man -- a boy -- in the doorway. "Professor?"

"Come in and shut the door, Tom," said the younger Dumbledore. The boy -- he looked perhaps fifteen -- hurried inside and closed the door behind him as requested.

"Is she dead?" the boy asked, and Harry heard curiosity more than fear in his voice. There was a sharp hiss of breath from the girl in the scarlet robes -- Minerva. Harry could see, now that she had turned, the echoes of Professor McGonagall in her face, an unusually pretty face framed by black hair. She had a Head Girl badge pinned to the collar of her dress robe -- and the boy was in formal green robes with a Prefect's badge...

"Maybe she's just unconscious," McGonagall whispered.

"I think you know better," Dumbledore said. "Do you hear that?"

The silence was punctuated by sobs, Myrtle's sobs, and the boy moved forward, skirting anxiously around the crumpled body in the corner. He threw open one of the stalls.

"Oh, Myrtle," he said sadly. "I'm so sorry."

"Go away!" Myrtle's ghostly voice cried.

"Come on now Myrtle," Tom wheedled. "It's Tommy, look. Tell us what happened."

Harry glanced at the younger Dumbledore, who had moved forward to stand behind McGonagall. He touched her shoulder gently and she turned away from the corpse. Harry had the distinct impression that she was not crying, though her face was buried in the tall man's chest.

"I don't know," Myrtle said sullenly.

Tom was still pleading with Myrtle's ghost. Harry shuddered.

"That is, as you may have guessed, your Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore said. "One of her fellow students found the body and summoned her before she found me. I shall spare you the tedious process Tom went through to discover Myrtle's story; suffice it to say that she was weeping, as she was wont to do -- over a love affair, I think, and a boy who had taken some other young girl to the little dance we had arranged to cheer the students' spirits."

"That's why they're dressed up?" Harry asked. In the background, Tom said "But you must have seen something, Myrtle."

"Yes -- This was in Minerva's final year at the school. The young man beyond her is Tom Riddle, a very promising fifth-year -- I think that is a name you should remember," Dumbledore added. "They made a striking couple; he was rather younger than her, but a very...old soul for his age."

Harry saw McGonagall leave Dumbledore and go to Tom, who was still wheedling answers from

the ghost. They did look well together; two heads of black hair, green and red robes, intelligent eyes.

"What did she tell them?" Harry said.

"The same thing she has told me, on the few occasions I have tolerated her long enough to ask," Dumbledore replied. "She saw nothing but a pair of yellow eyes. Her body was stiff when we found it, though she could not have been dead longer than two or three minutes at the most."

"The basilisk?"

"I believe so."

The younger Dumbledore spoke, startling Harry. "Tom, Minerva."

They looked up at him, expectantly.

"I do not wish to alarm the entire school, but steps must be taken. Tom, please go to the Owlry and send an owl to the Aurors at once; tell them Albus Dumbledore wishes to consult with them on a murder at the school. I know you are aware of how to enchant letters; please enchant this one to Elissa Shackbolt's eyes only. Then find Professor Slughorn and have him call the board of Governors to a meeting."

Tom nodded, swallowed, and left.

"Minerva, you must inform the rest of the professors. Do not -- " he held up a hand. "Do not interrupt the ball. There has been little enough joy in our lives of late. Find reliable Gryffindors and post them at every entrance to the Great Hall. No one is to leave the hall or enter it until the Aurors arrive. Send the Hufflepuff prefects to fetch everyone who may be enjoying an evening...stroll."

"Yes, professor. And I should inform Headmaster Dippet, of course?" she asked, a slight edge to her voice. Dumbledore smiled gently.

"In your own time," he said. "Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, Professor."

When the door closed behind her, the scene began to change, first dipping and turning slowly and then faster and faster, until Harry thought he might be sick; when it slowed again, he was standing at the entrance to the Headmaster's office. The now-familiar red-whiskered Dumbledore was standing in the hallway, apparently speaking quietly with a portrait nearby.

"The Board of Governors determined that the school would be forced to close," the older Dumbledore said. "We began to make preparations. It was clear there was a monster stalking the

school, and with the death of a girl..."

The door opened and Harry jerked back, out of the way. The edge of it passed through his toe effortlessly.

The dark-haired boy from before, Tom, passed out into the corridor with a sigh.

"What are you doing, wandering around this late, Tom?" the younger Dumbledore asked. Tom started, but turned obediently and even seemed to incline his head respectfully.

"I had to see the Headmaster, sir," Tom answered.

"Well, hurry off to bed," Dumbledore replied, and Harry almost smiled. Professor McGonagall sounded exactly like that. "Best not to roam the corridors these days. Not since..."

"Yes, sir," Tom said, then seemed to hesitate. "Professor..."

"Yes, Tom?"

"Does anyone stay at Hogwarts over the summer?"

Dumbledore scrutinised the boy, carefully. "Why do you ask?"

"Only the Headmaster said," Tom said, hastily, "that I couldn't be let stay. But if one of the professors...Professor Slughorn, for instance..."

"I don't think it would be allowed," Dumbledore replied. "Although I understand your reluctance to return to the orphanage."

Tom's face darkened at this, and Harry glanced up at the older Dumbledore.

"Tom was half-wizarding -- his mother's side," Dumbledore explained. "His mother was dead, his father uninterested in him. He had no relatives."

"But why, sir?" Tom asked. "Surely I could earn my own keep..."

"I do not believe it is a matter of earning keep, as you know," the younger Dumbledore continued. "No doubt the Headmaster has informed you of his plans?"

"He can't close the school, sir," Tom said, sounding nearly hysterical.

"Alas that force of will should make it so. We have not discovered that creature which killed the girl...could Miss McGonagall's family perhaps...?"

Tom shook his head. "I wouldn't intrude like that, sir, and I haven't anything to pay them with."

"Always a very independent boy," the older Dumbledore said. Oddly, he did not sound approving.

"But if the creature were found..." Tom said, almost to himself, and the younger Dumbledore gave him a sharp look.

"Do not endanger yourself, Tom. Hogwarts has always been a sanctum; it should not ask the sacrifice of its students for its own well-being. And now...I think you had better find your dormitory, and your bed."

Tom nodded again. The younger Dumbledore strode off, and Harry made to follow him, but found himself still held by the arm.

They stood there at the juncture of two corridors; Tom vanished down one stairway, but Dumbledore did not go as far as Harry had assumed he would; after only a few minutes, the younger Dumbledore doubled back and, with a whispered incantation, followed on feet that were suddenly cat-silent.

It was almost comedic, like a string of ducklings -- Tom leading, the younger Dumbledore following Tom, Harry following one Dumbledore and trailed by another. They descended into an unlit corridor in the Slytherin dungeons; when Tom paused at a door, so did the younger Dumbledore. Harry edged past him, curiously. The boy seemed to be listening at a crack in the door, stock-still and almost quivering like a dog at point.

Then the door creaked, and Tom backed swiftly away. Harry heard an oddly familiar voice.

"C'mon...gotta get yeh outta here...c'mon now...in the box..."

Harry, intent on the shadowy figure speaking, almost jumped out of his skin when Tom spoke at full volume and commandingly --

"Good evening, Rubeus."

The enormous boy, now visible, jerked away from the door, nearly dropping the box he was carrying.

"What yer doin' down here, Tom?" Rubeus Hagrid asked. Harry gaped. The gamekeeper -- giant even as a young man...

"It's all over," Tom said. Something large and hairy pushed its way out of the box, and Hagrid shoved it back in, carefully. "I'm going to have to turn you in, Rubeus. They're talking about closing Hogwarts if the attacks don't stop. I don't think you meant to kill anyone. But monsters don't make good pets. I suppose you just let it out for exercise -- "

"It never killed no one!" Hagrid protested. Harry turned to see Dumbledore's younger self, one

hand splayed across his face in a gesture of defeat.

"You said it couldn't be Hagrid this time," Harry whispered.

"You eavesdropped," Dumbledore answered calmly.

"But whatever's in that box..."

"Come, Harry," Dumbledore said, and then they were tumbling backwards somehow, the wind rushing in Harry's ears. He found himself in Dumbledore's office again, but it felt as though the colour had seeped back into the world, and he knew that this was not a memory but reality once more. If he had not, the single Dumbledore replacing the silvery strands in his head would have convinced him.

"Hagrid was expelled, I'm afraid. Oddly enough," Dumbledore said, when he had finished, "the creature in Hagrid's box escaped. I think we shall see him once more in a minute."

Harry looked wildly around the office. Dumbledore chuckled, dryly.

"No, Harry. He is not here. What did you think of young Tom?" he inquired.

"Bit of a tell-tale," Harry decided, after a minute. "He only told on Hagrid because he wasn't going to be let come back otherwise."

"And in the same situation, what should you have done?"

Harry considered matters.

"I shouldn't have told. I wouldn't have waited for Hagrid; I'd have knocked him out and killed whatever it was and not told a soul," he announced. "When the attacks stopped, they would have asked us all back."

Dumbledore regarded him over folded hands, calmly.

"And now, Harry, that I have paid in coin of the realm, I must ask you to share a memory with me," he said. Harry glanced uneasily at Dumbledore's wand. "This afternoon's memory of your adventure in the Forest."

"Does it hurt?"

"No. You must simply concentrate very hard on the memory; remember the feel of the wind, the broomstick, the position of the sun..."

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated, and like the silver threads it unspooled; it rushed past him like a bullet, and there was the sensation of having a loose tooth pulled -- no, there was no pain,

but a feeling of something momentarily...missing.

He opened his eyes. There, on Dumbledore's wand, dangled a thin silver strand. It looked more sharply defined than the others, like steel wire instead of thread.

"Shall we?" Dumbledore asked.

"Me too, sir?"

"You too, Harry."

When the tumbling, falling sensation had passed this time, Harry found himself standing on a stout branch near the clearing, well up from the ground. He looked up; there he was overhead, Neville clutching him tightly around the waist. Down below --

"Oh," he said suddenly.

"Yes -- the large spider," Dumbledore said, holding onto a branch for balance. "That was Hagrid's pet; as you can see, a good sort of creature in its own way."

"It's a giant bloody spider!" Harry blurted.

"Language, Harry," the Headmaster reprimanded him gently. "Ah yes, and the valiant Anglia. Now, let us see..."

He pointed past the battle, past the car and the giant spider and the equally giant snake -- the basilisk. Harry followed to where the tunnel mouth opened, its stones covered in moss and ivy. The wording was clearer in the memory, not noticed at the time except in passing.

It was a short memory, and before he could puzzle out even what language it was, he was falling back into reality, but he could hear Dumbledore speaking as they went, chanting as though attempting to memorise the phrase.

"Cavite hospites viae serpentorum ," the Headmaster said. *"Cavite hospites viae serpentorum .* Beware, Strangers, of the road of the serpents..."

"So what does he want you to do about it, anyway?" Padma asked, later that evening. Harry, who was in bad odor with his House after forfeiting the game, had retired to hide in the library, where Padma and the others had sought him out.

"I don't know," Harry said, somewhat miserably. Draco offered him a marzipan wizard's hat from a box of the stuff Dobby had brought him. Harry nibbled it.

"At least we know what it is now. Heir or not, it's sort of comforting to..." Neville paused. "Well, you know. To know it's a big snake capable of killing people with its eyes, instead of not knowing what it is."

"And that's the point, isn't it?" Draco said. "I mean, that it is basically a very large snake. For all you know it might do what you tell it, Harry. No wonder the Headmaster wants you to be prepared."

"And now there's proof you're not the one already telling it what to do," Padma added. "You were playing Quidditch when it attacked Cricket. Couldn't have been you giving orders, could it?"

"I guess not," Harry said doubtfully. "I don't think very many people are going to be thinking that logically about it, though."

"It all gives me a headache," Neville complained. "Hagrid was the Heir only he wasn't the Heir because he had a spider and not a snake, and the spiders were fighting the snake, and Dumbledore doesn't think he's the Heir, which means there's another Heir, but it's not Draco or Dora or Harry even though he talks to snakes, and there are brothers switched at birth..."

"Hard to remember who's what, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"It makes you miss the days when people just outright were trying to kill you," Neville complained. "At least then you knew when to duck."

"The saddest part of that sentence," Draco said, into the silence that followed, "Is that none of us thinks it's very unusual for a twelve-year-old to say it."

"Spiders and snakes are natural enemies," Harry mused, lost in his own thoughts. "Well, I mean, snakes eat spiders, and when they're not eating them, they're eating all their prey. Snakes are a lot smarter than most spiders, too."

"Well...." Draco began.

"What?"

"Now we know why the spiders were leaving your dormitory, don't we?"

Harry blinked at Draco. "You don't think that thing is somewhere in my dormitory, do you? It's huge! "

"Stands to reason it'd be underground. Where else is someone going to keep a snake that big?"

"It would be a lot more useful if you could talk to spiders instead of snakes," Neville said.

"If you think I'm going in search of that ruddy great spider we saw in the Forest, you're bonkers,"

Harry said.

"If you think I'm going in search of any kind of giant snake or insect or other brand of crawly thing, you're bonkers," Draco told Harry.

"Well, we're not likely to find it anyway," Padma said suddenly. "You can't think Dumbledore expects Harry to find it, not with an Auror working at the school and all the professors probably looking too. So you might as well just forget about it."

"It's a bit hard to do that," Harry said mildly, "when it talks to me in the walls at night."

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 20

Colin's mishap notwithstanding, as the days blended into weeks a sort of defensive calm settled over the school. The Voice sometimes echoed out to Harry from someplace distant, but when he went looking for it he invariably hit a wall -- sometimes literally. Once he asked Completely Headless Nick to help him by extending his head through the walls and having a look around, but Nick couldn't hear the Voice and was of very little help.

The Dueling Club, after its first mishap, continued fairly smoothly. Having learned a mutual lesson on their first try, Snape and Dora began rehearsing their duels ahead of time to illustrate certain points; it was quite cathartic for them both, as McGonagall observed to Hooch one evening over tea while watching them hex and parry through the window of her sitting room. Down below on the grounds Dora had succeeded in throwing Snape into a hedge and his furious cursing would have curled the hair of a less experienced professor than Minerva McGonagall.

"Cathartic?" Madam Hooch asked, nibbling a biscuit. "What on earth could two people have repressed which requires this much violence to purge?"

"Insecurity, I should imagine. Not everyone is of a stolid and dependable temper around small children," McGonagall replied. "Severus thrives on nerves, you know. And Dora has seven years of pent-up annoyance with her Potions Master, not entirely undeserved on his part."

"Oh look, he's gone and vanished her nose -- tut, doesn't work when you can grow a new one, I suppose," Hooch added, as Tonks concentrated and popped a new nose out of her momentarily blank face. They watched with interest to see what would happen next, and were startled to discover that Severus Snape knew how to laugh. He was howling, in fact, leaning up against the building for support, while Dora Tonks shouted furiously at him.

"It's not that funny," Hooch decided.

"It is to him," McGonagall said smugly.

"You really are absolutely incorrigible, Minerva."

"I've seen three generations of students come through Hogwarts, if you count my own days as a student," McGonagall said complacently. "If I have not learned anything about human nature in that time, I have been wasting my talents in an unforgiveable manner. I know what I am doing."

"Let's hope so. If you don't, it may all end in homicide," Hooch said, sipping her tea. Down below, Dora had given in to the humour of the situation and was sitting next to Snape, back against the wall. He, all angles with his legs bent and his elbows resting on them, had accio'd an apple from somewhere and was peeling it while she broke off parts of the peel and ate them, despite his repeated brandishings of a knife in her direction. Next to him, Tonks looked rather like some kind

of parrot sharing a perch with an unusually dour raven.

But they were sharing it, at least, which was more than they'd been doing three months before.

Over the course of the year, as she'd worked on their portrait, Remus and Sirius had discovered that Helena Broosh was an enthusiastic young woman, interested in everything and always excited about new events. She had finally declared the portrait itself to be acceptably finished, after two sittings with Padfoot to capture his doggy personality fully, and invited them to an unveiling before she put the final charms on it. She had asked for, and received, permission to invite a few other artists from the studios to be there as well.

"Aren't you excited? I'm excited," Sirius said, as they climbed the now-familiar steps to the green door of Broosh & Chackle Studios.

"I'm nervous," Remus answered. "I mean, what if we hate it?"

"We won't hate it! You've seen her work, she's brilliant."

"All right. But what if we realise that we're both horribly ugly?"

Sirius stopped just inside the door. "What?"

"Well, you know, like that short story where the artist paints a portrait for his odious boss and his boss won't buy it because it was too true to life?"

"Have you gone entirely off your head, Moony?"

"Mr. Black, Mr. Lupin," said Crane, the gallery attendant, as he approached. "Here for an appointment with Miss Broosh?"

"That's right," Sirius said. "Come on, idiot," he added, and Remus grinned at him.

They passed through the gallery and into the high-ceilinged back room with its little painting stalls; at Helena's, near the far end, a small knot of cheerful, paint-spattered employees were gathered around a fair-sized painting draped in red cloth.

"Mr. Black, Mr. Lupin, I'd like to present my colleagues -- Ms. Amano, Ms. Linn, Mr. Simons, Ms. Cara, and Ms. Asoda...."

"Our pleasure," Sirius said, nodding at them. Helena presented them each with a glass of champagne. Sirius raised an eyebrow at her.

"I thought it would be nice. It's a fully-functional portrait right now; to me, that's finished,

really," she said. "You just have to schedule one more sitting for the final Dorian Gray charm. Anyway, I have to get you drunk in case you don't like it."

Sirius laughed; Remus ducked his head and grinned.

"All right, all ready?" Helena asked. She grasped the red velvet cloth, held it up, and tugged slightly. The other painters burst into friendly applause, then laughed as the Remus in the portrait looked around, startled -- and the dog at his feet began to bark, soundlessly.

It really was marvellously done, particularly on first glance; light streamed in golden from a window and picked out gold accents in his own hair, illuminating the pages of the book he held and parts of the library bookshelf behind him. Padfoot lay indolently at his feet, black fur contrasting nicely with the red-and-gold rug. The other artists were crowding around, talking with each other and asking Helena the occasional question.

"You never give them voices, Helena," one said. "You really ought to; your voices are beautiful when you do them."

"It annoys people," she replied. "Besides, Mr. Lupin specifically requested that they not speak. I don't blame him; I wouldn't want a talking portrait of me around until after I'm gone. Squeaking puppies are a novelty; talking people are just noise."

"I like the off-centre composition," another said. "Look how Mr. Lupin fits in -- then you've got the dog down here, drawing all the attention..."

"Art imitates life," Remus said with a smile. "It's lovely, Helena."

"All right; viewing over, shoo off, all of you," she said, and the rest of the painters took extra flutes of champagne with them as they went. When they were gone, she gestured at the portrait again; where a black dog had been, Sirius now lounged in black trousers and a dark shirt open at the collar, occasionally turning to look up adoringly at Remus.

"I'm so glad you like it, Mr. Lupin," she said. "Mr. Black, what do you think?"

Sirius was studying it, an unreadable expression on his face; he glanced at her and smiled.

"It's perfect," he said, and his eyes met Remus' over Helena's shoulder. "I wouldn't change a single thing."

Magical mandrake root, the cure for basilisk petrification (according to books; nobody had ever been petrified in such a way in living memory) was much harder to come by than ordinary mandrake, and so it was several weeks before Cricket was up and about again. The mandrake had to be harvested, pressed, packaged; paperwork had to be signed and registered, including import

clearances. Once everything was arranged, the pressing was hand-carried via broomstick and Muggle transport only.

The special courier who arrived at Hogwarts carrying it was not only admired by everyone at the school for being a bona-fide world traveler, but a welcome sight to at least one professor.

"Wotcher, Tonks?" Bill Weasley asked, shaking the late-spring rain off his leather hat and doffing it with a swagger. Dora laughed and threw her arms around his neck in welcome, careful not to jostle his bag.

"Welcome back to England! How long has it been?" she asked.

"Two years," he answered. "Look at you, all grown up and a Professor."

She stepped back long enough for him to shed his leathifold-hide cloak and take in the rest of the professors, who were seated around the common room.

"Professor Dumbledore," he said, inclining his head politely at the Headmaster. "I've brought a parcel for you from the Calcutta Arboretum and Nursery." He produced from his bag a large jar of transparent greenish liquid labeled Essence of Mandrake; Mag; 12.22. "That's Essence of Mandrake, Magical Variety, bottle twelve of set twenty-two. Latest pressing -- should be very fresh."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore answered with a smile, passing the jar to Madam Pomfrey, who vanished into the hallway, heading for the hospital ward. "I hope your journey has not been a long one?"

Bill grinned, showing a set of perfect white teeth. "Not really. I mean they could have mailed you the stuff if it weren't for the import laws, and I wanted to get back to England anyway. They brought it to me in Egypt and I've carried her the rest of the way."

"And clearly you've had a warm welcome waiting for you," McGonagall said, smiling gently at Tonks.

"Dora and I were pen friends for about -- what, year and a half after we left school? Then she had exams and the pace was picking up on the Egypt dig..." Bill shrugged.

"He still sends me bottles of sand from time to time, though, just to annoy me," she replied, shoving his shoulder.

"I sent her an extra-large one when I heard about the Hogwarts job," Bill said.

"It's only for a year. It's not like I'm a real professor," she protested.

"Nonsense, she's a fine one," Madam Hooch said from the windowseat. Dora blushed.

"I'm sure she is," Bill agreed.

"When not knocking over cagefuls of Cornish Pixies," said a voice from the doorway. Bill turned, warily.

"Professor Snape...sir," he said, respectfully.

"Mr. Weasley. Making a mess as usual, I see," Snape said, regarding the dripping cloak hanging on a peg next to the door. "I presume you are our courier for young Creevey?"

"Yessir."

"Still wasting your abilities with that wretched Goblin bank?"

"We like to call it unorthodox application of skills," Bill said.

"Yes, well. You have my thanks for your prompt delivery," Snape said, crossing to his armchair. "No doubt Creevey will wish to thank you personally when he is revived."

"That's his way of inviting you to dinner," Dora said, leaning on Bill's shoulder.

"He knows perfectly well that Hogwarts extends its hospitality," Snape replied. "Do stop hanging on him like a second coat, Professor Tonks."

Madam Hooch badly stifled a laugh; Dora blushed and casually stopped leaning on Bill, who took this as an opportunity to wrap an arm around her waist instead.

"You'll like Cricket, anyway," she said, gently disentangling herself. "He's a sweet little kid."

"Colin Creevey is a useless first-year with a talent only for making trouble for himself," Snape said. "I trust Madam Pomfrey has already gone?"

"She just left," Dora said, an odd edge to her voice.

"I shall see to my student then. Good day," Snape said, stalking away.

"Why does he always do that?" Dora sighed. "Anyway, Bill, come on, would you like to say hello to your brothers and Ginny?"

"Do you, Minerva, happen to know what has gotten into Severus?" Dumbledore asked with the barest hint of a smile, after Tonks had dragged Bill Weasley away.

"I couldn't say, I'm sure," she replied calmly. "It is spring, you know. Perhaps he's restless."

"Ah yes. Spring," Dumbledore replied. "I myself recall the restlessness that spring imposes on young spirits. My great-uncle Gouldian used to recommend cold showers and brisk walks. I may say I indulged in a great many brisk walks with young women of my acquaintance when spring restlessness came upon me, and it did wonders for my mental well-being."

"Well, that's settled up, then," Neville said, sitting back and dusting his hands. "There's my schedule. It's perfect."

The other three, seated around the library table, turned to look at his index cards, which were now covered with scribbles and notes about who was taking what when and how likely he was to pass a given subject.

"You've got Charms in there twice," Draco pointed out. Neville's face fell. After a morose minute he sighed, gathered the cards up, took out the extra copy of Charms, shuffled them, and began spreading them out again.

"Well, I'm taking Ancient Runes, Divination, and Care of Magical Creatures," Harry said, "and I don't care sod-all who's taking them with me."

"Didn't Remus want you to take Arithmancy?" Neville asked.

"Yeah, but I'm pants at numbers, and besides, I want to take Care of Magical Creatures instead. I'm taking Runes cos he wants me to, even if he won't say it," Harry said. "And I'm taking Divination because Sirius thinks it'll be fun, and I'm taking Magical Creatures for me."

"Are you sure you're going to do all right with three new classes?"

"Sure, and if I don't, I'll drop Divination. Padma, aren't you taking three?"

Padma, who was writing in a notebook in front of her, looked up wearily. "What?"

"Three new classes. Aren't you? I want to be able to crib your Runes homework," Harry said.

"I don't know," Padma answered. If she had looked tired before, she looked absolutely exhausted now. Harry wanted to chalk it up to nerves -- exams were coming soon -- but he wondered if she wasn't sick. Neville had spoken with Parvati about it, but Parvati didn't know and, what was more, didn't seem to care. She'd declared that all Ravenclaws were moody drama queens and that if Neville fancied tangling with Padma right now, he could do it himself.

"Come on, Padma, tell us what you're taking," Draco begged. "I still can't get mine sorted and Dobby's decorated my trunk with all the new gold stars I bought. Help me decide how big a row to have with mum."

"Oh, your mum," Padma said angrily. "Grow up, Draco, for Merlin's sake. I don't know what I'm taking and I don't care. Maybe I won't even come back to Hogwarts!"

They stared at her, astounded, even as Madam Pince began to glide towards their table to hush the near-hysterical Padma. Before the librarian could reach them, Padma had gathered up her books, thrown them angrily into her bag, knocked over her chair, and stomped off. The three boys exchanged wary looks.

"Should we go follow her?" Neville asked hesitantly.

"I am grown up!" Draco said to no one in particular. "I just don't like being shouted at. There's no reason she oughtn't to help me."

"I think we'd better leave her alone," Harry said.

"She's left her notebook behind," Neville said, picking up a cheap, rather battered book that had fallen out of her bag.

"Oh -- that's not her notebook," Draco replied. "That's her diary."

The other two looked at him.

"Padma keeps a diary?" Harry asked, taking the notebook from Neville.

"Well, I assume that's what she uses it for. I didn't ask," Draco said. "I gave it to her before school started. She writes in it all the time."

"Can't be the one you're thinking of," Harry said. He had opened it without a second thought, but every page was blank. "There's no writing in it."

"I'm sure that's it," Draco insisted. "Mum's friend Mr. Macnair gave it to me ages ago when we were in Mardjinn Alley. He said something about needing all the proper supplies at school. I told him I had tons of parchment but he gave me that old thing anyway. Remember, because that was right before he tried to punch Remus and Remus beat him up."

"We didn't get to see it," Harry said, still slightly aggrieved over this even after several months.

"Right, well, I said I didn't want it so Padma took it. Maybe it was charmed, I don't know," Draco shrugged.

"Well, we can shove it back in her bag at dinner," Harry said. "Here, pass me your quill."

Neville obediently surrendered his quill, and Harry dipped it in the inkpot.

Padma, stop writing in invisible ink -- show us your secrets! he wrote.

To his surprise, the ink faded into the diary, disappearing as if it had melted through the page. He flipped the page over -- nothing.

"Harry!" Draco said urgently. Harry turned back just in time to see the words appearing:

I'm not Padma.

Before he could fathom it, the book had been snatched from his hands and there was a sharp pain in the back of his head. He turned, rubbing it, to see Padma behind him, clutching the book to her chest.

"You hit me!" Harry said, stunned.

"You read my journal," Padma hissed. "How dare you!"

"There wasn't anything -- "

"I hate you!"

Harry blinked. Padma burst into tears and fled.

"We should definitely follow her this time," Neville said apprehensively.

"No," Draco answered. "You stay here, I'll go. Harry would only make her angry. I'm used to it -- mum, you know. I'll calm her down. She doesn't mean it, Harry, people never do."

Draco left his bag and books behind, running in the direction Padma had gone, ignoring Madam Pince's impotent cry not to run in the library.

Summer was coming fast, now, and the swim from the edge of the lake to the hot-springs was becoming more pleasant by the day. The giant squid often frolicked at the south shore, making waves that rippled across the water. The waves, combined with an occasional tentacle to dodge, made for refreshing, challenging swimming.

It helped to clear the head, as well; there were far too many worrisome goings-on in the castle these days. Albus had confided to him and to Tonks, as well as the Deputy Headmistress, that the danger was real and pressing -- a basilisk of all fool things. How he felt he could in all conscience keep things quiet Severus was not certain, but he was not going to turn round and tattle to the Ministry or the Board of Governors on the one man who had trusted him for the past twelve years over something quite so stupid as a basilisk. If Dumbledore felt that the rest of the students were safe, then they were safe.

What Dumbledore intended to do about a giant murderous-eyed snake running around the school unchecked, Severus wasn't positive, but the Headmaster had presumably dealt with stranger things in his time.

In addition to which, all this talk of Heirs and Basilisks made the students uneasy. Cricket -- *Colin Creevey* was making a pain of himself, Harry always looked tired and his marks were slipping, and the seventh years were stroppier than could be believed. Draco Malfoy hovered around that Patil girl like a hen with one chick, and Patil herself, his best student in the year -- not that he'd admit it to her or anyone else -- had actually *fallen asleep in his class* yesterday.

It was a relief to have only the water and the waves to deal with; those could be overcome by sheer brute force and didn't require careful handling or thought. Madam Pomfrey continued to tut over his exercise in the water and the state of his heart, but if he hadn't killed himself by now he wasn't likely to in the future.

Dora -- Professor Tonks -- had been at the hot springs a few times since their first surprise encounter, but he'd never seen her arrive; he wasn't sure if she swam and then chanced returning through the forest, or had found a safe-passage path from the grounds through the forest to the springs. There were such paths, he knew, lined with iron-ore rocks anchoring charms against wild beasts and...other threats. At any rate, she always wore something that she claimed was a bathing costume, although he didn't call it much more than a handkerchief. He'd told her so the first time she teased him about his prudishness; she'd have been less indecent naked, he felt, although that of course had resulted in her threatening to take off what little she'd managed to put on.

She was there now, seated in the hollow of the wide, flat rock, contemplating the sunrise.

"I'd have thought you'd have brought Bill Weasley along," he grumbled, pushing himself up on the rock and stretching out, letting the water run off him in rivulets. He folded his hands behind his head to cushion them and closed his eyes.

"If I'd known you wanted me to, I would have," she answered.

"I didn't say that."

"Besides, he's gone back to Egypt -- or he's on his way there. He left this morning."

"I'm heartbroken, to be sure," he muttered.

"You might show a little gratitude; it's due to Bill that Cricket's up and running around again."

"It's due to Mandrake that Cricket's up and running around again, and I could wish he weren't; he had nothing useful to tell us at all and he's given the most atrocious indulgence in his schoolwork."

"The boy was Petrified for weeks!"

"That's no excuse."

She splashed water up over her head, and it caught him across the face. "What would you call an excuse then?"

"Death. I give lightened courseloads for death."

"Someone's parent has to die for them to get a break?"

"No. Death of the student in question," he said, and she laughed.

"Why are you so hard on them? I know it's not for some kind of altruistic motivation."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're not stern with them so they'll try harder. That line might work with fourteen-year-olds but I don't buy it." She crawled up on the rock nearby; he could hear her move. He opened his eyes and tilted his head back slightly and she came into focus, upside-down from his point of view. "So why is it, then?" she prompted.

He closed his eyes again.

"I'm not your student anymore; you can tell me, you know." She had shifted position; when he opened his eyes again she was sitting next to him, and he tilted his head slightly to better watch her reaction.

"I am hard on them not so that they will try harder, but so that they will do as much as they can."

"What?"

"Daily we both see the height of intellect and the depth of stupidity which humanity can produce. It follows that if you are capable of one, you are capable of the other. Why should I expect any less from a fool than I expect from a genius? That way he is marked honestly, and he often surprises himself. You passed NEWTs-level Potions, did you not?"

He sat up, propping himself on his arms and waiting for her answer. She studied him over her shoulder.

"We are not simply weights and measure, you know," she said. "You can't measure each child on the same scale as another."

"Is that not what we do daily?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "You're not a bad teacher, but you'd never last if you had to do it for a living. You like them too much."

"Don't you like your students?"

"I love them. I'm not required to like them."

"You like Harry."

He fell silent.

"I wasn't scolding you," she said, ducking her head so that she could meet his eyes. "Everyone likes Harry."

"I suspect so," he said. "It matters very little. I've answered you, haven't I?"

She grinned. "Yes, you have. I still don't see why you don't like Bill, though; he's a nice man, and he helped out one of your students."

"I am not required to give reason for my personal dislikes so long as they do not interfere with my professional duties."

"What, is that carved on the lintel over your door?" she asked, amused.

"On my heart," he replied.

"That's a terrible thing to have carved on your heart, Severus," she said quietly.

"Well, for lack of anything better, it is all I have," he answered.

"Not Harry or Neville or my parents?" she asked. "Not me?"

"Definitely not you," he said.

And then, inexplicably, he kissed her.

As kisses went, it was a good one; he didn't have *much* experience, all things considered, but he knew a bad kiss from a decent one and this was definitely above-par. He knew because she was kissing him back. And because it was becoming difficult to breathe.

When he finally broke the kiss, she hardly moved; just leaned back slightly and caught the inside of her lip with her teeth, worrying it.

"Oh," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"I see now -- you were jealous of Bill."

"I never was."

She grinned and put a hand on his chest and kissed him again, pushing him back for better leverage, and it seemed natural to raise his left hand and rest it on the warm, bare skin in the small of her back. He knew he must actually have lost what little mind he'd had a firm grip on in the first place, because he was kissing a fellow professor, a former student, and the daughter of two of his only friends in the world.

"Good, because you certainly needn't have been," she said against his mouth.

"So noted," he replied. "Dora -- Nymphadora -- Professor Tonks, stop."

"What? Why?" she asked, leaning back.

"Because we're necking atop a rock in the middle of the lake wearing very nearly nothing -- "

"Not true, you're dressed from knee to chin," she replied.

"Yes, well, you're wearing nothing-enough for the both of us," he answered dourly.

"And did you really just call what we're doing *necking*?" she asked.

"What would you call it?"

"Well, I certainly wouldn't say stop," she said. "Although..." She glanced up at the school, where smoke was just beginning to rise from Hagrid's cookfire. It was as reliable as clockwork; he lit it every day around the time breakfast was starting in the Great Hall. "You're right, we'll be late for class."

She leaned in and kissed him, then scrambled away off the rock and into the water, swimming for shore.

"I'll see you at breakfast!" she called.

"What, is that all?" he called back.

"You'll be later than I will!" she shouted. Realising she was right, he ran to the other end of the rock and leapt into the water, making for the shore even as she was running through the forest. He rather thought he broke his best time; he felt exhilarated, energetic, and quite desperate for the shore, his clothes, and the comfort of his teaching robes.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 21

"I wish I knew what was wrong with her," Harry said to Draco at breakfast.

He and Draco were sitting at the Hufflepuff table, since the Hufflepuffs never minded and Gryffindor and Ravenclaw's Prefects had already ordered them to their own tables. Harry was watching Padma from across the room; she seemed to be eating quietly and apparently placidly. The problem was that Padma was not placid by nature, and the look in her eyes was upsetting. It was...dull. Sleepy. Not like Padma.

"I told her she should go see Madam Pomfrey, I don't know what more you think I ought to have done," Draco said guiltily.

"I'm not blaming you."

"Good, because it isn't my fault," Draco insisted. "She told me she was fine. She even showed me her diary."

"She did?"

"Oh yeah, it's brilliant -- now I wish I'd kept it. It talks back to you, she made it say hello to me and everything. I mean she didn't show me anything she'd written, you know. Did her good, I think," Draco said. "What I mean is, she saw that it was all right, you know. I didn't tease her, so she wasn't as angry at you for looking in it, after I showed her it wasn't a big deal."

"I don't want to read her stupid old diary," Harry said. "It was just a bit of a joke."

"Yeah, well, girls," Draco shrugged.

"I don't like it, anyway," Harry said. "I'd better go -- Prefects're coming."

He made it to the Slytherin table just in time and spent the rest of breakfast studying what everyone else ate and who they sat with, not with any real purpose but because he had recently received a book of detective stories from Remus and he had decided to improve his odds of having an interesting life by Noticing Things. Mainly what he Noticed this morning was that Hufflepuffs tended to avoid kippers and Dora's hair was especially brilliant this morning, pink with streaks of gold and silver.

Severus hadn't been sure what to expect when he entered the Great Hall after drying off and changing; he was certain that there must be some sort of...sign, something obvious that he'd missed but which would tell the whole world that he'd spent the morning inappropriately kissing

another professor.

Hardly anyone even reacted, however, though he came in so late that he barely had time for a bowl of oatmeal and a cup of tea. Dora didn't even look at him, though he detected a blush now and then when he would glance down the table at her. Her hair hadn't had gold and silver in it when he'd arrived at the hot springs, he was sure. He wondered if it was supposed to be some kind of sign. He really was rotten at this kind of thing; there was a reason it had been years since he'd had any kind of romantic entanglements.

The problem was that his natural inclination to reserve, which was telling him *no good can come of morning trysts at the hot springs*, was warring with every other part of him, which was saying *well, she's not your student now, she won't be a professor forever, and you know her parents like you...*

"Professor Snape!" she called, as the students rose to go to their classes and the professors began to file out. She caught up with him in the corridor. "May I have a word with you?"

"Certainly," he said, positive that every single student above the age of fourteen was staring at them. She took his arm and led him into an unused classroom. No sooner were they inside than she'd pulled him down to her height (possibly growing a few inches as she did so; life with a metamorphmagus could be...*interesting*) and kissed him soundly. His natural inclination to reserve was no match for it, really. She made noises when she kissed, little sighs and exhalations that were --

-- were going to *keep him from class* --

"This is fun," she whispered, giving him an impish grin before she ran out of the classroom and back toward her first class of the day.

He paused, mouthed *fun?* incredulously to himself, shook his head, and then likewise hurried away. Not that it did much good; he taught his first two classes in a confused daze and thanked his stars that they were first and third years, since if he'd been teaching his NEWTs students he probably would have blown up the dungeon.

He didn't actually see her at lunch, because he didn't get to eat lunch; he had to supervise four very contrite students who *had* actually made a spirited if accidental attempt at blowing up the dungeon. They didn't finish scrubbing -- or complaining -- until it was nearly time for his next class. Apparently she'd heard; she sent a note down with one of his afternoon students that was charmed up to the gills and said only *Dinner in Hogsmeade - You're buying - Front Gates, 6pm.*

It was utter foolishness, of course, and no doubt simply the result of contempt breeding familiarity -- but he did *not* ball the note up and toss it on the fire as he generally did. Instead he locked it in his desk drawer, smoothed and neatly folded.

At the end of afternoon classes he retreated to his rooms and faced something of a moral

quandary.

For years he had adamantly refused to change out of teaching robes when visiting Hogsmeade. He had also adamantly refused to care what his clothing looked like beyond two criteria: it should not have holes, and it should be black. Black was easy and, more importantly for a Potions professor, it did not show stains. Granted, he did own clothing which was considerably nicer than his (black) teaching robes and (black) undertunic and trousers, but if he changed clothing now then it would go against his policy of Not Caring and in addition Nymphadora would notice. She might even tease.

She would certainly tease him for caring this much about such an utterly foolish thing. He snorted, closed his wardrobe, and definitely did not check the mirror to see if his hair looked all right. Instead, he checked to see if he had enough Galleons in his pockets for dinner and made certain he was not on any kind of Detention duties that evening.

He felt oddly as though he were a student again as he made his way down to the front gates of Hogwarts, which led by a rather circuitous path down past the train station to Hogsmeade. The children generally took the back route, over a river footbridge and through a cleared area of the forest atop a small ridge, but the front-gate road was a more pleasant walk. He reminded himself that it was not illegal for professors to leave school grounds to have dinner somewhere more hospitable than a cavernous dining hall full of noisy, annoying children. It was not in any way forbidden to fraternise with other professors, either; hadn't he been spending quite a lot of time with Dora lately at any rate, when they practiced their duels for the club?

It was entirely likely that she merely wanted to talk about the Dueling Club, anyway. He rather trusted her to be above the sort of juvenile tricks that this might look like if they were both fifteen -- the pretty girl and the sort of boy who never got pretty girls -- but he wouldn't put it past her to have realised what a colossal mistake she'd made. He would be calm and collected and take his cues from her.

She appeared at the gates five minutes late, wrapped in a brightly-coloured light cloak against the still-chilly night air.

"I was worried you wouldn't come," she said, shoving her hands in her pockets and grinning at him. "Am I very late?"

"Five minutes," he grumbled. "When one extends the invitation, Professor Tonks, one is expected to arrive -- "

"-- before the invitee, I know," she rolled her eyes. "I got held up by a student who wanted an assignment and it took me a while to find it..."

"Yes, I've seen your office," he said drily.

"I suppose I should clean it up before the next professor comes along, shouldn't I?" she asked,

following as he turned and began the winding, scenic walk down the path to Hogsmeade. "After all, I'm leaving Hogwarts in a few weeks. No more Professor Tonks, no more Dueling Club, no more drafty Professors' quarters. No more terrible pork soup."

"Oh gods!" he said, shaking his head. "House Elves should never be allowed to improvise with the food. That was a waste of a good pig."

"It would have been the waste of a *bad* pig. But the food's been good, by and large. It's not Dad's cooking, though."

"Very little is."

"Was that a *compliment*? From Severus Snape?"

He smiled, just slightly. "I have been a guest at your parents' table many times. I would hardly have been induced back if the food was inedible."

"We'll have to have you down for a celebration dinner when I'm cleared for active duty with the Aurors again."

"Do you look forward to going back to dodging hexes and apprehending stray Grindylows?"

She shrugged. "Yes. I love my old job. Hogwarts has been nice, though...maybe in forty or fifty years I'll come back and get a job teaching again, like McGonagall. I'll miss it, as much as I like Auroring."

He nodded, contemplating the line of the train-tracks below and the village, now visible ahead to their left.

"This is the part," she added, "where you say you'll miss me too and that I'll have to come visit often."

"You know as well as I do without me saying it," he answered. "You're not moving to the other side of the world, you aren't even leaving the country. You're perfectly aware that you are welcome at Hogwarts and that I will almost certainly be in London to visit your parents before the summer is even properly begun, let alone ended."

"It's the symbol of the thing," she sighed.

"I don't believe in symbols; too often they're actually lies," he replied. He felt the fingers of his left hand clench into a fist.

"All right," she said, making a face. "I won't make you say it but I know you're thinking it all the same and you can't stop me assuming that deep down you have a romantic heart."

"Deep down I have a heart condition," he retorted.

"I bet you tell that to all the girls."

"Are you going to flirt incessantly and shamelessly with me for the *entire* evening?" he asked. She swung around in front of him and he stopped abruptly as they kissed for the third time that day.

"That was the plan," she said, gazing at him with eyes that were, for the moment, a brilliant grey-blue.

"Oh," he said.

"You aren't going to object, are you?" she asked. He considered it, head tilted to one side, aware that the flush in his cheeks was probably making the scars on his face stand out livid-white.

"No," he said finally. "So long as you don't require any reciprocation. I do not flirt."

"If you did, I'd be distinctly worried for your mental health, such as it is," she said, moving aside so that they could continue down the path. She deftly changed the subject to the question of where they ought to eat, and he found to his relief that he really needn't participate actively much in the conversation at all. Like her mother, Dora had quite enough personality for two people. He had simply never seen it as much of a positive quality until now.

He had the distinct sensation that the phrase "until now" was going to apply to a lot of his immediate future.

It appeared, that evening, to be a fine night for romantic dinners all round.

In London, in the little house whose east-facing windows looked onto a grubby Muggle street and whose south-facing windows looked out on Diagon Alley, the Tonks-Black household was dining in elegance -- if only because Andromeda and Sirius, well-bred down to their fingertips, could make even intentionally-messy food look graceful.

"Moony, no, look, don't use your fork," Sirius said, picking up the crab-claw from Remus' plate and cracking it deftly with a steel nut-cracker. He peeled the shell back and slid the meat out whole, much to Ted and Andromeda's delight. Remus, who had been attempting to remove the meat with a combination of another nutcracker and a long-tined fork, sighed and accepted the meat from Sirius' fingers while Andromeda loudly cracked another shell.

"I quite like crab, you know," Remus insisted, wrestling with the other claw until it dissolved in a pile of shredded meat and shell chips. "It's just that normally, it's a little less...organic than this, by the time it reaches my plate."

"That's the charm," Ted said, offering Remus another bottle of beer. Andromeda passed Sirius a handful of legs, which he accepted gleefully.

"It's so much work for so little food, though!" Remus said. "And really, isn't it basically just a vehicle for the butter sauce?"

"Bite your tongue and chip a tooth," Sirius said, looking horrified. "Don't give him any more, he doesn't properly appreciate it!"

"There ought to be a charm to just magic it out of the shell," Remus said with the determination that comes from three beers and not enough actual meat in his stomach. "Some sort of *Accio* variant..."

The others laughed and went on eating and talking, but Remus watched the way Sirius' fingers pulled the meat from the shell in whole segments, trying to intuit how it was done and how one might re-create the same results with a spell. Perhaps it would be easier to simply hex the shell into oblivion, but he was willing to bet that would spoil the taste. Perhaps it would anyway, to use magic; apparently the process was part of the meal.

He had focused so closely on the actions of Sirius' hands that for a moment, in the haze of intense concentration, he didn't realise what had happened. After all, it hardly looked real -- Sirius had simply taken hold of his left thumb instead of the crab's leg and tugged, gently.

The thumb came away in his fingers -- smoothly, bloodlessly and without any visible cuts. Remus blinked, staring in horror and fascination. Sirius apparently hadn't noticed, because now he was grasping his index finger. It, too, came away with no trouble at all, and both were laid next to Sirius' hand, on the tablecloth. Still there was no blood, and Remus found himself opening his mouth to speak and absolutely unable to say a thing.

Middle and then ring finger followed so quickly that Remus found himself struggling to swallow so that he could shout something, anything. There were no words, and *nobody had noticed*.

He watched as Sirius pulled the little finger off his left hand as well, with the same quick jerk as the others, but this one was different; in the palm of his right hand it suddenly began to blacken and ooze thick, dark blood. The hand shook; Remus finally forced his eyes upwards and saw --

It was a pale, intelligent-looking face framed by black hair, but it wasn't Sirius' face at all. There were remote similarities that he would recall later, but at the time all he could see were the fine features of a complete stranger, and the panic in the man's hard, cold green eyes. There was a little spot of red deep in the pupils of each, and even with its handsome look, the face was somehow distorted. The man stared down at the shriveled, blackened lump of flesh in his palm, not with horror but with a sort of sullen, annoyed petulance.

"That was my first," he said, and then Remus managed to jerk away from the table and shout a

warning to Ted and Andromeda, who looked up in surprise and confusion.

"What is it?" Andromeda asked, staring at him. Remus looked back at where the man had been sitting to find Sirius, gaping openmouthed at him.

"All right, Moony?" he asked cautiously. He put down the crab's leg he held in one hand -- the left hand, whole again and with all five fingers -- and the steel nut-cracker he'd had in the other. "What's wrong?"

"I -- thought I -- saw something," Remus said, blankly. Andromeda touched his arm, her expression turning from shock to curiosity. "Sorry, I don't know..."

"Did you see one of your...?" Sirius asked. Ted glanced at him, vaguely confused.

"I don't know," Remus repeated. "It didn't seem like it. Maybe -- maybe."

Andromeda tugged gently on his arm and he sat down again, picking up the bottle of beer and taking a deep drink.

"Sorry -- really," he said. "It's all right. It's probably nothing -- I'm just...tired."

He saw the glances that telegraphed across the table, saw Andromeda mouth "moon?" and Sirius subtly shake his head. He might have objected, some other time, but his heart was still racing and it was more important that he try to slow his furious pulse.

"What did you see?" Sirius asked, when he finally felt as though he could function again.

"Nothing -- I'm sure it was nothing," he answered. "Nothing to do with Harry, not like last time -- I just saw a stranger's face and it startled me. Honestly, it probably wasn't anything."

None of them looked convinced, but to his gratification they did look as though they were willing to play along.

"I think I'll just send off a quick owl to Harry tomorrow morning, anyway," Sirius said quietly. Andromeda asked how Harry was doing with his schedule-planning, and slowly the conversation picked up again.

Remus, horrified at what was apparently his own imagination, was quiet and subdued for the rest of dinner. When Sirius crawled into bed later that night and looked anxiously at him again, Remus merely picked up his left hand from where it lay on the bedcovers and spent a long time studying it silently, passing his own fingertips over the creases in the skin where finger joined palm. Sirius, sensing there were some times when questions were best left unasked, waited until Remus had fallen asleep before gently disentangling his hand and examining it to see if he could discern what Remus had found there.

At first, Severus thought it might have been the wine they were drinking -- not bad wine, but not great wine either. There was a...not a buzzing, not precisely, but a sensation of pressure in the back of his head, just above his neck. He ignored it through most of the dinner, which was livelier than he had expected (feared) it would be. He had very few topics, outside of his work, which he was interested in discussing, and he had been gripped by the sudden uneasy sensation that this dinner with Dora may in fact have all the makings of the most awkward meal he had ever endured. And yet it wasn't; she had her parents' knack of putting a person immediately at ease. He envied it deeply.

As the meal progressed, the sensation grew worse until he was forced to stop Dora in mid-sentence, much to her surprise, and ask her to be silent for just a minute. He put actual effort into being tactful, but he still saw the perplexed look in her eyes.

"Something's...wrong," he said slowly. "I think perhaps at the castle. I think we should return."

"Severus, if you're not enjoying yourself -- "

"This is not an excuse," he snapped, then stopped himself. "I...apologise. I don't want to leave, but something really is wrong."

"How do you know?" she asked, even as she was standing and taking her cloak from the hook nearby. He threw a handful of Galleons and Sickles on the table, enough to pay for the meal, and led her out the door.

"Look," he said, pointing to Hogwarts, standing against a darkening sky. Every light was blazing; far more than should be.

"It can't be too serious, or someone would have sent for us -- can it?" she asked, hurrying to keep up with his long strides.

"It's quite possible no one has thought to. Did you tell anyone where you were going?"

"Yes -- well, not exactly, I just told McGonagall I was going to have dinner in Hogsmeade and I'd probably be back late, and I think Hagrid saw me -- I waved to him as I was walking to the gates. Why?"

"It looks as though they're searching for something -- someone," he added. "I remember...when I was a student, I -- " he paused, weighing his words carefully. Now was not the time to dredge up that terrible full moon so many years ago. "There was a student who went missing. There was reason to worry. That's the last time I can recall seeing the castle lit up like that."

He reached out with his mind to try and touch someone at the castle -- Dumbledore was unreadable, always had been, but McGonagall seemed worried about something, desperately

concerned. Almost fearfully he found Harry; the boy was pacing furiously in the Great Hall with the rest of the students, his thoughts full of unidentifiable terror but his body whole and hearty.

They had instinctively made for the shorter back-route to Hogwarts, avoiding the main gates altogether. Halfway there, a light came bobbing down across the grounds towards them, and in a few more yards it had resolved itself into Hagrid, carrying an enormous lantern.

"Perfesser Snape! Perfesser Tonks! Yer wanted in the Great Hall!" he shouted.

"I know!" Severus called back. "What's happened?"

"Blamed if I know. Dumbledore says Padma Patil's gone missing and t'was a bas'lisk took her."

"Padma?" Dora asked, even as they continued the seemingly interminable journey up to the school. "She's gone?"

"Can't find 'er anywhere, an' there's a message..." Hagrid dug a scrap of parchment out of his pocket. It was hastily scribbled, probably duplicated from someone else's; it read *Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever*. "Painted on the stairwell it was, 'neath the first one. All the teachers've turned out to look for 'er. Keepin' all the students in the Great Hall, cept for the seventh-years and they're only to search the top floors. Yer to come straight to the Great Hall -- Dumbledore says. Special job for ya."

Snape glanced at Dora, who shook her head in confusion. They hurried up to the school with Hagrid leading, through the doors and into the antechamber where the first-years waited to enter the Great Hall. Dumbledore was there.

"Time is of the very essence," he said, holding up his hands to forestall questions. "I am about to do something which will very likely lose me my job, but it will save the girl. Nymphadora, you and Harry must go into the forest and find the *Viae Serpentorum*."

"The *what*?" Tonks asked.

"A large tunnel -- Harry can find the place again, he's seen it once. It is the way by which the basilisk came and went into the Forest. I suspect he was using the old water-system when he traveled within the school's walls itself. I must remain here in case....you do not find it in time."

Tonks, biting her lip, nodded and left the chamber. Dumbledore turned back to Severus.

"Take what Slytherin students you require and search the Dungeons thoroughly. I suspect there may be an entryway to the Chamber there. When you have finished -- "

"The water systems?" Snape asked abruptly. An idea was forming in his head. Dumbledore nodded. "I'll leave the Slytherins to search the Dungeons -- I can think of more efficient uses of my own time."

"Go," Dumbledore urged. Snape ran past him into the Great Hall.

"Sixth and fifth-year Slytherins, to me," he called. Students, sitting in little knots at their tables, looked up. A handful of Slytherins stood and presented themselves. "Potter, you too."

A murmur went round the room as Harry, biting his lip, came forward also. Neville and Draco joined him, silently.

"Not you," he ordered.

"If he goes, we go," Neville said. His voice trembled.

"Don't waste time, you little idiots."

"If he goes, we go," Draco repeated. "Padma's one of ours."

There was no time; he would send them to Tonks and she could stun them and leave them in the hallway or something. "Fine. Go. Professor Tonks is waiting for you in the antechamber."

As he began giving orders to the rest of the Slytherins, he heard Harry's not-yet-pubescent voice asking questions and Nymphadora answering back confidently. He set aside a small place in his mind to worry about them both, to wonder what would happen if he lost Harry and Dora in one single night, and turned the rest of his thoughts to the task at hand.

"This is the Dungeons skeleton key; it will open any door. If there is no lock but the door is warded, press it to the centre of the door," he said, handing the sixth-year prefect his key. "Don't even think of making mischief with it. This is deadly serious. Pay particular attention to the washrooms."

"The....washrooms sir?"

"Do as I say."

She nodded and led the others away, leaving him standing there to collect his thoughts. Finally he turned and ran out the side entrance to the Great Hall. It couldn't be the kitchens, the House-Elves would have seen something before now. He could start on this floor and work his way up.

How many sinks and washrooms could Hogwarts have?

Dumbledore had vanished through a door Tonks didn't know existed by the time Harry, Neville, and Draco showed up in the anteroom.

"Professor Snape sent all of us," Harry said.

"He did not," she answered. "Dumbledore says you have to show me where the Viae Serpentorum is. He says you know."

"We'll need broomsticks," Harry answered, already leading the way past her, towards the Quidditch shed. "It's on the way. Come on!" he urged, and she ran to catch up to him and the other two boys. "Neville knows too, so he can set me right," Harry called over his shoulder. "And he'll need Draco to ride second."

He burst through the doors of the equipment shed and picked up his own broom, tossing Flint's to Neville and Draco.

"You start it, I'm pants," Neville said, and Draco got the broomstick in the air before giving Neville a hand up. Harry was already mounted, looking expectantly at Tonks.

"I'm going to get in so much trouble for this," she sighed, climbing on and wrapping one arm around Harry's waist, holding the broomstick in front of her with her other hand. "All right, take me there."

The flight was fast and terrifying; she'd forgotten how children flew when they had no fear of their own mortality. She ducked low for a lot of it, avoiding branches that Harry was too short to even consider a danger. Neville and Draco followed close behind them, occasionally letting out a shriek at a sudden drop or rise.

They touched down in the darkness, in the middle of a small open place; even at night, the white stones of the tunnel were more than clear.

"Merlin," she breathed, staring up at it. "How big is this bloody thing?"

"Big," Harry answered. "Are we going in?"

"You three need to -- " she stopped, because she wasn't quite sure she believed her eyes.

With a creaking, clanking noise, a Ford Anglia had appeared in the clearing and rolled to a stop in front of the tunnel. The fact that this was not the surprising part just made it worse. Along with the Anglia were two small motorised dirt-bikes, moving of their own accord and the same turquoise-blue as the Anglia itself.

"Where did those come from?" Draco asked.

"I think they're her....offspring," Neville answered.

"Sirius is never going to believe this," Harry whispered. He moved forward towards the tunnel, and the bikes revved their tiny engines. The Anglia made a low growling noise.

"It's all right," Harry said. "Please don't attack us."

Tonks looked up and realised that there were enormous spiders in every tree. Hundreds of compound eyes watched them.

"See? Remember me?" Harry asked, taking another step towards the car which was blocking the tunnel. "Harry, right? I rode in you once, on the way here."

The Anglia's growling turned into a low engine rumble.

"I know you're fighting the basilisk. We're fighting it too. If you let us go in, we'll kill it," Harry said. He reached the place where the bikes were sitting, and they eased forward slowly. He patted one of them on the handlebars. "I promise. We're here to kill it. It took Padma. Remember Padma?"

The headlights flashed. Dora held her breath.

Eventually, slowly, the Anglia moved away from the tunnel. The bikes followed rather more quickly, once they realised she -- it -- had pulled to the side.

"This place is *really* weird," Draco said, staring at the bikes fixedly. Neville gave him a shove and they both ran forward to where Harry was standing, staring up at the inscription. Dora followed hastily.

"I'm not leaving you three here with a thousand acromantulae waiting to make you a snack," she said. "But I'm leading the way, all right?"

"I'll hear it coming, if it goes this way," Harry said. "It talks to itself."

"If it's as big as all this, we all ought to hear it coming," Tonks answered. "You just keep those broomsticks handy."

She lit her wand as brightly as she could and stepped into the gloom of the tunnel. She could hear the boys' footsteps as they followed her, and after a few seconds, Harry took her free hand in his.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 22

They walked as quickly as they could through the gloomy tunnel, passing the occasional skeleton -- thankfully never human, at least as far as they could tell. The tunnel narrowed slightly as they went, angling downhill, until Dora realised that they must be underground -- possibly even under the lake.

"This could be Roman," she said in a hushed voice, studying the stones as they passed. "Some kind of underground crypt."

"Remus says the Roman wizards got this far, but most of them went native," Harry replied in a hushed voice.

"Makes sense -- the people around here built underground barrows for the dead," Dora agreed. "Never this big, though."

"Remus gave me a book that says all the trouble over purebloods and halfbloods started with the Romans," Harry continued, as if speaking helped keep away the looming shadows. "It says that the Romans thought the Picts and Celts and the Gauls weren't as good at magic as they were, and all the Romans declared themselves purebloods, so the only pureblood houses have Latin names."

"But none of the big pureblood houses now have Latin names," Draco said. "Even Malfoy is French."

"Remus says that's the point," Harry answered. Draco digested this in silence, and seemed about to speak again when they emerged from the tunnel into an enormous cavern.

There was something in the cavern, enormous and glowing pale white with undertones of green and blue, black and red. Harry could feel Tonks grow tense.

"That's not it," he whispered, stepping forward. "The basilisk is green..."

Tonks moved quickly, placing herself between him and the rest of the cavern; she edged toward it carefully, wand held high. Finally the little globe of light thrown by the wand began to encompass it, picking out facets that shone like glass.

"It's the skin," she said, amazed. "It shed its skin."

"It must be..." Draco glanced at Harry. "It must be bloody enormous."

"Yeah," Harry said grimly, reaching out to touch the papery skin, feeling it between his fingers. The thin parts alone felt like thick parchment. "Let's go on."

They edged around the snake-skin and Tonks held her wand aloft again; shadows danced across the far wall and were swallowed up by a great black tunnel nearby. She peered into it as they passed.

"I think this is how it got into the school," she said. "It looks like a drain-pipe. There are thousands of branches off of it."

"Wonder where it leads," Harry said.

"Probably bricked over," Tonks replied. "So much for the secret entrance to the Chamber of Secrets."

She moved closer to the far wall where shadows played like black fire over two figures; on closer inspection they resolved themselves into two entwined serpents, their eyes set with great glinting emeralds. Neville drew a shaky breath.

"They look alive," he whispered.

"I've seen that before," Draco added, pointing to the design. Harry and Tonks turned to look at him. "That's Slytherin's personal crest."

"I don't see any doors," Tonks said, biting her lip.

"We're looking at it," Harry replied. He knew what he had to do; every time he spoke, the emerald eyes flickered. He cleared his throat and spoke in Parseltongue.

Open.

A narrow crack appeared in the middle of the crest and the snakes began to pull apart as the wall slid smoothly out of sight in two halves. Tonks looked pale and frightened.

"We have to go in," Harry said softly.

"I go first," she answered. Harry looked at her, amazed. Even if she *was* a girl, in that moment he wanted only to be like Dora Tonks when he grew up.

She moved forward, nimbly climbing up to the gaping hole and vaulting through. Harry and the other boys followed less decisively but no less quickly, watching silently to see what she would do next.

This was also a cavern, though it seemed more intentional somehow, as though it had been carved. Towering stone pillars entwined with more carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long, black shadows through the odd, greenish gloom that filled the place.

"This is it," Tonks said, her voice barely audible. "We're standing in the Chamber of Secrets."

He would have recruited the house-elves in the kitchens if he could, but they had no idea what to look for and he had no time to fetch them; he would have to search himself.

Severus had learned detection spells early in his childhood, even before they became a vital part of his life at Hogwarts; a bullied child soon learns every method of detection his father can employ, and uses them himself when he suspects his bullies are hiding in wait for him. Hiding, and discovering when others were, had been twin weapons of his childhood.

Now he went methodically and carefully, never minding that centuries of searching had been futile; they hadn't known what to look for or where to look. He was using at least three on each washroom in Hogwarts: identifying strange drafts, revealing all hidden hexes, and searching for traces of recent magical activity. He found, mostly, graffiti.

In the third-floor washroom, however, he encountered *Myrtle* .

"Out of my way, you stupid bint," he roared, when she barged out of her stall to demand why he, a boy, was in the girls' washroom AGAIN. "There is a child in danger."

She looked at him, burst into tears, shouted, "I know!" and fled to her stall. He paused, amazed.

"You *know*?" he demanded, banging the door open. She dove into the toilet. "Damn you! You are still a student at this school and I am a senior professor! Come out of that bloody toilet this minute!"

A pair of eyes peered up at him from the toilet seat. He rubbed his forehead.

"How do you know that Padma Patil is in danger?" he asked, trying not to shout.

"She fell down the hole," Myrtle whimpered.

"What hole, idiot?"

"The hole she made in the sink," Myrtle offered, pulling back a little into the toilet.

"Which one?" he demanded, turning to stare at the row of sinks. He cast a discovery spell without waiting for her to answer. Two of them glowed slightly; recent magical usage.

"Second from the end," Myrtle whispered, pointing to one of the glowing ones. "She made a hole in it by hissing at it."

Severus ignored her; he was, instead, studying the sink itself. He reached out and rubbed some of the grime off the decorative tap; a snake's head, mouth open to allow water through. A similar

treatment of the handles showed them to be composed of intertwining snake bodies, sinuous and scaly.

"Severus Snape commands you to open," he tried, feeling an idiot. Nothing happened. "Open, damn you!"

"She hissed," Myrtle said.

"She did?" he demanded, turning to stare at her.

"She hissed and then there was a big hole and she fell into it."

Parseltongue. He didn't speak it; it wasn't something one could learn easily and he'd never seen the need. He tried a random hiss; of course it didn't work.

But any lock with a password could, his devious soul knew, be picked.

He sat down on the damp floor, composed his mind, and began to pick, slowly, at the concealment charms wreathing the sink.

"Keep your eyes narrowed," Tonks said as they moved forward, footsteps echoing off the shadowy walls. "If you see movement, shut them."

As they came level with the last pair of pillars, Tonks' lit wand illuminated an enormous statue, as tall as the Chamber itself. Harry looked up, basilisk forgotten, into an ancient wrinkled face with a long thin beard.

"Salazar Slytherin," Tonks whispered, studying the enormous gray feet in front of them. Then she gasped and ran forward.

"Padma," Harry breathed, dropping his broomstick and rushing to the crumpled, black-haired figure. Tonks was rolling her over, running her hands over Padma's arms and chest, checking her neck and head for injury.

"She's not dead -- not Petrified -- there's a pulse -- knocked unconscious, maybe," Tonks murmured. Her hands, when Harry took them, were cold; Neville knelt next to him and looked at Tonks worriedly. Harry turned to see Draco, his face white as a sheet under his pale hair, his eyes like dark, angry shadows in his face. His fingers were clenched around the broomstick so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

"Padma, sweetheart, wake up," Tonks said, cradling the girl's head on her lap. "Padma, come on, it's Professor Tonks. Wake up."

"She won't wake," said a new voice, and all four of them turned. Draco and Harry had their wands out before they'd properly registered who it was.

There was a tall, black-haired boy leaning against the nearest pillar, hands in pockets, watching them. He was strangely blurred around the edges, as though seen through a misted window. Still, Harry recognised the green eyes, the tidy black hair, and the narrow, clever shape of his face.

He heard Tonks slowly ease Padma's head back onto the stone and rise. She had come forward and wrapped her arm around Harry protectively, wand outstretched in front of them both, before Harry found his voice.

"Tom Riddle?" he asked hoarsely.

The boy nodded, glancing at Tonks warily.

"Why won't she wake?" Tonks asked. "What do you know?"

"She's still alive," the boy said with a shrug. "Only just."

"Do you know this boy, Harry?" Tonks asked. Harry glanced up at her, then turned back to stare at him. "He's not a student here."

"He used to be," Harry said. "He was a student years ago."

"You're a ghost, then?" Tonks asked. "Can you go for help?"

The boy shook his head. "Can't. I'm not a proper ghost."

"What?"

"I'm a memory," he said. He took one hand out of his pockets and pointed past Padma, to where a little book -- her journal -- lay between Slytherin's feet.

"I don't know if she'll survive being moved," Tonks said, ignoring his gesture. "Boys, take your broomsticks and go back the way you came. Go straight to Dumbledore in the Great Hall and tell him we've found her and she needs -- "

"I don't think that's a very good idea," Tom interrupted.

"Why -- the basilisk?" Tonks asked. "Do you know where it is?"

"No. It won't come until it's called," Tom replied.

"Then they've got to go now -- Harry, fly straight down the tunnel and don't touch the ground when you leave -- you'll have to get out before the acromantulae even know you're there -- "

"You'll never make it out of the Chamber," Tom interrupted again.

"Listen, there's no time for *games* ," Tonks said impatiently.

"Actually, I have all the time in the world," Tom said, grinning. Tonks slowly looked up at him, doubt beginning to show on her face.

"What are you?" she asked.

"I told you. I'm a memory," he said. "It's nice to have a bit of a stretch; I've been in that diary an awfully long time."

"What did you do to her?" Tonks asked. Neville and Draco slowly moved to put themselves between Tom and Padma.

"Nothing she didn't invite on herself, the stupid girl," he said. "She's been writing in my diary for ages, you know. She told me, actually..."

He turned to Draco, grinning at him. "It was supposed to be you, sport, wasn't it? You gave her the diary? Got it from some bloke named MacNair. Sounds like a stand-up character, if you ask me," he added with a laugh.

"Get away from him," Tonks snarled.

"Or what?" he asked. "You can't hex me until I properly exist, can you?"

"Whatever you're doing to her, stop it, or believe me I'll find a way," she retorted.

"Good luck with that," he answered. "It's wonderful, really. I've been gaining in power all these months as she's written to me, even when she was scared I was the one *doing things* to her -- making her kill the chickens, all that kind of thing. She's a very independent-minded girl, you know. It took a lot to keep her under harness; she even tried to trick me once or twice. And she did slip away from me once -- she was quite mad with fear by then, which I suppose excuses things. She got that Creevy boy. She did it to give you an alibi," he added, fixing his eyes on Harry. "You....are *very* interesting to me, Harry Potter. Try it and see what happens," he added conversationally, as Tonks made a move to hex him. "She's unconscious, but she can still feel *pain* ."

"Why am I so interesting to you?" Harry asked uneasily. "I'm just Harry."

"Oh, no you're not! You're Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived! Padma's told me all about you. How you defeated the Dark Lord before you could walk, how you can speak to snakes and how you're in Slytherin house too. Delightful."

And then, to Harry's shock, Tom spoke in Parseltongue. *Look at all the tricks we can do, Harry.*

Realisation slowly dawned.

"It was you, fifty years ago," Harry said. "You let the basilisk out then, too. And then -- then when you were afraid of getting caught, you framed Hagrid -- "

"He framed himself," Tom said, but he was quick to say it. "He was keeping an acromantula in a box under his bed, the fool. Where do you think they came from out there in the Forest? Horrific creatures. Dumb as rocks."

"Smart enough to know a bastard when they see one," Harry replied. "Been giving the basilisk enough trouble, haven't they?"

"Have they? Not *quite* enough, it would seem," Tom retorted.

"Dumbledore knew, didn't he?"

"Oh, who cares about him? Probably he did, but he never did anything to stop me," Tom answered with studied carelessness. "Still, after that he was annoyingly present all the time, always watching...and I couldn't very well let my beauty roam free again after the monster had supposedly been dealt with, could I? Hence, the journal."

"So that if someone ever got hold of it again...." Tonks murmured.

"I must say, I don't know where it's been all these years. I would think it would be my most prized possession," Tom mused. "Still, it worked."

"Not very well," Harry said. "Nobody's died -- not even Cricket."

"Yet," Tom replied. "Besides, there will be plenty of time for that after I've dealt with *you* . You don't think it's chance that led you here? You couldn't resist the mystery, and we both knew it. I could have had her bring anyone down here -- even her own sister. But you wouldn't have come yourself for anyone less than the article herself. And look what gifts you've brought with you! Even down to Little Malfoy, son of my greatest supporter -- "

"Oh, god," Tonks whispered. Harry turned to look at her, but she was staring at Tom.

"I see someone's finally figured it out," Tom sneered. He held up a finger and wrote letters in the air with it; they left a glowing aftermark, spelling out the name *Tom Marvolo Riddle* .

"From the genealogy," Draco murmured. "The one Padma *showed* us, remember? The Gaunt that wasn't a foster from the Blacks..."

"That's right. Fascinating stuff. Padma copied it down into the journal," Tom said. "I never knew

the Blacks were heirs to Slytherin as well. Means I wasn't the last heir of Slytherin after all. In fact, it means that you are," he said to Draco. "The Tonks girl doesn't count; watered-down half-breed. And I don't suppose your godfather's likely to breed any time soon, is he?" he asked Harry. "Padma told me all about *him*, too."

"I'll show you who's watered down," Tonks muttered, glaring at him. Tom grinned at her and turned his hands palm up, setting the letters into movement; slowly they formed new words.

i aM loRd voldemorT

Draco made a soft, fearful noise.

"I couldn't very well use my filthy Muggle father's name forever, could I?" Tom asked. "I made for myself a new name."

"Same pathetic Muggle blood, though," Tonks said suddenly. Tom stared at her, shocked. "You might think I'm a watered-down half-breed, but your father was a Muggle too."

Tom visibly restrained himself. "What's your point?"

"Only that you're lucky," Tonks said. "You won the genetic crapshoot and can talk to snakes. Big fucking deal. It doesn't make you powerful or special. A toddler beat the shit out of you last time you met him. What do you think he's going to do now?"

Tom took a step forward, bursting the smoky letters that still hung in the air. He stopped himself, then.

"That's the question, isn't it?" he asked Harry. "What *are* you going to do now, Harry Potter?"

"Picking on a little kid? Why don't you try fighting grownups?" Tonks demanded contemptuously.

"Dora," Neville said nervously.

"It's all right, Neville, he can't really *do* anything to you," Tonks said. "He only picks on children and the weak. He's a bully, nothing more. A half-blood bully."

"Bitch!" Tom shouted.

"Bastard!" Tonks shouted back. Tom's eyes flared red.

"How dare you, you puny little -- "

"-- half-blood?" Tonks asked. Tom raised his first and she raised her wand. "You really want me to try?"

Tom hesitated, then a smirk crept over his face. He let his fist fall and turned to the statue, raising his arms.

"When I tell you, take Padma and run," Tonks whispered to Harry. He turned to look at Neville and Draco, who nodded to show they'd heard.

Tom spoke again in Parseltongue, even as the other two began to edge closer to Padma's too-still body.

Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four, he said, raising his arms. Almost involuntarily, Harry and Tonks turned to look at the statue. There was the horrible sound of stone grating on stone, and the statue began to move, its mouth opening wider and wider, revealing a gaping hole behind it.

A hole in which something was moving, *slithering*....

"Do you truly wish to see what I'm capable of?" Tom shouted, over the roar of the stone. The whole Chamber shook.

"Close your eyes," Tonks shouted, shoving Harry towards Padma and the shelter of Slytherin's feet.

Harry shut his eyes obediently, ducking under the shadow of the statue's robes with Neville and Draco. The grinding noise stopped with a sharp finality, and there was silence broken only by the sound of the basilisk, emerging from Slytherin's mouth. Harry squinted; Tonks was looking at Tom.

"Can't fight yourself so you call on something bigger? Typical," she snorted. Harry was no longer at all afraid that Professor Snape was being too mean to Dora.

"Be silent," Tom snarled.

"Make me," Tonks answered.

Tom hissed; Harry heard the order to kill and tried to shout a warning at Tonks, but she was already ducking and rolling behind a column. The basilisk dropped to the floor in front of them, but it was focused entirely on Dora; Harry could see its huge head but not its eyes.

"Dora, it's coming on the left!" he shouted. She wheeled around to the right and fired a lucky shot; something exploded wetly and the serpent screamed in pain. It hurt Harry; it sounded no different from his own Snake when he had died, amplified a thousand times. It drew back and hissed, turning its head; Harry closed his eyes just in time and pulled Neville and Draco further back, away from Padma but into the safety of a low niche. He heard scales grate on stone as the basilisk tried to fit inside, but the crown of horns on its head prevented it.

Not them! Kill the woman! Tom screamed. There was a thunderous booming noise and the basilisk shrieked again, so close to Harry that he thought he might go deaf. Neville was clutching his arm so tightly that his nails were drawing blood.

There was a groan of scale-on-stone as the basilisk pulled away, again chasing after Dora; Harry ducked out of the niche and snatched the diary from where it lay, then darted back into the shelter of Slytherin's robes and began tearing out pages. This time it was Tom who screamed in pain.

"She got the other eye," Draco whispered in his ear.

"HARRY!" Tonks shouted. "THROW IT TO ME!"

Harry darted forward, leapt over Padma and ducked under the basilisk's flailing tail; he threw the diary in her direction, paper flying everywhere, just as the basilisk made a sudden strike.

Tom Riddle laughed as blue light exploded around Dora; the serpent let out a moan of agony and there was a terrible snapping noise. Harry saw Dora struggle backwards, an enormous fang buried in her leg.

The basilisk's tail flopped, spasming, and Harry glanced over his shoulder to see Draco and Neville dragging Padma into the safety of the stone niche. With a crash, the serpent's head fell to the floor, blood drooling out its mouth.

"Dora!" Harry shouted, as she collapsed against one of the columns.

"She'll be dead in minutes," Tom's voice called. He was still laughing. Harry ran to Tonks, who was holding the fang in both hands. Her wand lay next to the book, a few feet away.

"Harry, the book," she said. Harry turned automatically to pick the book up; there was a terrible noise and when he turned around again, Tonks had the fang free. Blood ran in rivulets down her leg.

She didn't even hesitate and Harry had no time to flinch; with a swift movement she swung the fang up in an arc and brought it down, right through the book in his hands.

There was a moment of silence even more terrible than the sound of the basilisk dying.

"Dora!"

Harry heard Snape's voice echoing in the Chamber, but he was busy staring at the book; great bursts of ink were gushing out of it, flowing over his hands and onto his robe. Someone pushed past him; he looked up to see Snape, catching Dora as her leg finally gave out.

"Basilisk venom," she murmured, her eyes turning glassy.

"Idiot woman," Snape snarled. There were noises in the background, someone was screaming and someone else was swearing, but Harry could only stand there, dazed, watching Snape slide one arm under her knees and the other around her shoulders, lifting her off the ground.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked Harry. Harry shook his head.

"Under the lake, maybe," he said in a hushed voice.

"Are you unhurt?"

"Padma -- "

"She's all right!" Neville called. "We're fine."

"Right," Snape said. "I'll be back for you -- stay here if you can. Dora?"

"Mmh?"

"I'm going to side-along. Hold tight."

He closed his eyes and Harry saw his lips move; he thought he said *Please Merlin let this work*.

Then he was gone with a loud crack and a lingering smell of sulfur.

Harry pulled the fang out of the book carefully and walked with deliberate slowness around the blood-drenched head of the basilisk. He put one hand up to touch the lowest spike of its crown, sadly.

You didn't know any better, he murmured. Then he turned to the statue again.

"It's dead," he called. Neville and Draco emerged from the gloom, holding Padma upright between them. She looked confused and ill, but she was walking; even as he watched, she straightened up and began to move a little more confidently.

"Hiya, Padma," he said quietly.

"Is it over?" she asked. Harry nodded, holding out the diary. She let go of Neville and Draco's shoulders, walking up to him unsteadily and accepting the diary from him. Harry watched, wordlessly, as she sat on the ground next to the dead basilisk and began deliberately tearing the rest of the pages out of it. It took all three of them a while to realise that she had begun to cry, and that as she went on she was tearing them out faster, more desperately, until she was merely shredding the paper with her fingers and nothing was left but the cover. She ripped it in two, furiously, and hurled both halves at the basilisk.

Harry heard footsteps and knew that Snape was returning; he offered a hand to Padma and helped

her to her feet, then led her around the serpent's head.

"You're not injured? Physically?" Snape asked without preamble. He crouched in front of Padma, dark eyes studying her coolly. She swallowed, lifted her chin, and shook her head.

"I'm taking you directly to St. Mungo's. I can't take all four of you; if you three are unhurt there's a passage back up to the school through the old pipes -- don't go through the forest, you won't last five minutes. Go directly to Dumbledore and tell him that I've taken Padma to the hospital and Professor Tonks is there as well; ask him to send Fawkes."

"Is she going to be all right?" Harry asked. "Professor Tonks?"

The shadows on Snape's face seemed to deepen and shift, frighteningly.

"I don't know," he answered. He straightened and took Padma's hand, wrapping it firmly around his arm.

"Hold on tightly to me, and picture the lobby of St. Mungo's as clearly as you can in your mind," he said. "This won't take long."

They vanished with the same appalling noise and smell; Harry looked at Neville and Draco, wondering if he was as dirt-smudged and messy as they were.

"Let's leave," Neville said quietly. He looked like he was about to cry. Harry realised that it was Neville's sister, not just Professor Tonks, who might die tonight. To his own surprise, he wrapped his arms around Neville's shoulders and hugged him awkwardly.

"It'll be all right," he said. "Come on, we'll find the tunnel Professor Snape talked about."

He led the other two back into the cavern where the basilisk-snakeskin lay, up to the mouth of the giant water-pipe. Even as they mounted their broomsticks there was a creaking crash and a cloud of dust burst out from the tunnel they'd come in by; the *Viae Serpentorum* was collapsing.

"We should hurry," Harry said, and the three of them together began the long journey back up the pipe.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Chapter 23

Fawkes arrived at St. Mungo's while Snape was still speaking to the Healers about Padma; a little part of his brain was shouting that he made a rotten romantic lead, since any hero in his right mind would be off pining at Dora's bedside, but the rest of his brain was quite sensibly reminding him that he had a duty to his students and that pining did nobody any good.

"Hey, no pets in here," ordered one of the mediwizards.

"He's not a pet, imbecile," Snape said, accepting the letter Fawkes offered him and allowing the bird to perch on his shoulder.

"Well, he can't stay here."

"He can and will," Snape growled, opening the letter. It informed him that Harry, Neville, and Draco were safe and being seen to by Pomona, and that Padma's parents had been notified and were on their way via floo while McGonagall had been sent to get Andromeda and Ted. He had hoped to use Fawkes to get back to Hogwarts and make a report personally, but he would have to go and meet them or they'd probably get lost in the sea of bureaucracy that was the ground-floor of St. Mungo's.

He turned the letter over and took a quill from the fingers of the mediwizard who was making notes on Padma's condition. On the back of the letter he scrawled "Will come as soon as possible, send Fawkes if urgently needed" and gave it to the phoenix before handing the wizard back his quill.

"Go to Professor Tonks," he told the bird, who tilted his head and chirped inquiringly. "Go to Nymphadora and stay there."

Fawkes vanished and Snape ran from the room, making mental notes on how to return there once he'd found the Patils.

It was past midnight, somewhere out in the real world, and the lobby of the hospital was nearly empty -- or rather, it had been before Parents had begun arriving. Technically, though he loved Andromeda and Ted more deeply than he would admit to himself, he hated all Parents. All they ever did was complain and interfere.

Sirius Black was standing in the middle of the lobby in a pair of black silk pyjamas, shouting at the mediwitch on desk duty; Lupin, in a rather more sensible pair of trousers and white pyjama shirt, was busy checking the floors. The Patils, fully if hastily dressed, were clutching each other tightly and looking worried. Ted and Andromeda looked as if they hadn't yet gone to bed, but both of them were barefoot and Ted had forgotten to take off his reading glasses. Andromeda was holding tightly to McGonagall's arm.

"Mr. Patil, Ms. Patil," Snape said, as they hurried up to him. "She's fine. She's awake and she seems out of danger."

Padma's father began to weep.

"I need to speak to the Tonkses," he said. They nodded, but he was already turning; he met Ted's eye and saw the despairing look of a father preparing for the worst possible news.

"I don't know fully what's happened yet," he said. "As far as I can tell, Dora was bitten by a basilisk. They're venomous, but there are several known antidotes and I think she arrived in time."

"What in the bloody *fucking* hell is a basilisk doing at Hogwarts?" Sirius demanded.

"Shut up, Black, your son is quite healthy and still at the school," Snape snarled suddenly. "Nymphadora may be dying, so you *will* be quiet."

"They insisted on coming," McGonagall said. "Has Fawkes found you?"

"I've sent him to Dora. You," he said, wheeling and turning on the mediwitch. "Where is Nymphadora Tonks?"

"We can't give out information on patients -- "

"I will strangle you barehanded if I must," Snape answered. She must have seen that it wasn't a lie; she made a frightened noise and looked down at the parchment in front of her.

"She's one floor up in critical care," she said. Ted and Andromeda ran for the stairs, Sirius and Remus heading for the nearest floo portal that would take them to Hogwarts.

"Come with me," Snape said to the Patils. "I'll take you to your daughter."

When he had seen them safely into the room and properly terrorised the staff into allowing them to stay, he headed for the stairs again. He could have -- perhaps should have -- run, but if she was well she would still be there, and if she was not....well, then there was little need to hurry.

He had almost reached the stairs when there was a shout from behind him and he turned.

"*Severus!* "

Standing in the corridor, leaning on a crutch, stood a young woman in hospital-issue pyjamas with one leg tightly braced from thigh to ankle. Pink hair, blue-grey eyes, and a phoenix perched on her shoulder --

"Dora," he said, suddenly aware that he was trembling as he came forward. "Tonks -- "

"Hi," she said, looking down at the crutch and mistaking his tone for worry. "Oh -- it's nothing, temporary. And they've already healed my arm -- "

In the middle of a hospital corridor, as the mediwitches and Healers walking with Tonks stopped to stare, Severus Snape swooped down on the young woman with the bright pink hair and the crutch and kissed her so hard that they both stumbled and Fawkes took flight, scolding them loudly. The crutch clattered to the ground when he caught her around the waist, pulling her close, and her arms went around his neck. His other hand cupped her cheek just as the Healers began to applaud.

They broke apart, Nymphadora's hair turning deep gold in embarrassment, spots of colour appearing on Severus' cheeks.

"I -- " he stuttered, shocked at his own behaviour. "I -- "

"I've dropped my crutch," Tonks said weakly. He crouched slowly and picked it up, handing it to her.

"They told us you were on a lower floor -- your parents have gone there," he said.

"The Healers wanted to make sure I wasn't hexed at all," she replied. "Can you show me where they went?"

He nodded, taking her hand and leading her away from the hoots of the mediwitches, down to the end of the corridor where a single, magically-operated elevator stood. He helped her inside and it began to creak slowly downwards.

"You have my deepest apologies," he said, shame still burning his cheeks as she turned to face him. "The pressures of the moment -- it's been a long night."

"Of course," she murmured.

"I would never presume -- "

"Severus?"

He looked at her, awaiting what he was sure would be an ill-worded but politely-intended reproof, possibly even a rejection.

"Unless you're actively trying to get rid of me, shut up and stop apologising," she said. "I mean, I know I don't look that great right now, but -- "

"This is ludicrous," he said, bending to kiss her again, if only to shut her up. It was an exceptional kiss, better even than the last one; he felt her fingers thread through his hair as her body pressed

against his...

...and the doors opened.

He stepped back so quickly that she nearly dropped her crutch again, then caught her around the waist to stop her from overbalancing. Fortunately, there was no-one in the lobby except the mediwizard at the desk, who gave them both a sardonic look. Even as he helped her out of the elevator, Andromeda came down the hallway, the stormclouds visibly brewing.

"If I am not told," she shouted at the mediwizard, "In ten seconds or less where my daughter has been taken, so help me Merlin -- "

"Andromeda," Snape said quietly. She whirled, furiously; in a split second her expression completely changed.

"Oh, my baby," she said, and he moved away so that she could wrap her daughter in her arms. "You weren't in the room they sent us to and I was so afraid -- "

"It's all right, mum," Dora said, but it was at least another thirty seconds before Ted could pry her mother away so that he could have a good look at her.

"You're hurt," he said, staring at the brace on her leg.

"It's only temporary. I have potions for the poison and the leg's already healing..." she answered, before the wind was knocked out of her by her father's tight hug. She squeaked. "I'm okay dad, really...I got here before the poison did any permanent damage."

"Thank Merlin," he murmured. "It was like the Grindylows all over again..."

"It's all right, really," she said, looking embarrassed as he let her go. "Severus saved my life, you know!" she added, misdirecting their attention. He ducked his head at the sudden looks from the Tonkses.

"Anyone would have," he muttered.

"What, with me and three adolescent boys?" she asked. "He Apparated me to the hospital."

"How did you Apparate from Hogwarts?" Andromeda asked.

"There's time for all that later," Severus said stiffly. "I should notify the Headmaster that you're all right, and check on the children."

"All right," Dora agreed reluctantly. "But come back when you're finished?"

He nodded and would have turned to go, but she put a hand on his arm and leaned up, kissing his

cheek. He avoided her parents' eyes completely as he fled into the stairwell, though he did hear Ted say "Dora, are you and Severus -- " before the door shut behind him.

Harry, Neville, and Draco were looking much cleaner by the time Snape returned via floo to Hogwarts, and they were vocally requesting that they be allowed to go and see Padma and Dora. Sirius was with them in the still-crowded Great Hall, attempting to keep them under control.

The three boys ran up to Snape as he appeared, demanding to be taken to St. Mungo's; Sirius, who had apparently borrowed a set of robes from a seventh-year to cover his pyjamas, glared at him.

"Stop this infernal commotion at once!" Snape roared. The boys immediately fell silent, which only annoyed Sirius further. "Where is the Headmaster?"

"Here, Severus," Dumbledore called from the high table, where he was in conference with the rest of the professors, minus one or two. "Have you come from St. Mungo's?"

"Yes, Headmaster. Professor Tonks is out of danger; Ms. Patil appears to be well," he said. A wave of murmurs raced around the hall. Dumbledore held up his hands for silence.

"Thank you. Professors, I think you may escort your students back to their dormitories; please remain in the common rooms tonight to forestall any more untoward events. Madam Hooch will supervise the Gryffindors in the absence of the Deputy Headmistress; Slytherins, please report to Professor Sinistra, as I shall require Professor Snape's company a while longer."

Sirius herded the boys forward as the rest of the school began to stream out the doors, whispering and giving them all odd looks. Dumbledore gestured for them to be seated at one end of the Hufflepuff table, then brought a chair of his own from the high table and sat in it, polishing his glasses carefully.

"Now," he said, "having had only the very barest bones of the story, I wonder if we might not fill in a few gaps."

"There are certainly a few I'd like filled," Snape snarled.

"Please, Severus, now is not the time for histrionics."

"Histri -- !" Snape sputtered.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster, I think now is *precisely* the time for histrionics," Sirius agreed, then looked horrified at having said something in support of Severus Snape. "I'd like to know what's happened, too."

"So you shall. I have sent Mr. Lupin with Professor Kettleburn and Rubeus Hagrid through the

portal Professor Snape so obligingly opened for us in the third-floor washroom," Dumbledore said. "Incidentally, Severus, in some calmer time you will have to share with me how you became so adept at magical lock-picking; dropping the visual wards with a hex on the sink was nicely done. In the meantime, let us not see if we might start at the beginning and continue until we come to the end. At which point, if we are able, we shall stop."

"I suspect, Headmaster, that you must begin," Snape murmured. "With Miss Patil's abduction, I think."

"Dear me, no. I believe the story begins in Mardjin Alley, some time last year," Dumbledore replied. "Does it not, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco swallowed and looked apprehensively at Snape before turning back to the Headmaster. "Yessir," he whispered. Sirius laid a large hand on his thin shoulder, and he lifted his chin a little. "Yes, sir," he repeated.

"You were given a journal?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Macnair -- "

"Macnair!" Sirius exploded suddenly. "I'll fucking have him *put down* -- "

"Sirius, if you cannot contain yourself, I must ask you to leave," Dumbledore said firmly. Sirius subsided. "Continue, Mr. Malfoy."

"He's a friend of mum's," Draco explained. "He gave me the journal because he said I'd need the proper tools for school. It was the wrong year though, and tatty and old, so I thought I'd just say thank you and throw it out later. But Padma said she'd always wanted to try keeping a journal..."

"I see," Dumbledore murmured. "Did Walden Macnair say where he acquired it?"

"I guess he bought it somewhere," Draco said thoughtfully.

"Not bloody likely," Sirius muttered.

"Continue, Draco."

"So I gave it to Padma. I saw her write in it sometimes," Draco said with a shrug.

"I believe that some -- not all -- of the...mischief and mayhem that has occurred this year is the result of what I understand to be a manipulation of Miss Patil by the diary itself," Dumbledore said. "Perhaps, Harry, you will share this evening's events with us..."

Harry recounted the battle with the basilisk, assisted by Neville and Draco, while Sirius occasionally swore under his breath. When they came to the aftermath of the basilisk's death,

Dumbledore turned to Severus.

"I understand you did, in fact, Apparate from within the Chamber of Secrets," he said.

"The wards on the access tunnel..." Snape gestured a little haplessly. "Slytherin was a very flexible-minded wizard. He set charms to prevent his work being found even if the material structure of the school was modified. The dungeons' stairwell has been moved three times by various useless Headmasters and it always moves back, and that's merely a set of stairs. It stood to reason that his inner sanctuary would be impervious to things like anti-Apparation spells."

"That will have to be seen to," Dumbledore said to himself, even as footsteps rang in the Great Hall and they looked up to see Remus, pale and worried, approaching.

"Kettleburn and Hagrid have gone to the kitchens for a stiff drink," he said. "I can't say I blame them. I've never seen a basilisk up close and personal before, and I hope to Merlin I never do again. I assume it was Dora who blew its brains out through its eyesockets?"

"She did what?" Snape demanded.

"Well, that's Kettleburn's professional opinion as an animal handler. He thinks she used a modified, focused *expelliarmus*. And there's this," Remus said, holding up a leather sack he'd been carrying at his side. It was full to the brim with scraps of paper. Two bits of pasteboard were shoved down one side. "We gathered up every piece, like you told us."

"Torch it," Sirius said, starting forward. Dumbledore pulled the drawstring of the bag tight, tucking it away in his voluminous robes.

"You should know better, Sirius," he said gently. "This will require more than mere fire, that I promise you."

"Poor Padma," Draco murmured. "You should have seen the way she tore into it."

"Understandably," Dumbledore replied. Just then Fawkes appeared and circled the hall, settling on Dumbledore's shoulder. He dropped a bit of scrap paper in his lap. "Ah. Miss Patil and Professor Tonks, it appears, will both make a full recovery; I believe we have reached the end of our story, at least for this evening. All things considered, we shall suspend classes on the morrow. More time for the students to study for their exams, and more time for our young would-be heroes to spend with their friend," he added with a smile. "Mr. Lupin, Mr. Black, under the circumstances I will allow you to escort Neville to his sister's side; in the absence of closer kin, I suspect you may act *in loco parentis* for Mr. Malfoy as well, as I'm certain he would like to see his cousin. And I cannot, of course, stop you from taking custody of your legal ward for the evening."

He stood, gathering up his robes. "If you will excuse me, there is the disposal of the basilisk's body to be considered, as well as a few other small matters. Severus, you will certainly wish to be

a party to the...dissection of the noble if ill-managed beast?"

Snape looked torn. "Y...es, of course, Headmaster -- "

"Very well, I will see that it is put in a stasis charm until you return from St. Mungo's. Please locate Parvati and bring her along with the other children to the hospital."

Sirius glanced back and forth from a grateful-looking Snape to Dumbledore. "Here, why is *he* -- "

"Do run along, Sirius, there's a good fellow," Dumbledore said with a gentle smile.

Dora Tonks woke, the morning after her battle with the basilisk, to clean warm sheets, a brightly-lit room, and the sound of an almighty crash.

She pushed herself up on her elbows, looking around; a second muffled crash indicated that whatever was going on, it was happening outside her door.

Her leg felt stiff, but it didn't hurt too badly; at least this time she didn't have a hundred small, swollen, itchy bites to tend for weeks and weeks together. She tried swinging her legs over the edge of the bed and then stopped as icy pain raced up and down her body.

Okay, maybe it *did* hurt too badly.

She carefully lifted her legs back onto the bed and scooted back so that the pillows supported her, drawing her good leg up slightly. There was a pitcher and a water-glass on the table next to the bed, and she helped herself while she waited for her head to clear a little. She'd fallen asleep last night after talking to her mum and dad a little and giving a report to Moody. She remembered that much, and the news that everyone was safe. She thought she'd woken once in the night to the sound of her dad talking to someone -- maybe Sirius -- but she couldn't be certain.

The door opened and she glanced up; Severus entered, shut the door tightly, and leaned on it, tilting his head back and closing his eyes.

"Hi," she said in a small voice. He started and looked at her.

"You're awake," he said, coming forward quickly. "Do you need a Healer?"

"No," she said. "I feel all right. What's going on out there?"

He turned to look at the door. "Oh -- nothing."

She raised her eyebrows. It was a move she'd learned from him.

"I may have been a bit impatient with a journalist lurking around your door," he admitted. "And the photographer she brought. Specifically, his camera."

"Oh, dear," she murmured.

"Your parents are having breakfast; I can fetch them..."

"No -- that's all right, let them eat. I've put them through enough yesterday," she said with a smile. "Come on, sit down and tell me what's going on. How's Padma?"

"Discharged to her parents this morning. They're with your parents, and Black and Lupin, and the rest of the troublemakers," he said sourly. "I daresay the hospital canteen has never seen such a circus."

"I'm sure they've seen worse," she answered. "Why aren't you with them?"

"I can go -- "

"That wasn't what I meant," she said, putting a hand on his sleeve. She tugged, gently, until he sat on the edge of the bed, head turned to study her.

"I was just...making sure those imbeciles they employ here had seen to you before I joined everyone else," he said.

"Well, as it happens, they haven't, so I'd be obliged if you'd wait here with me so as to yell at them more conveniently when they do show up," she said. He actually smiled.

"Of course."

"Severus Snape, knight gallant."

"Hardly," he replied. "I'm not the one who saved Padma Patil's life last night."

"No, just mine."

He shrugged. She looked down at her fingers, twisting in her lap.

"About...last night...and yesterday, and really the past few weeks, I suppose..." he began. "What do you think of....what's happened?"

"Aside from the bits where I nearly died?"

"In general terms."

"I've enjoyed them," she said. He worried his lower lip with his teeth; the scars on his temple, three long jagged lines left by Peter Pettigrew, were red against his face, a sign that he was embarrassed.

"As have I, but we must be sensible," he said. "We would do better to consider the situation at large before our...impulses run away with us."

"That's half the fun of this," she answered.

"Is it?" he asked distantly. "I can't say I've encountered it in quite this fashion before."

"What parts of our...situation did you want to consider?" she asked, a little amused.

"Facts of age and experience. I *am* twelve years older than you," Severus said slowly, and she gave him a bare nod. "When you were born I was already attending Hogwarts. Before you had reached the age of ten, I was a professor there. For seven years you were my student. For much of our lives, the balance of power has been on my side, and that's not easily forgotten by either of us."

"I know," she whispered.

"We are nothing alike," he continued. "You are a clumsy, foolish young woman -- "

"Severus!"

"And I am a sullen, cruel man pushing middle age."

There was a second of silence as she realised what he'd said, and she touched his shoulder. "You are not," she said fiercely. "You're hardly thirty-three, and you just want your students to do well - - you're a good teacher -- "

"The problem is," he continued inexorably, "that I'm fairly sure you are one of the few people on this earth I can tolerate for more than five minutes at a time and therefore I appear to be falling in love with you. I'm not any happier about it than you are," he added. She stared at him. "If you want me to, I'll leave."

"I...everyone's going to be *scandalised*," she blurted. He lifted an eyebrow. "Sirius is going to make so much fun of me -- Harry's going to positively gloat -- "

"Not quite the admission of affection I'd hoped for," he drawled. "But it will do. You've forgotten what Albus Dumbledore is going to say."

"Merlin," she wailed, and he leaned forward, turning to allow her to bury her face in his chest. She felt him pat the back of her head awkwardly; it occurred to her that he was no more experienced at this than she was.

"My world, in general, is a world of order, of systems and formulae," he said against her hair. "This is much more complicated. I cannot promise that I will always know what I'm doing."

She laughed into his shirt. "Mark the calendar -- Severus Snape admitted there's something he didn't know."

"You're *teasing* me."

"Yes," she said, tilting her face up and kissing his jaw. He turned his head, catching her mouth with his own.

"I also cannot promise your parents won't disapprove," he said, when they had finished kissing. "They are good friends, but there is a limit to friendship."

"Let me deal with them," she replied. "It's not like you're going to need to get a permission slip signed."

He turned his head away and for a moment she thought he was going to bring up some other troublesome fact, but instead he slipped off the bed and turned to her.

"The circus is coming," he said.

"How did you -- "

"I'll tell you later," he promised, as the door opened and the room began to fill with people -- Neville and Harry climbing up on the bed, Draco standing nearby, the Patil family en masse appearing to thank her, her parents beaming in the background. She did look up from all the attention in time to see Severus quietly leave the room, stopping to say a few words to Andromeda on his way out.

Padma was quieter than usual, a little withdrawn, although that was more reassuring than a laughing, shouting girl would have been. Her parents were grateful, it was obvious, but they were also gracious about it and Tonks found herself liking them immensely.

With her usual aplomb, Andromeda had soon wrangled a small table and several chairs into the room, stolen by Remus and Sirius from a nearby waiting area. Although the Patils were on their way home so that Padma could have a few days of rest, everyone else seemed determined to stay and keep Dora occupied. There was the whole story to rehash once more in detail, with feats of heroic bravery embellished suitably by the boys and admired suitably by Andromeda and Ted. Several bouquets of flowers arrived throughout the morning, and at noon one particularly pretty basket of dahlias arrived attached to the arm of the Headmaster.

"I see that you have been kept busy, Professor Tonks," he said with a small smile, setting his bouquet on the table and touseling Draco's hair as he passed. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, sir, thank you," she said. "They're discharging me this evening."

"Splendid. You will go home, I hope, for some well-deserved rest?"

She looked indecisive. "Final exams start in two days, sir..."

"So they do, so they do. Do you intend to return to administer them?"

"I'd like to," she said, glancing at her parents before turning back to Dumbledore. "I won't be walking much, but I'm not the one who'll need to."

He smiled again, that small, knowing smile, and then rubbed his hands together.

"I was wondering if I might have a moment alone with Professor Tonks, in that case," he said, pointedly not looking at anyone in particular. The boys sighed and began to head for the door; Sirius glanced at Andromeda before he and Remus followed. The Tonkses gave their daughter good-bye hugs and assured her they'd be back later in the afternoon. When they were gone, Dumbledore stood looking down at Dora for a long moment.

"Sir, can I ask..."

"Hmm?" he said.

"What about Padma? And exams, I mean."

"Oh, I think she can be excused from her exams. Extenuating circumstances. Don't you think so?"

"Well...she's a Ravenclaw. And I know her...she likes order. She likes things to happen as they're supposed to."

"I see. You think she would rather take her exams than be forced to miss them?"

She shrugged. "I think you should give her the option."

"I will take that into consideration," he replied. "Quite an ordeal you have suffered, both of you."

"This'll be over soon enough."

"And you will return to your position as Auror. If I may say so, you are remarkably suited to it."

She smiled. "Thank you, sir."

"We will miss you. Severus in particular, I suspect. A little irreverence is good for him." He studied her again, as if he were trying to divine how to ask something. She waited patiently.

"Nymphadora, do you believe in omens?" he finally asked. She tilted her head to one side, considering.

"You're not talking about Divination."

"No. Something larger than tea leaves and star-readings. The confluence of events in time...the preparation of the way for larger things," he said. "Manifest prophecy, if you like."

"I know what you're talking about...but I'm not sure I understand why."

Dumbledore produced a small gold phial from his pocket, no bigger than the end-joint of his little finger.

"This contains all that remains of Tom Riddle's diary," he said quietly. "A little ash, a little grease...I believe you are the most qualified to keep custody of it. It is harmless. Now, at any rate. I would not lay that burden on Padma Patil, but I trust you will keep it secure."

She allowed him to place it in her palm. The top was sealed with scarlet wax and cork.

"Walden Macnair is an ignorant man who follows because he has not the courage to lead, even to lead in the name of a bad cause," Dumbledore continued. "I suspect he was told to give young Draco that diary; I even suspect that Draco was a known and intended sacrifice, though who can say if that is true or not. I don't believe Macnair was ordered by anyone with real power to do this, but I do believe that this...child-resurrection of the man who would become Voldemort may be a sign of things to come."

"What can we do?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"As your own mentor says -- be vigilant. Be careful. Look for things others who are ignorant may not." He smiled at her. "Be honest, brave, and true. And now, my dear, I must return to Hogwarts. Always so much to attend to; there is truly no rest for the wicked."

When he was gone, she stared down at the plain golden phial in her hand. At last, she undid the clasp of the chain and secured it around her neck, tucking it inside the hospital pyjama shirt she wore. When Severus returned that afternoon, he found her sleeping soundly, her face smooth and peaceful in the afternoon light.

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Laocoon's Children: Secret Tongues

Epilogue

Exams had passed and the school term was over almost before Harry could catch his breath. Considering everything, the Quidditch championship was cancelled, which only seemed to speed up the arrival of exams. Padma even came back to school and took her tests, though she went home right afterward and Hermione Granger beat her out for top of the year, which must have been annoying. Neville promised Harry he'd go visit the Patils as often as he could, and Draco swore he would too, although of course for Draco it was a little more difficult. Especially since his mum was apparently in a very foul mood indeed and had been seen publicly fighting with Walden Macnair, up to and including trying to scratch his eyes out. Draco didn't know what it all meant, but he had a feeling he was going to have a very long, very unstable summer. Harry pressed the invisibility cloak on him again, and Draco didn't even make a token objection this time.

Draco did, however, have one consolation for not being able to visit Padma personally. He sent Dobby to the Patils for the summer, with his wages paid in advance, which Sarasvati thought was a very gentlemanly gesture and Parvati thought was pure show-offery. Draco assured Neville and Harry that Parvati was just jealous because nobody had ever sent *her* a house-elf.

Summer would be different for Harry than it was for the others; he was going back to Betwys Beddau, the little Muggle town where they kept their summer house, and he wouldn't be able to even fly on his broomstick for three full months. Still, there were good points; he had a long, exciting train trip to look forward to, as well as the warm summer days in what Remus always said must be the greenest place on earth. He'd get to see all his old school friends from before Hogwarts and play football again and go fishing in the river with Padfoot, and there would be books from Professor Snape (there always were) and he'd have his bicycle to ride and all the town-folk would spoil him rotten. It didn't look to be such a terrible summer, except that he couldn't write to his friends. And he was only just a little bit envious that Andromeda and Ted were taking Neville to Canada for a whole month to visit Ted's Muggle brother and his family.

Remus had gone down to Wales during exams to take all their things to Betwys Beddau -- the important things, anyway -- and so there was no strict need to stop in London, but they had to transfer trains anyway and Sirius had inexplicably booked them on a much later train for the rest of the trip.

"We have to pick up the portrait," he explained to Harry, as they walked through the crowds in Diagon. "We'll keep it in London most of the time, but I thought you'd like to see it and we can certainly take it to Betwys Beddau for the summer."

"Is it really going to make you look young for ever?" Harry asked. He followed Sirius into Fansif Alley and towards the green door of Broosh & Chackle.

"No," Sirius said, looking over Harry's head at Remus. "We were going to, but..."

"Well, given everything...." Remus added.

"I mean, you wouldn't want your old godfather to look the same forever, would you?" Sirius asked, somewhat anxiously. Harry grinned at him.

"Course not," he said, and Sirius smiled in relief.

"I thought we'd get your portrait done next year," Sirius continued. "Over Christmas, maybe. Helena's dying to be the woman who paints the portrait of the Boy Who Lived."

"Sure," Harry said agreeably. He felt in quite an agreeable state; Peter Pettigrew hadn't been heard from in ages, he'd personally helped save Padma from being eaten alive by a diary, and he had Remus and Sirius' undivided attention. He continued to feel agreeable all through the train ride to Llangynog and the bus from there to Betwys Beddau.

There was a letter waiting atop a pile of books when they arrived, as Harry had expected; Professor Snape's handwriting, in his usual emerald-green ink.

Harry,

I trust that you have arrived safely and without undue incident. Please inform your guardians that I have tested the wards on the house and found them sound, although the state of the garden leaves much to be desired. It is upon this subject that you will conduct your summer studies; I expect full documentation of a proper wizarding herb garden and have provided the appropriate seed packets and a text on their care and cultivation. Please do not allow that empty-skulled mutt of yours to dig it up.

In the interests of keeping you out of mischief, I have also selected several volumes for your summer reading. Try to retain something from them.

Nymphadora insists that I inform you that she "says hello". The woman is infamous.

As ever, I am

Your Professor

Severus Snape

Remus sorted through the books, idly. "Here's the text on Herbology, it's the usual stuff...other books: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Never Cry Wolf*, and *A Brief History Of Wizarding Politics*. Oh, and *Wizard Bird*. Say what you like, Padfoot, but the man knows how to pick books."

"At least one of those is going to bore him to tears," Sirius answered, pouring instantly-hot water out of the kettle on the stove.

"Run and get into your pyjamas, Harry, and if you're in bed in half an hour we'll pretend you're asleep and not reading one of Professor Snape's books."

Harry was allowed to stay up late that night, with his cocoa on the bedside table and *Never Cry Wolf* propped on his knees; the summer unrolled before him like a splendid panorama, and he was happy.

A month into his holiday, Harry woke to the insistent sound of knocking on the front door of the River House. He froze in his bed; nobody had ever knocked on the front door before. Nobody could *find* the front door. Which meant that either the *fidelius* was broken, or --

"You stay there," Sirius shouted at him as he ran down the hallway, wand in hand. It wouldn't work unless Harry was in danger -- that was the deal they'd made with Albus Dumbledore -- but he tended to keep it closer than he had in the past. Remus staggered out after him, pulling on his pyjamas as he went and blocking the doorway between living room and hall. Harry saw him nod at Sirius, and Sirius flung the front door open.

"Professor!" Harry cried, slipping past Remus. Severus Snape stood in the doorway, looking exhausted.

"What on earth?" Remus asked, coming forward and putting a protective hand on Harry's shoulder. "What are you doing here? You know you're not supposed to come unless -- "

Snape held up a folded copy of the Prophet and offered it to Sirius, who accepted it with a suspicious look. Harry craned his neck to see the headline.

Lucius Malfoy escapes Azkaban, it read, and then in smaller font, *Daring daylight disappearance baffles authorities*.

"They say," Snape said pointedly, "that it looked as though a rat had chewed through his straightjacket straps."

Sirius grabbed the other man's arm and tried to haul him inside, but Snape put out a hand to stop him before he could.

"Is he coming here?" Remus asked worriedly. "Do they know? Did Dumbledore send you?"

Snape looked over his shoulder, out through the front doorway. At the end of the garden, where the path to the front door met Cwudu Road, there was a Hogwarts school trunk. Sitting on it, looking very small and bereft, was Draco Malfoy. He was clutching Harry's invisibility cloak, twisting and creasing it between his fingers.

Remus looked at Sirius, then back at the boy.

"I'll go transfigure another bed in Harry's room," he said quietly.

Snape held out a small leather bag with the Gringotts Bank seal stamped on the side.

"For his room and board," he said as Sirius accepted it. "Equal parts Dumbledore and Narcissa Malfoy. I cannot linger."

He walked back down the path to where Draco sat; Harry tagged along curiously as Snape bent to whisper the location of the house in Draco's ear. Draco's eyes widened as the River House appeared before him out of the empty meadow. Before Harry could thank the Professor, he was gone.

"Hi," he said to Draco. The other boy looked pale, and he had deep circles under his eyes that bespoke more than a single sleepless night.

"Hi," Draco murmured. "Brought your cloak back."

"Thanks," Harry said. "Want some help with your trunk?"

Sirius came out of the house when they were halfway to the door and took the trunk out of their hands, carrying it easily into the bedroom. Remus was already in the kitchen, preparing an early breakfast. He offered each of them a plate of sausage, eggs, and toast; Harry led Draco out onto the wooden porch that overlooked the back garden and they sat on the steps, quietly.

"So," Harry said.

"So," Draco echoed. Harry looked sidelong at him, and a grin suddenly split his face.

"This is going to be the best summer *ever*," he said.

END